

## INDOCTRINATION OF CHILDREN IN CUBA AND OPERATION PETER PAN

October 2, 2013 by [Agustín Blázquez with the collaboration of Jaums Sutton](#)



***“Common Core” is the same educational system the communist regime of Fidel Castro imposed in Cuba in the early 1960s. It is the norm in all totalitarian communist regimes. Each child will have a file from birth to death with all his information, including his conduct, his friends and his parents. Based on that information depends what he would be studying, what kind of job he will be assigned, where he will be allowed to live and what food and clothes he will be allowed to have. To avoid that situation, Cuban desperate parents did the unthinkable and sent 14,048 unaccompanied children to the U.S. between 1960 and October 1962. It was known as Operation Peter Pan. Most Americans have not been told about it.***

### Cuban Kids from the 60s Exodus

#### The Largest Exodus of Children in the Western Hemisphere

Of the thousands of stories of the Cuban exodus, this one must be told. It's the story of the biggest exodus of children ever recorded in the Western Hemisphere, but is largely unknown. From December 26, 1960 through October 22, 1962, 14,048 unaccompanied children between 6 and 18 years old left Cuba for the US. There were many valiant and dedicated people in Cuba and in the US working for the success of this secret operation. It was coded: Operation Peter Pan.

In the 1930s, 7,482 Jewish children were smuggled out of Nazi Germany to England and other countries and in the communist take over of Spain that lead to a civil war, thousands of children were evacuated to France, Belgium and England. When the communists in Spain were heading for defeat, it is said that 5,000 children were sent to the Soviet Union. In 1940, during the Battle of Britain, about 1,000 British children were sent to the US for safety. And at the end of the war, about 5,000 orphans were brought from Europe to the US for adoption.

Before Castro, people used to immigrate to Cuba. But after Castro, the biggest exodus in this hemisphere began. The first to arrive into the US in January 1959 came with their money and belongings but later, as Castro added more and more restrictions, people were forced to leave with nothing. This created a terrible burden on the relatives and friends who arrived earlier and were supporting and helping the newcomers. Later, the burden fell to private charities and the US government. By 1960 some 4,000 had arrived and by December 1961, 12,000 with 200 arriving in Miami each day. By 1971, 261,000 were established in Miami and almost as many elsewhere in the US. During the 1980 Mariél exodus 125,000 left but 2 million more who requested to leave were stranded in Cuba when that door was closed. In 1997

there are 2 to 3 million Cuban exiles all over the world and their numbers would have been greater if leaving Cuba had been easier.

In opposition to general beliefs resulting from 38 years of Castro's propaganda echoed by the press and the liberal establishment, Castro's revolution affected Cubans from all walks of life and the brutality of his repression was felt since January 1959. From the beginning, when people realized that he was moving toward a communist dictatorship, the opposition began, even from the people who previously fought at his side against Batista. Many Cubans, as the situation worsened during 1959 and 1960, thought that Castro would be overthrown. As his control grew and his cronies became entrenched in civilian and government positions, Cubans became concerned that unseating Castro would lead to a bloody civil war, as in Spain in the 1930s.

On May 1, 1960, Castro launched his slogan "Cuba sí, Yankees no!" and ordered the creation of communist indoctrination schools while publicly denying he was a communist. In July, he began to confiscate properties owned by Americans, Spaniards and Jews. In October, he created the neighborhood committees (fashioned after 1930s Nazi Germany) to spy on and control each city block.

The radicalism of Castro's revolution spread toward the educational field raising parents' concern. Circulating rumors that he was planning to confiscate the over 1,000 secular and religious private schools (which did materialize later) made parents fearful about their children's future. Some private schools began closing – temporarily, they thought – because of the increasing pressures from Castro's regime to change to Marxist textbooks to indoctrinate the children. After private schools closed, many parents kept their children home instead of sending them to public schools where communist indoctrination had already begun.

Many Cuban parents remembered the stories of the end of the civil war in Spain where 5,000 children were sent to the Soviet Union for indoctrination and others were held as hostages. They were fearful that the same thing would happen in Cuba. Many parents did not want to leave Cuba because they thought that Castro would be overthrown in a matter of months. Or because they could not abandon an old or sick family member, or a spouse or a brother who had become a political prisoner. Others because they were involved in the anti-Castro movement. They couldn't leave but they wanted their children to be saved.

In the fall of 1960, rumors circulating in Cuba and in Miami exile circles added to the fears of parents in Cuba. The main concern was the prospect of losing the "patria potestad," which meant that parents would lose the right to make the decisions about raising their children. Instead, the government would decide such things as where each child would live, each child's school and curriculum, etc. This did materialize later on.

