A Latino Memoir

Exploring Identity, Family and the Common Good

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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For Isabella, Gabriela and Alexandra

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Acknowledgements

A Latino Memoir: Exploring Family, Identity and the Common Good reflects a lifetime of personal and professional inquiry, my family and our history, and many who inspired me along the way. Some of these people are characters in the text, but are only a fraction of those who befriended, taught and otherwise influenced me. There are too many to name, but I do want to acknowledge those who had a special hand in helping move this manuscript along to publication. My father, Sergio, Uncle José and especially Uncle Jorge shared many stories. The youngest of the brothers, Uncle Ernesto, died very young but his passing affected me in existential ways that I understood only years later. My brother Sergio spent time helping me remember, as did siblings Cindy and Jeffrey. Four colleagues and friends took time from their busy lives to read early drafts and advised me in important ways. Dan Bjork read the earliest draft and judged it worth continuing. Later, Antonia Castañeda reminded me of the critical need to always keep gender in mind and urged me to keep the women in the forefront. Arturo Madrid, who wrote an extraordinarily moving memoir, insisted I reexamine the text with an eye to making the story explicitly my own. As a historian, I have always written in the third person, and the shift to first person memoir was hesitant and awkward at first. I needed some pushing. Chris Ruud, a medical doctor and diligent reader of what he refers to as "cracking good stories," gave me the confidence to believe that my story could be one of those. I also thank Miryam Bujanda, whose unending support for my work gives me time and inspiration to get it done. Interested in publishing with Arte Público Press, I sent the manuscript straight to Nicolás Kanellos, knowing he would give it a thorough and critical reading. After the

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Introduction

This is a Latino story, in the broadest sense. It narrates my family's migrations over five generations in the Western Hemisphere, in the Americas. It is a story of a family's loss—the loss of a much beloved Cuban homeland over several generations—but also a story of new places and a US Latino destination. It links individual lives with the impersonal historical forces at work in the world. My family moved and adapted and, more than once, integrated into unfamiliar economic, social and cultural worlds. Transnational experiences formed us.

The Poyos lived under Spanish colonialism, embraced Cuban nationalism as a central purpose in their lives, experienced the realities of United States expansionism into their homeland and attempted to make sense of ideological debates about nationalism, capitalism, socialism, communism and religion. Some lived with idealism, while others lived more pragmatically to survive. As exiles, but also as migrants, they experienced want and privilege. Family members crossed borders, traversed the seas and landed in alien places where they reinvented themselves and thought about their lives in different ways. They combined cultures and religious traditions, changed nationalities, became bilingual, defended diverse political perspectives and shifted class identities. In exploring the experiences of each generation, this story reveals a family's constant search for security, stability and existential comfort.

My father, Sergio Poyo y Álvarez, was from Havana, and my mother, Geraldine Sylvis Darnell, was from Flint, Michigan. They took my older brother, Sergio, Jr., and me to Bogotá when I was six months old. I celebrated my eighth birthday in Tenafly, New Jersey and my tenth birthday when we got off the ship in La Guaira, Cara-

cas' port city. I was twelve when we landed in Buenos Aires. Born in 1950, for most of the years up to my eighteenth birthday I enjoyed a life steeped in Hispanic cosmopolitan sensibilities. As I encountered new places and ways, my perspective changed, and my thinking took on complexity. Language, religion, education, food, politics, work, recreation, marriage and so many other things influenced how I viewed and lived in the world. Parents and some extended family formed me along the way. I moved easily from place to place, but it required not looking back. It seemed not only normal to *just* move on, but emotionally necessary.

I lived my childhood in wealthy American suburban bubbles inhabited by corporate leaders, US government diplomats and military personnel, as well as local elite families hoping to send their children to universities in the United States. At the same time, I lived in countries where economic position was people's primary concern, where there was little talk of the kinds of nationalist and aspirational ideals articulated as an "American Dream." No one made declarations of their nation's greatness—it was a way of life mostly defined by social class, not by national identity.

