

Interviewee: Marisela Verena

Interviewer: Jose Cardona

Date: April 1998

FIU Number: 541

Marisela Verena = MV

Jose Cardona= JC

JC= ... That you were coming to the United States. How did your parents tell you? What was it like?

MV= Very honestly. I was eleven, my sister had left, my brother had left. We all left alone, each in its own time. Why? Probably because my parents were waiting for something to change for the positive. So first they sent my sister, who was the eldest, then my brother, and I was eleven. By the time, that it was time for me to leave I felt relief because I hated piano lessons [Laughing]. I wasn't going to have any more piano lessons

JC= So it was basically...

MV= Well you can tell that I wasn't much aware of the dramatic consequences of what was going on. I mean, I said wow I don't have to take any more piano lessons. This is a child's point of view. Really a child's point of view. Of course then... you do not realize of what's going, you don't realize the depth of what's going to happen to you.

JC= When your brother and sister left, you told me they had left before you. Had they been gone a long time before you?

MV= No, my sister left in February, my brother left in May and I was given a visa in July. I came in July. You know that I have realized that everybody, every Cuban knows the date that they left Cuba? This is something that is never forgotten, you can ask any Cuban even if he is senile and he'll tell you the day they left Cuba.

JC= Why do you think that is?

MV= It's obvious, they didn't wanna leave. It's a landmark in their lives, definitely.

JC= Can you tell me about the actual departure? Do you remember the day you left, saying goodbye to your parents?

MV= Yes, that I remember very much. We are from Pinar del Rio, western most province. The most beautiful province. I went to Havana. My father went with me and my mother. There was a militia man who said to my father, if you do not leave within so many miles of the airport, your daughter will not be allowed to go. I remember he was very mad about it, but he had to be subdued because it was true. They had all the power. My mother was the only one allowed inside. We stayed probably over eight hours waiting for the plane to depart. Once we were taken inside the what we call the fish bowl, everybody has mentioned I am sure the "pecera," we were separated from anybody else except that we could do signs through the glass. Through the glass of that place. I do remember my

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mother crying and me kind of consoling her. Saying everything is alright mom, it's gonna be okay. And I was eleven, but of course then I realized what was going on.

JC= The mindset of your parents if you can kind of recall at that time; was it something like you were telling me they thought that maybe this was going to be temporary, a few months at most.

MV= Right.

JC= Do you remember that. Do you remember that type of conversation with them. Do you remember what they told you, don't worry you'll be back in a few months?

MV= I do not remember that. I do maybe remember that my father kept saying that this was not going to be a long time, but I do not remember them telling me that. No, I don't.

JC= Okay. What thoughts went through your mind the day or when you actually got in the plane when you're on route to Miami. Your mindset changed or you still...

MV= No. That I must really have blocked, because I don't really feel anything. I don't remember anything. I don't remember fear, I do not. Then of course I was always very much... a pretty, what is the word... I don't know what the word is... [In Spanish] una niña arrojada. I was pretty...

JC= Bold, audacious?

MV= Yes, I was pretty much an extrovert. I even remember when I was being... when they took us inside to check our luggage, because every kid had their luggage checked. Probably we were taken grenades or anything like that [Laughing]. We were allowed only two pieces of clothing, one dress, one... two dresses and two skirts and all of that. I do remember starting talked with the guy that was looking through my suitcase. He was a friend of a doctor that was... no he was grateful to a doctor that had saved his mother's life and was from Pinar del Rio and this doctor was a very good friend of ours. So like I started talking to this guy and this guy started talking to me. So, I told my mother, hey I met, you know this is a very Cuban thing. I met this guy that knows doctor so and so, I already made a friend in there... Culo cagao, que se dice en español. Bur, I do not remember really having any special emotion on that plane. No fear, maybe it was numbness, maybe it was fear that it was like... hidden behind, fear hidden behind numbness, I don't know.

JC= Your arrival in Miami. You get here at the airport, you strike a conversation with this gentleman. Or actually, you got to Miami, what was your...

MV= My conversation was in Cuba

JC= What was your first impression of the United States?

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MV= Well, things are happening too fast and you are very young and this is very big, a big place. We were taken to a guy named George. George was very nice and he gave us chewing gum. We waited there and some kids went away because they had relatives and they had family that were taking care of them and the ones that were going to the camp just stay behind. George kept us behind. Kept us apart and then when it was time we were put on a little bus and we were taking to Florida City. We got there already by night. Then you start like looking at, this is really happening to me. We were given a dollar in dimes. We were given a soap, a bar of soap. We were given an aerogram, so we could write our first letter to our parents. And we were assigned our foster home. And you got there. You realized you were... in a camp. You were in a strange land; this was not mom and pop anymore.

