

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SARA ACEVEDO

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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MONROE TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SARA ACEVEDO

Mohammad Athar: This begins an interview with Sara Acevedo. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

Sara Acevedo: Yes, correctly.

MA: The date is March 2, 2016. The interview is taking place in Monroe Township, New Jersey. The interviewer is Mohammad Athar. Thank you very much for having me here.

SA: Sure, my pleasure.

MA: To begin, could tell me where and when you were born?

SA: Yes, I was born in Cuba in the province of--well, the new Province of Cienfuegos, because before there were only six or seven provinces. With the new government they made it into fourteen provinces for better administrative and political administration. I was born in the old Province of Las Villas that became the Province of Cienfuegos. I was born on July 13, 1953.

MA: Could you give us a sense of where it was located in Cuba?

SA: Yes, it was located in the center of the island to the South. A landmark could be the Bay of Cienfuegos.

MA: Could you tell us a little bit about your family history, maybe starting from your grandparents?

SA: Sure. My grandparents on my maternal side were from northern Spain. My grandfather's uncle was in Cuba prior to his coming. They came looking for a better life. Then, there was the war against the Moors and other members of the family kept coming to Cuba. My grandfather didn't want to fight with anybody, so he since he had his uncle in Cuba, who was doing well, he decided to come. Then, later my grandmother came too. They met and married and ended up settling where my grandfather's uncle was. They were the only Spaniards. Actually, my mother and my uncle were the ones born in Cuba

MA: Did your grandparents settle in the same area of Cuba?

SA: Yes, all of them settled in the same area and never moved elsewhere. This is actually where they died.

MA: And what about your father's grandparents?

SA: My father's side, all Cuban. They are all Cuban from the same town and area.

MA: You said in your survey your father was a machinist?

SA: Yes, my father was practically illiterate, but he had a tremendous intellectual capacity and he was an avid reader. He basically formed himself. He came from very humble origins.

Basically he suffered all kinds of scarcities but there is like a contradiction here. His father was employed by the town court, for the City Hall but they were poor. There were many children and my father just didn't have the means to pursue education, but he was brilliant and taught himself many things.

MA: In the town were the people of the same education and status?

SA: Well, it was mixed. My town was, let's say, in a semi-rural area. It was surrounded by five sugarcane factories which made it really prosperous and it was between two main cities. Cienfuegos, which is the city where I was born, and the other city on the opposite side, like going north, called Santa Clara. My town's name is Cruces, meaning cross, which is the crossing of the roads that took you to the two main towns. So, in my town there was a lot of everything and there were opportunities for all. There were people that had more means because they had a business like my maternal grandfather, who wasn't rich, but he had like a small depot of construction materials. The sugarcane farmers would go there and buy the wood or other materials to fix their wagons to carry the cane from the fields to the factories. So there was a lot of life in town. We had a high school. We had a cinema. We had a clinic, so it wasn't rural lost in the midst of nowhere and there were also people of varied social and educational levels. It was a suburban area and it was a municipality.

MA: And the sugarcane industry was the main industry?

SA: Oh, yes, that was the source of income for many families and as I said before there were five factories at a very short distance. Another strong industry was tobacco and to a smaller scale coffee.

MA: What about your mother? Was she also working?

SA: My mother never worked outside the home until she came to this country. For her it was the old-school thing. She got to go up to 8th grade. She graduated from 8th grade, but at that time, there were practically only two options that girls had: going to school if, and after that, get married, having children and dedicating their lives to them and the husband. That is what my mother did.

MA: Was your father involved politically at all?

SA: Well, that was the big thing because my father was totally against Communism, totally, totally, totally. This was the main reason why we ended up in this country because he was going to be killed. For example, he would stand in front of the refrigerator and would say: "I have never seen you so white!" meaning that it was empty. So he would go out with several friends. They would pitch in money and would go to the farms to buy a cow for their families. It wasn't stolen or anything. The deal was made with the farmer but it was not allowed by the government. They would buy the cow and kill it there at the farm. It was put on a fifty-five-gallon-tank on the back of my father's truck. He would bring the home to my mother and he would prepare the packages for the individual families and we would deliver it. I delivered too on my bike. So, if my father was caught that was going to be tough. Then he also began to do--I

don't know to what extent because those things were not spoken in my house. It was like a big cloud. Sometimes you pretended that you didn't see a thing because it was painful and scary. So, I think he was also involved in some clandestine activities against the government.

MA: And this was in the 1960's?

SA: No, this was a little later because I was born in 1953. I was like thirteen years old, oh, yes, yes.

MA: And so you said your father was very against the communism.

SA: Oh my God, yes. He and many families from town, that was risky. Thank God we were a very decent family and we had good relationships in town. Once my father was about to get caught on the way back from the farm with a cow on the back of his truck. There was another friend of ours who lived in a nearby town and he just ran since at the time there were no cellular phones. He found the way to let my father know. The friends spread the news and my father was told: "Don't come this way because the police are waiting for you. Go the other way." That is what saved my father.

MA: I am getting the impression that the town was also very anti-communist.

SA: A lot of people, yes. This is how it was. I can speak for my own family and for people that were close to us. Nobody believed that it was going to end up in what it ended up being. The promises at the beginning were so different. Now I know in any political thing this is what in many instances happens. There were so many promises made and because Cuba was in such a poor situation, I think we believed whoever came first offering something different. Even my mother believed it blindly. Of course, she was very young at that time, twenty-six. But the dentist of our family said: "Don't be a fool, this is not what they say it is. Leave now while you can." But my mother didn't have the capacity to believe that and she thought he was exaggerating. She was young.

MA: What are some of your early memories from growing up in your town?

