

Gambling and Prostitution Virtually

By Michael Arkus

Reuters

HAVANA — Cuba's revolution has given Havana such a moral face-lift that returning prodigals scarcely recognize the city once known as "The Brothel of Latin America."

Before Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, there were well over 40,000 prostitutes in

the capital alone. It was the city's proud boast that it had literally everything there was to offer.

Now, with a wind of puritanism blowing through Cuba, the ill-lit clubs of the Street of the Virtues in the old city have lost their dubious denizens. Only an occasional shawled figure, scurrying

from bar to bar, remains to remind one of Havana port's wild past.

Nearly all the brothels have disappeared from the capital's other quarters, too, and the couple of thousand prostitutes left ply their trade with the greatest discretion.

The many gambling dens, once the delight of American tourists and mostly run, according to officials here, by the American Mafia, have been banned. The theaters famous for their sexy films and "special shows" have been closed down.

The revolutionary campaign against prostitution is a two-way one, based on the elimination of its prime causes and on the rehabilitation of the prostitutes.

Castro himself has said that merely to pass laws is no cure. As he sees it, the only lasting solution is to remove the economic conditions which, he says, forced tens of thousands of daughters from humble worker and peasant families into prostitution.

According to this theory, once sufficient economic op-

portunities have been created for all women the profession will die a natural death.

Police have banned street soliciting. Special morality brigades from the Ministry of the Interior went the rounds of the brothels to persuade the inmates to undergo re-education.

Many, unable to carry on their profession as before and unwilling to change their ways, went into exile. Others, who are to be rehabilitated, have been interned in re-education centers where they learn dress-making and other trades.

Some are tacitly allowed to continue their trade, pending its final disappearance, in the few remaining brothels, but with diminishing economic returns.

Apart from the internal campaign, prostitution, like many things here, has fallen victim to the American blockade. The disappearance of the tourist trade and the reduction in the number of incoming ships have taken their toll.

Ended Under Castro

The authorities have clamped down on homosexuals, too. These had their own preferred bars and were very much in evidence up to a short time ago. Many of these, too, have now been sent off to re-education centers.

The many bars and old haunts of Havana's once famous night life still exist. They are still as seedy, and as dimly-lit or plunged into near-total obscurity, as ever. But nowadays they are virtually empty as well.