JC= Is that when, obviously reality begins to set in and now things are becoming more permanent, you are in this strange place. You realized this is where I have to live.

MV= Right

JC= How soon was it, maybe the next day or the day after that. I don't know what were your emotions when that eleven-year-old naive girl begins to realize that this is more permanent.

MV= I think this is when your survival switch turns on. Then you say, let me look around and I am going to start surviving. And who do I have to, just start looking, you start seeing who is your friend, who may be your friend. The foster home that I went to, the foster parents were nice, but they were not loving. They were okay. Some girls went to foster homes that they had loving foster parents, they were very warm. I did not have warm foster parents, they were not loving. They were just doing a job. I understand they had a lot of responsibility and they probably were going through their own trauma, but they were not sweet. I do remember, for instance, being assigned the bed right next to... this were two story houses, and I was assigned the bed right next to the stairs. The lady would sleep upstairs, there were some rooms for girls upstairs, for the older girls. And downstairs we had some bunk beds and I was given a kind of daybed. Every morning she would go to Mass, this lady, would go to Mass at six a.m., and she would wake me up, for me to wake up the rest of the girls. This was probably my first, the first sign of responsibility, because you know when you are a kid you take like two hours just to get up and your mother has to drag you out of bed and you don't want to go to school. And this is something you allow yourself to do because you can do it with your parents, now here I was in boot camp. I mean, she would just touch my leg and I was up, and I would wake everybody else up. There was one girl that arrived a day after me, she was like nine. I've never forgot she, her name was Ada, she was a nine-year-old girl and she would pee. She was obviously very upset. She started being, of course, target of mockery of the other girls. So I started covering up for her. She would have to sleep; finally, she wet her bed do many times that they put her to sleep in one of those beach chairs with just a sheet. She was

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having a rough time, but I felt I could try to protect her. It's a matter of character, you kind of try to be stronger or are stronger than others. There was one time that I was, I had a very bad pain in my stomach and I had about possible appendicitis in Cuba, before I left. I didn't say anything, I shut my mouth. I remember somebody went and told the guy, the foster father that I had a pain and he took me, like he was bawling me out, he was screaming, took me to the infirmary, but in a very rough way, because he said that he had lost a brother to appendicitis. So he took me there scolding me, but he was, of course, being, he was protective but as I said they were not loving people.

JC= Your foster parents were Cubans?

MV= Yea, they were Cubans. Everybody was Cuban there.

JC= So you were at the camp, you were in Florida City.

MV= Right. Florida City, in girls camp Florida City.

JC= How long were you in the camp?

MV= July until September.

JC= That's when your parents came?

MV= No

JC= What happened then?

MV= I was sent to Iowa. When I first got to the camp, you had a regular meeting with the social worker, who kind of look you over a few times in several weeks. I guess they made psychological reports or profiles or whatever. And I said I have a sister, my sister had already left when I got to the camp my sister had already been taken to Iowa to a school. She went with ten other Cuban girls and they were all together there. So, as per instructions from my parents and as you may think it would be logical, I said I want to go over where my sister is. Meanwhile my brother is in Matecumbe and I was in Florida City. Every day there were buses that would bring the boys to the girls' camp when they had relatives, if they had cousins or they had a sister, so I would see my brother. My brother would come fill to the... there was not an inch in his body that didn't have mosquito bites. And he was pretty much, very upset. He was very upset. He was, I think, fourteen at the time. So I said, I want to go with my sister and every time I had a meeting with the social worker I would said I wanna go to Our Lady of Angels Academy, which was the name of the place. You assume that this is being taken care of, so one time they said you are leaving tomorrow. That's it, you are leaving tomorrow. You tried to set up camp, because you already you left your house, you left your mother, you left your land. And then you say okay, now I am going to see what this is all about, you start making some kind of friends, you start trying to make this your territory, and then they say okay you are leaving again. So, you got to leave again. I packed up. I was taken to the

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airport and I was given a ticket and I was put on a plane. I spoke, probably, five words in English, pencil, horse, girl, boy. Plane landed in Chicago, the whole plane... everybody deplaned and there was nobody waiting for me in Chicago, in O'Hare Airport. So, I just stood there, stood there, I stood there and there was nobody. Nobody would come claim me. I saw a couple with a young girl, probably a teenager, cannot remember their faces. I thought I had heard them speaking in Spanish on the plane, but I wasn't sure. I just saw that there was nobody in the plane, everybody left, nobody would asked me who I was. I went to them and said do you speak Spanish, and they said yes. They had left and they were like they were lost, but they were adults. They were lost adults. I said, I am going, supposedly, to I kept saying my sister's, the place where my sister was. This was in Clinton, Iowa. Clinton, like the president. This is a small town borderline with Illinois. I had to take a plane to take me to Des Moines and you had to cross the whole airport to do this. You had to go to another completely different gate, but I did not know any of this, nobody gave me any instructions. This is incredible. It is incredible when you see it in the distance. They said okay, they probably saw this girl that was alone and did not know where to go and they had to take that same plane. Of course, this was sent by the angels, which we all have. They were a Latin American family that were taking the young girl to study English in some school, a high school. But they had to go to that gate, they were looking for that gate. In their poor English, they asked somebody in the airport. I just said wherever they're going I am going with them, because at least they speak my language, but they were going there. I got in the plane and then there was in Des Moines a social worker. A blue-eyed, blond social worker, very smilish, understanding American lady with a little girl waiting for me. And took me to an orphanage and left me there without any explanation. That I haven't forgotten, and that I haven't forgiven.

