

**THANK YOU,
USA**

José M. Millares

A Memoir

José M. Millares

Thank You, USA

This is a work of nonfiction. However, the names of some people have been changed to protect their privacy. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher. The author represents and warrants that he either owns or has the right to publish all materials in this book.

Thank You,

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*To My Parents,
Wife,
Daughters
and
Grandchildren*

José M. Millares

Thank You, USA

Special thanks to Margaret Doman for the time and effort she put into this work. Her suggestions and editing support were invaluable.

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Author's Notes

I started writing this book with the ultimate goal of leaving a family history for my daughters, grandchildren, and subsequent generations. After a while, I came to the conclusion that besides the original objective, I was compelled to use this book for other purposes. First, to give credit to God – with His help, everything has been possible. Second, to provide a truthful and accurate account of life under atheist Castro's dictatorial regime. Finally, to depict life as it was in Cuba before Castro. I will do this by describing my life from 1940 – the year I was born – to 1963, the year I left Cuba. As I wrote my story, I thought of the many people who helped us throughout our journey to freedom. I have never acknowledged my gratitude to some of them. I am not a writer; my command of the English language is limited. Nevertheless, my determination to do what I have to do will prevail. Finally, I am taking this opportunity to give full recognition and gratitude to a land that gave us everything, and without which nothing could have been accomplished. A country that opened its doors to us at the very same time that a malicious system was closing all opportunities in our motherland. At last, I am able to say one thousand one times, "*Thank you, USA.*"



José M. Millares, Marta L. Millares and Marta B. Millares

Prologue

Our Last Day in Cuba

On March 1, 1963, at eight o'clock in the morning, we left our house in Havana for the last time. Our good friend Rafael drove the three of us and my mother to the Cuban international airport of José Martí in Rancho Boyeros. My aunt Hilda Cantón Martínez, her husband Norberto Lugones and my father remained at home.

My father was sad to see his only son, his "champion", as he called me since childhood, and his grandchild, Cucusita leaving Cuba. Cucusita was the nickname Norberto had affectionately given to my daughter, Martica. We also left behind our beloved dog, Golfito. This noble dog was very close to my daughter – no stranger could get close to her. He would immediately begin to bark and try to get our attention.

A few months after our departure, a friend told me that the day we left, my father's cries could be heard coming from inside the house. Even though he was depressed by our decision to emigrate from Cuba, he never complained, or told me to change our plans. On the contrary, he tried to appear strong and said things like, "I am happy because I know that if necessary, you will be able to aid our family from the United States."

The reason he said these things was that by this time the economic and political situation, was becoming extremely difficult. Cuba's Communist regime was rationing clothing, food and medicines.

The ride to the airport took forty-five minutes. We were silent the entire ride, as I did not know what to say to my mother. The morning was cool and windy.

After we arrived at the airport, we went to the Departures area. All Cubans knew this glass-enclosed room as "de pescera" (the fishbowl). My mother and friend remained on the other side. At that moment, I was overwhelmed by the same feelings I had felt early in 1961, when my wife and I had been there to say good-bye to her parents. The difference was that this time we were on the inside, and my mother and friend were outside.

Then, as before, Cubans were running away from Cuba's atheistic government. I remembered that on that day, in 1961, I felt a great wave of depression as I observed my wife, and so many other Cuban families, saying their last good-byes to their loved ones. What a feeling of sadness, and emptiness! I had said to myself that I would never go back to that place again to say good-bye to any other person. Now, I was there again – and yes, this time would be the last.

After a while, a female security officer took my wife and child to a room for a physical examination. I went to a different room to undergo the same process. The reason for this examination was that Cubans leaving the country were not permitted to take money, jewels, or any other property out of Cuba. The only authorized items were the clothes you were wearing and two extra changes of clothing – for example, two shirts, two pairs of socks, and so forth. We, like all other Cubans, were expected to leave Cuba practically the same way we came into this world – naked.