The departure from Cuba of Castro's 12-year-old son, Fidelito, to be educated in the Soviet Union seemed to confirm this rumor. Then, the creation of the Young Communist Pioneers – replacing the Boy Scouts – and the Association of Young Communists added panic to the situation. Some of the children already absorbed into these mass organizations began to show the effects of the indoctrination: parroting Castro's slogans and using communist jargon, and becoming informants. In some instances, parents became fearful of their own children and self-censored what they said in front of them to avoid being

denounced to the authorities. The future didn't look promising for families under Castro. Painful as it was, many parents thought that it was time to get their children out of Cuba even if they had to leave unescorted.

In October 1960, the first unaccompanied Cuban child arrived in Miami. He was sent by his parents who thought that their relatives and friends would take care of him temporarily until Castro was overthrown. They had no way of knowing that their relatives were almost destitute. Since no one was willing or able to take responsibility for his welfare, the 15-year-old boy was being passed from one family to another on a daily basis. This psychologically affected the boy. He was scared and hungry and had lost 20 pounds when someone took him to the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami on November 15, 1960. The man who brought him in pleaded for a foster home or a boarding school for the boy. The boy's name was Pedro (Peter). Later on, the organized effort to get the unaccompanied children safely out of Cuba and properly cared for in the US would be named for him: Operation Peter Pan.

Father Bryan O. Walsh, Executive Director of the bureau, made temporary arrangements for the care of Pedro. Father Walsh, born in Port Arlington, Ireland in 1930, was ordained as a priest in St. Augustine, Florida in 1954. He was a dedicated and compassionate Spanish-speaking priest who had been in Miami since 1957. He was aware of the impending influx of Cuban children through a sister agency, the Hispanic Catholic Center in Miami. He realized that Pedro was the first child of many that would come as the situation deteriorated in Cuba. And he sought federal help to cope with the emergency situation that was developing.

Father Walsh also turned to the Welfare Planning Council for help. They arranged a meeting for the third week of November 1960 with representatives of the Dade County Welfare Department, Florida State Department of Public Welfare, Florida Children's Home Society, Children Service Bureau and Jewish Family and Children's Service. President Eisenhower, aware of the emergency refugee situation in Miami, had just appointed Mr. Tracy Voorhees to look into the matter. As a result of the meeting at the offices of the Welfare Planning Council and with the recommendation of Mr. Voorhees, one million dollars was allocated by the Eisenhower administration on December 2, 1960.

Also in November 1960, a Cuban mother flew to Key West bringing her two children. She feared that because of her and her husband's anti-Castro activities, her children would be sent to the Soviet Union. Since she did not have family or friends in the US, she brought her two children to the Key West Juvenile Court. She begged the Judge of that court to find a home for them. The Judge assumed jurisdiction and placed her children in foster care. The mother returned to Cuba to join her husband in the fight against Castro. In addition to Pedro, now there were two more children, without their parents but safe from Castro.

James Baker was the Headmaster of Ruston Academy, an American school in Havana, catering to US residents on the island and upper middle class Cuban families. As a resident of Cuba, Mr. Baker was very well aware of the tenor of Castro's regime and the increasing opposition. Cuban parents concerned about the communist indoctrination and welfare of their children approached him for a way out for their sons and daughters. In November 1960, he sent one of his teachers to Miami and Washington to look over the situation. As a result of that visit, they decided to open a boarding school in Miami to help the fearful parents get their children out.

For the purpose of finding a suitable building for the boarding school, Mr. Baker traveled to Miami in the second week of December 1960. In Miami, he heard about Father Walsh and the plans of the Catholic Welfare Bureau to provide care for unaccompanied Cuban refugee children. On December 12 he paid a visit to Father Walsh, who pointed out to him that the boarding school would be only a partial solution and that the legalities of custody would eventually surface if separation from their parents became lengthy. Father Walsh thought that the best way to handle the situation was through a social agency, and said, "specially the younger ones, belonged in foster families, not institutions." Also, there was the concern that Jewish and Protestant children would be coming and assurance must be made to their parents that their religious heritage would be respected.

Mr. Baker determined that the best way to handle the situation was to work together with Father Walsh. He estimated that 200 unaccompanied children would be coming. He would arrange to get them out of Cuba and Father Walsh would be responsible for receiving them upon arrival at Miami's airport and provide them with proper care until Castro was overthrown and they could return to their parents in Cuba. Thus the yet to be named Operation Peter Pan was created.