JC= Tell me about that?

MV= No, don't do that [Crying expression]

JC= Do you know where your sister was?

MV= Yes.

JC= So she took you to an orphanage, you weren't, nothing was explained to you?

MV= [Crying] No

JC= You are an eleven-year-old child thinking you are going through this whole journey. You go from Chicago to Des Moines. This woman picks you up takes you to an orphanage...

MV= [Crying] Yeah. [Inaudible 18:45-18:53]. To this day, I hate lies. I never lie and I hate lies. Because I wasn't lie to I was just, maybe, I wasn't considered a human being. I was eleven and I was taken there. And I had to go through, you know, abandoned children can be very cruel. Because they have to make, you know Lord of the Flies, you have to make your own system of authority and I didn't speak any English. I got there and I was target

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of cruelty. I was the goat, expiatory goat, which I understand in the distance, but not at the point. There was a nun there that spoke Spanish, because she had been in Mexico. I spoke to her and I said why am I not with my sister. She said, they don't have your age grade in that school. They made a call, they called that night, they called my sister and my sister said there is kids, there is kindergarten kids here. So you could tell this was a mystery... a terrible organization. There was no organization. We were being sent to orphanages, and we were being sent to reform schools. I mean kids that probably never left their nannies' sides were going to reform schools.

JC= When did you see your sister?

MV= I saw her like a must have been a month and a half later, I think, maybe two. It must have been three months. I think it was three months that I stayed there and it was hellish for me, because then I was waiting for something. It was like waiting for the sentence, you know for you to get released from a sentence. I was really having a bad time... in there. Not because of the nuns or anything, I was not been mistreated at all by the nuns. It was more the kids and my own subjective attitude towards the place that I felt that I didn't belong there. That I should be with somebody that I knew. It's just the fact that you think that something is going to happen to you and all of a sudden it's different and there is nothing that you can do about it. That you are totally impotent. This is something that has, that sticks.

JC= Does the reencounter with your sister, that must be very, very, stick on your mind as well. Because after three months...

MV= That was happiness! I am sorry, I am not saying... [In Spanish] Yo no estoy diciendo las preguntas.

JC= No, you are fine. I'll tell you tienes que decir las, pero por ahora vas bien

MV= When I met my sister again, there was like total happiness. There were ten other Cubans there and all of a sudden, I was their pet, because I was a little girl and they were all like fifteen, sixteen. Maybe some of them were fourteen, but they were older than me. They were all very loving and they had a very tight-knit-bunch. They were ten Cubans in there, they were like mafia. You know, in the good sense of the word. Of course they were in other dorms, but I knew they were there. It was different; it was like another whole total different experience for me, once I got to that place. Because now I felt that this is the place where now I can stay. Now here I can start moving my charm, clicking on the charm to be able to make friends and get used to this, adapt, you try to adapt.

JC= Your brother was still in Matecumbe during all this time?

MV= Yes, my brother was in Matecumbe. He stayed months until we were finally able, my sister, through the Mother Superior, was able to work it out so that he was adopted by a foster home in that same town. Near the school.

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JC= How long was his process, before you saw your brother again?

MV= It must have been six to eight months, something like that.

JC= You are at the school with your sister now. You are getting a little bit better. You are felling that now you get, at least, your sister with you and some other girls there, Cubans, with you. What you told in regards to your parents. First of all, how often did you communicate with your parents?

MV= We wrote and they wrote

JC= Rephrase that question.

MV= We would communicate through letters with our parents. We would write and they would write to us. Nuns would read the letters, but we would get as far as we know we got their letters. I used to write to a dear teacher that I liked very much in the few months that I was in the camp, whose name was Marta Lopez. She was very loving to all of us, whoever she taught English. I wasn't her best pupil, but she was very, very loving and wrote to her and she would write back. There were a lot of girls that wrote to her after they were transferred from camp and she would always write back. I would get letters from her. As far as I know we were, our communication was as slow as Cuban mail worked.

JC= What were you told about your parents? Would you see them, would you gonna see them soon? Any information given to you by your parents and their eventual arrive?