Migration compels a person to negotiate their identity in order to establish or maintain a sense of belonging. Anchored in some immutable characteristics, personal identity is always on the move. The old-self remains in the recesses as you adapt to new ways of doing things and cultivate new perspectives. Identity transformations are not choices, but rather survival strategies. They are rarely linear, but first circular, then a meandering river, and always a complicated terrain. The one continuity for me was the expatriate American communities in which I grew up. Despite my parents' efforts to raise me as an American, the truth is I could not be the American my Cuban father envisioned. Anyone could see my American socialization in my attitudes and my dress, in the way I spoke English like an American instead of the British-accented pronunciation preferred in Buenos Aires. I even looked the part of a stereotypical American*:* white-skinned with blonde hair. But I became a different kind of American: a hemispheric American, a borderless American, who crossed nation-

al and cultural boundaries, but never imagined myself to be an integral part of the various countries I encountered.

This lack of rootedness eventually provoked in me a determination to learn about the history of my family. I looked back. To write this story I *had* to look back. History is what I know, so I began with a traditional third-person narrative. A disconnected first draft left me disappointed, and I sought strategies for tying together disparate generational stories. History, economic theory and political and social history had commanded my reading and writing over the years, but these alone would not suffice for this telling. I finally realized this narrative required my presence in the text as a unifying thread along with the memories of those who had shared their past. I combined history and memory, which are not the same and often compete for authority, but when brought together in judicious ways they can provide a way forward. Memoirs, novels and biography gave me inspiration.

The occasion of a 1997 family reunion in Atlanta inspired me. José Francisco Poyo y Álvarez, my father's seventy-seven-year older brother, had prepared a brief thirteen-page family narrative entitled "The American POYO Family." Of the four brothers, Uncle José was the traditionalist and most attached to his Cuban past and culture, but whenever I visited him as a boy, which was not often, he rarely spoke to me. One of his sons later confided that he was not much involved in their lives either until they were fully grown, married and with children when he suddenly changed and left behind his stern patriarchal ways. Uncle José took more interest in me when I began asking questions about our family history and gave him family genealogical material I had gathered. Excited, he said he would write something about the family.

Family histories begin, he wrote, with "an outstanding, an unusual ancestor," who in our family was José Dolores Poyo, his great-grandfather. History placed José Dolores in Key West during the early 1890s "next to José Martí, the Cuban patriot and father of Cuban Independence." These historical events, Uncle José noted, "Brought

about the first migrations of the Poyos to the United States." José Dolores and his family fled to Key West in 1869, where they remained for thirty years until Cuba's independence from Spain and then they returned home. Later, in 1942, his story continued, as a result of the difficult circumstances sparked by his father's untimely death; his mother, Sergia Álvarez y Rodríguez—"Nana" as we called her—and her four sons, including he and my father, had moved to Atlanta from Havana. Uncle José wrote, "It had taken forty years for the descendants of José Dolores Poyo to return to the United States," almost as if that interregnum in Cuba was but a detour from the family's manifest destiny to be Americans. My father had proudly expressed similar views about the family's Americanness, even in relation to their life in Cuba before immigrating. We were always Americans; his father and grandfather had been born in Key West—that made us so!

My uncle's narration told the family story in a straightforward manner with a sense of chronology, but with little reference to contexts or questions. There was no discourse of loss or nostalgia for their Cuban past, only pride in returning to their homeland, the United States. If our ancestors were American, why did they return to Cuba in 1899? They could have remained in Key West and become Americans, but they chose not to stay. How did they reintegrate into Cuban society when they returned? What about the powerful nationalist ideals that sent them to Key West in the first place? What was it about Cuban society that forced the family to definitively leave in 1942 and become explicitly American citizens? Why was it so important for them to emphasize the Americanness of their family and their destiny in the United States and ignore Cuba so thoroughly? Why did I grow up outside the United States, the country which they so revered? My uncle's narrative left so many of my questions unanswered.