To help Mr. Baker raise the funds for this operation were a group of members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Havana whose properties were confiscated by Castro. Among them were Kenneth Campbell and Bob O'Farrell of Esso Standard Oil Company and Richard Colligan of Freeport Sulfur Company. They were in Miami in a wait and see mode watching the developments in Cuba. Judging by Castro's brutality and violations of human rights and the increasing opposition, they agreed that it was a temporary situation until Cubans would gain the democratic change they wanted. These businessmen wanted to help spare the Cuban children from a possibly bloody struggle.

Mr. Baker returned to Havana on December 13 and the group of businessmen began to obtain donations from US companies (and one British, the Shell Oil Company, which had done business previously in Cuba). But, they had to prevent Castro from tracing the sources of the funds, otherwise he might stop the operation. The first donations were paid to the Catholic Welfare Bureau. They in turn issued checks to a series of Americans living in Miami, who in turn, issued personal checks for the airfare of the children via the W. Henry Smith Agency, a travel agency in Havana, owned and operated by H. Gilbert Smith. This complicated process was necessary because, in order to get US currency, Castro had already forbidden the purchase of airline tickets using Cuban pesos.

Meanwhile, the US Embassy in Havana issued student visas to each child. The Catholic Welfare Bureau gave a letter to Mr. Baker stating that they would be responsible for any child referred by him. To keep Castro out of it, all communications concerning this operation were handled via the US diplomatic pouch, thanks to the cooperation of Mr. Culver Gidden of the US State Department Reception Center in Miami and the Charge d'Affairs at the US Embassy in Havana, Mr. Daniel Braddock.

On December 15, 1960, several of the American businessmen in Miami took a letter from Mr. Baker in Havana that had arrived that morning in the diplomatic pouch, to Father Walsh. The letter contained a list of the first 125 children that would be coming. Immediately he looked for housing for the children. The County Welfare Department had a group of vacant buildings known as the Kendall complex that had been used to house delinquent children and offered them to Father Walsh. There, 60 children could be housed

but 125 were coming! Father Walsh found that the St. Joseph Villa, a small group home for children run by nuns, had nine empty beds. He found that the Assumption Academy, a private girls' boarding school, also run by nuns, would be empty because of the Christmas holidays and they could temporarily accommodate 200! He stopped by and asked the Mother Superior for her help. She agreed with the condition that the children had to leave by January 6, 1961.

On December 24, 1960, Father Walsh received the news that the first children would be arriving in Miami the next day. On Christmas Day, the only person he was able to locate to go with him to the airport to receive the children was Mrs. Louis Cooper, a Catholic Welfare Bureau social worker. There were two flights from Cuba that afternoon: Pan American's 422 and National's 452. To their surprise, no children came on flight 422. They waited with anxiety for the second flight. Flight 452 finally arrived also with no children. They were disappointed and concerned. What had gone wrong? What had happened to the children . . . ?

As Father Walsh anxiously awaited the flow of what would be the largest influx of unaccompanied refugee children in history, the situation that was causing the influx worsened. Fidel Castro's January 1960 death penalty decree for joining or even helping the revolt against him weighed heavily on everyone's mind. Masses were apprehended and thrown in jail without trial and summary executions were rampant. The neighborhood committees spying on each city block were terrorizing people. Peasants were in open revolt and fighting in the Escambray Mountains. Students and workers were joining them and other anti-Castro rebels all over the island. Rebel groups in the countryside were as close as 36 kilometers from Havana. The organized anti-Castro resistance in Havana and other cities was growing. The number of people involved in the resistance against Castro was to far exceed the number that had struggled against Batista. The brutality of Castro's repression was something never experienced before. Castro was waging an all out war against the will of his people.

Many parents were panicking at the approaching second anniversary of Castro's revolution, January 1st, 1961, with the prospect that children may no longer be allowed to leave Cuba. The government was taking control of more and more aspects of daily life – including the raising of children. A desperate plan to get them out was under way. In Havana, James Baker and others willing to take great risks formed a clandestine network. In Miami, on safer ground, Father Walsh and other dedicated Americans, prepared to accept an awesome responsibility. The goal was to create the means to get as many children as possible out before January 1st, 1961.

December 26, 1960: Sixto, 12 and Vivian, 14, brother and sister, the first two children to leave in this underground operation were in Havana's José Martí International Airport. As required in Castro's Cuba, they would wait for hours to find out if they would actually be permitted to board their plane to freedom. Unexpectedly, their mother was allowed in the waiting room with them, a room that came to be known as "the fish tank," because it normally separated with glass those hoping to leave from their relatives watching from the outside.