MV= I have no recollection of that. I am sure that there were letters saying that, but I have no recollection of that.

JC= What about the people at the school, where you ever told anything about your parents? When you would see them or if you wouldn't see them?

MV= No, I don't think that... I don't have any special recollection about being told anything of the sort.

JC= How about in your mind? Did you started wondering you and your sister, when are we going to see, when is our family going to be united again?

MV= My feeling, if I am going to be very sincere, right now if I dig in my mind I think that we were just trying to adapt. We were just trying to survive. We weren't thinking... we were present time. The way we all should be, but we were really present time. This is the feeling I have that we were really trying to survive there. We were really trying to make the best of our existences. It was very existential. I remember making good friends with an American girl who lived in Michigan, because the day I got to that school a nun came with her and she was my same age and grade. She gave me her hand and she said wherever she goes, you go. Her name was Carol Brinker, I've never forgot her and I've

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never seen her again. She was my buddy, my best friend. We slept in the same dorm. I went to her parents' house like two or three times in Thanksgiving break and Spring break. We kind of made, tried to make that place a family. Of course, we knew it wasn't. I think it was a very much, at least for me, it was very much present time.

JC= When was it that you saw your parents again?

MV= I saw my parents again when they got here, they came on a Red Cross boat, ship, that was I think one of the last, or one to the few boats that left after relations have been broken in October [19]62 and this was [19]64. They were able to leave through Catholic Welfare and parents that had kids in the Catholic Welfare Program. I saw them again like seven or eight months after they had been here, because they were trying to rent a place and they were trying... they were working in, as tomato pickers. Whenever there was work. We were three, my brother was desperate and he kept writing desperate letters to my mother and father, because he was having a bad time too. Government here said to my parents, I guess it must have been said to everybody. I imagine that government didn't want all these Cubans together in a same place, so they tried to re-localize as much as they could. So they said we will keep your aid, we'll keep giving you aid and food and we will re-localize you to Chicago, near your kids, as long as you go. If you refuse to leave Florida we'll take away the aid. And my father said, I don't want to leave Florida. My father was though he was leaving next month back to Cuba. He quit the money he was giving by Refugio, the Refugee money, which was like very small amount of money, plus meat and peanut butter and all of that. It was even worse because he had to rent the place that we would hold us, three of us, and there were two cousins that were living with an American couple, teenagers, that knock on my father's door and said please take us in because we don't like where we stay. So my father and mother took them too. We were going to be a whole bunch of people and they didn't have a penny, but we got together. We got together sometime in [19]64, finally.

JC= In total how long was that

MV= It must have been three years...

JC= Two and a half, three years?

MV= Two, probably two and a half years. Two, two and a half must have been, two and some.

JC= Describe that moment when you see your mom and dad the first time in two and a half years?

MV= It was. When I saw my parents again, I was very much... We would, we had to leave in Christmas break. Christmas break the girls, the Cuban girls weren't invited to a friend's house, who lived in whatever. We stayed in the school with the nuns, which was pretty lonely and pretty rough. When we were able to meet our parents again, was Christmas break, so I wasn't able to say goodbye to all my friends. Now, this is why I think, when I



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mention that you really do make some kind of... land or country out of your present. The fact that this is your life, this is now where you have your ties, so your ties are your girlfriends, your ties all of the sudden... you know you do not belong there, but these are your only loving ties. Because you don't get a lot of love from nuns. So I was hurt that I couldn't say goodbye to my friends. Of course, you are meeting your parents, but all of a sudden, this is your reality you are going, again, you are going through a change. You are going to change again, you leave Cuba, you start establishing some kind of habitat in the camp, then you leave there and you start making some kind of habitat in another place and then you have to leave and then start all over again. It's very weird, but I guess is a survival tool.

MV= The reencounter with your parents, in two and a half years you haven't seen them, you have been through this odyssey, this experience with your sister and your brother and now you see your parents and they have been through an odyssey themselves...

MV= Oh yes.

JC= How difficult was that reencounter in terms of getting accustomed to each other again?

MV= It wasn't difficult as far as love concern...

JC= You need to...

MV= The reunion with my parents wasn't difficult as far as the fact that you know that they are your parents and you love them, they love you, and you know that and you take that for granted. You assume that, but they weren't the same and we weren't the same, at least I wasn't the same. I was always very rebellious, I was a pretty a much liberated child, but now I was really, I felt that I was on my own. That I have been on my own. The first, just the first sign of scolding that my mother... the first sign of authority that I saw from her I wouldn't even take it. Because I had survived alone, you know. It is not that I have never resented them, never, not consciously, not unconsciously. I know that this is something... I mean I was conscious enough when I was eleven that this was going on and that they were very much victims of a situation. Probably even more victims that us at that point. I did not resent them, but I was already somebody else; or somebody that had grown beyond the child that would take scolding, even though I probably deserved it.

