

Interviewee: Olga Chao

Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando

Date: August 1997

FIU Number: 530

Olga Chao = OC

Manuel Gonzalez Pando = MGP

OC= Asi que los almuerzos eran... [switch to English] the luncheons were fantastically, I realized today, they were really a very well planned lesson. I remember being a little shy with Miguel Angel Asturias, who had been duly explained as a Nobel Prize winner and you know what a Nobel Prize winner is, of course, and I had no clue when I was eight, so. Then I was really impressed and I sat at his side cutting a fish or something and I wasn't talking and so my father started asking me questions on whether I had read any of Mr. Asturias books and I said no, I don't think so. Then he asked me if I was going to read them and then, without realizing what was happening, I was in the conversation. And the other side of the educational part of those fantastic and perhaps, I'm sure, I'm exaggerating my memories, but they're very good, had to do with my mother. On the other hand, serving the table every day with priceless porcelain and crystal, and silver. Someone broke a baccarat glass or plate, she wouldn't blink. And one day I said, aren't you upset that so and so let fall this glass? I like this glass. As a matter of fact, it wasn't baccarat it was crystal Saint Louis in very bright colors. And I love those glasses and she said, I cried for two hours after they left [Laughing]. And she said the equivalent of grace under pressure which was, you never make a person feel bad because a thing broke. And I must have been ten, and I've gotten into all kinds of trouble for adhering to that. So the lunch was educational in a very real emotional and social level and an intellectual level. When the revolution started, mom and dad had been part of the urban twenty six of July. Specially my mom carrying medicine and all kinds of victuals to the Escambray, which of course was closer to Matanzas, so she took several runs in her car to the Escambray. Taking things to Che Guevara and later to Camilo Cienfuegos, when the revolution was moving on a little faster. My dad was involved with writing programs, and manifestos and whatnot, and getting people out of jail in the city. So when the revolution finally was there after the first of January. We received a lot of the new dominating leadership class and it was soon obvious that my mother wasn't going to sit in those lunches because of, not of their political thoughts, but because of their atrocious manners. And my father was getting more and more depressed, early on, with the fact that there wasn't any thought but a Marxist thought and he thought it was a libertarian revolution. So quite early and quite privately, they both were sick about what was happening. And then refused to leave like a lot of friends because they felt that they could do something in Cuba and dad was involved with the cooperatives and so on, which had been his ideal and his dream as a young man. Basically, you know, he really ran afoul of Raul Castro and Fidel and was put in jail in the fall of [19]60. So all of a sudden, in October of 1960 the family started to really tremble. Not so much with fear, as with the impact of this incomprehensible thing

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that was happening. Even with my parents' horror with the shootings and "los fusilamientos" and so on, which made them very much against the revolution at an early time. And so to me, was the absolutely clear cut point 'cause my father is truly a libertarian, was more than... never was a "Fidelista," but was very much a revolutionary. And so seeing him in jail was an absolute loud voice that this was a force regime, that this was not a free place where ideas could develop. And all of a sudden, it was amazing, but that house which was very filled with children, all my friends came to the house. Two of my friends were great friends of my dad, two other were great friends of my mom. My brother Sammy had friends, he is two years younger. We are five. So there were huge amounts of kids and there were three or four servants in the house and their families would come by if they either had a problem or just to say hi. So it was very big house and a very alive house. In October of 1960 there was a chill, really, over the house. So before that time when my father was put in jail, the sounds that I remember are, really, opera or Cuban music, which were the two things that were played in in the house and the sea, of course, right across from the sea. When all of a sudden there was a real great silence.

MGP= Do you remember when you first heard the possibility that you would be sent to the United States? When some of your friends were sent earlier, do you know how...?

OC= I was very, very involved in Cuban Catholic Action since I was fourteen. And I had been in the... when was that student strike against Batista? [In Spanish] Fue en Abril? [19]58 so I had been warned by the local police during Batista's time to keep out of political activities. His name was El Chato Miranda in Matanzas and he said "de tal palo tal astilla", you are really just like your parents so you are too young for this. Don't help with any strikes, but I did help organize the students' strike and I... It's amazing to me today at fifty three that I was fourteen. It doesn't keep any kind of weight or relation to the way I saw my kids at fourteen, without the challenge of all of these upheaval and imbalance, but I felt very adult. Perhaps they did too, at fourteen. Being involved in Catholic Action, Catholic Action, I think more than a spiritual quest at the time, which I certainly believed it was then, it was a very empowering youth movement. That allowed us to travel and to organize cells of Catholic youth and train them, guajiros, "peasants," and students and I loved it. I loved getting on a bus alone in Cuba at fourteen. Nobody that I knew socially did that, so that was another great appeal. Extent of my adolescent rebellion was to be very socially minded and so that was done through Catholic Action, but it was very empowering. I did learn to speak in public. I did learn to organize things. I learn how to make meeting agendas and all kinds of leadership things, that again, I realized later I wasn't aware that this was happening, but in 1960 when my mother or my father was in jail, I was burned an effigy in El Parque de La Libertad in in Matanzas. I was sixteen, a senior in high school, I had as an aside, I had wanted to go to a boarding school in Switzerland, where all the heroines of all the novels I read went. And my mother said that was a very anti Cuban movement for someone who was thirteen and I would become a socialite and perfectly useless woman. She wouldn't send me to Europe or to a boarding