At the time we left, the new Cuban government was working "at its best." According to this malicious system, all material things belonged to the State – people had no rights to property.

For those Cubans who were not able to escape, things would get worse. Later, the "ideal Cuban system" would attempt to take control of their spirits and souls, as well as all worldly belongings. Even their faith in God would be tested – and on many occasions

lost. You cannot serve two masters at the same time – Castro and God. The dictator was your only choice. Otherwise, the cemetery or in the best of cases – prison – would be your final destination.

At last, the moment came for us to go to the boarding area. We took one last look at my mother and friend, and walked out of the glass room. I was carrying a suitcase and my wife was holding Martica. The inspectors opened the suitcase, and like "trained dogs", began sniffing our clothing. To our surprise, we overheard a harsh voice saying, "You have new shirts and new baby dresses. It is against ordinances to take new clothing out of Cuba."

I had had the two shirts made by a clandestine tailor a few months before – the two children's dresses had been given to my baby daughter for her birthday a few months earlier. These were the last expressions of love given to us by our friends and neighbors. I vowed that this would be the last time this perverse system would confiscate anything from us. Finally, we began the long walk to the airplane. We walked holding each other and our daughter tightly.

After sitting in our seats for some time, one of the flight attendants announced that we should fasten our seat belts, and get ready for take-off. Next, we heard the loud noise of the four engines, and slowly, but steadily the airplane started gaining altitude. In the distance, Cuba was getting smaller and smaller, until it vanished from sight.

Today, forty-five years later, we have never returned to Cuba – the majority of our family and friends have died, and the Castro brothers are still in power. We live in a land that has enabled us to prosper and to realize our dreams – a land that we have come to love as our own. For that, we say, "*Thank you, USA.*"

José M. Millares

Thank You, USA

Part I

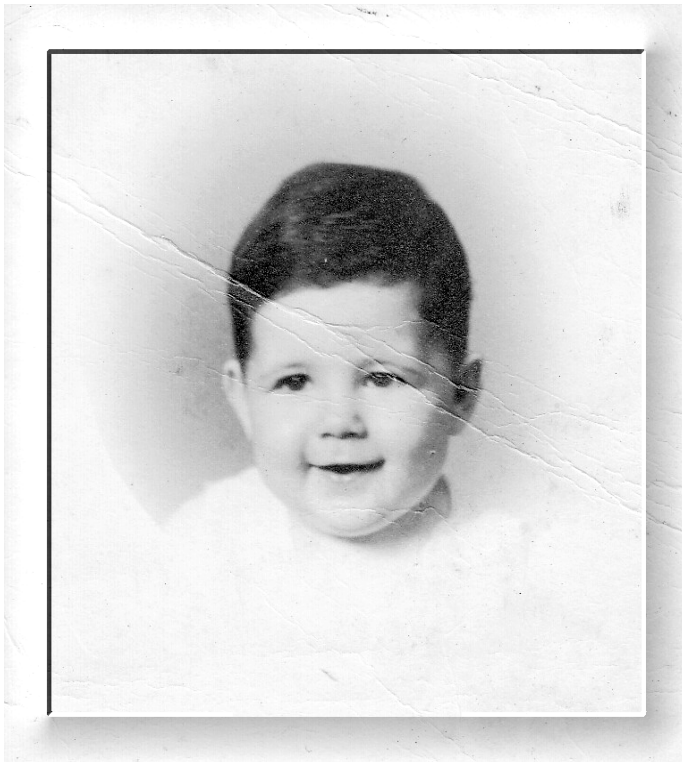
Cuba Before Fidel Castro



The Cuban Flag

Chapter 1

The Beginning



José M. Millares – 1940

Minutes after the airplane took-off – my mind went back to early recollections of my life. I was born on March 28, 1940, at two-thirty in the afternoon, in Havana, Cuba. The name of the

health clinic was Reina. My parents were Gertrudis José Manuel del Jesus Millares and Hernandez, known as 'Guarango', and Caridad Raquel Cantón Martínez, known as "Nena".

