

CUBAN REFUGEES ADAPT TO LIFE IN U.S.

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Byline: By GEORGE VOLSKY, Special to the New York Times

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Body

Every day, five days a week, about 225 **Cuban refugees** are interviewed here by special Immigration and Naturalization Service examiners, and practically all of them become permanent residents of the **United States**.

Five years ago these men and women were part of a group of 125,000 **refugees** who came to this country from the port of Mariel, west of Havana, in what was perhaps one of the most controversial migrations in American history.

Many of these **refugees** experienced discrimination and economic hardships far worse than had earlier waves of immigrants from Cuba, but, with their new status as residents, they are beginning to merge into the mainstream of American cultural and economic **life**.

"We from Mariel had to begin from zero," said Eduardo Suarez, a television cameraman in Miami. "In five years, we have done what those before us took 20 years to accomplish."

Perry A. Rivkind, district director of the immigration service office in Miami, said "Fidel Castro sent us a lot of riffraff, but most of the Mariel people are hard-working, legitimate people." Vigil G. Salois, the assistant district director who is in charge of processing the Mariel **refugees**, agreed, saying: "We see very few who are not eligible for adjustment. Practically all have jobs and families and are contributors to the community."

Vision of Orderly Boat Lift

When President Carter authorized the immigration in April 1980, it was envisioned by Washington as an orderly process of transporting aboard American vessels some 20,000 Cubans who were either relatives of Cubans already here, dissidents or former political prisoners.

But the immigration turned into a huge, disorderly exodus, manipulated by the Government of Fidel Castro, which placed on boats bound for Key West, Fla., more than six times as many **refugees** as expected, including thousands of prison inmates, mental patients and others whom Havana called "antisocial elements."

Thousands of the Cubans were detained on arrival by immigration service inspectors. Even now, more than 2,500 of the **refugees**, classified as "undesirables," are in American jails. Their repatriation to Cuba under a Washington-Havana agreement was interrupted by Mr. Castro, who denounced the pact on May 20, the day Radio Marti, a branch of the Voice of America, began broadcasting to Cuba.

This summer the Justice Department decided to continue holding in custody a number of Cubans, even though they had served jail sentences for crimes committed since they arrived in the **United States** five years ago.

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Treatment of Mariel Refugees

The Mariel Cubans were treated differently by the Government from those who came here in preceding migratory waves. The earlier immigrants were immediately given refugee status by the United States and allowed to settle, but more than 65,000 of the Mariel arrivals, mostly those without families here, were sent to five detention camps around the country, from which they were slowly released.

In addition, they were given the immigration status of "entrants," a classification that placed them in a legal limbo, from which they were only recently removed when permitted to apply for American residency.

By early 1981, more than 90,000 of the entire group had settled in the Miami area. Experts in refugee affairs believe that never before has a single community in the United States experienced such a great influx of refugees in such a short time.

For several years, the Mariel refugees had difficulties in obtaining jobs and housing. The weak labor market could not absorb all those who had arrived at essentially the same time. By mid-1983, some destitute "Marielitos," a name that has acquired a pejorative connotation here, were roaming Miami streets, usually in small groups, asking for handouts and sleeping in the parks.

Resentment Toward Immigrants

Many Cubans who had already become part of the Miami community indicated resentment toward the new immigrants, whom they said reflected badly on themselves. Stories, often exaggerated, of larceny, robbery and other crimes committed by Mariel refugees fueled their estrangement from the earlier Cuban immigrants.

But in the last few years, as work, especially in the service sector, became more available, the economic conditions of these refugees improved to such a degree that many Mariel immigrants interviewed here believe the problem has ceased to exist.

"We had one major advantage," Mr. Suarez, the television cameraman, said. "We knew from the beginning that there was no way back to Cuba, and even more to pre-Castro Cuba. Those who came before us, for a long time thought it is possible, and some of them still think so, living in an old historical capsule."

'Many Sleepless Nights'

Mr. Suarez, 35 years old, who has won several local awards for his camera work, remembers his adjustment problems.

"I was able to obtain a job fairly quickly because of my profession," he said. "But in the beginning I spent many sleepless nights thinking how would I pay for my and my wife's expenses if I were to be fired the next day. It took me a year to acquire self-confidence in this strange land of opportunity."

For Ponciano Perez, 39, and his 33-year-old wife, Norma, this country has offered the opportunity to own his own business. A mechanic in Cuba, Mr. Perez first worked in the United States for a year in a lumber warehouse and two years in construction, mostly for minimum wages.

In 1984, he and his wife opened a small coffee shop. Their Cafeteria Cachita is open from 6 A.M. to 9 P.M., six days a week. "We cannot afford any help, so it's hard work," Mr. Perez said. "But I don't mind. I only regret that we didn't come here 20 years earlier. I'm now working for myself and my children."

Working Day and Night

Roberto Rodriguez, a 45-year-old Miami gardener, is not complaining either. He said that 43 members of his family came on the Mariel boat lift. He owned a small farm near Havana that belonged to his family for four generations.

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"I work here harder than I did in Cuba, even though the farmer's lot is not easy," he said. "I cut grass during the daytime and in the evening I am a part-time butcher. My wife works in a factory and one daughter is also employed."

After five years in Miami, Mr. Rodriguez and his family saved enough to buy a \$80,000 home. He's making improvements on the house himself and expects to sell it for a profit.

His two teen-age daughters speak English fairly well, there are three automobiles, three television sets and a whole array of appliances in the home. "It is not only us," he said. "All members of my family who came here with only clothes on our backs are fine. I think it's because we came here to work, not to loaf."

Graphic

Photo of Cuban refugees crowding around a table at a Miami immigration center (UPI)

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