Ancestral narratives often lack meaning for the following generations without historical context and reflection. I found my uncle's interpretation intriguing. In some ways, I thought his narrative a cry for belonging, a demand for acceptance in the United States. I had heard it before from other Latinos—Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans—who incessantly declared their loyalty as a way of proving

their worthiness as Americans. Yet, something inside me resisted this emphasis on being American to the almost complete exclusion of our family's history in Cuba. As I continued my research, I came to believe that my father and uncle's embrace of Americanness was too emphatic, too pure. Indeed, overdone. Why? I eventually learned that despite my father's best efforts to become American, in many ways he never fully felt a confident sense of acceptance. Of this he never spoke. Ironically, on the other hand, when I arrived to live in the United States in 1968, I didn't really aspire to be American—although I was, more than I realized—and my certainty that I did not belong inspired me to look to his homeland for clues to my heritage.

Like my uncle, I too began with José Dolores Poyo, the earliest personality accessible in family memory, and I eventually wrote a book-length biography, *Exile and Revolution: José D. Poyo, Key West, and Cuban Independence*. Unlike Uncle José, I did not interpret his presence in Key West as a "first" migration to the United States, but rather as an exile experience in a thoroughly Cuban community sixty miles from Havana. From a psychological and cultural point of view, the Poyos had never really left Cuba, did not want to become American, and they returned home as soon as they could to build nation and nationality. But in reality, they had already fallen into the orbit of the United States. They did not come "back" to the United States after forty years, but they did bring with them signs of having been in the American orbit for many decades.

Relatives, living and deceased, helped me in this intimate work of uncovering the family's past. Family stories defined the central themes, and historical research followed the clues. This book considers the ways families cope with disruption and rupture, but remain connected across generations, whether they know it or not. Tracking the generations through various historical moments and contexts, I learned that we did what we did because of our heritage and personal quirks, but also because of the unpredictable, impersonal forces always at work in our lives. Our ways of thinking and actions reflect-

ed our times. The historical past was imprinted in our persons, a gift from the dead, expressed in our genes but also in other mysterious ways.

Even without at first realizing it, ancestors I never knew taught me about politics and economics; about culture and religion; about women and men; about the importance of place, circumstance and experience. The living told stories and gave me old documents and photographs, while the dead left behind forgotten evidence of their lives in archives, churches, cemeteries and even museums. Sometimes the ancestors even visited in the night—a legacy of spirit and faith, I suppose. Aspects of our past were also revealed in neighborhood spaces and tombs. Family aspirations, actions, sacrifices and even disappointments could be excavated and interpreted.

A meticulous man with a penchant for order, my father was fond of his garbage bin, but he kept more than I would have expected, including documents belonging to my mother. These documents allowed me to know about their lives as never before and included letters, grade-school report cards, military documents, old passports, business newsletters, newspaper clippings and an impressive photograph collection. I applied my historian's training to this obsession for recovering my family's hidden past, including complementing it with archival and library research of the rich body of documentary and oral history family members contributed. Archives, libraries and a new invention, databases, yielded access to a family history that may not have been expected to leave a paper trail that could be tracked over generations.

Activities of wives and mothers were less well documented than their husbands' careers and actions in the world, but their testimonials offered critical information and insights. Women obviously played a central role in each generation as actors in their own right, as partners in the enterprise of family and life, transmitting cultural values, promoting relationships, often maintaining stability in times of trouble and ensuring continuity. We know that women in our family shared many of the same experiences as their husbands, but how they interpreted these same events and what they meant to them was not always

easy to determine. These women left only some correspondence, and even the oral tradition for some was sparse, but women especially appear in sections narrated as memoir. One of the great benefits of writing this family story as a memoir has been capturing the women who would otherwise have remained silent in a strictly historical and third-person narrative. While family patriarchs dominate the storyline, women are often the interpreters of our story and appear explicitly with voices intact. The text includes much about the Poyo women, but sadly a great deal about their lives is forever lost.