From the clinic, I was taken to a small room they were renting in the suburb of La Vibora (the Viper). The owners of the house were named Reinaldo and Maria. The house had four bedrooms, a kitchen and a bath. Reinaldo and Maria used the entire house except for the last two bedrooms – one of them was rented to my parents. We occupied that room for a short time.

Later, we moved to another room that was part of a larger rental facility – two miles from where we had lived previously. The name of this place was Bello Apartments. Bello was the last name of the property owner. His brick house was located only a few feet from the rented rooms.

Every room had a small kitchen area right outside the room itself. It was literally outside the front door. All the rooms had electricity and running water. There was also a large kitchen, two showers and two toilets, which were available to all tenants – these facilities were located at the center of the nine rented rooms.

My earliest recollection of my life is of this place. I recall that our room was small. It only had space for my parent's bed, a small table with two chairs, a wooden closet, and my own small bed. During this time, we had no television or radio – the former was not available yet, the latter, too expensive for us. Information was available from newspapers, and word of mouth.

This room was convenient for my father, as it was only two blocks from his job. He worked as a bus-driver on route #15. This bus line provided services for various areas of Havana. I always remember him in his gray uniform and small black tie, smoking the Cuban cigar, which he so enjoyed. Like most women at that time, my mother did not work. She stayed at home taking care of her husband and child.

My father was a hard worker; when extra work was available, he doubled his regular hours. Additionally, he worked as the personal chauffeur of Raul Merida, the owner of the bus line. Twenty-three years later, he would be instrumental helping me to resolve a serious problem my parents encountered with the Immigration Department of the United States. Through the years, my father kept up his hard work, and slowly but steadily improved our standard of living.

I remember the names of the two female tenants living in the first and third rooms. Their names were Yoya and Raquel. We were living in the second room. My mother was at odds with these two women and the frequent fighting between them frightened me. As a result of one of these fights, one day my father got into a brawl with Raquel's husband, who was also a bus driver. My father got the worst of the fight – he suffered a broken arm.

I also have clear memories of one of the worst hurricanes ever to strike Cuba. This occurred in 1944. The owner of the rented rooms told all the tenants that it was unsafe to stay in the rooms. He said that anyone without a safe place to go to was welcomed to stay in the main house. My parents decided to take advantage of his offer. Once in the main house, all the children were sent to a room that had one large bed – we were seven youngsters in all. My parents and the other tenants were in an adjacent room, waiting for the cyclone to pass.

At one point, the severe weather got even worse. Roofs started to fly – electrical cables and trees also started to fall. As things began to worsen, my father came in to check on me. Assured that I was all right, he announced to the rest of the tenants that he was going to the bus terminal to see if there was anything, he could do to safeguard the buses. Everyone told him to stay, but he went, anyway.

Later, he returned and said that the place was a mess, and there was nothing he could do to minimize the damage. We

stayed in the home for a few more hours, and returned to our room when it was safe to do so.

The Cuba of those years also had its share of "Al Capon"- like gangsters. The two main ones were "El Rubio" (the blonde-haired one), and "El Colorado" (the red-one). One-day machine-gun in hand, "El Colorado" and his men burst into the Bello Apartments. They ordered everyone out of their rooms. My father immediately took my mother and me outside. No one knew why they were there or what they would do next. "El Colorado" announced that they were looking for a specific individual, and that no one else would be harmed. The outlaws went room by room searching for their target, but did not find him. Then, as quickly as they had come, they drove off. Everyone was badly shaken and grateful that whoever the intended target was, he was not there at that moment.

The most popular sport in Cuba at that time was baseball – I have special memories of the many games my father and I attended together. On many occasions, he would drive his employer, Merida and business associates to the baseball game at the professional sports stadium called Tropical stadium. He often took me with him to these games. Once in the stadium, Merida would take his friends to the Box Office seats he owned. My father and I would go to the general admission seats to watch the game.