SA: It's a mix of things but I really loved it. I think the person that I am today, no bragging, good or bad--we are not finished products--I owe it to that time of my life. I owe everything I am to Cuba. I often say that I owe it to Fidel Castro--even though many of my countrymen will totally disagree with me but I have my reasons--because by turning everything around he made us--okay, we were not only trying to solve technical challenges, meaning problem solving. We were challenged to be adaptive, which involved a lot of changing even in morals, values, ways of thinking, if you wanted to still thrive wherever you are. If you want to flourish you have to adapt. You have to be very careful and this is when you start discriminating. What is worth keeping and what is also worth leaving behind because it is becoming like a dead weight preventing you from growing. I think for a kid of my age, I matured ahead of time. Perhaps I burned stages, who knows? But that was beneficial. In the midst of such serious things, I have a lot of fun memories because we were a lot of kids in the neighborhood. We used to go to the same school. We used to go to the same church. In my town there was one of each, this

denomination and the other. So we had like a huge support group even though we didn't know what it was. Because of our reputation, other parents would only let their kids go to parties if we went. If we didn't go, forget it, no permission to go to the beach, dances, whatever it may be. It was so cool! My mother has been always shy. She is not like me. You can tell that I love to talk. I am very outgoing. My mom was always shy and more reflective but she allowed me to go out because she knew what kind of kid I was and I always mingled with the right people. This is how it was in my childhood and then in my adolescence it was very similar and, of course, I went to school. But this was traumatic for me because I love studying. I really, really love it. Even now, I'm taking classes in Dayton University as continuous education, formation is always necessary. I am on my third certificate already completed and working on the fourth certificate now. More than thirty courses since 2011. I enjoy it. My friends here say: "Are you crazy? Why are you taking so many courses?" "Well, because this is what is giving quality to my life." So, in those years, I was really traumatized because I was always an A student, but because I was coming to this country, I couldn't go to the university. Even though education is free in Cuba you were supposed to go for social service for three years like paying back for the education that was given to you. That was also a privilege. So, how could I have that privilege if I was like a traitor? I was leaving my country. That was terrible. I began high school like three times. I ended up leaving before the end of the year or I would fail the tests on purpose because I could not pass. Then I decided to leave rather than fail. That was really, really tough and, of course, all my friends went to the university and I couldn't. And even coming here was so uncertain because there is nothing sure in Cuba. I even had to renounce coming here because so much time had passed. I almost forgot to mention something here that was very important. Since when Castro took over I was only five, my generation was like the pioneer in many practices established by the new government. One of these practices was having to go to work in the field, every year for months, in grades 7th to 9th. Then in high school it was for forty-five days. In both instances it was mandatory. If you didn't go, you could not be promoted to the next year of education. The work was really intense and we were just kids, twelve, thirteen. We had to work in sugarcane fields so huge that you could not see the end and we were supposed to fertilize them with granulated fertilizer that we carried on our shoulders in really big bags. There were other agricultural procedures also performed by us. And we had to stay that time on farms that had been breeding farms so they were infected with all kinds of insects. We had to sleep there, that was the dwelling place. We slept in hammocks hung at different heights, all over the place. That was really tough, I'm glad I remembered to mention this. So, my father came to this country when I was sixteen years old and my mother and I came almost eleven years after. We had no clue if we were going to come or not. I had to work. I couldn't continue like that. Well, like anything else in life, all has two sides. Because I had to start high school three times, I developed an extensive group of friends so that was really cool. Then I went to the vocational school to get a profession so I became a draftsman in cartography. I would make blueprints. Then I began working in a place called Physical Planning which handled classified information. They developed towns, deal with infrastructure, remodeling existing towns or creating new ones. Everything was according to the norms of the government. Then I ended up going to night school and finished my high school as an adult with colors but still, I couldn't go to the university. Then when I came here, I was almost twenty-seven and it certainly was a cultural shock. I could have pursued a higher education but I didn't have the means in the beginning, no English and other responsibilities that prevented me from doing that. But like I said, my time in

Cuba was positive, in spite of the turbulent times and of the pain that was inflicted. Maybe it would be more accurate to say it was productive in the long run.

MA: In terms of your early schooling, what was going to school like in your town?

SA: Yes, there were several schools in my town, like three elementary schools, a high school in town up to 9th grade. This range of education was provided in town. Then from 10th to 12th grade we had to go to the city where I was born; then one would go to college. There was a lot of education in Cuba, in fact, it is mandatory. The main reason for young men to be sent to the military was if they were not attending school. At that time military age was from sixteen to twenty-seven, but if you were in school that would spare you. All the young men dreaded going to the military because it wasn't easy at all. It was not like here that you opt to join any branch of the military as a possibility to educate yourself out of your free will. You had to be good in school otherwise the military. That was it for you.

MA: What was your favorite subject in school?

SA: I love numbers and Physics and Chemistry. Now I have a better appreciation for history but I didn't like much remembering dates and events. I think I didn't like it either for what was going on in my country.

MA: You mentioned the church in your town. Was there one church for the various denominations?

SA: No, there was one church for the Catholics, one church for the Baptists and then small halls for the other denominations. The Baptists and the Catholics were the well established churches in my town.

MA: And you went to church every week.

SA: Yes, the church was my life. I was born and raised Catholic, baptized when I was a little baby, but I always say that I am Catholic by baptism and by choice. Later on in life this is what I choose to be.

MA: Do you remember any of the activities that you partook in with the church?

SA: Like I said, the church was our life. We, especially the youngsters, became like the guarantee for the rest of the families. Even though people didn't practice much their faith, we meant something for the town. We were so faithful, well behaved and committed with all, not only the church. We tried to do our best. And again, when Castro took over, it wasn't only for us, the people, to assume adaptive challenges but for the Church also had to modify her way of being without jeopardizing its integrity. It became really, really present in our lives with the values that were supposed to be kept. So, again, we were like a refuge, a fortress for others, like a safe shelter for them. And we were so active. It was our life. We were happy, we danced, sang, played the piano. When we fought among ourselves like in any other group, we were not used to apologizing. We did not say I'm sorry but you knew how to reconcile without words.

You just went to the piano and began to play and little by little you could see shadows behind you. Those were the people you had argued with and that was the end of the fight. We went out places together just to enjoy and also doing ministerial work in the little towns that didn't have a priest. We would go once a month or so to have religious services that didn't have to be done by a clergyman. The life in the Church was beautiful. In fact, when I came here, it was so different. I think it was different here because they didn't have that experience that we had to go through where the Church was persecuted and you were labeled. That was another thing. I was labeled by a professor who was from my hometown. He said to my friends who made it to the university: "Well, Sara is a very good girl but it's not convenient for you to associate with her because she is Catholic." That was my stigma. And also, when I was in the technological school where I became a draftsman in cartography--okay that school had male and female students in separate classes and also there were classes that were mixed. It depended on the career. The topographers were all guys and we, the cartographers, were all girls. We became good friends because we saw each other all the time; it was a fenced-in boarding school with a military post on the main gate. We spent a lot of time together and our careers also were connected. It was very nice. But there was a youth group that is like the foundation or the quarry for future members of the communist party called the Youth Communist. They were proselytizing of course. At a point, you got like a sponsor that was supposed to nominate you in an open assembly to be a Youth Communist. They were supposed to talk about your qualities so you could be one of them. That was a big thing, a huge honor for them. But for that your first quality had to be that you were atheist. The guy that was supposed to nominate me got up ... but this is what the communists do, they create division but the good always prevails. The beauty of the relationships could not be destroyed. So, he began to talk about me. I was this and that. I had good grades but I also had a problem he said. He would twist his hands in nervousness. He was stuck. He did not want to put me in jeopardy but he had to proceed with his presentation of me. You could tell that he was suffering. Then I raised my hand saying: "I don't have any problem. What he is referring to is that I am Catholic and I practice my faith." Then the guy who was like the head of the Communist Party there, who everybody was afraid of got up and said: "Indeed, you are a great person. You are a really revolutionary person but you cannot be nominated to the Youth Communist because of your faith." Again, this was a person that we feared but I don't know what I inspired to people that he did not treat me badly. He respected me. He never insulted me or anything. So we were faced with that kind of thing and for me that was meaningful, because I could be a testimony in an adverse environment. Again, that helped me mature a lot I think.

