

Interviewee: Yvonne Conde

Interviewer: Man / Woman

Date: 1997

FIU Number: 543

Yvonne Conde= YC

Woman= Wm

Man= Man

[Testing. Interview start by min. 00:29]

Wm= La pregunta que quería hacerte principalmente yo, era la cuestión de tu research. Cómo empezaste a hacer tus investigaciones sobre todo la Operación Pedro Pan.

YC= Yo empecé a hacer la...

Man= Inglés. In English.

YC= Why didn't anybody tell me? [Laughing] I started to do research on Operation Pedro Pan when I found out about it in 1990. I was taking a journalism class and we were assigned the book Miami, by Joan Didion and it she mentioned this exodus of Cuban children. I realized that I could be one of those children since I did leave Cuba alone, I realized that my cousins and other people I knew had left you alone, but I had no idea that there was an exodus of this magnitude of over fourteen thousand children. Being very inquisitive, I started looking into it and I wrote an article for the class with my own experiences. When I turned it in, the teacher said that I should write a book about it and I really didn't think that I should or could, but the more I thought about it, the more this project fascinated me, and the more questions popped into my mind that I thought needed answers. I also think that this book is a very important. I also think that my book is very important. My purpose for writing it is because this is a very important part of Cuban history that hasn't been told. It is the only exodus, the only children's exodus in this hemisphere and it is very important that people know about it.

Man= Okay. What are the major findings as you get along with your book? what sticks in your mind that is unique?

YC= As I've been researching my book, I found so many things that are unique, among the things that are unique, I think, is the courage, the courage of parents, and the courage of the children. The children became adults as soon as they crossed the Tropic of Cancer and they landed in the United States. Children became keepers of their parents. They were sometimes in dire circumstances, and they wouldn't tell their parents. They would pretend that everything was alright. Once their parents got here, in many instances, those children continued to be keepers of their parents, because then by then they knew the system and they were able to help their parents. In my research, I've also found the kindness of strangers. There were so many people who are so wonderful to these children. I've also found the cruelty of human beings as some of these children, unfortunately, landed in circumstances that were far from perfect.

[Short dialogue between interviewers]

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Man= On your book, what are the main subjects you talk, do you concentrate on a specific group of people specifically or on the whole Operation Pedro Pan? What is the focus of your book?

YC= My book is about the whole Operation Pedro Pan. It is a nonfiction historical book, I have done a lot of research, especially on the times of Cuba. What was happening in Cuba in those years for parents to take this decision to send their children out. It follows them into the United States, and then I divided it in topics. Certain topics that were consistent throughout my research, such as the children who went to good homes, the children who did not go to good homes, the children who forgot their Spanish, their reunion with their parents, and then the children today. A little profile and a database of what has happened to those children today. The ones that we have been able to find.

Man= Did you find any, in any way, a connection with the CIA operation as Nena Torres has mentioned?

YC= Regarding the see CIA, I was the first person to write a letter to the see CIA. I requested a Freedom of Information from immigration. The State Department and the CIA, just because I was trying to expand any information on this operation. I got a letter from the CIA that says that they had could not confirm nor deny that they had any information on this operation, but that if they did, they couldn't give it to me. We appealed the decision and that appeal, although granted, was turned down. And my next avenue was to sue the CIA. Now it is very costly to sue the US government. So I decided against it. I belief that the CIA might have been involved as far as the visa waiver situation. Visa waivers could also be given to people who were in the CIA in Cuba or in counterrevolutionary activities against Castro, as a means to get them out of Cuba quickly. So in that sense, yes. As far as the CIA stirring up rumors of patria potestad and frightening parents, I haven't found any evidence about that.

Wm= How many children, in general, you think you have contacted? How many, adults now, former Pedro Pan children have you contacted in your research?

YC= For my research I have over three hundred questionnaires that have been responded. Excuse me. I'm sorry. Every time I locate one of these children, I send him a questionnaire. I have over three hundred questionnaires at this time, in which they asked. I asked them where they went. How long they were separated from their parents. How was the experience for them and could I talk to them? And from those, I have chosen the ones that I felt were more appropriate for my book.

Wm= You learned anything as a result of your research that you didn't know before hand?

YC= As a result of my research, I have learned, I've asked. As a result of my research, I asked all the children if they feel their parents did the right thing by sending them out of Cuba alone. And the great majority say yes, they think their parents did do the right thing. The

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next question I ask is, would you do the same thing? Majority say no or that they are unsure.