After the game was over, my father, and I returned to the parking area to wait for Merida and his friends. Then he drove them all back home. Later, a new baseball stadium by the name of El Cerro was built. There were four teams: Almendares (blue color), Habana (red color), Cienfuegos (green color), and Marianao (dark orange color). Most Cubans were fans of the Almendares and Havana teams. My father liked the Marianao's, and I did too, probably just to imitate him.



José M. Millares – December 1941

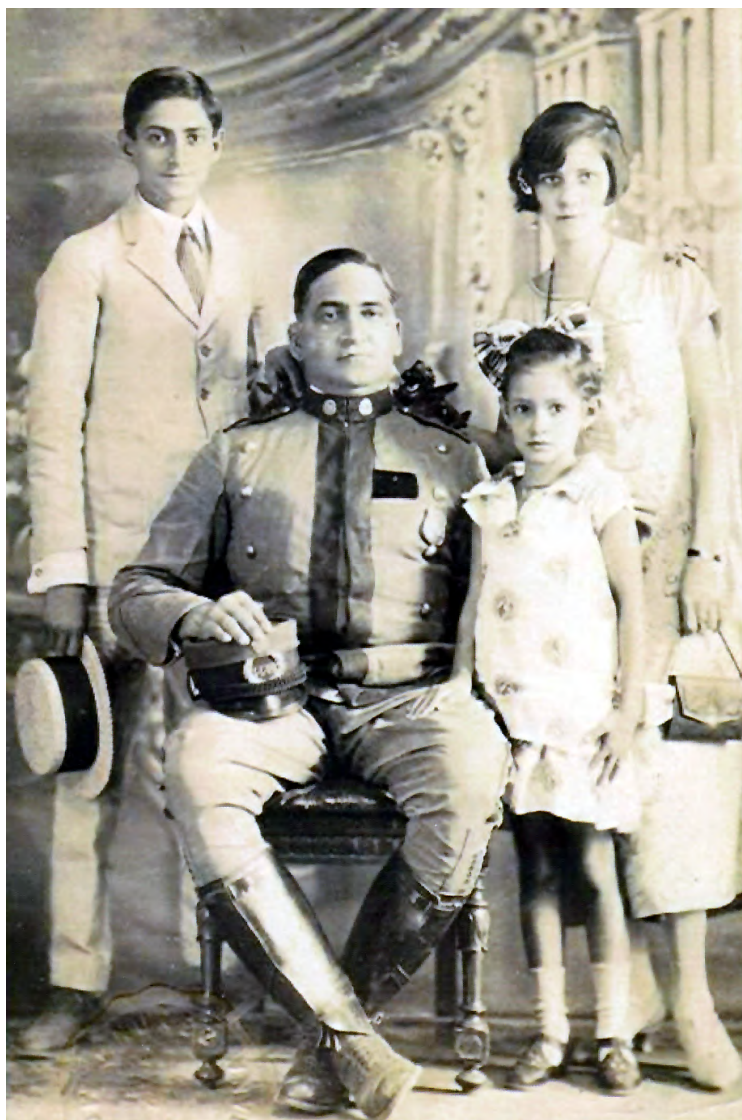
My father would regularly take me with him on one of his two-hour round-trip driving routes. I rode side by side with him; there was a seat parallel to the Driver's seat, which I proudly occupied. All the bus drivers were my friends, and treated me with love and affection. I remember one, in particular, who I nicknamed "El Amigo" (the friend). Years later, while living faraway, I frequently asked my father about "El Amigo."

Chapter 2

Family and Friends



Antonio María Cantón Pérez and wife Vivina Martínez Oliva, and children: Juan Antonio Cantón Pérez and Caridad Raquel Cantón Martínez



Juan Antonio Cantón Pérez, Antonio María Cantón Pérez, Hilda Cantón Martínez and Caridad Raquel Cantón Martínez