

Interviewee: Olga Chao  
Interviewer: Manuel Gonzalez Pando  
Date: August 1997  
FIU Number: 531

Olga Chao = OC

Manuel Gonzalez Pando = MGP

MGP= Let's take up again.

OC= Si, la visita esa al G-2.

MGP= In English.

OC= I am sorry Miguel. You know that this just points out in true psychoanalytic fashion, the emotional content of this entire period. It's amazing that this happened almost forty years ago. It's not even... It's not sadness. It's not terror, it's just a huge amount of emotion associated...

MGP= It's loss.

OC= It's a huge sense of loss. It's a world that has absolutely gone with the good and the bad. And with mostly good and not just through young woman's eyes. But just above all, just a very lively, very intelligent, are very good people that I think perhaps has become a little bit sharper edged, both in exile, and certainly in Cuba. But that somehow, of course, has lost its innocence completely as a group. I mean there was there was a real nice tone to Cubans. I'm not saying that we don't have it anymore, but it's it's much too sharp edged to at least what my recollection is of the emotional tone of my parents' friends and my friends and people everywhere around me in Cuba. Perhaps vicissitudes and need and challenge makes you bolder and brighter, and you learn a lot and you make lots of achievements, but they sharpen your edges. Anyway, we went to jail to get dad's signature. And that was a very good exercise in developing a British upper lip, because naturally I couldn't let dad know that I was upset. I felt it was very important that he knew that I would see him soon. I would be back soon and that he would be out of there. I managed to visit without becoming emotional, which was very hard, but then I was really quite terrified to think they would shoot dead. Anything could happen, despite my mother's brave attempt at telling me that she could intimidate them. I just believed the 10 percent of that.

MGP= Any advice he gave you at that last visit?

OC= No, no, we both, my mother and I, try to keep it light and witty and non-emotional. Because my father is a romantic and a poet at heart and he was going to absolutely be distraught. You know, he was being tortured and he was surviving in jail. So we both felt that it was very important to not break down or get emotional or romantic in any way in a grand Spanish or Cuban manner of a great parting. This was a very matter of course thing and we were going to see each other soon, and I have to say that earthiness that that element of practicality in my life is very much my mother with her German and English

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ancestors lurking. Just really insisting on moving on and just not to make a big deal out of things. My father, who's the exact opposite practical in some things, but a total romantic, would have written an elegy and so we didn't want that to happen because it would have debilitated him. And I am afraid both of us too. So while all of this was happening my three brothers and sisters, the youngest of whom was two, were in Matanzas with my grandmother, and friends. So we were always driving hundred kilometers, one hundred and twenty kilometers. My mother drove very fast to go to Havana and come right back was my first experience in fast commuting. So that was good. People in those days, and you may remember this actually thought of a trip to go from Havana to Varadero or to... we didn't. We went to Havana to theater and it was part of a worldview that my parents had, which was really little askew always was never well focused in the upper middle class of Cuba, or how things were supposed to be. You weren't supposed to go theater in Havana, and of course the answer was why not? So why can't you drive back at two in the morning? So things were always extremely possible in my family.

MGP= Take us through those last days before you left, not only in terms of the practical, but also the emotional...?

OC= I went to the Cemetery.

MGP= Just before I left...

OC= Just before I left, I went to the Cemetery of San Carlos in the outskirts of Matanzas. Which Leon Uris describes as a little place with tombstones and it killed me when I read Topaz and that description because of course it is utterly wrong. The cemetery was a magnificent Spanish deal from colonial times with great pantheons and an absolutely baroque tombs and you name it. So this guy is describing Matanzas, obviously without having seen it, which is one of my great literary disappointments of all times. That's just the digressive curve that I threw you. I went to the cemetery to say goodbye to my great-great-grandfathers and mothers. It sounds morbid, but you know very well that in our culture this was not scary and not weird, and because of a strong sense of family instilled and pride on my mambises grandparents or grandfathers and granduncles and great-uncles, on the Nodarse side and on the Schwier side as well. So I decided that I needed to go over the important points of Matanzas that I wanted to keep in my retina. I didn't take pictures, because they wouldn't be enough. So big mistake, forty years later. But I walked the colonial side of Matanzas, which I loved. I. Knew every stone of the colonial side of Matanzas, and that had to do with a little bit of my father talking about history books and taking us, my friends and I, to the City Hall to look for old