JC= How was it, I mean have you ever talked about that with them? Have you ever discussed the whole experience or it is something that it was just not talk much about?

MV= Not really, we have mentioned it, we have gone through it. [Siren sound in the background] But it's not something that... the emotions usually come from my mother who says that this was very tough for them. This was very difficult thig to do and I understand.

JC= If you were them, and you had to make that decision...

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MV= HUUU that's so difficult. If I were them, it's a very difficult decision because it would imply that they weren't responsible enough and I don't think that's true. I think we were victims of a paranoia. We were victims of a probable half-truth half-paranoia and if we were manipulated politically, if our families were victims of a political manipulation, it's a terrible thing historically, it's a terrible thing socially. And whoever did it will go through to resolve that responsibility, that moral responsibility, but in the end I am sure that this was done for our best. I think that, if you really think, if you really look at Cuban society and Cuban parents, even Latin American parents as a whole, we are very protective people. We are very, we are hens, mothers are very chicken like with our chicks and this must have been really [Telephone Rings], if this was not true and this was a manipulation, they really got them to believe that we were in danger; [Telephone continue ringing] or, we were in danger of being, of course, indoctrinated or taken away from the family values and the family feelings.

[Break in recording, 37:31-37:41]

[Defected area, no sound and run too fast, 34:42-37:47]

MV= ... very protective of our kids. Even more so of girls. If you really look at that, socially, if you look at the scope it must have been a trauma, it must have been such a difficult decision. And it must have been pushed by a very threatening reality, well they must have seen it as a reality. The fact that we would be indoctrinated, that we would be taken away from them. Otherwise if they hadn't been that serious, that dramatic, I don't think that they would have ever let us go.

That's why I don't know if I would have done the same. If you are in panic if you are being overprotected, sometimes you do... you have heard about dogs, female dogs that would kill their puppies when they see that their puppies are in danger. This happens. They protect their dogs so much from the danger that they feel is coming or may be coming that they would kill their puppies. So it is not for me to say if I would do it. I think I wouldn't, but it is not for me to say.

JC= Fourteen thousand of you or so went through a similar experience, differences, of course, in places you went, in how you were treated, but when did you become aware, Marisela, that you were part of this, that you were one of fourteen thousand children in this thing called Operacion Pedro Pan?

MV= I know that this is called Operacion Pedro Pan from maybe ten years ago. I did not any of this. I don't think any of us were aware. We knew that we were many of us because we lived in the camps and we saw, and then we met other many people that have been in the camp after us, but we weren't aware of the thing as a whole from the distance and we did not we were part of a group that was called something. No, we didn't know. We just tried to survive and I think we did pretty good.

JC= Let me ask you a couple of questions in Spanish.

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MV= Okay.

JC= ¿Cuándo te enteraste Marisela, después de la odisea ésta de años que eras parte de este grupo que se llamó Operación Pedro Pan?

MV= Hace como yo diría diez años o menos, menos, que a través de personas que empezaron a reunirse y a tratar de como juntar a la gente y a todo este grupo de personas que habíamos pasado por esta experiencia que fué que me enteré que que había habido una operación con un nombre. Lo cual lo hace muy misterioso, muy de suspenso, que nos llamábamos Pedro Pan y que eramos un grupo. Cuando nosotros estábamos pasando por todo esto. Nosotros no sabíamos nada de esto. Por supuesto, también era muy pequeños. Pero no... esto como que se estaba, es como estaba sucediendo, no estaba sucediendo nosotros, pero lo que estaba sucediendo no sabíamos lo que era. No sabíamos que tenía mi nombre, ni logística y no tenía mucha logística. Yo creo que fue un despelote.

JC= Hablame de la salida de Cuba, es decir, tus padres te dicen un día; bueno tu hermana y tu hermano se van, entonces te toca ir, a tí irte. ¿Qué pensaste, qué sentiste, en aquella época tenías once años, hablame un poquito de eso?

MV= Cuando me llego a mí la salida. Que mi padre obviamente demoró, pretendiendo mis padres quizás, que hubiera un cambio para hacia lo positivo en Cuba y que no tuviéramos que irnos. Primero se fué mi hermana, pues mi hermana estaba siendo presionada en la Normal de Maestros, ya presionada para que fuera parte de todo el aquelarre, ¿no?. Después se fue mi hermano, llevó su salida y no había cambio y por lo tanto salió mi hermano y entonces eventualmente salí yo que tenía once años. La reacción mía cuando me llegó la salida fue que que bueno que no tenía que dar más clases de piano. [Rie] Ese fue... si me preguntas, lo primero que me vino a la mente fue hay que bueno no tengo que dar mas clases de piano. Pues me obligaban al dar clases de piano. Pero es la dimensión de una niña de once años.