Their father, watching in silence, felt deep sorrow and fear on the other side of the cold glass. He felt impotent in the situation that made him and his wife take a drastic step, not knowing when they would see their children again. He consoled himself by thinking that at least in Miami his children would be safe from the unpredictable nightmare of Castro's regime.

For Sixto and Vivian, this was the first time they were going to be separated from their parents. They were going to the unknown; to a country with a different language, culture and environment. They were afraid and sad to be leaving their parents, relatives and friends, their familiar home and their country, but as youngsters, they also felt a sense of adventure. Each one was carrying a small suitcase with the few belongings that Castro's regime allowed them to take, and of course, no money. Before, with their parents around, that was not a problem. But now they were on their own, not knowing who was going to take care of them.

Because their mother was permitted to wait with them, the situation was not as intimidating for them as it was for the others inside "the fish tank." Castro's political police at the airport interrogated the other passengers. They had to be very careful with their answers and appear calm and confident at all times. The most minimal suspicious behavior or inconsistency could prevent their departure. Their suitcases would be carefully checked and anything deemed to be of value would be confiscated "for the revolution," meaning it would be kept by the inspectors. This was what Cuba had become since Castro, and until the very last second on that island, while they have you under their control, you are living in uncertainty and fear. Finally, after four agonizing hours inside "the fish tank," the police shouted that children were allowed to board the plane. A last hug and kiss from their mother and a last look at their father on the other side of the glass, a last silent goodbye . . .

On the "other side of the world" in Miami, Mrs. Cooper went again to the airport to continue the vigil to see if any children would arrive today. The wait was excruciating. The first flight from Havana arrived without children. At about 7:30 pm the second flight arrived. All the passengers arriving showed an extraordinary sense of relief as they descended and touched the ground in Miami. Suddenly a boy, holding the hand of a girl emerged and descended the stairs to the tarmac. They were alone. They appeared very worried. There were no relatives or friends waiting for them outside the doors of Customs. Fear controlled their faces. "Good God, our children!" exclaimed the relieved Mrs. Cooper.

Sixto and Vivian were very much relieved to see the friendly, smiling face of Mrs. Cooper. They didn't know it, but they were the first in a line of 14,048 children that would be arriving during the next 23 months.

Mrs. Cooper took them to St. Joseph's Villa where they would live for the next two months until they went to live at the home of their mother's cousin in Hialeah, Florida. Their mother came from Cuba five months later and their father about six months after her. The family was reunited after 11 long months.

The daily vigil for unaccompanied children from Cuba at the Miami airport continued. Two came on December 28th, six on the 30th and 12 on the 31st. January 1st, 1961 arrived and Castro did not forbid the exodus of children. However, he demanded that the US Embassy in Havana reduce its staff from 120 to 15. This brought a strong reaction from the Eisenhower administration and on January 3, 1961, the US broke diplomatic relations with the Castro regime. So, the US visas for the coming children would be very difficult. Father Walsh thought that it was the end of the operation. No children arrived on January 1st, 2nd or 3rd. However, four arrived on the 4th!

With the closing of the US Embassy in Havana and the Consulate in Santiago de Cuba, most of the US citizens living in Cuba began to leave. James Baker, his wife Sybil and their children arrived in Miami on January 5. Mr. Baker was able to explain in person to the Catholic Welfare Bureau the delays that they were experiencing in getting visas for the children and the increasing number of requests. Castro's secret police surrounded the US Embassy while the staff was burning documents – as is customary when closing an embassy. In the last minutes, the US embassy officials allowed him to stamp 25 extra visas.

Before leaving Cuba, Mr. Baker, with the approval of the State Department, left Miss Penny Powers, a British citizen, in charge of the exodus of the children. She had been a nurse who was instrumental in the escape of 10,000 Jewish children from Nazi Germany, and years later in Cuba became one of the teachers at Ruston Academy in Havana.

For Father Walsh, Miss Powers and the others involved in this operation, the breaking of relations between the US and Cuba posed an additional challenge, since no more visas for the children could be issued in Havana. Another source would have to be found in order to get the children out . . .

Since communication and the free flow of information were among the earliest casualties after Castro, it became very difficult to know what was really going on inside Cuba. Everything became politically sensitive and a security matter to the regime. Telephone conversations were monitored and letters were opened by the authorities, so Cubans began communicating by passing information from person to person in a confidential manner. Everyone became extremely careful, because seemingly anything could bring an accusation of “counterrevolutionary,” or “CIA agent” resulting in jail. It was known through the grapevine that Castro's henchmen would select at random from those in jail, who was going to be executed. Also through this grapevine, desperate Cuban parents learned about the facilities Father Walsh was creating for Cuban children in Miami. But the problem was, how to obtain the US visa, now that the US Embassy in Havana was closed.