MA: From what you mentioned there was open discrimination against Catholics.

SA: Yes! It was better for you to be gay than to profess a religion and for the gay there was also discrimination. For me it was nothing compared to what it was like for my friends that were Baptist. There was a place that one could almost compare to a concentration camp, of course, not to that extreme, but it was very tough. The name of the camp was UMAP, *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción*, meaning *Military Units to Aid Production*, where homosexual and religious people were sent as a means of severe punishment, doing forced jobs and being humiliated. These people were put like in septic tanks filled with excrement up to their necks, the ones that I know, just because they practiced their faith. I never had to go

through that. I know this information firsthand because they were my friends. They were so brave. I really, really admire them.

MA: Were you still able to practice and go to church?

SA: We went all the time whereas in other places there was a stronger persecution. There were towns in which the churches were closed and religious orders of women and men from foreign countries were sent back to their country in a very rough manner, but others stayed. We were able to practice. We received all the sacraments, even some of my friends were married there in the Church. We might have not had nice clothes and many beautiful things but we learn to see what was really important and what was not so much so. That was a benefit. I shared this in an interview that I had with a Catholic paper and also in my classes a while ago. I said that I owe my faith, in this order, to Castro, secondly to my mother, and thirdly to God. Fidel was the one that helped us put things in place, where the important things should be. A lot of people used to go to the Church in Cuba like here or in any other place, for political or social reasons, just to be seen [that is intrinsic to the human condition], but in reality, without any intention to judge, that was meaningless. So, that is what Fidel did, he indirectly put things in place, in perspective. Before a huge evil there is always a greater good people say, isn't there? Then my mother because in her innocence or whatever we want to call it she was so faithful to the belief that she had inherited from her mother that she had made hers. She passed that onto us children. My brother is not religious, that is what he says. He believes and all but he does not practice. I turned out to be religious, that was my choice and then of course, God, the Church was always there for us.

MA: Did you only have one brother?

SA: Yes, only one.

MA: What is his name?

SA: His name is George, Jorge Luis.

MA: Was he older than you?

SA: No, he is five years younger than I.

MA: You must have been young when this occurred, but I was wondering if you had any memory of the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

SA: No, I have no memories. I heard of it but I was five years old when Castro took over and I think by the time when this happened I was like nine. My mom knows but I don't.

MA: Let us return to your high school experience. You said you went to three different high schools if I am correct?

SA: No, I went to the same high school, but I began three times because I had to fail but I loved it. It is so difficult for me to understand the educational system here. In Cuba, let's say that you had ten different subjects and you had to take this one now and the other later. No, no, no, there was a curriculum per year that you had to pass. If you didn't pass it you had to drag it into the next year or go to summer school to pass it. Over there it was a very structured thing. And I hear all over that Cuba had the highest level of education in Latin America.

MA: So, during high school did you have any jobs or take part in any activities?

SA: No, it is not like here either. In our culture, it's not that you're less responsible but your family tells you that your main responsibility during the school years is to study and to get good grades. And, of course, you help in the house chores and other things. You live there until you marry. Sometimes people continue living there even after marriage, which is not too recommendable but that is always your house. It's not like here that this is the house of your parents. So, my responsibility was going to school and then later I decided to work. Of course I was going to work but I continued living with my family.

MA: You mentioned before how your father would bring cows to various families, bringing food to them. Was your family ever red-flagged by the government?

SA: Well, not specifically, because everybody there was targeted one way or another. There were also like, I don't know how to call it, let's say popular courts where people who would judge the neighbors that were caught in what they considered irregular activities. These people could be like a mob. When I say the mob, it's not in a derogatory manner. It's not referring to them like the ignorant either because you could be very educated with a poor value system but usually one associates both, a mob rioting creating problems because they are like lower class. I will always remember an older lady, a neighbor of mine that would collect leftovers from house to house to feed a pig that she had in her backyard that eventually was going to be eaten. She managed to get some clandestine meat for her consumption. It was wrapped really well and put at the bottom of the container where she had the leftovers. We don't know how, but the poor woman was denounced and then she was brought before one of these popular courts, what they called called *juicio popular*, where you were just judged by the mob. Ridiculed, almost stoned. There was no justice in doing that. It was just an angry mob almost like saying: "Why were you so lucky to have a piece of meat while we do not have it?" It was a privilege to eat a small piece of meat every eleven days if we were lucky, if there was supply because this was what was assigned for you. We were lucky if there was supply. So, the families, of course, they were labeled. And another thing that I almost forgot. There was a thing by the name of the *Defense Committees of the Revolution*. This consisted of a family in the neighborhood that was like a watchman, the gossips of the neighborhood who would know everything and everybody. There was a guy down the street from us that had a small grocery store. He became communist and that is the thing. These were people without principles, without perhaps good self-esteem that were suddenly given more than authority. They were given or they took the power in their hands. So, they would betray everybody. He was alert seeing this and that even if it was not real. So, he knew we were leaving the country and if we could help you because you didn't have anything we would. What I mean by that is that I would give you a chair, a bed, dishes, whatever because you didn't have anything and he saw us doing that. He knew it and he said: "If

they continue doing this, they are going to be in serious trouble." The threat, there was like a hanging cloud over you all the time, all the time.

MA: You mentioned the older woman who was taken to the mob. Did you notice any other members of the community that were taken?

SA: Yes, that was a common occurrence! The one that I just talked about was the one that I remember the most because she was older and she deserved the respect that wasn't given.

MA: And you said the one man in your town that became communist, he stalked the poor people.