JC= Te montaste en el avión y llegaste a Miami, ¿Qué te acuerdas de Miami, tu llegada a Miami?

MV= La llegada a Miami. Un señor que se llamaba George que fue muy amable, que nos regaló un chicle. Una lasquita de chicle. Y que nos separó, hubo unos niños, nos tomaba los nombres, que yo tengo esa lista, alguien me mandó una fotocopia de la lista. Del libro de George. Con el día de llegada. Me llamó mucho la atención que hace un tiempo. Y esto no te lo dije ahorita en el otro idioma, pues estamos como en tres idiomas, somos muy eruditos. El otro día, te estoy hablando como hace un par de años. Hablé con una chica que se llama Candi Sosa, que creo que ustedes la entrevistaron. O por lo menos el señor Pando. Y ella consiguió mi teléfono, me llamó, me dice yo soy Pedro Pan, soy cantante. Enseguida empezamos a conversar. Entonces en la conversación que ella vivía en Los Ángeles, que era cantante, que tal. Me dice ¿cuando tú saliste, yo salí en julio? Digo, yo también. Entonces digo ¿qué día saliste? Dice, el primero, digo yo también. ¿El

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primero de julio? Sí. Salimos el mismo día, en el mismo avión. Yo nunca la conocí. Ella se quedó mucho tiempo en el campamento, y yo me fuí a los tres meses. Y entonces recuerdo llegar al campamento de noche ya. Entender que aquello empezó como a suceder de verdad, hasta ese momento era como... algo que te estaba pasando, que tú no le das mucha. No le das mucha atención. No le das la profundidad, no le das la dimensión porque no tienes capacidad de dar la dimensión. Cuando tú tienes esa edad o sientes una cosa, o no la sientes, eso es todo. No hay intelecto haciendo el filtro. Recuerdo que deje a mi madre muy triste y traté de consolarla. Pero lo que me estaba pasando uno como que no sabe mucho lo que le está pasando. Cuando llegué al campamento, allí nos dieron un jabón y un aerograma para que le escribiéramos a nuestros padres, nos dieron un dólar en monedas de a diez. Nos recibió una monja y entonces nos asignaron, a las diferentes chicas que estábamos, nos asignaron las casas... [Pregunta al entrevistador] ¿Cómo se dice Foster Parent en español? ¿Hay palabra Foster Parent en español? [Rie] Se dice foster parent. Padre postizo es horrible la palabra. Nos asignaron las casas donde dos, un matrimonio, hacía las veces de [En tono de broma] clowns, dummy parents. Y allí estuve unos cuantos meses.

JC= Estas tres meses allí y de pronto bum [Chasquea sus dedos] para Iowa a ver a tu hermana para estar con tu hermana. ¿Hazme esa anécdota en español?

MV= Cuando salí de allí de Florida City que me... que de pronto te llegaba una orden de que estabas siendo enviada a otro sitio. Yo había pedido que se me enviara con mi hermana. A una escuela donde está mi hermana con otras diez cubanas que las había mandado juntas. Y llegué al aeropuerto, tome un avión, llegué a Chicago. En Chicago no me estaba esperando nadie. Me quedé esperando a la puerta del avión. Esperando, esperando el avión bajó complete, se vació. Y nadie me recogía ni me decía nada. Yo no hablaba inglés. Yo creo que yo había cumplido los doce años. Yo creo que cumplí los doce años en el campamento. Entonces al ver que pasaba el rato y a mí nadie me reclamaba, pues me pareció ver, había como un matrimonio con una muchacha joven que estaba caminando por allí. Y me pareció que los había oído a ella, yo creo que yo la había oído a ella vomitando en español [Rie]. Porque me pareció por allá atrás en el avión oír algo. Y entonces me acerqué a ellos y les digo ustedes hablan español y me dijeron que sí. Ellos estaban perdidos, pero eran adultos. Y yo me dije, me agarro de este gente y si van para Siberia, yo me voy con ellos. Y entonces ellos estaban buscando que les señalizaran o les dijeran cómo llegar a la misma puerta donde yo tenía que ir, que era atravesar el aeropuerto entero para coger otro avión para llegar a Des Moines, el aeropuerto de Iowa. Entonces de ahí supuestamente ir a Clinton, que era donde yo entendía que me iban a llevar, que era con mi hermana. Entonces llegue a Des Moines. En Des Moines me estaba esperando una señora. Las trabajadoras sociales siempre son personas con una sonrisa muy grande. Lo que pasa es que ellas te tratan bien poquito. Entonces una señora muy dulce, me esperaba allí y con una niña. Ella no hablaba una gota de español y yo no hablaba ni una gota de inglés. Sí recuerdo que tenía un station wagon y sí recuerdo que