In Miami, Father Walsh continued making arrangements for receiving the estimated 200 children. James and Sybil Baker, after their arrival from Cuba, were appointed the first houseparents at the newly created Cuban Boys Home at 175 S.E. 15 Road in Miami. This house was donated by Maurice Ferré, a Puerto Rican industrialist in Miami whose parents were from Cuba. It was the first home for Cuban teen-aged boys in the city of Miami. The Bakers made daily trips to the airport to pick up newly arriving children. They also assigned a Cuban couple, Angel and Nina Carrion, as permanent residents of the house, which eventually became known as “Casa Carrion.”

At the Kendall facility, far from the city, Father Walsh appointed as houseparents, another Cuban couple, Mr. and Mrs. Fernando Pruna. He also had to hire cooks, janitors, social workers, clerks, typists and a bookkeeper. James Baker couldn't forget his friends stranded in Cuba and in coordination with Penny Powers and other trustworthy friends in Havana, a plan was developed with the cooperation of the British government, to get the rest of the children out via Kingston, Jamaica. The British Embassy in Havana would issue visas to the children. After the children arrived in Kingston, the US Consul there would give them US visas and they would be able to continue to Miami. However, the children would need a place to stay in Kingston overnight.

Meanwhile, on January 6, 1961, seven more children arrived at Miami's airport; two on the 7th and two more on the 8th. The children were leaving in such a small numbers to minimize suspicions. On January 8, Father Walsh flew to Washington, D.C., to meet with Frank Auerbach, his contact for the operation at the State Department, to talk about the Jamaica plan. Although it was Sunday, Mr. Auerbach made arrangements to meet at 2 pm at one of the building's side doors.

Father Walsh: "It was a bright, cold winter afternoon, and the streets around the State Department were completely deserted. Somehow the weather, the day, the time, the happenings of the past weeks all combined to create an atmosphere of intrigue and conspiracy. Promptly at 2, Mr. Auerbach drove up and we met for the first time. We entered the building and walked along deserted corridors to the office of Mr. Robert F. Hale, Director of the Visa Office, who was waiting for us. We spent about three hours discussing the possibility of bringing the children out via Jamaica on the two KLM flights a week among other possibilities. It was then that I heard for the first time the words 'visa waiver'."

At that meeting the possibility that the State Department would grant visa waivers to the children in Cuba, that would allow them to come directly to the US, was discussed. But consultation with the Justice Department the following Monday morning was necessary. Father Walsh stayed in his hotel room waiting for word. On Monday afternoon, the call was received giving the O.K. to both proposals. So now, the children could leave both ways, coming directly from Havana to Miami and through Jamaica with the visa waiver formula. The visa waiver applied only to children from 6 to 16. For those from 16 to 18, names had to be submitted for security clearances. The operation was on its feet again, for as long as Castro did not discover it.

On January 10, 1960, Father Walsh and Rachel Erwin, his Supervisor of Child Welfare, boarded a flight for Kingston with the list of the coming children to make arrangements for their arrival. They were met at the airport by Father William A. Connolly, the Chancellor of the Diocese of Kingston who took them to lunch at the Bishop's house. At the meeting it was arranged that the boys would stay at St. George College and the girls at Immaculate Conception College. Father Walsh stayed that evening because next morning he would meet with the US Consul and the managers of Pan American and KLM airlines to secure their cooperation. On January 11, Father Walsh returned to Miami while Miss Erwin stayed behind to receive the children. But no children arrived that day in Kingston.

Back in Miami, 50 children were being cared for at three locations: The Cuban Boys Home, St. Joseph Villa and Kendall. But no new children were leaving Cuba. Father Walsh, called Miss Erwin in Kingston. She said that according to KLM, the first children would arrive on January 17. However, on Monday, January 16, two children arrived at Miami's airport. During this impasse, Father Walsh and Mr. Baker were involved in organizing an education program for the children. Although everyone thought this was a temporary situation and the children would soon be returning to Cuba when Castro was overthrown, they did not want them to miss their schooling. Word was sent to Havana to have the children bring their textbooks, if possible.

