

Interviewee: Alina Gomez
Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando
Date: August 1997
FIU Number: 530

Alina Gomez = AG
Manuel Gonzalez Pando = MGP

MGP= Vamos a, como hacen esos psiquiatras que te llevan a otra vida. Vamos a empezar del [19]97 and kind of go back. [19]97, [19]87, [19]77, [19]67, [19]65, [19]63, [19]62. Cierra los ojos, cierra los ojos un momentito. Acuérdate de tu casa en Cuba, de tus padres, okay? Quiero que recojas el feeling de cuando tú eras una niña, viviendo en tu casa. ¿De dónde eres, de La Habana?

AG= En la Habana, Miramar.

MGP= Okay, quiero que mires alrededor de la casa tuya en Miramar y veas detalles de la casa, que oigas el sonido de la gente en tu casa, que huelas, que recobres la memoria de como olía tu casa. Your feelings at the time.

[Break in recording to fix setting, 01:30-02:12]

MGP= I want you to remember how your life was, how old were you, what did your parents do. As Castro took over, the comments that you would hear as a young girl, let's talk about that. Just create me that mood and the ambiance.

AG= When Castro took over in [19]59

MGP= Me miras a mi

AG= When Castro took over in [19]59, I was nine years old. I remember very vividly the first day that he arrived in Havana. I lived in Miramar, suburb in Havana. And next door to us lived the mother-in-law of Fulgencio Batista. A block away lived Piedra, which I understand from what I heard he was a very higher up in the regime. And then three blocks away lived Tabernilla. So you can imagine what took place at that time, right there.

My grandfather sat down in the living room of our house in Miramar. And of course we lived in an extended family. My grandmother, my grandfather, and great aunt, my mother, my sister. And they had what we had. We were listening to what's happening outside and my grandfather was horrified. My mother was... she had mixed emotions. She was a professor of the Instituto de Marianao. Therefore, she has a Ph.D. degree, and she wanted to change, but my goodness what a change did we get [Laughing]. So there was a lot of mixed emotions in my household at that time, but I remember my grandfather being horrified by that was going on.

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

MGP= At what point and how did you get an inkling that they may send you to the United States?

AG= In 1960 my father was taken prisoner. He joined the contrarevolucion. My father being an attorney and my mother being a professor, they always had very high values and standards for us or for themselves, and they lived within those values and those standards. They always believed in the civil liberties for everyone. To be an individual. They saw how the Revolution was going to more of a collective process and individuals being lost in the process. And since my father was taken to prison and my mother was horrified with the patria potestad, not knowing what could happen to my sister in myself. She made up her mind that she was going to send me to United State so I could seek that freedom that my father fought for and wanted for us.

MGP= Do you remember the first time they talk to you about it?

AG= In my household, things like that were never discussed. I was never told that I was going to come here by myself. I remember going to school every morning and every morning when I arrived at school, someone was gone to United States in my classroom. So in the morning was not a who was there, was who was not there in the classroom. At one point, I remember my mother telling me how would I like to go to United States. That it was for me to, was an extended vacation I was going to have. That was the first time that I was ever told that I could come to the United States. The day before I came, we gathered at dinner time and that's when I was told that I was leaving to the United States the next day.

I did not know my father was a political prisoner at that time, I was never told that until later on when I arrived in the United States. Three or four years after I found out. Thinking back, I realized the courage that my mother had to part from us. The struggle she must have felt at that time, whether she was doing the right thing or not. Being a mother now, I can understand and appreciate what she went through.

[Break in recording to fix interviewee microphone, 6:41-07:22]

MGP= Remember the last day in Cuba? The trip to the airport, the saying goodbye?

AG= Yes, I remember. It was, I remember, in my house. I remember my grandmother was at the door telling me that I was going to have a good time. That I was coming back in three months. This is only going to be three months and you are going to see all your friends in Miami. And you're going to come back and we are... and everything is going to be fine. We are going to keep our house and all your dolls. And we are just going to wait for you. It's going to be just three months away and you will be back. You are coming back.

