

The arrival in Boston of a sailboat named Mariel

By Paul V. Montesino, PhD.

The time was the spring and summer of 1980.

As usual, the city was focusing its attention on the activities of the Boston Red Sox and its eternal adversaries the New York Yankees, a contest that would leave Boston thirteen games behind the formidable "Striped Uniformed" that season. Fenway Park would witness the firing of manager Don Zimmer and the appointment of Johnny Pesky and nothing appeared on the eye-dashing horizon. Eventually Philadelphia would defeat the Kansas City team in the World Series to become the dominant kings of the baseball universe for a year, not a long time by any means.

Local Cubans, always tied to love without conditions "la pelota" with our DNA, were part of that fanatical show. But certain incidents would come to steal our attention unexpectedly, some that we did not think were logical. In April, Peru's embassy in Havana was overrun by an angry mob of tired opponents of the Castro government who entered the embassy. The ruler Fidel Castro not only accepted the asylum but offered those who wanted to leave Cuba the opportunity to do so as long as their exiled relatives came to pick them up at the port of Mariel by boat. That green light was all Cubans in Miami needed, most with access to ships of all kinds, to travel to Cuba to pick up families and friends, even strangers.

The U.S. government, headed at the time by President Jimmy Carter, was caught by surprise and could not avoid for humanitarian and political reasons, to rescue thousands of Cubans on the island who arrived disorganized to the Florida shores. Among these Cubans, there were common crime prisoners, the mentally ill and drug addicts unrelated to the owners of the vessels. Those were forced by the Cuban government to join them with the intended rescued under threat not to allow the return to the United States of those who refused.

A total of 125,000 Cubans would eventually arrive in the United States and Boston would eventually be affected by those events. The history of New England had numerous examples of seafaring: the arrival of the Mayflower in Plymouth in 1620 and the Arbella in 1621 and, of

course, the Boston Tea Party of 1773 with the participation of the Beaver, the Dartmouth and the Eleanor which began the rebellion against Great Britain.

It was inevitable that the Miami area would not be able to absorb in a few days a number of newcomers that surpassed the exiles who came from Cuba until that moment at the rate of one hundred or two hundred a day. The latter could be administered, the first was impossible to control. Relocating the new exiles, now dubbed “marielitos”, became the word of order. Boston, because of its economic status and previous experience with Cuban refugees now residing here, became one of the cities assigned to the relocation.

Numerous local trading companies volunteered to help those who arrived, and many deployed in their windows messages of faith, hope and charitable support towards the new refugees, something that unfortunately did not last long.

Gradually, experiences with ordinary prisoners, mentally sick or drug addicts, began to mingle and counter the news about those many who had been examples of morality and principles, and doubt overcame the merchants who wanted to help. Suddenly, the windows in our community were empty of the early signs of sympathy and welcome towards those expected, including my own banking organization. The Head of my Board of Directors called me into his office to explain to me apologetically that the information being received from Florida by institutions related to ours in Boston spoke negatively of the newcomers, ones that did not resemble local Cubans known for their laborious and ambitious spirit.

Unfortunately, as the Castroist dictatorship expressed in its propaganda, the newcomers were seen as producers of crime and corruption, not as they really were: the product of an immoral society where the individual had to sacrifice humanity in order to survive and that survival took the form that in their despair the survivors imagined and built. It was obvious to those of us who cared, that if we wanted help for these new refugees we had to provide it ourselves.

It happened coincidentally, that many Cubans, both men and women, with recognized leadership positions in the city, received from Massachusetts Governor Edward King (1925-2006), Democrat in 1980 turned to the Republican Party in 1985, but able to communicate with both sides of the political aisle, an invitation to attend a meeting in the state house. The Governor came to the point quickly and could not be more explicit: "In view of the extraordinary number

of refugees from Mariel, Fort Chaffee of Arkansas alone had received 19,000 of them, the federal government was trying to send ten thousand marielitos to be housed at the Otis National Guard airbase in Cape Cod and as soon as we get confirmation from the administration, we are expected to implement it.”

“We are not equipped to communicate with so many Cubans who only speak Spanish”, he added, “and we want you to help us. I'm going to need your phone numbers, addresses and job centers. As soon as we are confirmed of the relocation, we will inform your employers to explain the emergency to them and we will send a state police to your residences to pick you up and take you to the Cape. You are an example of good citizenship and you can help your compatriots and us.” The proud audience remained silent, there were no objections, and the governor left quickly while his assistants wrote down the requested information. Our mission was not for after the arrival of the refugees but for their reception. We weren't babysitters, we were midwives.

Fortunately, or not, the mass relocation never took place. The vacationers of Cape Cod missed that summer the unique opportunity to live with about ten thousand Cuban refugees who could have told them many lively stories of communism. The sailboat "Mariel" never arrived, it sank as soon as it started sailing. But that wasn't the end of the story.

It was only a matter of time before the new refugees began to arrive in Boston, some with local relatives or friends who claimed them, others alone. Members of our community who had been concerned with this situation and had been identified as volunteers by Governor King, decided to step up and prepare effective support for those who arrived. A group of several dozen people gathered at a Vasallo family clothing facility in Jamaica Plain, then and now the place of most concentration of Boston Cubans, and decided to set up an aid committee called the “Cuban Refugee Emergency Fund” (CREF) made up of a group of Cuban refugees, several teachers and business people. For unavoidable personal reasons I could not attend that meeting, but absence did not prevent me from being elected treasurer of the committee.

The committee members realized the responsibility we had assumed. The tranquility and safety of the new refugees were at stake. And so were the prestige and good name of the Cuban community of Massachusetts, qualities obtained during nearly twenty years of work and sacrifices.

Our first meeting discussed the objectives and parameters that we would follow in our work, the first related to the funds raised from the area's charities. In this topic, I made sure to define and discuss not only our philosophy, but my personal credo as well.

"I accept this financial responsibility," I said, "on the following condition: If we reach a point in our activities when we cease to exist, the funds in the treasury will be returned to the institutions that have donated to the program in the same percentage that each had contributed to the total." The members of the committee, without exception, understood and accepted that moral responsibility of the group and mine. From that moment, the money lost its personal selfish monetary attraction to become a social instrument. It was a decision that had repercussions months later when the committee disbanded and the state of Massachusetts took over a responsibility that we, as civilians, were unable to carry out permanently by economic and professional capacity, or by vocation.

Eventually about eight hundred "marielitos" arrived in Boston, some sent with help from the Miami community, others at the request of relatives or friends, some on their own. All of them received help in clothing, cash and job search. The Red Cross, the Boston Catholic Archbishopric and the Methodist Church, represented by Cuban Methodist Minister Mariano Rodríguez, who since died unfortunately, made significant cash contributions. When the final moment that had been predicted was reached, we contracted an audit of the funds and distributed them to those three institutions in the same proportion that they had contributed. The mission was accomplished. Thereafter, Mariel refugees were received and sheltered by the Massachusetts Department of Social Services.

As for the eight hundred "marielitos", some returned to Miami disappointed about the atmosphere or the weather, but those who did not, found jobs, dispersed in the state, continued or started families and stripped their selves of the title "marielitos" becoming simply Americans. Today, in one of the main areas of financial business in the city of Boston, as a symbol of that conversion, one of the best restaurants has a succulent Cuban menu and is known by the trade name "Mariel".

The ominous stain with which the dictatorship had tried to color that group of Cubans who had left the port of Mariel, but were from all over Cuba, dissolved in American freedom. That ship of freedom was able to sail successfully.