[08:23-18:56 video freezes, no transcription]

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OC= ...or I die at a hundred, but in the meantime. In the meantime at that point, the woman with, I remember her eyes with just horrendous anguish giving me her little girl and telling me to take care of her [Crying]. I didn't quite know how to take care of myself, except I thought I did of course, and we each had \$5 [five dollars]. We were allowed to leave with \$5. I didn't take jewelry or anything else out because mom was really deadly afraid that I would be stopped in the search or be body searched and then, of course, be stopped or put in jail. So we were in that KLM and I thought my feelings were not of despair at that point. Like most teenagers, I just felt that it was tearable that I was leaving, but now that I was on the plane it was going to be all right and exciting and I was going to help everybody I could to overthrow Castro and come back to Cuba as soon as I could. We landed in Kingston very quickly. My recollection, I have no idea if it is true or not, but my recollection of the Kingston Airport is of a hut, with just lots of people packed into a tiny space and I thought what the heck is this? Where are we? We must have looked like a picture of Hungarian refugees or something. I, the oldest bravest person in charge of these fourteen kids. All of them just hugging my legs and getting close to me. I saw a Priest or someone with a Roman color, and approached him and I had rehearsed the English and I said father, we are from Cuba and I think you want to take care of us. And he said, I with a very British accent, he said, indeed I do. Then I said, the boys are going to the Jesuits and the girls are going to the Franciscan mothers. And I said, I want to see where the boys go. And he said, no, you are not supposed to go there. And I said, I am sorry I've been charged by their mothers. I don't know how I said this. I could read English, it's like jumping the fence in a bullring. I mean adrenaline makes you even speak in tongues. I'm convinced. So we took a long ride to the Jesuit school. We left the boys, half of whom were crying. Because we couldn't sleep together even in those days, or special in those days. Then the girls, all of us were taken to the Franciscan convent, was a very, very posh girl school from where you could see the Blue Mountains of Jamaica. It had a beautiful Chapel, it was really like a converted hotel, with glorious rooms with a balcony and a marvelous view of Kingston Bay in the mountains in the back. The nun, the Mother Superior, took our passports and our documents for safekeeping and we were all given a single separate room. Which the rooms were magnificent, had brocaded canopies and good antiques, and I remember being entertained for about five minutes with how nice the room was, and then I thought I can't sleep tonight. I am totally insomniac and so I sat in the balcony all night. Looking out. That was my first night out of Cuba. The next morning was my seventeenth birthday, and I finally broke down and cried when the nun dedicated the mass to my good fortune [Getting emotional]. She had seen my birthday. It is so nice when people really take interest in doing that sort of things. That ended soon enough when I landed in Miami though. And now I'm not going to cry anymore. Landing in Miami was... We left around ten o'clock in the morning, I think, I am not sure. There was, I don't know if it was Monsignor Walsh, then Father Walsh. It may have been Father Walsh waiting for us; or, social worker called Adriana who had graduated from Barry. I remember as a Cuban American young woman who

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was constantly showing off how well she spoke English, and I thought that was quite gosh, so I don't know her name, her last name. We were taken to Saint Joseph's Villa for orphaned and poor girls somewhere in the northwest, and we have to ask Elly Choviano or one of the people who have done the history of Pedro Pan, because I've repressed half of these names. I remember the sequence and the feelings, some of the faces, some of the sounds, but I don't remember streets, I don't remember names which is not at all like me. I do remember names and I do remember streets. So, the emotional impact of the time was such that we were taken to this typically Miami, two storied stucco house in northwest Miami somewhere, and the Sisters of Saint Joseph's order ran it, and the Mother Superior was a heavy nun with her big habit, so she swayed from side to side. There were about twenty nine girls in that house at that time. Susie Inclán was there, Celita Ruíz, Vivian García Robiou, María Carlota Valdés, Liliana Valdés. I didn't know their names then, but we became fast friends in Saint Joseph's. We were all, of course, going to be back in Cuba in three to six months, and we were all pretty upper middle class, had never made a bed in our lives. It sounds like unimportant, but the shock of great British and American culture upon Cuban girls of privilege is not to be taken lightly, Okay? Making a bed was a mess and it was a challenge, but we did it of course. I was in Saint Joseph's for about a month and a half before being sent to another orphanage in Washington.