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

MGP= What were your feelings at the time?

AG= [Getting emotional] A lot of mixed emotions. I was parting from my family, but at the same time, I thought that I was coming back. This is going to be an extended vacation. So another trip to Miami, that's what I thought as a child.

MGP= So at the airport, saying goodbye, la pecera at the airport. Do you remember any of that?

AG= I remember when I arrived at the airport there was a friend of my mother there. And she's asked, my sister and I because we were placed in this pecera, as you called, what are you doing here? We are going to school. We are going to the United States. And she took ours over for us, at that point in time. I remember them going through my luggage and looking for things and then saying, they are just two kids let them go. Then I remember going up the stairs of the Pan Am. No, it was not Pan Am, I think it was KLM. That's what I remember of my last day in Cuba.

MGP= And you were at that time, how old?

AG= Eleven

MGP= Tell me about the trip, landing in Miami. Who picked you up?

AG= When we landed in Miami, I remember my sister. She is just four years younger than I am. She kept saying, you know English, do you know English? and I said I know a little bit. I went to Mercy Academy, so I know a little bit. Don't worry, I can handle this. I know how to do this. I remember landing there and there was a gentleman, Mr. Baker, and Josefina Lastra. Fortunately, she was a very good friend of my family, of my father. So when she saw me there, she was very happy to see me there because she knew that my father was in prison and very soon they will come, so they were delighted. It was late at night. I thought I had to speak English but I didn't have to. And I remember them taking us over to telling us we are going to go now to your house where you are gonna be staying. They gave us M&M's. I remember that.

MGP= Then you got to the camp.

AG= Then I arrived at the house it was in Kendall. It was in 1961, February the twelfth. When we got there we were told to the right hand side are the boys and to the left hand side are the girls. At that time it was coed. It was very small, not that many people. It was a husband and wife taking care of all of us, I don't recall their names unfortunately. I remember them telling us like you are not allowed to cry. You're not allowed to call your home. So tomorrow morning we'll give you instructions. And then they told us, they told me, okay, this is your sister. Usually we don't like to keep them together, siblings, because they tend to cry, but we'll do an exception this time because it was very late at night. So my sister slept next to me in the little cot that we had.

MGP= How long were you at the camp?

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

AG= I was there for three weeks. My mother, she was very concerned, she did not hear from her. She didn't know where we were. I guess that she started getting very skeptical as well did I do the right thing did I do something wrong or what's going on. So she contacted some of her friends in Miami. And some of her friends went to see me about two weeks after I arrived and they said that they have been in touch with my mother that they were going to try to see if they could take my sister and I out of the camp and take into their house. My mother had sent some papers over so they were in the process and I was there for three weeks in the camp.

MGP= And later?

AG= From the camp, which I have very good memories. They took us, I remember, they took us to outings. Crandon Park. They took us... we didn't go to school for, I didn't go to school for three weeks. I understand that after I left, the nuns from Mercy Academy arrived. But I was there, like I said, for three weeks, then we went to this house. It was a friend of my family, good friend of my family. They had. She had two sons. They've been here in the United States for a number of years. I spent Mondays through Fridays in their house and then on the weekends I went over to my mother's friend's house, which we were thirteen at that time in the house. They split the responsibility of my sister and I. It was very interesting. I never had to... my sister and I were the only children in the house, and all the attention was placed upon my sister and I. Like I said, we lived in an extended family. When I arrived at this other house, there were two boys, fifteen and seventeen and my sister and I. They did not appreciate two intruders in their household. So we had... we had good times [Laughing]. To say the least.

MGP= During that time, were you able to speak to your parents, to your mother?

AC= I spoke to my mother... once I had arrived at our friends house, I was able to talk to my mother on a weekly basis then. We kept in touch and contact with her. I did not know my father was in prison, still.

MGP= When did you find out your father was in prison? What were you told about your father? Your father was not there when you left.