Man= Okay. Are Peter Pans all over the United States?

YC= [Nodding to say yes]

Man= How was that decided, do you know?

YC= There are Pedro Pans all over the United States. There are some now and there were there. Children were sent to forty out of the fifty states. Monsignor Walsh called Catholic Charities a meeting here in Miami in 1962, in the fall of [19]62. Excuse me, I am sorry. In the fall of 1961, Monsignor Walsh called a meeting of Catholic Charities and people from all different areas of the United States flew into Miami. He presented the problem that he had finding homes for these children. Therefore a calling went out to all the Catholic dioceses throughout the United States, and these children were found homes in forty of the fifty states. Sometimes when foster homes couldn't be located for them, orphanages were chosen as a place for the children, because orphanages were open year round, whereas schools would close in the summer and they wouldn't have a place where the children in the summer. So orphanage became a not very desirable place to put the children, but it was a place for them.

Man= What's the most bizarre story that you remember from your findings? There is some particular story that sticks

YC= There are several very sad stories that stick in my mind but for some reason the story of a six-year old boy who used to be fed with the family dog on the floor in the kitchen. Who was also beaten and bruised has always had a very special place in my mind, because I met the person and I think that pain is still in his soul to today. It must have been horrible for him.

[Short dialogue between interviewers]

Man= How were you told you will be coming to the U.S.? Who told you and what was your reaction? If you could go back to the time and whatever you remember.

YC= I was told by my mother that I was coming to the United States. My parents were divorced and I was delighted because I was coming to the home of one of my friends from school. Of course, I was told that it would be for a very short period of time. So the idea of getting on a plane and coming to Miami was a fun filled vacation. I had no dread this... I didn't dread. I didn't dread the trip at all. I was looking forward to it. I was looking forward to coming to Miami and being with my friends.

Man= How old were you?

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YC= I was ten. I left I left Cuba on August 11, 1961. I was ten years old then. My father worked for Pan American Airways, so as soon as we got the visa waiver I was on the next plane out of Cuba.

Man= What are some of the details of your departure, like driving to the airport, saying goodbye to your parents, etcetera, your neighborhood? How did you feel leaving Cuba?

YC= Memories that I have of my departure are I was thrilled of all the clothes they were buying me and I remember specifically the hard time that we had getting clothes. I remember a pair of brown and white shoes that were hideous and they were like two sizes too big, but they bought them anyway and they put them in that big gusano suitcase and the gusano suitcase was a royal blue and it was shining. It was really hideous, but it was the only thing that we found. I remember my towels were all embroidered with my initials and I also remember my grandmother made me a wool coat. It was like a burgundy wool coat that was a little large on me and now I think back and I wonder if I was coming to Miami, why the heck did they give me that wool coat? I guess they really didn't know where I was going to be in the end.

Man= Do you remember your neighborhood or your life in Cuba? What do you remember of Cuba?

YC= I remember, I was ten years old when I left Cuba. I remember my neighborhood. I remember my school, the American Dominican Academy. I thought I spoke English. Of course I didn't. I remember the sea, el Malecón, el Vedado, Varadero, el Club Balneario, where we used to go on weekends. I remember. I remember Cuba as a paradise. A paradise I can't wait to go back to someday.

Man= And your friends when you were a kid. Do you remember saying goodbye to your friends?

YC= I don't have any recollection of saying goodbye to my friends. I remember leaving very quickly because as I said, my father worked for Pan American, so they I was out as soon as I got my visa waiver.

Man= What went through your mind during the flight to Miami?

YC= I remember specifically during my flight to Miami that the captain made the announcement that we had entered U.S. territorial waters, and the whole plane erupting in a big applause. And people saying yes, we are free we are in the United States, and I was delighted too. It was a joyous flight for me.

Man= And your arrival in Miami, how was that? Who picked you up at the airport?

YC= I was picked up at the airport in Miami by my two friends from my school. They took me to a supermarket and that to me was like a kaleidoscope of colors and things that I had forgotten existed. Jello, I remember, potato chips and Coca-Cola, things we hadn't seen in

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Cuba. Although it was 1961, by then they weren't on the shelves anymore, and this supermarket seemed to me like Disney World. That was a very first day I arrived in Miami so, so far so good. Miami was a wonderful place. I was having a great time.

Man= And the friends who picked you up you are staying with.

YC= Yes, I was picked up by these friends. These friends then moved to Houston and I was shipped over to some other friend's house.