In Havana, through the grapevine, word of the visa waiver had reached the parents and on January 17 the first seven children were able to leave for Jamaica and on the 18th, two arrived directly from Havana. In addition to Penny Powers, a clandestine network was established in Cuba for the distribution of the visa waivers. A group of very dedicated people were risking their lives for the sake of getting these

children out to freedom. Among them was the wealthy socialite, Sara del Toro de Odio, Albertina O'Fárril, Teté Pachéz (secretary at the W. Henry Smith Travel Agency in Havana), Gilbert Smith (son of the owner), Adelaida Everhart, Petit Esnart, Laureano Dominguez, Hilda Feo, Emilio Fernandez (Pan American Airlines in Cuba), Pancho Finlay (KLM Airlines in Cuba) and others. Many of them eventually served time in jail for their "anti-Castro Activities." But their incarceration did not stop Operation Peter Pan. Other people continued their work . . .

To obtain the visa waiver necessary to send their children to the US, parents had to get to the houses of the people distributing them in Havana. They had to do so very carefully, due to the increasing surveillance. There were the dreaded block committees, the network of informants and the secret police. The people distributing the visas also had to be extremely careful, because the people knocking at their doors could be informants or secret police. There were enormous risks both ways. Surviving inside a totalitarian society had become very complicated.

The wealthy Sara del Toro de Odio and her husband Amador had spent time in jail for their prior anti-Batista activities. They knew Castro personally. When he took over, they believed and supported his government until they began to realize the communist direction the revolution was taking. They learned about the summary executions and brutality against the increasing opposition. They knew Batista's jails and his treatment of political prisoners from first hand experience. Castro himself had been treated very well during his 20-month stay at the Isle of Pines Prison. They were appalled by what was going on now, under Castro. That wasn't what they and others had fought for: democracy. If there was something that the economically prosperous Cuba didn't need, it was a totalitarian communist regime.

As they had fought against Batista, Sara and Amador decided to fight against Castro. But because of Castro's violent and revengeful nature, they thought it would take a bloody struggle of dimensions never seen before. They worried that Castro might use their children as hostages and decided to take three of them to safety. Sara went alone to the US in January 1961 with her son and two daughters. Before she returned to Cuba to join her husband in the struggle against Castro, she met Father Walsh who gave her visa waivers to distribute in Cuba. Back in Havana, she and her husband decided to move from their city home to their recreational farm outside the city to be out of sight of the block committees and secret police.

Concerned parents all over the island learned about Sara through the grapevine. Sara and Amador's farm was one of the places where the parents could go to get the visa waiver. Extreme care was necessary to avoid being followed. The trip was an ordeal for many. One by one, people from all over the island showed up at the farm. Some were from poor and far away places who supposedly were the beneficiaries of Castro's revolution, however, they didn't want their children indoctrinated. Many did not have the means to send their children to the US. In those cases, Sara and Amador provided the US dollars for the trip.

Parents were also knocking at the doors of Bertha and Esther de la Portilla, Laureano Fernandez, Rev. Hernandez, Rev. Maximiliano, Bishop Muller, Serafina Hikel, Beatriz Morton, Israel Padilla, Alicia Thomas and others who also participated at great personal risk.

Through Jamaica and Miami, the number of children arriving was growing and more places were needed to house them. On Tuesday, January 31, 1961, Father Walsh stressed the need for keeping the operation secret, avoiding all publicity that could jeopardize the children's safe exit out of Cuba. The US press was already suspecting what was going on, but in a spirit of cooperation, they did not say anything. They were the ones who baptized the secret exodus "Operation Peter Pan." This name was in honor of the first boy Father Walsh took under his care on November 15, 1960, Pedro (Peter) Menendez.

Father Walsh wrote on February 1, 1961, "As of today 174 children came in (from Cuba). Of these, 53 have been and are being cared for by relatives and friends, the rest by the Catholic Welfare Bureau except for two by the Jewish Family Service. In addition, 20 have been sent to the Catholic Children Bureau, in Philadelphia." As the numbers grew, children were sent to orphanages and foster homes in 35 states.

The Cuban children were mainly from white middle class families, including some Jewish. There were also children from black and Chinese families. The Cuban children, not accustomed to segregation, were shocked by it in Florida. When black Cuban children were not allowed to enter some places, the others, in a show of solidarity, refused to enter.

The sudden separation from their parents, culture and environment, had a strong effect on many younger children who could not understand why their lives changed so drastically.

On April 17, 1961, the Bay of Pigs invasion took place. This was the opportunity that the anti-Castro underground resistance movement was waiting for to create a general strike and massive civil disobedience throughout Cuba. But the long awaited invasion went wrong from the beginning. First, US officials changed the landing place to a swampy area against the advice of Cubans with expert knowledge of their territory. Second, President Kennedy reneged on his promise to back up the landing with US air power (waiting and ready to fly). In the early hours of April 17, Castro ordered the massive detention of 250,000 people suspected of being unsympathetic to his cause, effectively preventing any civilian back up of the invasion. The detainees were housed in stadiums, theaters and prisons. Many were executed or remained in prison.