The first part of this book traces my parents' and ancestors' stories. They were everyday citizens, revolutionaries, housewives, baseball players, government officials, business and corporate leaders and wives, all trying to negotiate life in a complicated Cuba, Latin America and the United States. Often weighed down with difficult and painful historical baggage, they struggled to make things better for themselves and the people around them. The second half explores how family and historical forces set the contours of my own life. My experience included the Cold War; difficult relations between Latin America and United States; American business enterprise in Latin America; hemispheric discourses of sovereignty, nationalism and imperialism; politics and ideology; concerns about poverty and the common good; religion and spirituality; the inexorable trek of Latin Americans into the American orbit; and a search for belonging as US Latinos. Each generation examined here, including my own, inadvertently or intentionally made decisions that in a circuitous fashion transported the family across the Americas and eventually to the United States with Cuba in the foreground, or at least the background.

1
Bygone Generations

Stern-looking armed military personnel eyed us closely from the tarmac as we descended from the airplane at José Martí International Airport in Havana. Even more serious-faced officials dressed in Ministry of Interior military-style uniforms offered only a solemn greeting at customs. Just two and a half hours earlier, on a sunny March day in 1979, I had boarded the chartered flight in Tampa. My anxiety about Red Carpet Airlines didn't suppress the excitement, and neither did the World War II vintage DC-3 prop with two pilots who didn't look a day over twenty-one. Either my life would end that day, or it would change. After a moment of buyer's remorse, I settled in for a noisy and bumpy low-altitude flight along the Florida coast, across the Keys and the Straits of Florida. My life changed.

The customs agent's eyes seemingly endless rapid motion between my passport picture and face made me uncomfortable, but he finally concluded they matched, and he passed me through. Friendlier smiling hosts from the Instituto Cubano de Amistad de los Pueblos, the country's official hosting organizations for foreign visitors, whisked us to our accommodations. After dinner, I walked through the little beach town of Guanabo east of Havana, where our group stayed that first night. I came upon a CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) office, one of the revolution's most ubiquitous and controversial institutions in the lives of Cubans. Designed among other things to watch for potential counter-revolutionary activities, even spying on residents, CDR offices existed in every neighborhood and were staffed by local residents fully committed to the

Revolution. I entered the office, where a woman, perhaps sixty, sat at a desk just inside the door working her shift.

I introduced myself as from the United States, wanting to learn about the Revolution. After some time answering questions about CDRs, her curiosity got the better of her. "*¿Y tú, cómo hablas español tan bien*?" My father is Cuban I told her, and I introduced myself. "Poyo?" she said. She laughed. In high school, during the late 1930s, she had dated a young man named José Poyo, whom she had always remembered. Their first evening out, he dented his father's car, which he had proudly borrowed for the first time. He was so mortified that he dropped her back at her place early, sped home and confessed to his father. José is my uncle, I told her. We could hardly believe it. "Yes, I can see in you the same light skin and *ojos claros*," she said. After just a few hours in Cuba, I had already encountered a Poyo footprint.

In the final days of the ten-day visit, I attended a seminar on Cuban history and society. I immediately recognized Julio Le Riverend among the panelists. One of Cuba's most important historians and director of the Cuban national library, I had just recently read his economic history of Cuba for my dissertation proposal.

When I introduced myself, he paused. "Are you by chance a descendant of José Dolores Poyo?"

"I am," I said, somewhat startled that he knew about someone I thought was an obscure historical figure. I then explained my doctoral project on Cuba's nationalist movements in the United States during the nineteenth century and that I hoped to conduct research in the national library.

"Of course, you're welcome in Cuba anytime," he said. "Let the Cuban Interest Section in Washington know when you want to come, and we'll arrange everything."