MGP= How did they treat you?

OC= How do they treat me? Kindly, but this was.

MGP= Are we rolling? Si

OC= Kindly, gorgeously, strangely. This was our encounter with Catholic Irish, basically, culture. Remember I had organized strikes. I was in charge. I was secretary general of Cuban Catholic Youth.

[27:21-37:47; video freezes, no transcription]

OC= ... and of course. [In Spanish] Cómo se llaman? losetas. clay or tiles but not linoleum. So it was a fun new material and we wondered how come it shown so much. Of course, we found out the next morning. Then, we made it shine, waxing it with el caballo, "the big horse", we called it the horse, that round machine polisher. These were Sisters of Charity with their wimple and huge head at the time, and so on. All the girls there were pretty much delinquents or abused girls or daughters of prostitutes. I mean, they were not our same social strata, and it was a very illuminating experience. I mean, it was very nice what can I tell you; except that we were all writing our mothers that we were in a delightful boarding school, enjoying Washington D.C. They would have been absolutely horrified and choking had they known the stories we heard and how much we learned [Laughing] in Saint Vincent's Home for orphan girls. Things we had never heard of.

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One's mother having more than three boyfriends, lovers at once, and things that were very improper for our Victorian Cuban ears in 1961. But being a romantic, my first sight of Washington from the air was of the Lincoln Monument which was illuminated. Everything was very limited. I guess this was February twenty-second, President's Day or weekend. Washington was a great place to be. And Saint Vincent's Home, I mean, the things we did there were... we had a lot of fun in the middle of all the tears and so on. The eight of us revolutionized the orphanage, of course. I mean we taught Spanish to the girls, we taught table manners, we... I don't know what we did. We took them with us to museums. We had an impact. The Sisters liked us, but I think feared us a little bit, and didn't quite understand the weirdness. They presumed we were spoiled brats. One of us, Mariaca, said, I don't make my bed and she was very huffy about it and then she made her bed, but they cured cold by giving you a spoon full of Vicks VapoRub, heated. The screens of the Cubans were legendary, refusing to take this medicine and explaining to the nuns that Vicks was used for rubs not for ingesting, but they did make you drink. Take that thing if you had a cold. It was it was a typical boarding school in that sense. We made it a fun place. The Valdés sisters had very bad news about their mother, who had been changed to Guanajay prison from G-2. They were very sad and very depressed for days in the middle of all of this. So I decided that we needed to organize a great party. Susie played the accordion. Susie Inclán. This was beginning of March and I remember telling Sister Superior my first huge lie of exile, which was that this was Cuba's independence, and that we needed to celebrate it with cakes and balloons and music. And we did, March third. Poor nun, she is probably, I mean I'm sure she is dead already, but she was confused to begin with about where Cuba was, let alone which day the Cuban independence was. So they were innocent pranks that made us survive the orphanage.

MGP= How long were you there and where you able to talk to your mother? What is happening with your father during this time?

OC= He was still in jail. He was never indicted or tried. He was just...

MGP= Who is he?

OC= My father was not... They had in Columbia military. They had a prison in Columbia military camp, but it was a temporary prison. Dad was there for a little while and then he was forever at G-2 in Quinta Avenida, in "Fifth Avenue." He was never tried. He was just held a prisoner from October ninth until April third. He was let go by mistake. A santiaguero, not a santiaguero a militia from Sierra Maestra, who was in charge of the detail at the prison, as I understand the story, let him out by mistake. He just walked out and went to, I think a friend's house near Kasalta in Fifth Avenue, who was shocked to see him and drove him straight to Matanzas. My mother had prepared a boat for him and two friends that were waiting for dad to come out of jail to leave by boat. I think he, my dad, was the first balsero. Either Fernando Rodríguez of Varadero Supermarket, or someone else who had a store in Varadero where my dad own a building, were in that