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cuando iba atrás le dije en mi inglés cojo, le dije, yo voy con mi hermana, voy a Our Lady of Angels Academy, y ella me dijo, Yes, Yes. Y me dejó en un orfanato que se llama Saint Vincent's in Davenport. Y aquello fue muy difícil para mí, primero que me sentí traicionada. Y segundo, porque allí había una... allí ya estaba establecido un grupo con sus escalas y sus estatus y su autoridades. Los niños pueden ser crueles, niños abandonados, peor. Se me trató bastante mal, pero por parte de los niños. Tu sabes, al llegar una niña nueva, no hablaba inglés, yo estaba vulnerable, muy vulnerable, porque sentía que yo no pertenecía allí. Y yo, entonces eso fue, además, muy interesante porque yo fui una niña siempre muy líder. Siempre fui una niña muy segura y muy insolente en mi seguridad y en mí extroversión. Y allí me sentí el cuero del tambor. Fue difícil.

JC= Te reencuentras con tu hermana meses después, en la escuela de tu hermana. ¿Hablame de cómo te sentistes, te sentiste mejor obviamente y mas cómoda [Teléfono suena]

[Interrupción en grabación, 50:37-50:58]

JC= A la escuela de tu hermana. ¿Hablame de cómo te sentistes]

MV= Cuando yo llegué allí, fue un poco como... Llegué a un sitio donde, se supone que supone que tenía que venir...

JC= Cuando llegaste...

MV= Cuando llegue a la escuela donde estaba mi hermana.

[Interrupción en grabacion, 51:21-51:24]

JC= Okay. Cuando llegué

MV= Cuando llegue a la escuela donde estaba mi hermana. Que al fin se pudo lograr la... la desorganización, organizar que yo fuera a estar con mi hermana. [Suena telefono, 51:42] Cuando me reencontré con mi hermana en en colegio donde ella se encontraba con otras cubanas que tenía una, un bonche allí, bien apretadito y bien compañero. Hay todo el mundo estaba hermanado en una misma identidad, en una misma... en un mismo bote, una situación. Eran todas personas muy bonitas. Eran todas mayores que yo, pero fueron muy cariñosa conmigo, porque yo era la más chiquita y llegué como fui la mascota. Y fue cómo llegar allí despues de pasado tan malos ratos en el orfanato. Y el hecho de que yo sentía que allí era donde yo tenía que haber ido en primer lugar. Pues, sentía la protección de tu hermana mayor, es un familiar, o sea, tú sabes es ver agua en el desierto. Es lo que necesitas. Mi hermana nunca ha sido mi hermana favorita, pero cómo es la única que tengo, es mi hermana favorita. Allí me sentí bien, sentí que ahí ya yo tenía que empezar a establecer un hábitat, un lugar a donde había que adaptarse. Yo me podría quedar ahí, había que empezar a bregar, como decimos en Puerto Rico. Allí me sentí bien, allí empecé a estudiar y a hacer amistades. En tres meses sabía hablar inglés. Me pusieron en un grado ridículo, no se si fue quinto grado, que se yo. Y yo hice tres grados a la vez.

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Pedí permiso para hacer tres grados a la vez. Y traducía los libros, palabra por palabra, con un diccionario que me había regalado una monjita del orfanato. Y en seis meses gradué tres, hice tres grados. Para caer dentro del grado que me correspondía por mi edad. Porque me atrasaron por el español. Digo perdón, me atrasaron por el inglés. Pero no contaban con mi astucia. No contaban con que nosotros somos Cubanos y no somos chovinistas.

JC= El encuentro con tus padres, que sucede dos años después. En el sentido de lo diferente que de pronto era la relación esa entre padre e hijo. Tú me hablaste un poquito sobre tal vez la cuestión del respeto, tu mamá mostrándote autoridad y lo extraño que te sentiste la primera vez ¿Hablame un poquito de eso?

