Cuban Exiles, Too, Are Troubled by Generation Gap

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MIAMI, April 15—Puffs of clouds sail across the Miami evening sky and a buttermilk moon casts a soft half-light on the roofs of the sprawling Cuban district. Under one roof, Ada Merritt Junior High School, America's newest immigrants sing a chorus of their first English words: "... four, five, six..."

The Talk of Little Havana

Rolando Amador, a handsome teacher with dark curly hair, stands beneath a giant banyan tree in the courtyard and listens to the sing-song count of his countrymen echoing from an upstairs classroom window.

"There are many people in Miami who still resent Cubans settling here," he says, "but for the most part we have been the most successful immigrants in American history. Americans find it hard to look down their nose at us because we arrived here loaded with American characteristics. We are just too outgoing and enterprising and hard-working for them to stay mad with us."

Ten years ago, on April 17, 1961, Cuban exiles suffered a bitter defeat at the Bay of Pigs, an event the people of Little Havana, the southwest section of this city, will commemorate this Saturday by dedicating a memorial. That defeat marked the end of the exiles' serious hopes for a swift return to their homeland. Since then, the population of Little Havana has swelled to 300,000 Cubans, about half the number of refugees who have entered this country since Fidel Castro seized power in 1959.

In recent years, as more and more Cubans accepted permanent exile, they have turned their energies away from chimerical anti-Castro talk to doing combat with the American way of life.

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Mr. Amador, a lawyer in pre-Castro Cuba who now heads his school's community program for adults and children, shows a visitor around the school, which recalls a turn-of-the-century settlement house in New York City. Next to the classroom where Cuban adults struggle with English, children study the Spanish language. Down the hall, men who were airline pilots in Cuba learn the intricacies of Federal air control operations, while in the auditorium boys from the neighborhood hold band practice.

"I still can't believe they are Cuban children when I see this long hair and bell-bottom trousers," Mr. Amador says with a smile. "Their parents go crazy with them. Do you know what it means for a Cuban father to see his son grow a beard like Castro? And the older generation thinks the peace symbol their children wear is diabolic—a twisted cross. I know of families where fathers and sons have fist fights over these things."

In the school cafeteria a rehearsal is under way for a Quince, a traditional celebration of a girl's 15th birthday that signals her symbolic entry into womanhood. In the middle of the floor a dance master instructs 14 teen-age couples in the ritualized performance as Gloria Beltran, the girl who will be honored, watches from the sidelines near a group of middle-age women chaperons.

Gloria, whose long brown hair gives a heart-shaped frame to her face, says that she does not feel as free in this country as she did in Cuba, which she left three years ago, because her parents are concerned about drugs and crime in Miami and are very strict with her. After her party next month, she will be allowed to date, but only in the company of a chaperon, presumably her mother, who speaks no English, a custom that Gloria says she will accept until her marriage.

However, one of her friends, Graciela Balanzategin, a pretty 13-year-old who left Cuba when she was 4 years old and only dimly remembers life on the island, expresses her distaste with Cuban tradition that builds a wall around a young woman until her wedding day.

"I don't want to be raised like my parents were," she insists in a voice free of accent. "I think it's dumb."

Another girl who is older described her fights with her family over dating. "They finally realized that to get along they would have to let me out of the house more often. I told them it was either that or else I was moving out," she said.

Two months ago Mr. Amador started a weekly group therapy session at the school called El Club. A psychiatric caseworker meets with neighborhood teen-agers who are experiencing serious problems with their parents.

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Employment is high in the Cuban community and the glow of prosperity is visible in the auto showrooms and the miles of shops with Spanish names that line S. W. Eighth Street, the heart of Little Havana, where in the late evening the clubs and cafes are alive with people enjoying la vida buena.

The price of success has been costly. Conversion to American styles of living (fast food, traffic jams, uprooted families) has confounded and

frightened those who seek protection and comfort inside Little Havana as more of their sons and daughters move away to the suburbs (crab grass, supermarkets, car pools). The upheaval has threatened to disrupt the traditional strong Cuban family unit, built around cousins, aunts and grandparents, and divorce, suicide and mental illness have risen sharply.

Part of the problem rests with a period of immigration that coincided with a decade of upheaval in the host country. The initial cultural shock was compounded by the dizzying social changes under way in this country that perplexed most Americans. The generation gap that was splitting native families, for instance, was creating unbridgeable chasms for Cuban fathers and sons who had to contend with additional problems of language and culture.

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Bernardo Benes, a community leader with bright blue eyes and vivid red hair, worries that the older generation is neglecting these mounting problems, just as he says they allowed social conditions in pre-Castro Cuba to deteriorate until it was too late.

"Part of our downfall in Cuba was the fact that we had no national conscience," remarks Mr. Benes as he sits in a popular cafe called Badia's and sips dark, aromatic Cuban coffee that is heavily laced with sugar. "Here the people are more selfish than ever."

"The generation gap among Cubans is far worse than the Americans," he says, "and Cubans better start facing up to it and finding solutions instead of just sitting around waving the anti-Castro flag. That way we will be more effective anti-Communists."

For the moment, he says, the exiles must prepare for an indefinite stay in the United States, and he conceded that as many as 50 per cent or more of the Cubans would never leave their adopted country even if given the chance to return to Cuba. "Despite the fact that the Cuban exiles have been the most privileged political exiles in history, it has been a long and sad 10 years for us," he says, and finishes drinking his coffee.