SA: He was after all of us and another close friend of the family, the same thing. When Fidel gave speeches they lasted four, five, six hours. My little brother wanted condensed milk. We loved to eat condensed milk with bread. That was a big treat for us but you needed to have a coupon for one can of milk since all was very restricted. So this neighbor who used to be our friend, decent people, they were transformed. He became one of those guards so he had control over the coupons for certain things. My brother sat in front of the TV when Fidel was giving one of the speeches. He had a little rocking chair and he sat there for three or four hours, a young boy, imagine? He said: "Let me sit here to see if Fidel says that I can have a coupon to buy a can of condensed milk." So my mother just mentioned that to this person with the hope that it would touch his heart and say yes but he never did. So people hardened against the needs of others but the ones that wanted to remain loyal to friendships did. It was a good opportunity to demonstrate what kind of people you really were.

MA: You mentioned the speeches. Did you watch those speeches?

SA: No, I didn't watch the speeches, no, no. I was still young and we were really afraid. There was nothing normal about that. It was so crazy. You never knew what he was going to say, what would occur to him.

MA: So you said at sixteen your father had to leave. He was going to be persecuted or jailed.

SA: We had to leave in any possible way so we submitted the petition to leave as a family. They used to number the petitions and this was what you were given, a number. We had two numbers to come in a direct flight to Miami but we were denied. Parallel to that, I don't even remember how, we were able to get my father a visa to come through Spain. All happened simultaneously so close to the time that my father was leaving, he was also called for those numbers so the whole family could leave together. My mother and I went to the Emigration Office, but see the level of cruelty, the torture. They showed us the numbers but the officer said he was not going to give them to us just because. At that time my brother was getting closer to military age. He was only eleven, but because everything took forever we were afraid that he would not make it on time. My father went to Spain and we stayed behind. It was my grandfather, my mother's only brother who was a sick person, a neighbor that we took into our house because he was a widower with no children or other family, my mother and I. I was sixteen, my mother was thirty-seven, and my brother was eleven.

MA: And how many years did you stay?

SA: My mother and I were able to come almost eleven years after. We came through Spain. As mentioned before, I was sixteen when my father left and I was twenty-seven when I saw him again. That was another shock because I had become a woman without a father. Not without the male figure or presence because I was the apple of my grandfather and uncle's eye. I am a privileged person because I have been very much loved in life. So, I had that but I had no father. That gap between father and daughter was not good, not because we had problems, but because there was no way to fill it. I became a woman on my own now, all of a sudden, I have a father who wanted to have authority over me. Then, shortly after, like a year or a couple of years after, my grandfather died and again, it was like a hole beneath my feet. Like a year after, my uncle died. So, it was my mother and I. That is why I had to mature. We became like sisters. We developed a good communication, the arguments or whichever way we want to call it between mother and daughter had to stay behind because we had more important things to take care of and be responsible for. We had to take care of each other and that's what we did. This is like crazy. When I began to work for the Institute of Physical Planning, again, this is good and bad, because people noticed my capacity, I say this in a humble manner. Sometimes people expect too much of me. So, at work they offered me to go to what they called the School of Project which was like in between the technological school and the university. I had two choices. I could go to the School of Project or I could go directly to the university for architecture or to become a civil engineer. If I opted for the university they could not pay my salary whereas if I went to the School of Project, they would. So, that had to be my choice in order to support my family because my mom did not work and my brother was still in school. At that time, because there was no hope to leave the country, I was forced to renounce my leaving. I cried my heart out because I said that because of me now I would have to stay in Cuba alone or my family was not going to come because they were not going to leave me behind. Notice the psychological pressure. It was terrible, it was a torment. The guilt was killing me but my mother in her integrity said it was not because of me, if it was meant to be God would provide. I had not to worry and it happened! At that time, it was also beautiful because I had good friends that were very supportive of me. Even my boss in that department was so great to me. Okay, Fidel was a member of the 6th Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement that took place in La Habana. Don't remember exactly but I think he was almost confronted. It was almost thrown in his face: "How can you advocate for somebody else's rights when in your country there are no rights?" So they decided to reunite the families and we fell into that category. So at that time, even if I had renounced, I could come but I was working in Physical Planning and they handled classified information, so I had to wait five years until things changed in their politics. Now, my boss, like the CEO, who was a member of the Communist Party, he had to be a member of this party to occupy that position, took the stand for me. I could never forget. Again, because they noticed my talent, they gave me the assignment to work on the historic part of the vice-president post graduate thesis. I was working on all the blueprints, a lot of very interesting information I was doing research on. I really loved it. I was in the midst of that when I was given the opportunity to come. So, I went to La Habana with a friend that accompanied me, got the visa, the plane tickets, went to the bank where they treated me like dirt. I had to go back to the office because I needed a release form, like clearance to leave from the Communist Party. When I got there, a guy who had gone to Angola, that is how good of a communist he was, he stopped me when I came for the clearance. He said: "I need to see you

Sara.” “Sure, what can I do for you?” My friends who heard him were out there pacing up and down because they knew what kind of person he was. He could ruin everything for me or could have given me the scare of my life or at least that was what he thought. He goes on to say: “May I see your passport?” “Sure.” He flipped it in every possible way and was almost playing with it like tormenting me. Minutes that felt like eternity passed and he finally said: “Boy Sara, you did not look good in this picture!” “I am not photogenic at all.” “You know what, this is all I wanted to see.” To which I replied: “I thought so because at any time competent people told me that I had to show my passport to the first person that stood in front of me. You have no authority.” Then I found out through other friends of mine that took the risk to go to my house to say goodbye at night so they could not be seen, that he had told the CEO that I knew classified information. The CEO turned to him saying: “You know this is not true. You very well know that Sara knows nothing! Even though she works in a place that handles that kind of information, she has no access to it.” So he saved me and I think it was because of the kind of person I was. I was respectful all the time. I think you reap what you sow. Sometimes it does not happen like that, but in this case it did.

MA: How did you get this job working with the classified material?

SA: That place was a government office for physical development and it was in connection with the school that I studied in.

MA: So, that job was waiting for you after you graduated?

SA: Yes!

MA: What did you hear of America before you left?

