



Voz do Migrante

MY LIFE AS A STRANGER♦

Josefina R. Chirino*

O presente relato traz a partilha da jornada migratória de uma refugiada cubana nos Estados Unidos. Relendo os passos de um percurso migratório sofrido e ao mesmo tempo desafiador e rico, Josefina narra também a experiência religiosa que marcou seu percurso e o interpreta ainda hoje.

This narration shares the migratory journey of a Cuban refugee in the United States. Looking back upon the steps of a suffering and, at the same time, challenging and rich migratory course, Josefina also describes the religious experience that has marked her journey, and still directs her interpretation today.

My life as a stranger began when I was ten years old. That was forty-five years ago, yet I can remember every detail of that short journey; and no feeling of that day, or of subsequent days related to this event ever escapes me. I emphasize the stranger component, because that was, and is, the most predominant feeling that accompanies my life as a Cuban exile. At age ten I became different; I became somehow separate, disengaged, disavowed. My life was severed, truncated and I became permanently “other.”

♦ The text is available in the CSEM website - http://www.csem.org.br/artigos_port.html, in Portuguese, Italian and Spanish

* Doctor of Ministry. Chairperson of Theology and Campus Ministry - Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, Miami, Florida. Mission Formation Coordinator Amor en Acción, Miami, Florida.

The days that preceded my departure were filled with secrecy. Although we were leaving through legal means, it was still not wise at that moment in Communist Cuba to announce one's exodus, because the State might send policemen to ransack one's home at any time. Thus, whatever possessions we had, were secretly passed next door to my aunt's home under the cover of night. As I watched this go on, I felt like a criminal: hunted, persecuted, wronged. I couldn't understand these feelings, but they haunted me for a long time.

A few months before, the State Police had arrested my father in a general round up they were doing in our town the day after the Bay of Pigs Invasion.¹ Since we lived in a small town, it was known that my father (who was assistant district attorney) was not sympathetic to Castro's government. He had resigned his post after realizing that justice had taken the back door, so to speak, under this new and totalitarian regime. It was easy for the police to simply arrest, accuse and send to the firing squad anyone, with or without cause.

I have to say, however, that the journey that brought me to the land of freedom was nothing out of the ordinary. It was a short, thirty minute flight from Havana, Cuba to Miami International Airport, on the 18th of December, 1961, six days before my 10th birthday. There was nothing extraordinary about it, since we left the country legally, as political refugees. There was nothing extraordinary about it, except the profound feeling of loss as I placed my hand against my father's through a glass cage that separated the ones that left from the ones to whom the State had not granted exit visas. My Dad was one of those. I left with my mother and my youngest sister, not knowing if I would ever see him again. The other half of the family, my older brother and sister had already left the country. Before boarding the twin engine Pan American airplane which would take us to the United States, we were thoroughly searched and our bags reduced to two pieces of clothing per person, absolutely no money and no jewelry.

Thirty minutes later I was a stranger in a strange land. There was nothing familiar about this new city, nothing that I could relate to, nothing that would make me think that I would like it here. Interestingly enough, the day I arrived at Miami International Airport was the day my journey actually began. That day marks the end of my childhood. It marks the day I began to know loss, anger, and confusion. Oddly enough, the land that would save me from the totalitarianism of a communist regime taught me

¹ The Bay of Pigs Invasion was a failed attempt by Cuban exiles, under the direction of the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to overthrow Fidel Castro on April 17, 1961.

fear and hatred, too. In the short span of thirty minutes, my life took a 180 degree turn and I still don't know if I landed on my feet.

I had never known want; I had never known confusion, fear nor loss. Safely nestled in the warmth of a loving home, I grew up totally confident that things were the way they were supposed to be. I spent my days in school or playing with my cousins around the streets of my small hometown in Consolación de Sur, in the province of Pinar del Rio in Cuba, where everyone knew who I was, and where everyone looked out for me. If I got into any sort of mischief, I could count on any one of the adults around to reprimand me or threaten that they would tell my mother. I played mostly in the park that was part of the plaza where our town church was. And what a beautiful church it was. It was large (or at least it seemed gigantic to my 10 year old eyes) and smelled of incense and flowers. And every Sunday my entire family would walk half a block for 8 o'clock Mass; and every Spring I would participate in the ritual procession where the children would sing and bring flowers to Our Lady; and every 2nd of February the entire town would dress in its Sunday best to celebrate the feast of our Patronnes, Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria. It was a safe place to grow up.

My arrival in the United States of America was marked at first by the joy of meeting my older brother and sister from whom I had been separated for several months. Yet quickly the reality of life as an immigrant set in. We initially settled in a house that we had to share with another family, and, though this experience was new, I adjusted quickly to sleeping in bunk beds with other girls my age. The winter of 1961 was particularly cold, and since the State Police had confiscated our belongings on leaving Cuba, we didn't have much in the way of winter clothing. The next door neighbor showed compassion and gave us a blanket. My entire family could do nothing but praise this very generous action, which I found so natural that I had thought a simple "Thank you" would have sufficed.

Later I realized why my family had seen this act as almost heroic. I quickly learned that most people are not so welcoming to those who arrive from the South. I quickly learned that not knowing how to speak English made us so different that we were really despicable in many people's eyes.