Cubans, after the invasion fiasco, disenchanted with what was perceived as the betrayal of President Kennedy by not helping them to get rid of the communist regime they never wanted, realized that there wasn't much that they could do alone on that isolated island with a omnipotent leader who would stop at nothing to maintain power. Kennedy seemed more interested in fighting communism in far away Vietnam than in his own neighborhood. They also realized that the separation from their children was not going to be temporary, and many started to leave in any way they could in order to be reunited with their children.

My father's brother and his wife made the "impossible" decision to send their two children to the US. Their son, Jorge, was 13 and their daughter, Ileana, was 11. They left on July 8, 1962. At their arrival in Miami, they were separated. Jorge was sent to live in a tent in a camp called Matecumbe in Miami. Ileana was sent to a girls refuge called Florida City. After a few months, they were adopted by Merlin and Peggy Blair in Pensacola, Florida. After two years, Jorge was sent to Bay San Luis Catholic Seminary in Mississippi and Ileana went to a Catholic orphanage in Mobile, Alabama. Later, Jorge was also transferred to an orphanage in Mobile, Alabama.

In Cuba, Sara and Amador were apprehended. One of their farm workers turned out to be an informant. They went to jail for anti-Castro activities. But in spite of the brutality and torture they endured, they never gave the names of the others. Their properties were confiscated and their farm was converted to a women's jail where Sara was forced to serve the last six years of her incarceration. After Amador was freed, they were able to leave for Miami where they reunited with their children. Amador died some years later.

For 16 months, Operation Peter Pan was proceeding in secret until March 9, 1962. Father Walsh remembers, "the Cleveland Plain Dealer decided to break the spirit of cooperation and prepared a story for publication. When all efforts to suppress the story failed, we agreed to a press release giving the basic story but omitting all references to what was being done within Cuba."

In Cuba, Albertina O'Farril was already in jail with Sara del Toro de Odio. But after the Bay of Pigs invasion and the massive arrests of April 17, 1961, others began distributing the visa waivers. During those times Ramón Grau and his sister Polita – relatives of the former constitutionally elected President of Cuba, Ramón Grau San Martín, 1944-48 – became involved in the distribution of visa waivers and the children continued to come.

Then the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted in October 1962, putting the world at the brink of a nuclear holocaust. With the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union, the last commercial flight from Havana to Miami departed Cuba on October 22, 1962. On that flight were the last children of Operation Peter Pan. There were 50,000 more children with their visa waivers left stranded in Cuba; 14,048 were safely out.

Of that total, 7,464 were cared for by the efforts of the 465 people who worked in this operation at the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami. The children were housed at their facilities in the Miami area and orphanages and foster homes in 35 states. The rest of the children were living with relatives, friends and with their parents as they were able to leave Cuba.

After the suspension of the direct flights from Cuba, parents began leaving through Spain and Mexico, although the transit visa through Mexico was extremely difficult to obtain. In some instances bribes had to be paid to Mexican officials by relatives and friends abroad on behalf of the parents. Their exiled relatives and friends were paying the money for the parents' trip and stay in the transit country.

In early 1965, Castro's secret police arrested Ramón Grau. He was brutally tortured for three months at the infamous Villa Marista, the headquarters of the G2 political police. He was placed in solitary confinement inside a 6x6 tomb-like cell 12 feet underground full of roaches and rats, where he couldn't even stand erect. He was subjected to a variety of psychological tortures in an effort to force him to sign a confession. He never did and was tried for anti-Castro activities and sentenced to death – later commuted to 23 years. His sister, Polita Grau, who was the director of a women's anti-Castro underground organization called Rescate (Rescue), also spent long years as a political prisoner.

To reunite the families, President Johnson created the Freedom Flights, which began on December 1, 1965. The parents of Operation Peter Pan children were given first priority. Within the first six months of

the Freedom Flights, about 5,000 children were reunited with their parents. These flights lasted until April 1973 and brought 260,561 Cubans to the US.

My uncle's son and daughter remained in separate orphanages in Mobile, Alabama until their parents were allowed to leave Cuba on the Freedom Flights on May 8, 1966. They were finally reunited after four years and settled in New Orleans, Louisiana. Both of my cousins have since married and have children and grandchildren.

For most families, reunification brought forth unexpected difficulties that had to be overcome. Many, including my cousin Ileana, could not communicate with their parents until they could relearn Spanish. Others remembered their parents as they looked in Cuba when they were younger and in happier times. The suffering, and for some, incarceration endured by the parents in Cuba, made some parents appear so much older and different that their own children didn't recognize them. Some children denied that they were their real parents. In other instances, parents found their children so changed by the different culture, that reunification became a long-term trauma.

