

Magdalena -- the CIA spy

By Paul Meskil *
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The shapely spy unbuttoned her blouse and revealed Fidel Castro's secret to the President of the United States.

It was on a tiny 16-mm film cartridge concealed in her bra.

Her code name was Magdalena.

Her maiden name, the one she now uses, was Geraldine Shamma. She was also known to New York and Havana society as Mrs. Alfred Suarez, widow of a Brooklyn-born millionaire.

She had every luxury money could buy — expensive cars, furs, diamonds, servants, a yacht, a seaside mansion, an apartment at the Waldorf, the whole ermine-lined bag. And she gave it all up to become a freedom fighter and an unpaid secret agent of the U.S. government.

Her clandestine activities cost her a \$20 million business, her palatial home and some things that can't be measured by monetary standards, such as her health. She spent nearly 2½ years in Cuban prisons.

The Cuban intelligence agents who arrested her claimed she was an American spy, a tool of the Central Intelligence Agency. She denied it.

That was her secret and she kept it throughout the weeks of interrogation and the awful years of incarceration. She kept it during all the newspaper, TV and magazine interviews she graciously granted on her return to the United States.

But now, for the first time, she has disclosed details of her double life because she feels she has received something less than fair treatment from the government she served at the risk of her life.

Geraldine Shamma, whose wealthy parents came from Syria, was born in Boston and proudly describes herself as "a Boston Yankee." She grew up and was educated in West Roxbury, Mass. During World War II, she met and married Alfred Suarez, heir to a Cuban tobacco fortune founded by his Spanish father.

She lived a typical socialite's life — golfing, yachting, dining with friends at "21," after-theater nightcaps at El Morocco, gambling tours of the Cuban casinos. Then her husband died in 1952 and suddenly she realized that life is not all fun and games.

"When Alfred died, he left an estate worth about \$22 million. We had no children, so I went to work, learned the business and ran it. I also became involved in the anti-Batista underground.

So she ran guns and relayed messages for the underground. Twice she was caught by Batista's security police, "but I wrapped myself in the American flag and denied everything." The fact that she was a wealthy American, with extensive business interests in Cuba, saved her.

Geraldine's bedside telephone rang around 3 a.m. on New Year's Day, 1959. She picked up the receiver and heard an excited voice saying: "He's gone! He's gone!"

"Who's gone?"

"Batista. He's left Cuba. We've won!"

But she soon realized she had helped replace a right-wing dictatorship with a left-wing dictatorship.

Soon after the Castro takeover, Geraldine was contacted by Frank Fiorini, an American who was an officer in Castro's army and secret agent of the CIA.

Fiorini, now known as Frank Sturgis, had been

who lost her fortune

working with Bill Patterson, the CIA agent attached to the American consulate in Santiago de Cuba, and Patterson suggested that he try to recruit the wealthy widow.

As soon as Geraldine agreed to serve her country, Frank introduced her to two top CIA officials at the American Embassy in Havana — Col. Nichols, the Air Force attache, and Major Robert van Horn.

Now a counterrevolutionary instead of a revolutionary, she helped form an anti-Castro underground in Cuba and helped anti-Castro political and military leaders get out of the country.

Working with a high-ranking Cuban intelligence officer, she obtained a daily list of persons who were to be arrested by Castro's secret police. She would then notify her CIA contacts and arrange to obtain American visas for those on the list so they could leave Cuba immediately.

"Around the second month of the Castro regime (February 1959), Nichols received orders from Washington to get some concrete evidence that Fidel or Raul (his brother) had a definite tie to the Soviets. So I asked three of our men to see what they could find out.

"At that time, Raul was staying at Camp Columbia (Cuban Army and Air Force headquarters) and American planes were still there. Fidel would stop by almost every day and spend two or three hours, taking his brandy and a nap. One of our men worked as a chef for Fidel and Raul.

"He managed to search their clothes and he found their Communist Party cards. Fidel had a fairly new card. Raul's card showed he had been a member for eight years. The chef took pictures of the cards with a little Minox spy camera, the kind we all carried.

"I took the film to the Embassy, but Col. Nichols wasn't there. He had told me not to give it to anyone else. He had said, 'If you get the evidence and I'm not here, get it to Washington.'"

So she caught the next commercial airline flight to Miami, then flew to Washington and called a phone number that Nichols had given her. A limousine picked her up at the airport and drove her directly to the White House, where a presidential aide ushered her into the Oval Office.

"President Eisenhower was sitting at his desk. He got up and shook my hand. He said, 'Well, I'm certainly glad to meet our rebel.

"I said, 'Our friend in Cuba had told me to come here with the information you wanted.' I had the film inside of my bra. I turned my back, unbuttoned my blouse and pulled it out.

"When I handed it to him, he said, 'It certainly smells nice.'

"I said, 'It's my favorite perfume, *Femme*.'

"He knew what was on the film. I said, 'A couple of our men risked their lives for this. But here it is.'

"He said, 'Unfortunately, we can't do anything about it at this time.'

"I thought he meant the film. I said, 'Well, you can get it developed tomorrow?'"

"He said, 'No, I mean we can't do anything to antagonize the government of Fidel Castro. We're going to have to wait. There are too many people supporting him.'

"I said, 'Thank you very much, Mr. President. May I be excused now?' I was so mad. I didn't even want to talk to him, President or no President.

"After three weeks of work, for which we could have been shot, that was the anticlimax."

* SEE ALSO SFEX 20 APR 76