Man= Okay. The question is what were you thinking or what was your first impression when you arrived at the campsite? I guess this is...

YC= No. That does not apply to me.

Man= Your house then.

YC= I lived with these friends, with some friends for a couple of weeks. Then I was shipped over to some other friends who had two children and they had one bedroom and their son was given, they gave me his bed and they put him to sleep in an inflatable rubber raft, like the ones used for the pools. I think they didn't like me very much, the kids. Although they were, the whole family, was very, very good with me. I lived with them for some months until my uncle came.

Then I moved with my uncle and aunt. That's when I didn't have it so good. For some reason I can't remember why they worked at night and sometimes I was left alone. I was ten, eleven with to take care of my cousins who were like four and five and I remember being alone at night with them. I also remember being hungry a lot when I was with my aunt and uncle. I remember the cans of peanut butter, del Refugio, and I would stick my finger in the peanut butter and to this day I love peanut butter and I would try to take out a little but not too much so they wouldn't notice that I was eating peanut butter. But I was hungry, to this day I am hungry all the time. But I remember being very hungry with my aunt and uncle. They weren't good times. I remember having holes in my shoes and I would put little pieces of cardboard. Until I reached into my suitcase and I found the horrible brown-white shoes that by then fitted me and they were ugly but they wouldn't have any holes. So I start wearing those.

Man= How long did you stay with your uncle? What was he doing, what was he...?

YC= I live in my uncle for about four months until my parents arrived. I really don't know, I don't remember what he was doing, what he was working. Although I think his wife was taking some sort of classes at night and he must have been working on.

Man= Were you able to, during that time were you able to phone your parents in Cuba?

YC= I don't remember talking to my parents in Cuba during our separation at all. I remember once receiving a dollar in a letter addressed to me that somehow or other my mother had

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gotten a hold up in Cuba. I remember the letter saying you haven't written to me in a while and I am concerned about you, this is when I was living with my uncle, so here is a dollar so you can buy stamps and write to me.

Man= What did you do with the dollar?

YC= I bought stamps and wrote. I took the dollar and I did buy stamps and wrote to her.

Man= How were you treated. I guess this is your family that treated you well. How often did you communicate with parents or it was just purely letters?

YC= Don't assume that because it was my family, they treated me well. I mean this is not me very specific, but I've had many, many stories of children who were treated horribly by their families, or when they realized that they weren't getting any money from welfare, they kicked them out. So that's not, you know, for future reference, don't assume that.

In this particular case, I remember my uncle and my aunt had a horrible fight one night, and they were screaming and my aunt said if you leave take that damn kid with you and I thought Oh my God, where are we going to go? I mean, my uncle and me, where are we going to live. So it wasn't horrible, but it was scary. It was frightening. I felt unwanted at my uncle's house.

Man= So you never went to an orphanage or...?

YC= No.

Man= Okay. Did you ever feel that you will never see your parents again?

YC= Although I was ten years old, I understood why my parents couldn't come out of Cuba. I knew they wanted to come out, but I knew that they couldn't physically because they were being held back. But I always thought, and I had the conviction that they were going to overcome whatever obstacles and they were going to come and be with me. I always kept the faith that it would not be long and that they would be with me shortly.

Man= Did you feel anger towards your parents for sending you to the U.S.?

YC= I never felt anger towards my parents for sending me to the US. However, my parents were divorced and my smaller brother was left behind in Cuba and I although I understood that he would...

[No audio, 18:45-18:55]

YC= Well, how long? As a result of the experience of growing up. Growing up, when I was growing up, I was a very rebellious teenager. I don't know if it was a result of the experience or as problems that I was having at home, but I, it was the [19]60s. I was very, very rebellious. I fought against establishment, against the old Cuban customs.

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Chaperones being the first one that I succeeded in invading. We moved to Puerto Rico and I refused to mingle with Cubans. I shunned my Cuban identity. I wanted to speak like a Puerto Rican. I wanted to be accepted by my Puerto Rican peer groups. I became an Independentista. I wanted Puerto Rico to be free of the United States. I went through a very rebellious period in the [19]60s. I then went completely the other way. I am now more Cuban than anybody I know. My house is the most nostalgia museum with Cuban paintings. I collect Cuban stamps I have Cuban books. I read everything I can get my hands. So now I feel very Cuban but it took me a long time to come back.

Man= When did you see your parents again, how long...?

YC= I was separated from my parents for eight months.

