

The Life of Exiles

Their U.S. Stay Is Just A Long Wait for Home

By Paul Coates
Los Angeles Times

MIAMI—The day starts early in a crowded refugee apartment building.

Toddlers, informally dressed only in underwear tops, cluster on the front stoop. The rich, powerful aroma of Cuban coffee fills the hallways. From somewhere upstairs, a harassed mother shouts at her screaming child. It's her small contribution to the breakfast-hour bedlam. Radios blast furious Latin rhythms or Spanish language newscasts with the volume turned to the highest possible level.

Pasted above many of the doors is a little card with the words of the Cuban national anthem or a cutout of the Cuban flag.

A man, still fighting his way free of sleep, yawns, stretches, scratches his armpit and starts off for work. Others follow. Perhaps they were business executives, shopkeepers or professional men in Havana. But they left with no more than they could pack in a suitcase and, in Miami, they're going to their jobs as bellhops, waiters, elevator operators, and construction laborers. Their women work as waitresses, domestics and at sewing benches in the garment district.

A Door Opens . . .

I knock on the door of an apartment in one of the tenement buildings and

Juana Milian invites me in. She lives here with her 16-year-old grandson, Ramon, who already has left for school. They have one room, but they have a tiny space for a kitchen and a bathroom of their own.

The apartment is spotlessly clean. Ramon's bed has been made up and folded back into its hiding place into the wall. Grandma Milian's daybed, an old paint-blistered table and two wicker chairs are all the other furniture they have.

Senora Milian and her grandchild got out three years ago. Her daughter and son-in-law still are waiting to leave. Through the U.S.-Cuban Refugee Center, a division of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the boy receives \$46 a month. His grandmother gets an allotment of \$60 a month. Out of that they must pay \$54 rent. But the government supplies them with surplus food. Each month they get eight pounds of rice, five pounds of powdered milk, two cans of lard, peanut butter and two large cans of spam.

I notice that the bathroom shelf has such essentials of American teen-age life as a bottle of after-shave lotion and a men's deodorant.

"Does Ramon speak English?" I asked his grandmother through an interpreter.

To Go, To Stay

"Ai!" she said rocking her head in mock despair. "He forgets his Spanish. He wants to be American. No more Cuba."

"And you, senora?"

"I go home. Someday, I go home."

Everywhere you ask, it is the same. The children want to stay. The adults are waiting—some of them with an impatience that almost seems insulting to their American hosts—until the time they can get back.

"I am only a visitor," another woman told me, "I have been in Miami six years. But it is only a visit."

"After Fidel leaves," she said, "I go back. If I don't feel I can get home again, I must go crazy here."

Very few refugees have applied for citizenship. One who did, a prominent attorney under Batista, who works here at any odd jobs he can find—including acting as my interpreter—told me:

"They are fools, my people. They live on wishes, meaningless slogans. It will never be the same. Castroism in some form is there to stay."

"The old days," he added, "are gone in Cuba."