SA: Imagine, for many this was Paradise. We know everything is relative but if you compared it with what I had, wow! But I wasn't like dazzled because again, I knew what was important in life and I also heard that this was a Protestant country and to me my faith was important. And of course, that was not a very educated opinion because one cannot generalize, but that was what I knew. I was afraid and more than afraid I think I was so hurt because I had to leave my friends, all I knew for the uncertain. As good as it was, it was also unknown. And I was twenty-six years old. If you can give it a name, I was late for everything because I couldn't go to the university, marry--I mean, of course I could and I had a boyfriend. But I could not marry because I had plans to come here. If I had my own family I had to start all over again with the petition to leave. I could not leave my mother alone because I was her support and she was mine. It was not a codependent behavior, not at all, it is difficult to explain. But at the same time, I found out ways in which I could realize myself. And today I think I am a very happy and realized person. Even though I never married, I always tell people that I am in love because I am in love with life. I am passionate about things. It is not only that I have ideas but I also like to implement them. If they don't materialize fine, but I don't like to quit before I try.

MA: Did you know any English before you came to America?

SA: Yes, we had to choose between two foreign languages in school. Well, it became three, English, French or Russian. I said to myself since I had the slim possibility to come to this country that I would take English. And that was another thing. When I came here, see how much I talk, I was terrified. I did not want anybody to come close to me because I didn't understand a thing. It is never the same when you learn it in school than when you start talking. But then, I had the privilege to work in a company, two weeks after I came, in the place that my father was working, Ethylene Corporation in Murray Hill, New Jersey. It does not exist anymore. Those were really good times. I began working in a machine shop with a drill, drilling cast iron pieces. That is what I did but, because of my background as a draftsman, I could transfer the measurements from the blueprint to the raw material. One day, I was helping my father transfer the measurements to make like a \$35,000 teflon piece; this is what they processed along with different kinds of flexible joints for industrial use. One of the foremen saw me working with my father. The engineer came to make sure that all was fine and it was. I didn't understand English still since it was shortly after I came but they called me to the office and gave me the position of Inventory Control. This was still a position out in the plant but I had like a different title. I wasn't drilling holes anymore. I am really organized, I love arranging things. In fact, I say that I always end up doing things that nobody else wants to do but I find a lot of enjoyment in doing them. I'm not a control freak but I love organization and it comes natural to me. Part of my job also included balancing two one million dollar each ledgers. One ledger was for the resins, the teflon, the polymers and all that. The other was for the metals. At that time, computers were being introduced in the company, but I also maintained my ledger as a parallel system in my cage. The cage was huge with all kinds of products. The owner would come to me: "Sara, could you please tell me how many pounds of 1620 we have? We bought so much of that not long ago and it seems we ran out of it already. I rather come to you because that computer is not accurate. If you tell me that so many pounds are here I know this is how much material we really have." He trusted me. I didn't know that but they would talk among themselves. Then when the auditors came they were impressed to see the accuracy, the way I kept the products leveled with part numbers and the amounts were correct and we are talking about thousands of pieces and I did this alone. I took a lot of pride in doing that. I was dirty because I was out in the plant but I really loved it. And this is where I learned my English. People say my English is good because I was among people with a certain level of education. Then the guy who became my boss was my age and was so patient with me because he saw the capacity and potential. He would be surprised to see that I knew about chemistry and other things, it blew his mind. I told him I had learned that in school in Cuba. Again, the high level of education paid off. I figured out how to balance the books. I did not know what overhead was and all those terms but I figured the numbers and the little that I understood helped. After a while I knew everything.

MA: Where were you living at this time?

SA: In Summit, New Jersey. I lived for a very short period of time in Summit from July 31, 1980 to January 6, 1981. Then we moved to Perth Amboy where I lived for thirty-four years until we moved to Monroe Township on May 1, 2014.

MA: Do you remember the year that you came to America?

SA: Yes, 1980, I left Cuba on March 21, 1980, stayed four months in Madrid and came to America on July 31, 1980.

MA: How was the travel like going from Cuba to Spain and then four months later coming from Spain to America?

SA: It was as if you were in a cloud. Thank God I went to Spain first and there was a strong possibility that we stayed there because my entire mother's family is from Spain. They live there. The only ones in Cuba were the ones I mentioned before. My father waited for us in Spain for four years but the economy there was not very flourishing at the time and a friend of his encouraged him to come to the U.S. Being here would improve his economic situation. The friend encouraged him to come and then later, once we were together, if we wanted we could go back to Spain but that never happened. My mother and I came almost eleven years after my father had left, as mentioned before. Then my brother had to stay behind almost eight more years. My brother was eleven when my father left and was twenty-nine years old when he saw my father again. It was even worse for him than for me for the same reason, the huge gap. We could not go back to Spain for the same reason that my father came to the U.S, the situation there was not good. But when I went to Spain, the feelings were mixed. It was so sad because I had never seen so many things in my life like in the stores. My first thought was my friends. I had never taken an electric escalator, imagine! To me the whole thing was a shock. I cried and cried and I had to go back to the house because I even had cramps in my stomach because of the suffering. Then my cousin's boyfriend and another friend of mine very close to me whose family also had to stay behind were in Madrid. They had arrived a couple of months before us. They came looking for my mother and me, and they began to take me out of the cage so to speak. That was a different sense of freedom but it was also tough! Then, coming here, when I saw the sign New York like when I went to Union City I would say to myself: "I think I am really here now." It wasn't real to me until I saw the signs and how all was in English. There was also a comical incident in Newark when I went to get my social security or green card, do not remember exactly. We came legally. In Cuba you were prohibited from using courtesies, being polite. You could not address people as Mr., Mrs., Miss. No, it had to be *compañero*, *comrade*. It was reinforced that all of us were alike, so no social distinction of any kind was permitted. We could not treat people with deference. All were the same regardless of the age. If you used some of those terms, you were using vices of the past and you would be labeled for that. On the elevator to the state offices, one fellow said to me: "Good morning Miss." It took me a minute because I looked around to see if he was addressing somebody else. I was the only one so it had to be me. I really liked it. I think it was the first time in my life that at twenty-seven I had been called Miss in a public place. Things that could be meaningless or routine for others have a big impact when you are noticed as a person with respectful distinction. That was a very peculiar incident that I will never forget. We were not supposed to listen to the American radio stations, even in your own house because those were vices of the past.

MA: When you were traveling to Spain and then eventually to America were there other Cubans with you?