Within a month of sharing a house with another family we had to move out on our own. Throughout those early years moving from one house or apartment to another was the norm rather than the exception. Either the rent was too high, or we were asked to leave because there were too many of us, or the landlords realized that renting to Cubans was the equivalent of giving shelter to animals. "For Rent" signs outside buildings carried the codicil: "No dogs or Cubans". Attending public school became

a little private war of my own. Since I could not understand why other children laughed at me, or mocked me, or refused to let me play with them I often reacted with violence. Other times I retreated to my own little world. I could not understand why I was suddenly such a different person. I could not understand why everything was so different. What was so wrong about speaking Spanish to another Cuban girl at school?

To this, I have to add the difficulties associated with poverty. My parents didn't always have jobs, and they couldn't always afford to put a warm meal on the table for us. Much of my clothing came from the neighborhood church, which periodically would hand out bags of used clothes to people who stood in line long enough. We were very poor; we couldn't speak the language and we didn't understand the culture. What's perhaps worse, the 'welcoming' nation didn't understand us. We were different; we were strangers.

That is where my faith journey begins. In the midst of this 'otherness', in the center of my greatest confusion, in the enormous desert of my loss, Jesus was present. Actually, He was more than present. He was active, engaged, involved in my ever growing struggle to find home. As I look back past the forty some years that separate the woman I am now from the child I was then, I can clearly see how this experience of otherness, and my subsequent search for wholeness have prepared me for and even *determined* my encounter with Jesus years later.

My parents found a way to get me into a parochial school (on scholarship, of course) at age thirteen, and I began to go to Mass in this strange land. There was something in that church, something which I didn't know then, but I know well now. It was something that attracted me so that I started to walk to church by myself on Sundays, and I wanted to just be there and sit in those pews and listen to what went on. It smelled of incense and flowers. I know *now* that I had found home. This was the one place where things were the same as they always had been. This was the place where women had to wear veils over their heads (as in my town) and priests spoke in Latin. These rituals I could follow. I could understand and even respond in a language which, though unknown to me, was terribly familiar. This was the place where Jesus waited for me. He brought me here and welcomed me, but I was too young then to recognize him. That recognition took place years later. At this point I was only able to respond to the feelings of peace that this place gave me. For now, he had managed to bring me to him through the familiarity of the rituals of the Mass, and that was the first step in my journey to him.

I went to a Catholic high school, and though I loved the school and the friends I made there, I graduated wishing never to step in a Church

again. Unwittingly, I associated my catholic faith with the people that taught me, and what they taught me was that my culture – and by extension, my PERSON – was to be looked down upon. They showed contempt and disrespect for anything Spanish or Cuban and so managed to teach me that God preferred Anglo-Saxon girls because the rest of us were somehow marred. After four years of college I returned to Church, because the Good Lord placed in my path a nun who was Cuban, who spoke like me and taught me that no matter what, Jesus loved me for me. *What a revelation!* This was the second step of my journey to Jesus. My early twenties were filled with the enthusiasm of one who has just fallen in love and wants to simply give herself entirely to the beloved. I had a small Christian life community of friends who shared my newly found passion for Jesus and his Kingdom.

I entered and left Religious Life in the span of two years. I started teaching at a Jesuit school. And when I traveled with a group of my students to the Dominican Republic to do missionary work among the peasants of that country the attraction I had felt when I started to go to Church as a girl returned. There I began to recognize myself in the faces of those people who were suffering from hunger, in the smiles of the little children who had no future to look forward to, in the rough and weather beaten hands of the peasants who worked the fields for next to nothing. I too had experienced hunger; there had been a time when I had nothing to look forward to; my parents had worked the fields picking tomatoes.

I began traveling frequently to this and other impoverished areas of the Dominican Republic, now as a member of a lay missionary community, and the more I traveled, the stronger my need to continue to do this sort of work, the stronger the bonds that I was forming, the love that unites me to these people. These missionary journeys changed me forever. Now as an adult, I continue to witness the effects of injustice, what happens when one group of people oppress another group of people. I continue to witness the pain of discrimination, of cultural bigotry, but from a different perspective.

Let me explain. I continued studying and got a Masters Degree in Pastoral Ministry and a Doctorate in Ministry. I am no longer the shy little girl who could accept contempt and condescension for not speaking English correctly or for having another culture. I have a successful career as an educator. I am no longer the oppressed. Yet my contact with the poor keeps me in touch with that little girl who was afraid, and who felt lost, and who didn't understand. I know what it's like to live in crowded conditions; I know what it feels like when you have to go to bed hungry; I know what it's like when people despise you because you are not like them – and

blame you for it; I know what it feels like when your parents don't have jobs; and what it feels like when others think your family is lazy because they can't find jobs; I know what it's like to lose your home, your family, and everything that is familiar. My life as a Cuban exile and immigrant was the instrument that the Lord chose to prepare me to be a missionary. My life as a missionary in the poorest areas of the Dominican Republic and Haiti has been my salvation. My contact with the poor has become a source of grace because in them, I not only found myself, I also found the crucified Christ, the suffering Christ, the Christ who doesn't want anyone to be lost or hungry or hopeless; the Christ who died so that we would recognize injustice when we saw it, and on seeing it, we would move to do away with it.

Now I know that throughout my struggles as an immigrant, as a stranger in a strange land, Jesus was holding me by the hand and preparing me for what he truly wanted from me. My life has come full circle. What I thought was the worst moment in life really was the holiest hour, because my life experience is that God is as present in the midst of the worst as he is in the holiest moment.