The next morning, a longer conversation with Le Riverend and a tour of the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí told me he was serious. Completed in 1957, the fourteen-story national library building was relatively modern, in Cuban terms. It holds among other things the *Colección Cubana*, a treasure trove on all aspects of Cuba's history, including the extensive correspondence of Cubans who lived and

worked in New York and Florida during the 1870s and collections of exile newspapers. LeRiveraend also arranged for me to meet with scholars at the Centro de Estudios Martianos, the official guardians of José Martí's historical legacy, which was housed at the time in the national library. Martí Center's director, poet and essayist Roberto Fernández Retamar; prominent Martí scholar, Cinto Vitier; a young researcher my own age, José Toledo Sande; and a few others asked about my research plans and repeated Le Riverend's praise of José Dolores. They too offered to host me in Cuba. I couldn't believe it!

On my return to the United States, I set to work finding travel funds for an extended research stay in Cuba as I completed doctoral course requirements and began writing what I could of the dissertation. On a hunch, I called the Department of State Fulbright Program and, not surprisingly, learned that no program existed for Cuba. No one had ever traveled there on a Fulbright Fellowship, but I learned that nothing in the Jimmy Carter administration's policies prohibited using Fulbright funds for research in Cuba. The representative on the phone encouraged me to apply. My persistence paid off with a fellowship, and the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, DC issued visas for me, my wife Betty Kay and sons Jeremy and Noel.

The election of Ronald Reagan did not immediately derail this opportunity, but dark clouds threatened United States-Cuban relations during 1981. Elected on the promise of heightening Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union, the Reagan administration became increasingly bellicose toward Cuba for its support of rebel groups in Central America and Africa. He blamed the Soviet Union and Cuba for the social unrest in Central America, conveniently ignoring the historic inequality and military brutality against the people, which had finally inspired them to organize, resist and launch guerrilla movements. As popular unrest and guerrilla movements spread across Central America, especially Guatemala and El Salvador, the US government under Reagan funded the military governments and blamed Cuba for the conflicts that ensued.

I watched the troubling news as I waited for travel permits from the Treasury Department and a green light from the Cuban Interest Section. Half expecting an invasion, Cuba allowed the international press to observe the mobilization of armed citizen militias and promised to fight American intrusions to the last person. My father-in-law asked me if it was smart to take his daughter and his grandchildren. Could I go alone, he wondered? The United States would not dare attack Cuba, I assured him, not totally convinced. Anyway, Betty Kay was game, and it would be a wonderful experience for Jeremy and Noel.

Until the very day we left, I expected a phone call from the Fulbright Program retracting the fellowship, but it never came. On January 6, 1982, we boarded a Continental flight to Cancún and connected with Aero Caribe for a six-month stay in Havana. A representative who would serve as our host met us as we cleared customs and drove us to our apartment. A very simply furnished and roomy two-bedroom apartment, with marble floors and a combined living-dining area, a bathroom and kitchen in the heart of Vedado greeted us. In the master bedroom, a piece of plywood covered a hole in the wall where an air conditioner had once cooled the room. Later, I noticed that at some point somebody had removed the air conditioners from all apartments in this once upscale neighborhood abandoned by those fleeing the country. Perhaps they ended up in the offices of revolutionary officials. Our fourth floor apartment at no. 14, apt. 8, calle 21, *entre N y O* had large plate glass windows in the living room and a wonderful porch open to the breeze and a breathtaking view of the city. Across the street from the Capri Hotel, owned by Tampa-based mobster Santo Traficante, Jr. in the 1950s and down the block from the historic and imposing Hotel Nacional, we could see the broad Malecón Boulevard that ran along the waterfront.