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school. And I was furious, and so she wanted me to go to Mary G or American Dominican Academy or boarding school in Havana was fine, but not in Switzerland and not in Virginia. As a rebellion, I said I'm not going to any private school. I'm going to Instituto de Matanzas. Which of course was a great learning institution, and it was, again, nobody at all, that I knew was there. And It was a lot of fun. I met a lot of people who young people who lived in Matanzas that I never encountered socially and that were great friends through those years. Including the head of the Communist Party who was exiled during Batista's times and then came back, and betrayed me, really, because we were good friends. Study friends. We played tennis and basketball and whatever, and burn me an effigy [10:43]. I never saw him after that. But Rogelio Consuegra, the son of the baseball player who was in my class, and I were both burn big straw dummies with the sign with my name and another one with his for our counterrevolutionary activities. We had organized a small strike in the Instituto to protest the killing of two young men from Matanzas who had been killed. We were pretty sure by the government. They're kind of nameless. I don't even remember their names today. It was tragic. They were classmates of ours, and the militia had taken them and apparently torture them to the point where were their corpses were returned to their parents, they were unrecognizable, almost unrecognizable. Rogelio and I protested so we were burning effigy. So a long roundabout way to tell you that at that point my mother said well, and I remember she came home and she said, well, you're not going to Switzerland, but you are going to have to leave Cuba. And I said, Oh no, I'm not leaving Cuba. Dad is in jail and you are here and all my brothers, my sisters here, and my friends from Catholic Action. I have a lot of work to do in the Instituto. No way I'm leaving Cuba. And she started crying. I've seen my mother cried twice. The day that Batista gave the coup of d'état. I was in second grade and I came home. The nuns I was in a nuns' school in Matanzas and I came home very happy like with the hurricane because school was out in the middle of the day, my perspective was very clear I was going to go swimming. It was a beautiful March day. And Mommy, Mommy, I run into the living room and my mother was crying. My mother is very strong and a very independent woman and my mother is not someone who cries, unless it is an old movie, but life. I mean she's a terrific person facing life. So that day, March 7th, I was just stunned. And I don't think I saw her cry again except in movies. Until I told her I wouldn't leave. Darn it, she got me. You know, I mean it worked. So I said, of course you know. I can't stand the thought of your father in jail in Havana and now at sixteen you are going to be in jail sooner or later. How about sooner? I mean they are right after you. Just burned you an effigy and I have friends that are facilitating kids leaving. I said how am I going to leave? We don't have anybody right now that we know in the United States, and she said I'll explain it to you later. And that was the first time I heard. I never heard the phrase or the noun or the name Pedro Pan, until years and years and years later. But she talked about Esther de La Portilla, who was one of her very best friends from the time they were young brides and Rafael Morales, her husband, Ester's husband had been a classmate of my dad's in La Salle. So Esther got my mom involved in getting passports

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and arranging for kids in Matanzas to come out through Pedro Pan. And without the label I knew then what she was doing. This was probably late November, I guess. I am not too clear. I probably need two Yungian analysis to really put together and recoup all the memories from this time, because it was so traumatic. I started at that point, then she told me prepare yourself mentally for what you are going to do. Of course, we both thought that I would be back in six months, I think like everybody else. So that wasn't so hard and one night I told her I was a little bit afraid, she said are you afraid? and I said yes, I'm a little bit afraid. My English is not that good. I spoke French fluently. I said, can I go to France? These people have visas to France, but they didn't so my English was going to have to do. Also, I said I just hate to leave, it is very cowardly of me to leave and leave my dad in jail. And then she said like if you could save them. If they are going to kill him, they are going to kill him. I said Mom I mean, you could really could say something else and she said they're not going to kill him. I said why? and said, well there a little bit intimidated and I said intimidated by whom and she said by me. She would go. I went with her a couple of times to see dad at G-2 or in Columbia where he was a prisoner, and. The militia or the Sergeant or military man would say no, no, you cannot come in, or would be very, very arrogant and very, try to be very offensive and my mother would say. Young man, if you were in Sierra Maestra, I was transporting weapons to the Escambray. I do not what the heck you've done with the promises of our revolution, but I am going to sit right here until you let me see my husband. You are not going to tell me what to do. And they always let her see her husband and. You know. So basically, when I told her I was afraid. She said. That's good because I was getting very cocky and very arrogant with all these Catholic Action and leadership stuff, and thinking I knew so much. Like all sixteen year olds. Fear was all right.

MGP= Did you ever visited your father after you knew you were leaving?

OC= We needed to go so that he could sign the patria potestad, the parental permit authority to leave.

MGP= Perdoname. Mi pregunta... claro yo tengo que quitar un monton de cosas, editar a lot of things. Cuando me empieces algo, tu dijiste ahora por ejemplo, we need to go to get his signature. We need to go to jail. Tu entiendes, porque o si no a lo major esta es la primera vez que se menciona que él esta en la carcel...

OC= Okay. No, no, no. Make a direct reference. No, we needed to go to jail to Quinta Avenida, "Fifth Avenue" to G-2. He was still there and we needed his signature for me to leave because, of course, I was a minor. Again, you know was...

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