For some, death of one of the parents, either by natural causes or by being executed during the separation period, made the reunion very painful. Other parents, because one or both were sent to jail or a concentration camp, were unable to reunite, so their children remained in orphanages or living with relatives or friends. By 1971, 165 children remained under the care of the Catholic Welfare Bureau's Cuban Children's Program. The last of the Cuban children left in 1976, 26 years later! It is estimated that because of Operation Peter Pan, 150,000 additional people were able to come to the US. There are enough stories involved with this exodus to fill many compelling volumes.

Sara del Toro de Odio still lives in Miami. Albertina O'Farril, after 14 years in jail is in exile in Miami. Ramón and Polita Grau, after their release from jail also came to Miami. Penny Powers, now in her eighties, still lives in Cuba and was Knighted by the Queen of England. James Baker, whose wife, Sybil, died, lives near Daytona Beach. Father Bryan O. Walsh, 69, now Monsignor, as a result of his experience with the Cuban children, is developing a Children's Village in Miami, where needy children can live in a family like atmosphere.

The children from Operation Peter Pan have grown up to be doctors, lawyers, technicians, musicians, entertainers, etc. Among the most well known musicians is Willy Chirino. He married the popular singer Lisette Alvarez, also a Peter Pan child whose parents were the famous 1950s' Cuban radio and television performers Olga Chorens and Tony Alvarez. And singer/songwriter Marisela Verena and musician Carlos Oliva. Santiago Rodriguez has become internationally known as a classical piano virtuoso and Professor at Maryland University – he was 8 when he came to the US.

Sixto Aquino, the first official Peter Pan child who arrived in Miami on November 26, 1960, obtained a degree in Economics in 1969 from Georgetown University and is Division Chief for the Andean Countries at the Inter-American Development Bank and has two children. His sister, Vivian, graduated from high school in 1963, went to the University of Maryland, married in 1967 and has three children. She lives in Miami where she and her husband export software to Latin America.

Every Peter Pan child has an important story to tell. Margarita Prats, now Margarita Lora, who came when she was 8 with her sister Lola, 6 and brothers José, 9 and Benito, 7, has three children and is a Research Medical Technologist at NIH and lives in Maryland, while Lola became a Clinical Medical Technologist and has two children. Her brother, José, is a Communications Entrepreneur in Virginia with two children. Benito is an Aerospace Engineer in California with four children. Family reunions are very important for the Prats family and their parents have a series of photos lined up on the wall of their kitchen to prove it.

Mayda Rodriguez, now Mayda Riopedre, who came at 15 with her sister Lina, was a Research Librarian at the Smithsonian Institution and now lives in Miami. Her sister, Lina, has two children and is a Restaurant Manager in West Palm Beach. Psychologist Ana Cristina Gardano, PH.D., who came with her brother Enrique, is in private practice in Chevy Chase, Maryland. And the list goes on. There are grown Peter Pan children all over the US.

Since time has healed most of the traumas of the experience, most of the Peter Pan children thank their parents for having the courage to send them to freedom which they now fully enjoy and appreciate. Would they be able to do the same for their own children? Perhaps, for some, if the circumstances demanded it. But not for others, still suffering from the separation trauma. Some have chosen not to have children, others are very close and protective of them and are glad that their children live with freedom, something that can easily be taken for granted when you haven't lived in a communist totalitarian society. In general, they are grateful that Operation Peter Pan gave them the opportunity to fly as Peter did.

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**Sources:**

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For a preview and information on the documentary and books click here: [ABIP](#)

**“TO GAZE IDLY AT A CRIME IS TO COMMIT IT.”** José Martí.

**AUTHOR’S COMMENT:**

*“Common Core” is the same educational system the communist regime of Fidel Castro imposed in Cuba in the early 1960s. It is the norm in all totalitarian communist regimes. Each child will have a file from birth to death with all his information, including his conduct, his friends and his parents. Based on that information depends what he would be studying, what kind of job he will be assigned, where he will be allowed to live and what food and clothes he will be allowed to have. To avoid that situation, Cuban desperate parents did the unthinkable and sent 14,048 unaccompanied children to the U.S. between 1960 and October 1962. It was known as Operation Peter Pan. Most Americans have not been told about it.*

*According to the Code of Youth of the Cuban Communist Constitution, only the state have the right to educate the children. Parents do not have any input at all and they can be sent to jail if they teach their children something that contradict the state dogma.*