SA: Yes, the plane was full of Cubans. On the way from La Habana to Madrid, the relatives of families that had traveled before advised us not to buy the plane ticket with *Cubana de Aviación*

[the Cuban airline] because they would have jurisdiction over it and they could get us off the plane in no time if they wanted, at the last minute and for no reason. They advised us to buy the tickets with Iberia, the Spanish airline. That is what we did and even so, when we were getting ready for departure, we did not know the reasons but the secret police, that is how they call them, got into the plane and we did not know what happened there but it was mentioned that a couple of people had to leave the plane. Everybody was under that terror, that terror. Once in Madrid, we could recognize the faces of the people that had traveled with us. We had to go to the embassy. We all looked so pale as if we had been run over by a train because it was so tragic. And having to leave your country is not easy, especially when it is not your choice. It was not your choice. That is the main thing! I don't care how good it is on the other side of the pond. Before Castro, and this is another thing, in my opinion we cannot blame Castro for what happened in Cuba. I am going to explain. We have to blame Batista because thanks to his abusive methods, again, you go with the first person that stands in front of you offering you something better. Before Castro, the Cubans used to come and live here for six months or so then during the season for the production of the sugar cane, they would go back, work and come back to the U.S. They had the freedom to come and go as they wanted. They were not forced. We were forced to leave just to have a better living, not to shine, just to make a living. And I do not mean to say that we were forced out. No, it was the circumstances that made us do it.

MA: You mentioned Batista. Did your parents tell you stories about living under that time?

SA: I saw things myself. I don't know much about things like the Cuban Missile Crisis and stuff like that because it was a political thing and I developed like a political rejection. But I know about other things because the military base was a couple of blocks from my house. Everybody knew of the abuses and in addition to that, I lived nearby the headquarters. I used to live in a very central street, it was a road that lead out of the town and right there was the military base, so you could see them, there was a lot of activity. When people saw the military coming, this particular group called the *vaqueros* [the cowboys], they would tremble. They were feared by all. On the other side of the street, there was a very, very poor neighborhood. The streets were not paved, they had no floors on their houses. They were really, really poor, black in its majority. Fidel's triumph was not until January 1, 1959 but the guerrillas began to come down the mountains into the towns like on December 25, around Christmas. The military was having an opulent dinner in the headquarters when all of the sudden they realized that the guerrillas were nearby. They had to flee and the whole banquet was abandoned. The poor of the neighborhood found out and ate everything. They cleaned out the place. The banquet ended up being for them. They deserved it anyway. I knew things like that. There were many, many abuses. We were terrorized by Batista's gorillas [enforcers]. Also, in the distance, far back from this poor neighborhood, there were many farms and one could hear the bursts of the machine guns. You could hear the terrible noise. On September 5, do not remember the year, there was a popular revolt in the city of Cienfuegos. It was taken by the revolutionaries. A lot of people were killed and many of the wounded were buried alive. The bodies were just pushed into a common grave. One of my neighbors was there and he said he could hear the lament of the people being thrown into that pit. Years after, when things got really tough in my hometown, the revolutionary forces were bombarding the area. We were advised to cover any window that at night could indicate where the town was, no lights were allowed at dark. This neighbor, because he had had that experience in Cienfuegos, was totally terrified. He had a little daughter that was sick at the time.

All the neighbors gathered in my house looking for shelter. My house was one of the biggest in the area. The bombing was taking place at night but the planes would fly over town during the day scaring us all. This guy wrapped his little daughter in a blanket and he would run from place to place like a mad person. We would call him to come back to the house but he did not feel safe there and was looking for more shelter in his desperation without realizing that he was exposing himself and his little daughter. Thank God nothing happened but these are things that you do not forget as a child and perhaps as an adult either. Just look at me!

MA: So, you witnessed the fight that was happening between Batista and Castro.

SA: We were immersed in that. I was not there in an area where the actual battle took place but it was close enough to my town to hear what was happening. And because of where I lived, as I already mentioned, I could see the movement of Batista's people and the communist guerrillas coming into town. The soldiers had long beards since they had been in the mountains for a long time. They also wore rosaries on their necks and that was what made us believe that they were religious people. But then later, when Castro was solidly in power, in one of those discourses, he said--because in the beginning he said he was revolutionary and this is what we needed. We needed a revolution that would turn things around, for things to be better but he ended up saying: "We are Marxist and Leninist and will be forever." At the very beginning though, he had said: "No, we are not communist. We are green as the palm trees." We were so happy because the palm tree is the national tree. It is even in our emblem. Then, later on, I was old enough to come to this conclusion: "So we are not green anymore. Now we are red. Does it mean that we are ashamed and this is why we are blushing?" I just said this to myself, of course, I could not say it out loud. So now the abuse continued just in different hands. He was totalitarian, one opinion, that was it!

MA: The soldiers with the beards, those were the guerillas, not the Batista soldiers?

SA: No, they were Castro's army. The "gorillas" had to flee. They disappeared. Some were imprisoned. So this interview is very political I would say, because this is what I had to go through. I just want to reinforce that others may have a totally different story to share and would be equally credible.

MA: When you first came to America where did you stay?

SA: My father had an apartment in Summit, New Jersey and this is where we stayed.

MA: Your father was there before you came.

SA: Yes, he had been here for a long time. He stayed in Spain four years waiting for us. We came eleven years after he left Cuba so he had been here for seven years when we came.

MA: When did the rest of your family come to America?

SA: The only person that was left back was my brother and he came in 1987.

MA: Do you know why your brother was held back?

SA: Certainly, because he was in military age which was from sixteen to twenty-seven. He was twenty-one when my mother and I came.

MA: How long did you stay in Summit?

SA: For about six months. It was from July 31, 1980, to January 6, 1981, when we moved to Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

MA: You mentioned seeing New York upon coming to America. What were some of the cultural shocks and adjustments you had to make?

SA: Just leaving the airport and at the airport itself because we arrived at Kennedy Airport, seeing so many cars, so many roads, so much of all, imagine? I couldn't process that! It took me a while.

MA: Did your family have a car in Cuba?

SA: My grandfather had an old truck, not a car. You couldn't buy cars.

MA: You talked a little bit about working in the ethylene plant.

SA: The ethylene corporation here in New Jersey.

MA: How did you get that job? Was it through your father?

SA: Yes, my father was working there since he came and in fact, the four of us worked there.

MA: When you came to Summit, was there a Cuban community that was already there?

SA: No, it was more of an American community. The Hispanics at the time were a true minority in that area. We had friends in Perth Amboy from our hometown and they encouraged us to move to Perth Amboy, where they had established themselves. They found us a house for rent and we ended up buying the house across the street.

MA: After the job at the plant where did you work?

SA: I worked there most of the time at different moments. I left and ended up going back under a different administration, but the owner was still alive. It changed names, it was then, if I remember correctly, Sermatech Ethylene Corporation and I was in production control. Then when the economic crisis happened and there was a reduction of personnel, I was given two positions, inventory and production control. I really loved it but then the children of the owner

were not interested in the business, the mother was getting up in age so they sold it. Then it became Teleflex Inc. After that I began to work for the Catholic Church.