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boat when they left. It was a sixteen-foot boat with a small outboard motor. My mother... calls between Cuba and the United States happened, as a matter of course in those days, but we always spoken in code because we knew that if you had a relative or someone close to you in jail, they would tap your phones and listen to what or we presume that was happening. So my mother called and told me that, in code, that my dad had left, and I understood that he had left by boat. And that Mario Martínez, who is now dead; who died very old, at a very old age about three years ago here in Miami, Was very distinguished poet, matancero poet and gentleman farmer. Mario was a great friend of my dad's and was here, was the contact to call here. So I call Mario and he hadn't heard from dad, so we presume that dad was lost at sea, in fact, they were taken by a storm and were without an engine and just wondering in that little boat for four days. A Norwegian pleasure yacht picked them up somewhere as they were about to reenter Cuban territorial waters. Then Mario called me one day and said, you know dad had third degree burns or whatever, but he was fine. So an interesting thing of this period was how we went to school in Washington, when we were picked up at the airport by the Archbishop, he asked us what we were studying. We were in a huge limo being driven.

[46:11-56:42, video freezes, no transcription]

OC= And she walked to our home ...

MGP= She?

OC= My mother,

MGP= Empieza otra vez.

OC= My mother was let go together with a lot of women in that... they were put in a holding pen in the carcel municipal, in the "municipal jail," in Matanzas. Which was near the train station, very ugly Victorian thing that looks like Victoria station miniaturized. The jail is nearby or was nearby, because the revolutionary government of Castro has changed the physiognomy of cities not in provable or appreciable waste. But I've seen pictures of Matanzas where some of the things we would be taken care of in this country are all gone, not just a colonial buildings, but beautiful sights of the city and so on.

Anyway that was about twenty or thirty blocks from, perhaps fifty blocks from my house, the jail. And my mother was let go and simply walked to the house to find it sealed. They had a special seal like in the scene of a murder or a crime that had some words written that the person who owned that property was in jail and had lost their property. So when she got to the house and saw the seals, my mother pulled it off, tore it off. A couple of militia men, these, of course, are stories from neighbors who left Cuba since they have told me what happened. Neighbors telling her that it was a crime, she was going to be put right back in jail and she said, well this is my house. Nobody else has lived in this house except my family, for two hundred years. I didn't steal it. It is mine and nobody can take it away while I am alive and I am here. So let's rip this off and she

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found a key and she went in and indeed two militia came in to see what she was doing there, and she invited them to come in and have coffee, into her house. They didn't know quite what to do, but that same afternoon it was solved and she was there. Mom was in that house, this was probably, the end of May. Perhaps she wasn't in jail two months because this was the end of May, yeah, and she, my mother, and my four siblings came out of Cuba to Miami in June of [19]61.

MGP= How did you get to see them again?

OC= I took another Greyhound from Washington with my brother. The nuns would help me pay for the ticket. They would help me meaning, they would get me a job in the kitchen or in the reception desk off the college or whatever. So I would put money aside to buy the ticket and I know I wanted to spend the summer with my dad in Miami. I bought two tickets one-way Washington- Miami. You know it was a very interesting ride, because this was the Deep South in 1961. And in Washington, I had seen and visited with the Kennedys, with Robert Kennedy in particular, and who had warned me not to march in any civil rights marches because I could be deported. I was parolee, I remember his very nasal voice telling me that, and I said it was a moral imperative to stop discrimination that existed, and I didn't think I was essential to every march, but if I found myself compelled to march, I would. And I trusted completely that he would get me out of whatever trouble I got in. I remember him saying that things didn't work quite that way. But it was very much the Deep South and we went through in that Greyhound in the summer of [19]61. With colored facilities separate from whites. I was thrown out of one water fountain because I stood on the colored line. I thought it was extremely shocking and immoral to see that. I thought it was just despicable. At this phenomenal country, this terrific country could be so different once you went to New York or Pennsylvania and you're in Washington and things were civilized.

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by: Ximena Valdivia, August 14, 2020.