

Fidel's Pizzeria Diplomacy Paves

It was 2:30 in the morning, and there at a table in the Havana pizzeria, oblivious to the beer-drinking couples who seemed equally oblivious to them, sat the Swiss ambassador to Cuba and Prime Minister Fidel Castro. The meeting represented a sharp turn in U.S.-Cuban relations: not since the missile crisis had any diplomatic dialogue crossed the Florida straits. Now, as the prime minister fired up his Havana cigar, the ambassador, Emil Anton Stadelhofer, was speaking for the U.S. in negotiations over the free departure of Cubans who want to go to the U.S.

Castro's choice of a pizza parlor as a place for a diplomatic parley seemed as mercurial a gesture as his casual decision to let his countrymen go to the U.S.—provided the U.S. would accept an estimated 150,000 Cubans who find life under Castro unbearable. But from a tactical standpoint, Castro stood to gain. The exodus not only would rid Cuba of unproductive people but also would cut the martyrdom from under those willing to risk death to get away. Moreover, the expected wholesale arrival of jobless Cuban self-exiles would surely prove a problem to the U.S. And most important of all, whether the U.S. liked the idea or not, the very business of transacting the arrangements was a penetration of the American effort to isolate Cuba.

As Ambassador Stadelhofer flew to Washington to iron out the arrangements, Cuban exiles, who have escaped in the past and now live in Florida, did not wait for orderly planning to go to the aid of relatives and friends. Despite efforts by the U.S. Coast Guard to prevent them, they swarmed toward Cuba in hundreds of small boats. Braving heavy seas that sent some of them to the bottom, the boats reached the port of Camarioca, designated by the Cuban government for exile departures. There were tearful reunions and then the overloaded little boats, carrying people who had abandoned everything they owned, headed onto the high seas for the U.S. and freedom. LIFE's Miguel Acoca, who covered the start of the exodus, talked to many Cubans in Havana who have no intention of leaving but who nonetheless yearn for the old days of good relations with the U.S. A government official, though proud of what he said the revolution has accomplished, said, "How I'd like to see Miami again!" Another official said happily, "Do you realize that this is the longest contact other than protest notes that we have had with the U.S. since the break in relations?"



the Way for an Exodus

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