AG= No, I was told that he had to take care of some business and that he had gone on a trip overseas and that he will be coming back. Being in a businessman those things are expected. And they try not to talk much about my father at all. It was. My grandfather took over largely responsibilities that my father had, trying to, so that we would not see what was going on really. One afternoon when I was in my friend's house. Two days after the trial, my father had thirty years, was supposed to serve thirty years in prison. I remember their friends saying thirty years, how are we going to tell them, how are we going to tell them thirty years. At that time, those terms pardon, thirty years, twenty years, were very common. Because you keep hearing them all the time. So I said thirty years, my father thirty years and that's when I found out that he was.

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

MGP= How did you feel?

AG= [Getting emotional] Sad, concern and afraid.

MGP= Did you ever feel you may not see him again?

AG= No, because I knew that everybody was talking about the invasion and we're going to go back and other plans that we had, and it's just a matter of this kind of happen we are only ninety miles away from Cuba. We are going back. And that was before the invasion, of course. So and then a friend, a lot of my father's friends were involved in the Bay of Pigs. Things like that. So those terms and all of those activities that took place, I kept seeing them all along. I was so sure I was gonna go back. It was like it wasn't questioning I'm going back and my grandmother told me and my mother.

MGP= How long did you stay in that home?

AG= In that setting I stayed until after the invasion. My mother came over a month after the invasion. When she realized that this was going to be more than just a few months. It was going to be longer than that, so she came over to the United States.

MGP= And your father?

AG= My father, he was in prison until 1978. He came over with Toni Costa. The blind person. Then we would reunited at that time.

MGP= So actually you were for a very long time without ... did you ever feel you may not see your father after that again?

AG= After the invasion, I said to myself, and after my mother came, and my grandparents came and all my family started coming over. Then I realized that this is not a three month deal, this is going to be for a lifetime and I am not going to see my father again. I was very concerned. Then my father writing to me, like two or three letters I received from him throughout while he was in prison and things like that. And then friends of his came over that's how I found out about my father status being, what was going on. But there was always hope, because he was alive.

MGP= Tell me how was the reunion with you mother when she came. The reunion between your sister and you?

AG= We were, like I said, into different set of households. One Monday through Friday, one on the weekends. She came on a Wednesday. I remember very very well the day that she came. My sister and I were walking from school back to the house and I remember my mother come in this [inaudible, 17:30] shouting to us. For me that was the greatest thing on Earth. It was a very good experience because I had her again. We started sharing [Crying] a lot of things came to me at that time. [Wiping away tears from her eyes]

[Breaking in recording, 17:57-19:03]

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

MGP= When you all got back together, things were on smoothly?

AG= Well, as smooth as they could be. At that time she realized we are now, I had my... her parents were still in Cuba, a single mother with two children in the United States and with \$80.00 that's all she had. Because I remember that every week my grandparents and my mother would send me American dollars in letters. I would save them until she got here. So she had to start facing a new life style for her and for her children.

MGP= How was it growing up here in Miami?

AG= Well, I lived here for a number of years, then my mother, being a professor, we moved out of Miami. And we lived up north for a number of years. We live in Alabama and then we lived in Pennsylvania. And then when I graduated from high school I came back to Miami.

[Break in recording, 20:01-20:08]

AG= And my mother came back to Miami in 1967 also. She decided she wanted... she gave up teaching and she became a social worker.

MGP= Do you feel the experience of that period, even though it was short time, was that a lasting experience in your life?

AG= I think it has been, there will be, and it is. At that time what I resented the most was that my innocence as a child was being taken away. I realized at that time that the Revolution, the Cuban Revolution committed many more crimes than just the one taken away my innocence as a child. They committed crimes that are killing people, taking away their freedom, taken away their properties, imprisonment. So they committed a lot of crimes, but for me, the crime they committed to me was that they took away my innocence as a child. I didn't play with a doll again because I had to mature, I have to face exile. And I did mature a lot in that time in a very short span, at very young age. Looking back now as an adult that was just... nothing...

MGP=Now you are an adult, you have children of your own. You are faced with the same set of circumstances. You know your daughters were ten, would you?