MA: Is this when you began the missionary work?

SA: I need to go back here. I lost track of the sequence of events. When I worked in Ethylene, I worked there for seven years and a half. Then I entered religious life because I wanted to be a missionary. I went to Mexico and all together I was with them for fourteen years. I also worked in Texas and we would go to Mexico every summer to the mother house. Then I got really ill and three days after I came home on a sabbatical to take care of myself, my father unexpectedly passed away. He was a diabetic and he did not take care of himself but it was like almost a sudden death. That totally changed my life, because I wasn't going to leave my mother alone. As the saying goes: "Charity begins at home." So I decided to stay but I began to work for the Catholic Church as a lay person and this is where I am working now. Then the office was in Iselin, New Jersey, and I did not want to move to Piscataway where all the diocesan offices were consolidated in a vacant old high school. So after a couple of years working in Iselin, I went back to Ethylene. My family had a good reputation there. The co-owner, when I told him that I was going for missionary work, he said to me: "If you ever decide to leave, the doors of this company are opened for you at any time." Little that I knew that it would happen so I took his word. My brother was still working there and there was another girl that I knew from before but because of the changes in ownership she decided to go to another company and I occupied her position. Then I worked there for two administrations I think but I was still sick and the job was too tough for me. So I left and went back to the diocese. The Sister who was in the department that I had worked before was there. She was really good to me. She said I could start working this time as an auditor. When I was in Iselin I was a secretary. I told her I did not know anything about that but she said I knew because I used to translate for some cases and could see how part of the procedure was done. I was the interpreter for the Spanish speaking people. I was out of work so I took the offer and I have been there since. So the two times combined amount to almost fifteen years. This is my fulfillment. My job is not only a job. It is my ministry not only to the Church but to society in general.

MA: What was the type of work you were doing in Mexico? Was it also missionary work?

SA: Missionary work certainly!

MA: Do you have any memorable experiences of your time working in Mexico?

SA: I certainly do. I loved it, I really did. I am talking as a person of faith. I believe that God took me there and He took me home. I have a lot of satisfactions. It wasn't only happiness or ha, ha, ha, moments. There was a lot of happiness, yes, but more than happiness it was satisfaction which is what comes when you do what you are supposed to do to the best of your ability. I loved working in Oaxaca among the indigenous in the middle of nowhere. It was only two of us, another sister and myself. We were in the middle of the mountains living in a hut that had no lock, nothing. We would put a piece of wood on the back of the door to keep it closed at night. When we lay down on the cots at night, we could see the sky from the holes on the roof. There was only one big room for everything and the sanitary was outside. When we were having our meals, the door was wide open and people would come. We would ask them to sit down and

share the meal with us. They were so happy that we were there because they did not have many missionaries in the area. So we were eating and we would invite them to eat with us. The food was not much so at the end there was nothing left. This happened at every meal and before we got up from the table, there was somebody coming to the door. They were poor but they were bringing food for us for the next meal. They did not know we had no food for the next meal. I cannot forget that! To me it was evident that it was the Providence providing. I am being redundant on purpose. That was very satisfying. And they had nothing, the church in itself was in a very bad condition, it had no floor, it was dirt. There were a couple of benches that we would wash with a hose. I would play the guitar for the celebrations with other fellows and we had a beautiful ceremony with practically nothing.

MA: Did you mostly work with these indigenous people?

SA: Yes, poor people in the area and also in Texas and here in Perth Amboy. Some of those people over there in Oaxaca don't even speak Spanish. They speak their dialects.

MA: Okay. So talk about going to the Ecclesiastical Tribunal that you are currently working at. That is in Metuchen. So, did you move there?

SA: No, the Cathedral is in Metuchen. The Tribunal is in Piscataway.

MA: Okay.

SA: Those are the diocesan offices. They are there. Because of my religious background and all, and because I am bilingual, there are many Hispanics here, so they needed people like me there, and that's how I ended up with the Tribunal.

MA: What is your job in the Tribunal?

SA: The Tribunal handles the marriage cases, not the penal cases. So, when marriages between Catholics or other denominations fail and they want to marry a Catholic in the Catholic Church, it is necessary to declare the prior marriage null, if it meets the criteria. This is a procedure conducted in accord with the law of the Church, the Canon Law. That is what I do. I instruct the cases for the judges so they have all the necessary information to examine the petitions. Then again, there is a lot of satisfaction because there is much suffering behind a failed marriage. It could be easy perhaps to label people as failures or divorced or whatever the case may be but no. We really need to get beneath the surface to get to the core of the person. For me, the most rewarding thing has been who am I to stand before the core of our frailty and suffering? What I do is, I learn from it and bow in reverence because it is sacred. It is holy ground. So I have to remove my shoes, meaning, I have to remove my judgment and remain quiet. I have to listen attentively and respectfully.

MA: You work directly with the people in these cases?

SA: Yes because I instruct the cases as I mentioned before and part of the instruction consists of interviewing the parties. It is an interview very similar to what we are doing now. Then I transcribe it all. Then I give the case to the judges for the rest of the process.

MA: When did you start taking classes again? You mentioned that before.

SA: Yes, I haven't stopped educating myself, let's say formally or informally. So I decided to do it in a formal setting. Dayton University offers all kinds of courses, these are religion courses, but this is what I love! There is a partnership with our diocese so we get discounts. These are five week courses and for me instead of taking courses randomly, I decided to go with the certificates. I have completed three certificates as I previously mentioned and I am working on my fourth.

MA: What are those three certificates?

SA: One, the first, in Spanish, is in catechesis. I was afraid of taking the courses in English. I wasn't sure if my English was going to be good enough to do it. The second one is in Adult Faith Formation and the third one is in Leadership in Ministry. The fourth one will be in Marianist Studies.

MA: And how do you take these classes?

SA: Online, that is the only way I can do it because I still work fulltime and I also take care of my mother. I am taking two right now but they are seminars only lasting three weeks.

MA: When you were in America during the '80s and '90s, did you keep track of what was happening in Cuba? Did you follow events there?

