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Cuban Politics: Living With the Lies

HAVANA — Over long pre-luncheon drinks in a restaurant bar, I am interviewing a Cuban official. We break briefly to walk to the dining room and in the hallway my husband hisses into my ear. "Keep talking like that and they're never going to let you meet Fidel."

In truth, Mr. Castro is not entertaining many Western journalists these days no matter how polite they are; doubtless he has had enough of them snidely suggesting that his recent talk about negotiating with the U.S. must mean he is in big trouble. Still, if you are a visiting newspaper writer

The Americas

by Suzanne Garment

the Cubans will give you to understand that Fidel may see you—but only if you behave acceptably in the early interviews you conduct. I am a certified coward, but in response to this trick I find that every hour or so I am throwing a rock through the conversational window.

The main challenge for a journalist in Cuba is to separate the truth from the lies, both deliberate and innocent. The Cubans have tensions with their Soviet allies but insist this is not so; they are in serious economic need but staunchly deny it. Their distinctive habits of speech pervade their relations with outsiders down to the level of the most ordinary personal relations.

Cuba puts on its best face for visitors and because it is controlled can be quite thorough in its deceptions. I discover that some of these do not bother me much. For example, the Cubans take us to their showcase Lenin School, a secondary school near Havana. The assistant principal in his jeans and T-shirt says he has almost no dropouts or discipline problems. The children in their uniforms are an ethnic rainbow, each one beautiful and shining.

I scan the happy crowd of students looking for the ugly kids—you know, like the ones at the Bronx High School of Science no one ever talks to and who go home, lock themselves in their antisocial little bedrooms and invent fusion. I do not see them and give a mental shrug at the Cubans' display.

The mixture of messages is harder to deal with when our hosts put us up against their charming and formidable minister of education, Jose Fernandez Alvarez, who looks and talks approximately like John Wayne. He was an officer in Batista's army, a prisoner in Batista's jail, a fighter in the revolution and a hero of the Bay of Pigs. He also trained at Fort Sill, Okla.

Commiserating with us over the dearth of taxis in Havana, he says: "Our cabs are very shy. When they see you they swerve to avoid you. They have more curves than Johnny Sain," who pitched for the old Boston Braves.

The U.S. government, with evidence, has recently accused Cuban officials of aiding criminals who smuggle drugs into the U.S. Mr. Fernandez says this is a vicious lie. I do not see how such a patently honorable man can be wrong. He says that none of the refugees sent to us through the Cuban port of Mariel in 1979 were known to be psychopathic, and I start wondering whether there has been a misunderstanding between the two countries' psychiatrists.

Then he begins to speak about Cuban education. He always needs more money, he says; as Fidel once said to him, "You should be education minister of Saudi Arabia." Then why does the country send so many children to relatively expensive boarding schools instead of leaving them home? Cuban families are very united, he explains, and overprotective—a virtue to a certain extent, but the children "have to learn to make their own decisions."

I am brought up short. Nice Mr. Fernandez is telling us that a major goal of Cuban education is to weaken the power of the Cuban family. Our talk becomes less cordial. Cuban Communist officials are different from you and me.

More difficult than any interview, though, is the morning-to-night time we put in with the Foreign Ministry official shepherding us around and the translator assigned to us. Both should get merit badges from their government for softening up U.S. hawks. We find our Foreign Ministry guide attractive and funny, with just enough of a dissolute air to assure you that he will not disapprove if you want to order another beer. The translator is a small, brown-haired, pretty woman of 28 who explains with her sincere eyes that she "grew up with the revolution."

As the days go on, they show more humor and irony. Our guide tells about the time he was assigned to Ottawa, traveling on a Canadian aircraft, and suddenly heard the pilot announce over the loudspeaker that the plane had been hijacked to Cuba. Another time I laugh to him about how the airport police are all confusingly dressed in army-styvie fatigues. "But you see," he says, his eyes lighting up, "all our army is dressed up as police. This is to fool the CIA, whose figures are therefore completely wrong." On the airport tarmac before our departure I notice furniture being unloaded. I have seen fine Cuban wood-

working and ask the translator, "Why are you importing furniture?" "This is known as Latin American friendship," she replies.

Yet when we ask to see the largest synagogue in Havana, our guide says he does not know where it is and forgets to find out; we discover it on our own, a large modern building now no longer functioning, a block away from one of our scheduled interview sites. When we talk about U.S.-Cuban relations he always cites U.S. abuses, in the same words, from the time just after the revolution: destabilization, infiltrations, crop bombings, assassination attempts. This is not a list to encourage the conversation he clearly wants, but he cannot dispense with it; it stands at the center of his political analysis.

We ask repeatedly about Cuba's relationship with the Soviets: Why are talented people like you hanging around with losers like them? They will not say a word against their Soviet allies. Neither do they, say anything substantive in the Soviets' behalf. Mostly when we mention the Soviets they fall prudently silent.

On our final night, the plane at the Havana airport is announced as landing in 10 minutes, then no word for an hour and a half. It sits on the ground another two hours before boarding begins. An American travel guide would have been accosting bureaucrats to get an explanation. But our government hosts sit still. Our translator sighs about the unreliability of charter flights; I snap at her that it is the Cuban government that will not get the plane turned around. She falls into one of the silences that have punctuated our time together and I know what she is thinking: four days of exhausting work down the tubes.

She is no more tired than we are when we finally reach our seats on that airplane. The hours of carefully chosen words, of falsehoods not responded to, of periodic silence, of alternating cordiality and alienation rob a human being of energy. I imagine what the cost must be for Cubans living indefinitely under this constraint, claiming to the world that they need nothing from us while they shuttle to the airport to meet their relatives from Miami. The island is, clearly no large and self-contained Soviet Union; it is impossible to think that the Cubans can bear these contradictions indefinitely.

Ms. Garment is associate editor of the Journal's editorial page. This article and her column, which appears nearby, are the last in a series on Cuba.