Man= Eight months. How had your relationship with your parents changed as a result of this experience?

YC= I don't think that my relationship with my parents changed that much as a result of this experience as it changed as a result of the times that we were living in the [19]60s. Where it was, to be in you had to be rebellious. You had to be sort of hippie-ish. You had to be different, be in the contra-culture and that affected me more, I think, than this separation did.

Man= Did you ever, is not in the questionnaire, but did you ever feel sympathy towards the Cuba Revolution?

YC= No, I never felt sympathy toward the Cuban Revolution. Even in my Independentista days in Puerto Rico, I always had harbored a big hatred of Castro. My uncle, the one that I lived with, went back to Cuba and he was shot. He was captured as soon as they landed and he was shot, executed without a trial.

Man= Have you asked your parents why they sent you to the U.S.?

YC= Unfortunately my parents are both dead so I can answer the question why they sent me to the U.S. I have asked my grandmother, who recently passed away also, and she gave me the standard answer. We were afraid of communism. We were afraid of patria potestad, which seems to be the answer that every parent that I've spoken to has given me. Patria potestad is the theme, the running theme through every answer the parents always give. The rumors were very strong about patria potestad. I've spoken to people who actually saw the document. Fidel spoke on October 1961 denouncing patria potestad as a big lie, and he jailed a group of persons who owned a printing press and he blamed them for having forged this document. But the document did circulate among Cuba, especially in people who had to do with the government or education. I've spoken to several people who swear they saw the document.

Man= You don't have, you do not know where you can get anything, like a copy

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YC= A copy of the document? No. I have a copy of Fidel' speech but nothing, not a copy of the document no.

Man= You have it on videotape or

YC= No

Man= Written

YC= [Nodding to say yes]

Man= Can you explain what patria potestad is?

WM= I was going to ask that.

YC= There was a rumor in Cuba that spread like wildfire. That the government was going to take over custody of the children or patria potestad. There were rumors that all the children were going to be taken away from their parents and become wards of the government. Once this happened, parents... children could be sent to Russia or to be sent to the countryside. Parents would lose control of their children altogether. Ironically, it did happen because with Cuba's educational system, children now go to the countryside and don't see their parents except once a month, sometimes, maybe twice a month. So patria potestad did take hold, although in a different manner in Cuba. An indice escolar administrative, or "school file" was produced for every child in Cuba. This was early 1961, so they had a dossier on every family who had children. This also augmented the fear of the patria potestad that they were working on it. All the schools, the Catholic schools, were closed in April of 1961. Therefore this also gave fire to the rumor of patria potestad and it was it was a big, big fear among Cuban parents. It's the number one reason they give for sending their children away. A thousand children from an orphanage in Cuba were sent to a communist countries. Fidelito, Fidel's son himself, was sent to Russia early on in the revolution. So these were all signs that parents saw that this was true.

The other thing that's very common and very fresh among Cuban families is that most Cuban families have a first generation Spaniard in the family who remember the civil war. They remembered the Basque children being sent off to France and Belgium, but many of them, over five thousand, were sent to Russia. So they remembered that and that was a very close link to the Cuban families. Children were sent to Russia. Cuban children are going to be sent to Russia.

Man= How did you change as a result of this experience?

YC= [Laughing]

Man= Looking back, do you feel your parents...

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YC= what I have changed as a result of this experience has been... what I have changes as result of this experience has been the last nine years of my life researching this book. I have become so aware of the courage of Cuban parents, the courage of Cuban children, the courage of people who were helping in Cuba to give out the visa waivers, risking their lives. It's a monument to the Cuban people. Operation Pedro Pan was able to succeed and be carried out under a regime like it was.

Man= Do you think that the Cuban government knew what was going on?

YC= I think the Cuban government knew very well what was going on in Cuba. I think that by letting children leave, they knew that their parents would be leaving shortly thereafter and he was getting rid of a middle class that was a potential of discontent group in the future.

Man= Looking back do you feel your parents acted correctly?

YC= Looking back, I think my parents acted correctly because they gave me choices. Once I came to this country, I had the choice to be whatever I wanted. I could be a communist if I wanted. I could go back to Cuba if I wanted. I could become a right wing extremist or a Buddhist. I was given choices. People who had left behind in Cuba had no choices.

Man= If you were in the same position would you have done the same?

YC= If I were in the same position, I don't know that I would have done the same as my parents. I don't have children, so it's very difficult for me to put myself in that situation. But also I think you have to be living in the moment those circumstances at that time. It is very difficult to judge what one would do if one is not there at that moment.