SA: That nexus will never be lost, that connection, because we have good friends there. I still have family there. My family, by the way, was communist, most of them, because they had no faith that they practiced, so it was different for them. They did not relate closely to us, they are from my father's side. They changed later, once they realized how things really were. A cousin of mine was sent to Siberia to become an engineer in aviation. He was so arrogant when he went down there with his green military uniform. I don't know if he realized that Siberia was in the middle of nowhere. When he came back a couple of years after, it was a totally different story. He had a different life experience. Then the relationship was so good. That is the sad part. There were no problems between us as a family. It was the different ideologies that became a problem. It was because of a system that destroys everything that is good. We have good friends that we send little things to because they do not have much at all. They could be highly educated, but do not have much of the material goods even to satisfy the primary needs. The little boxes that I send have to have specific sizes. They cannot exceed eight cubic inches and they cannot weigh more than four pounds. They have to meet these requirements to be considered mail. You have no idea how many things I fit in four pounds. And they are very expensive. You pay more for the postage than for the merchandise. On one occasion, one of the post office employees asked me why I sent so many packages because they were expensive, like

eight dollars a pound to what I reply: “Do you know why they are so expensive? Because they carry happiness, love, and dignity for the people that live there.”

MA: Have you ever been able to go back to Cuba since you left?

SA: No, I do not have the guts! It was tough enough to leave once. And I have been advised not to do it. My house--it is not the material factor. It was what it meant, our patrimony. It was the house of my ancestors. It was my own house. It was all I knew. Now it is gone. They took the property, demolished the house and built a two story house. At the bottom there is a clinic and upstairs the doctor lives with his family. The majority of my friends are out of Cuba now. They are educated, all professionals. They left and now they are all over, in Chile, Miami, the Canary Islands, Spain, etc., and they say not to go because our town is like a ghost town. They say I will die if I go there and it also costs a lot of money. I will have to get a Cuban passport because they do not honor my American passport and it costs a lot of money. The money that I am going to give to the government, I'd rather use it to send little packages for my friends that are still there.

MA: When did you move here to the community in Rossmoor?

SA: It's going to be two years in May.

MA: Are you involved here in the community?

SA: Not much because I still work fulltime and most of the activities take place during the day. I am not a formal member but I have volunteered to knit shawls for the Prayer Shawl Group. I knitted a lot in three months. I lost the count. It could be thirty or so. I do not have a social life per se. So my life consists of working, taking care of my mother, active ministry in my Church so any time left I use it to knit or to do some hobbies of mine such as photography and power points presentations and shows.

MA: What brought you here to the community?

SA: Well, health issues practically, aging, thinking about the future. I didn't think it was going to be possible because you hear it is too expensive. But a friend of mine who had moved here before always told me that there were houses here for every pocket and it is so. My house in Perth Amboy was a small house with stairs for the bedrooms and the laundry. My mom is getting up in age and I have back problems. So, the occasion presented itself and we did not let it pass. I love it here but at the same time feel sorry for my mother because she does not speak English. She is very friendly and now she is going twice a week to the adult care center and she likes it a lot. Also, friends from Perth Amboy have moved here because I told them, so now it is much better for all of us. Other friends from Perth Amboy may also move and there are several Cubans here already, more than I thought.

MA: So, you have your own community here.

SA: Yes, you always find people. It is okay with me. I am friendly and I love to meet new people.

MA: We are coming to the end of the interview here, but I was wondering, recently President Obama has opened up relations with Cuba. What are your thoughts on that? Maybe with this opening you could go back to Cuba one day.

SA: Well, I have a few things to say about that. Let's see if I can put my thoughts together because it really touches my heart. I highly respect President Obama and his good intentions but he is an outsider. He does not know what really happened behind curtains. Castro's alibi was the embargo. He was blaming, and still is, this country for the epic failure of his performance as a leader of a country. If President Obama now, with all his good intentions, lifts the embargo, he is going to publicly corroborate that indeed, this is what sabotaged Castro's efforts. This is going to prove that Fidel was right, but one thing must be said. The worst embargo that Cuba had was Castro himself. So, forget about the hunger of the people, of course that is important, but it was not because of the USA. It was because of his poor management and incapacity. It is very sad that such an eminent person, he is brilliant, used his capacity to destroy, to do what is evil. He is a leader followed and loved by many even now because he did a lot of good. In the beginning he was trying to bring balance. He educated and fed the poor, gave them a roof but he ended up being worse than Batista because he promised something that he did not fulfill. He betrayed many that believed in him even among his closest followers. So, with President Obama, I hope things change for the people but we know that never happens. This is my main objection: President Obama should leave it the way it is. I don't know how this can be handled because I have no political knowledge but no, to me, it is almost an offense to the Cuban people. By doing that, he is going to be like ignoring the suffering of so many, so many lives that have been lost, so many principles, people like our forefathers, like José Martí who had clean aspirations and really good thoughts. And President Obama, what does he know? What he heard from the outside. He does not have a firsthand experience. To me that is a very delicate thing. It is not as simple or easy as it looks and perhaps for other Cubans in Union City or Miami it could be a political issue and that is right. But there are also a lot of tears, a lot of legitimate suffering that has to be taken into consideration. It is going to be almost a worldwide recognition that "poor Fidel, poor Fidel" but this has been nothing but a fiasco with implications not only in Cuba but in the Americas and in the whole world. Now we have Evo Morales, Correa, Maduro, the late Hugo Chavez, Fidel's protégé. We are going from bad to worse and this is what this is about. The same pattern, a total failure. Look at Venezuela; it has gone on a faster pace to a terrible decadence than Cuba even though they had the experience of Cuba. Cuba had no mirror nearby to look for a model to follow or not to follow. The mirror was far away in Russia. After a while, even the Russians walked away from the craziness of Castro. He does not honor or follow any traditional doctrine. He was totally arbitrary. So, is President Obama going to discard all this with a good-hearted action? No, it is much more than that. And nobody closed the doors to Cuba from the outside. They were closed from the inside. That is my humble opinion.

MA: That is the end of my questions, but I want to give you this opportunity if there is anything you want to talk about, maybe there is something I forgot to ask you. You have that opportunity.

SA: Thanks for the opportunity but I have nothing else to add. When you asked me when we were trying to schedule the interview if I had questions, my answer was no. I was really totally open to this. I was blank, whatever you wanted to ask was fine with me. And as you can see, after thirty-six years of living in this country, I am still very passionate about this because it is my life. But I am not a political person. Sadly I have to talk so much about politics because this is what I went through. But there are many other things beautiful in life. I love life. I love people from everywhere. That opportunity that we had in Cuba with so many people from what was at the time the Soviet Union, even though we were an island, opened us up to diversity. I don't care where people are from. I just look for the goodness in them.

MA: Okay with that we will conclude the interview. Thank you very much.

SA: It was my pleasure, thank you!

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