AG= I have asked... that question a lot of times myself. If I would have the courage to do it. I think I would in the same circumstance because I think that freedom and dignity of man is very important.

MGP= So you have no regrets.

AG= [Shaking her head to imply no] No whatsoever.

MGP= Have you met Msgr. Walsh?

Interviewee: Alina Gomez

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

AG= If I have seen him?

MGP= Have you ever met him?

AG= Yes.

MGP= Tell me your recollections and his historic role in this all program.

AG= Whenever I see him, peace comes to my mind, he is very peaceful. Very serene, a very good person. Well rounded, well person. Good person.

MGP= And his historic role that he played. What do you think of him?

AG= I think that for him at that time, just being thrown into all these children coming over. Of course, I am sure he didn't realized the number of children that were going to come over in this Pedro Pan group. The way he just went about doing it and the way that he faced the circumstance and handled the whole thing for the well-being of us and for the well-being of children, and he didn't have any ties to us whatsoever. But he saw children in need and he was there for us.

MGP= You didn't meet James baker?

AG= Yes I did.

MGP= When at that time?

AG= Only once. The day that I arrived, he was there waiting for us.

MGP= How did your parents, your mother knew about Operation Pedro Pan?

AG= Because of the Finlays. Bertha and her husband, Franky Finlay.

MGP= Vamos a empezar my pregunta otra vez. My questions won't show, so you have to tell me, My mother learned...

AG= My mother learned the Pedro Pan group through Bertha Finlay and her husband Frank Finlay and they were the ones that arranged for us to come over. There were good friends of the family also.

MGP= Let's go back to the time that your father, finally, was able to join you, I mean you were adult...

AG= The last time I saw my father I was around eleven years old. Ten and a half, eleven years old. The next time I saw my father I was thirty-two years old with two children in the United States. It was very interesting. I remember him arriving, at that time, we gathered at the Dade County Auditorium. Because it was the first flight that came over with prisoners. It was a very chaotic day, was very disorganized, people, a lot of emotions taking place at that time. I met my father, we went home, and I remember I had a white Pontiac with those electric windows and he just look at that and he said look at that look

Interviewee: Alina Gomez
Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando
Date: August 1997
FIU Number: 530

where the Americans have done, electric windows, and went up and down, up and down. Because there was a time capsule for him, the last time he saw the car was in 1960. And this is 1978. All the changes that have taken place so. A lot of emotions. He met my husband for the first time, he met my children for the first time. He saw a woman in front of him when he only had a child.

MGP= And your relationship with him how did it get reestablish?

AG= My father had a very good sense of humor. The funny thing is that he has never spoken to us about his days in prison. I don't even know the number that he had. I don't even know the cause. What it was called. He does not want to remember that, he doesn't want to talk about that. He has never even mentioned any of his experience. He refers to my friends, my good friends and those days, but he has never told us anything that took place inside of that. I remember the first day after we gathered and took him home, we wanted to have dinner and I served at the table with the fork, knife and a plate, he could not grab a fork nor a knife. He grabbed a spoon, then he went to the kitchen and he looked around and he says, do you have any pot that I can borrow? I said why do you want a pot for? He says, I need some pot or pans, so I get this little pot that I had and that's where he ate, from the pot. And he didn't go out to eat with us in a restaurant for a long time. He would eat at home only. And he's incorporated in society very well after that.

MGP= And your relationship with him?

AG= It's very good. It is a good relationship. As good as a father-daughter relationship can be.

MGP= Well as you get older [interrupted by interviewee]

AG= Exactly. He probably thinks that I should call him more often. He probably thinks that I should spend more time with him, but in this society we are in a rush all the time.

MGP= Let me tell you, he is right. Being a father... Is there anything else that you feel would be relevant that we should talk about?

AG= No, I think you cover pretty much, I think that you have taken me through my emotions very well.

MGP= Okay.

[End of interview, 28:16]

Completed by: Ximena Valdivia, August 29, 2020.