Man= Is there anything that we have not talked about that you think is relevant to this project?

YC= I can't think of anything right off the top of my head that... [asking to woman interviewer] Ivette anything question you may have?

Man= Why do you think the US government did this? What's the reason?

YC= Did what?

Man= Why allow, the U.S. government, allowed Cubans to come?

YC= The U.S. government allowed Cubans to come into this country, helped them, gave them special entry permits under the Parolee law because it was the Cold War. Communism was bad. And they wanted to prove that these middle class people were leaving a country that was taken over by communism and that they, the United States, were opening their arms wide and welcoming them as was the role as big Uncle Sam.

Man= Why didn't they do it with Vietnam and other countries?

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YC= Because the Cold War wasn't going on anymore. [Laughing]

Man= Well another time, in the [19]60s they could have done it with other countries. Do you think it was because of the link with Cubans?

YC= Remember Cuba is ninety miles away and I think that the United States and Cuba have always had a very special relationship. It's not the same thing to have Communism in China so many miles away as to have it at your door step. I think it was a slap in the face, almost, the US government to have Cuba laughing at them practically. I mean it was, and having Cubans come in and giving them asylum was the right thing to do for them.

Man= Do you think they used that in some kind of propaganda way or it was just an act of kindness of their heart?

YC= Did the United States use this in a propagandistic way? I haven't run into any materials that say how good we were doing this to Cubans. I know that the film was done by the U.S. Information Office about the Pedro Pan children. I don't know to what purpose that film was used at all. Something interesting that I run into, it has nothing to do with Pedro Pan, but in 1960, 1961 or 1962. I am not really quite sure right now. Cubans gave back \$250,000 to the government. It was in 1962, I'm sorry. Let me go. By February 1962. Cubans had given back to the U.S. government, \$250,000 that they had received in aid. They would accompany the check with a little letter. I have a job now I am giving you this money so you can give it to somebody else and it was in the New York Times front page. It was such an unusual thing for a group of exiles to do. I always thought it was kind of interesting. [Laughing]

Man= How do you feel that the Roman Catholic Church played a role in this all thing? Do you think was their... it was that who put it all together?

YC= I don't think the Roman Catholic Church put it all together. I think Father Walsh, at the time, was the one who put it all together. I don't think he realized the magnitude of what he was getting into. I think he thought, and he has written to that effect, that he thought he was getting about two hundred children and the two hundred turned into two thousand and the two thousand into seven [thousand], and the seven [thousand] into fourteen [thousand]. I don't think he realized it, but once he had his finger out of the dike, the water kept coming out. He couldn't stop it.

Man= How many were there altogether?

YC= 14,048 children came under Operation Pedro Pan.

Man= And you have been able to contact how many?

YC= We have the names of about a thousand that we've located. Where are the rest?! Where are the rest?

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Man= Why do you put under your name lawyer-writer, what are you?

YC= I am a journalism, I am a freelance journalist.

Man= Anything else? Quiéres decir algo en español?

[break in recording, 32:43-32:53]

YC= New Mexico was the place that received most children both in foster homes and in a couple of homes homes. I think it had to do with the Mexican Americans that they found places that some Spanish was spoken, so that was preferable to being sent to Wyoming.

Man= Also Chicago and New York?

YC= Chicago? I don't have that many people that went to Chicago, but a lot of people went to New York, New Jersey, Nebraska, Montana. I have them all sorted. Every questionnaire I get I sort it geographically, as to what state they went to; or, if they went to family and friends as half of them did.

Man+ Do you think most of them got back together with their families?

YC= Yes, I know only about six who have not.

Man= Out of three hundred. Do you think most of them [Telephone ringing] stayed in those states or they are in Miami?

YC= I don't know, most of them are in Miami, but somehow remain in those states. [Telephone ringing]. If you look at the database, I can tell.

[Interruption in recording, 34:11-34:20]

YC= And I know two people who went back to Cuba.

Man= Oh you did?

YC= [Nodding] One of them is still in Cuba. The other one.

Man= That's kind of interesting, do you have their addresses?

YC= I know the brother of one of them and the other one is here. I would have to speak to her to see if she is... how she feels about, you know, speaking on camera. Yeah, that's very interesting.

Man= We maybe being able to go to Cuba.

[End of interview]

Completed by: Ximena Valdivia, September 4, 2020