MV= Cuando nos reencontramos con nuestros padres fue una situación dual. Fue una emoción dual porque, por lo menos en mí, era muy importante ver, reunirnos de nuevo con nuestra familia. Ese amor que tú tomas por sentado, que tú sabes que lo tienes. Mi padre siempre me fue muy importante para mí también. Pero tú estableces, nosotros establecimos, por lo menos yo sentía, que ya tú habías hecho un... Existencialmente tú tenías un hábitat, un lugar que era ya, al cual tú pertenecías. Yo ya tenía amistades en Iowa. Yo ya tenía amigas. Aquel lugar no era tu hogar, pero era tu hogar en los últimos dos años. Ese era a tu ambiente. Ese era tu entorno. Y esa era tu gente, las que eran tus amigas. Las que eran menos amigas. Y nos tuvimos que ir en unas vacaciones de Navidad. Se presentó de pronto la salida para volvernos a encontrar con nuestros padres. Y me tuve que ir sin despedirme de todas mis amistades, de todas mis amigas. En un colegio a pupilo también se crean unos nexos muy fuertes. Porque todo el mundo tiene que establecer esos lazos de supervivencia emocional. Tú no tienes mamá y papá. Tú tienes a tu amiga, o a tus dos, tres amigas, buenas amigas de tu dormitorio. Aquien único tu le puedes contar tus inquietudes o divertirte con ellos o crear un frente en contra de la autoridad. Y esa es tu familia en ese momento. Y entonces el yo tenerme que desprender de eso una vez más, volver a crear, a desenraizarme de Cuba al campamento, del campamento al colegio y ahora del colegio desenraizarme otra vez. Era otra vez un cambio. Y eso fue una emoción dual porque te querías ir, pero no te querías ir. Recuerdo que cuando se comenzaron las clases de Nuevo, una clase completa me escribió. La clase entera del colegio me escribió, cada persona una carta. Recibí, qué se yo, setenta, ochenta cartas. El cartero probablemente me odio. Pero fue un gesto muy bonito, muy bonito de toda la clase. Entonces tuve que empezar a adaptarme aquí. Adaptarme de nuevo a la vida con mis padres. A un colegio público nuevo, con gente que no conocía, en una ciudad que no conocía. Bueno, te ayuda mucho la edad, pero emocionalmente todo eso va cobrando, va cobrando. Por lo tanto, si yo te lo intelectualizo, te digo maravillas del reencuentro, sí todo eso está muy bien intelectualizado, pero emocionalmente, a la altura de los doce o trece años, tú estás funcionando emocionalmente en el presente y lo que te está pasando en ese momento. Y en ese momento era un nuevo desarraigo, y era volver a empezar en

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otro entorno, otro ambiente, aunque claro, con el atenuante de que eran tus padres. De que tú aceptas su amor como... como que eso no se cuestiona.

JC= Marisela, una pregunta un poco filosófica, no te la hice en inglés, pero ¿Qué efecto tú crees, no se si hasta se puede describir o si se sabe o no pero tú crees que ese efecto de separación en esos años formativos, en esos años importantes, además del trauma de estar separados, afectó tu vida y ha afectado tu vida y tu relación con tus padres por el resto de tu vida en alguna manera?

MV= Sí, definitivamente yo creo que afecta, la separación de tus padres afecta por el resto de tu vida. Y la separación... y la forma en que fue la separación afecta al resto de tu vida. Y sí, definitivamente creo que hay en nosotros, voy a hablar por mí, yo creo que en general los Pedro Pan, todos nosotros tuvimos que crecer a destiempo, tuvimos que madurar a destiempo. Creo que a la larga ha sido positiva la experiencia desde el punto de vista psicosocial, la experiencia ha sido positiva. Me imagino que habrá alguno que está resentido, o amargado, o ha sufrido unas consecuencias traumáticas en sus vidas emocionales después, pero creo que en general nosotros teníamos la suficiente base de valores para poder... acusar el golpe de la separación. Asumir lo que nos estaba pasando, sí sufrir, sí crecer, pero nos forjamos en ese sufrimiento. Y creo que a la larga también, aunque la larga es muy larga, pero a la larga creo que esta experiencia va a ser positiva. Porque nosotros somos la generación, entiendo, que vamos a reconstruir a Cuba. Entiendo que somos la generación que tenemos la amplitud mental que nos dio esta experiencia terrible. Pero que nos amplió el panorama existencial. Tenemos la compasión. Tenemos la identidad. Pero creo que tenemos la identidad... a ver cómo lo digo, no quiero decir la palabra mediatizada, porque no es mediatizada. Tenemos la identidad embadurnada de otras ideas. No, no tenemos una identidad cerrada, ni con un solo punto de vista, ni de una sola vía. O sea, hay un chovinismo quizás, pero está embarrado y embadurnado de otros matices, de otras ideas, de otros mundos. A nosotros nos tocó caminar y ver otras cosas y eso es lo que va a hacer a Cuba, ahora, un país enorme y maravilloso. Porque todos, creo, que estamos dispuestos a poner eso en función de nuestra patria. Por lo menos muchos de nosotros. Creo que eso nos hace ganar como Cubanos y le hace ganar a Cuba. Y creo que incluso vamos a tener más capacidad para poder entendernos con aquellos cubanos que allá les ha tocado sufrir también, tanto como a nosotros, de una manera totalmente diferente. Y en esa gran brecha de valores que hay, que definitivamente la hay, quizá ahí es donde va a entrar nuestra capacidad de amplitud mental y nuestra vivencia y nuestra compasión. Para poder subsanar esa esa brecha.

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[End of Interview]

Transcribed by Ximena Valdivia, August 7, 2020