During the first week, we explored the downtown Habana Vieja neighborhoods to get the lay of the land. The great fortifications of La Fuerza, La Punta and Morro Castle built at the end of the sixteenth century and protecting Havana harbor were part of the legacy of the city's critical role in the Spanish empire's commercial system from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. When Diego de Velázquez

and Pánfilo Narvaez launched a major campaign from Santo Domingo to conquer and settle Cuba in 1511, they established seven settlements, with Santiago on the island's east end as the capital. Several hundreds of soldiers crossed the island, killing the Taíno natives, breaking all resistance to the invaders and enslaving the survivors. It was a virtual annihilation later recorded by a member of the army, Bartolomé de Las Casas.

From Cuba's southern coast, Spain dispatched expeditions to explore and conquer Central America, Mexico and Florida. Havana assumed its central commercial importance when Spain began shipping Mexico's wealth across the Atlantic. The port city's strategic location soon converted it into the Caribbean's most important city. From Havana, naval vessels protected merchant ships carrying gold, silver, tobacco and other products from marauding French, English and Dutch privateers and pirates. Gathered in Havana, the fleets caught the gulf currents through the Florida Straits, up the Florida coast and across the Atlantic to Cádiz.

We walked Havana Vieja exploring the fortresses and docks. I asked Jeremy and Noel to imagine the hustle and bustle of a colonial port city. I also noticed something that brought my thoughts back to the present. Anti-aircraft gun placements along the shore east of Havana provided an ominous sign of the heightened tensions between Cuba and the United States that I hoped would not interfere with our stay.

I quickly got into the swing of things. On my first research day a week after settling into our Havana apartment, I walked to the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, a trek that became a daily ritual. From my apartment, I walked to calle 23 and L, where I purchased the morning newspaper and a cigar that I placed in my *guayabera* pocket for my evening smoke on the apartment porch with a drink of Habana Club rum. Then I headed down L to calle 27 de Noviembre at the University of Habana, where students filled the streets hurrying to work or classes. I turned right along the university, passing Calixto García hospital, named after an independence-era general José D. Poyo had worked with. I reached Avenida de los Presidentes, one of Havana's most elegant boulevards, and turned left. That street merged into Avenida Rancho Boyeros, the road to the airport. As I walked down

Rancho Boyeros, I could see the Plaza de la Revolución and the large statue of José Martí. I entered the plaza and saw the iconic image of Ernesto Che Guevara displayed on the Interior Ministry building. On the left was the library. Perhaps two miles, I could have taken a bus but preferred this round-trip walk each day. For exercise, but also to watch all the goings-on.

Le Riverend made the necessary inquiries to get me permission to research in the national archive, which for some reason took quite a while. Located on the eastern end of Compostela Street in Havana's colonial section near the harbor, the nineteenth-century stone National Archive building had been a military installation known as the Cuartel de Artillería. Before that, known as El Palenque, the building served as a barracks for government-owned slaves laboring in public works. Minutes after checking in at the front desk promptly at nine in the morning, a short stout woman in her late sixties approached me. She said that the *compañera* at the reception told her my surname was Poyo. I nodded affirmatively.

"Are you related to José Dolores Poyo?"

"Yes," I responded, "through his son Francisco Andrés."

She broke into a broad smile, shook both my hands vigorously and introduced herself as Nieves. "My husband is Luis Alpízar Leal, an archivist here," Nieves said excitedly. "He is your cousin and descends from Poyo through his daughter América, who married Francisco A. Alpízar."

In a few minutes, Luis arrived with an equally broad smile and held both my hands tightly for a long time. He was my father's age and short and soft spoken like everyone in that Poyo-family generation, he immediately wanted to show me around the building. Reminding me that José Dolores had been the third director after independence and had served for nine years; he led me to a staircase and pointed to the wall at the first landing. There staring back at me was a portrait of a distinguished-looking José Dolores, with spectacles, a large mustache covering his lips and a serious demeanor, the

painting's dark background seemed to envelop him. Years later, I came across an article in *El Mundo* reporting on the ceremony at the National Archive unveiling portraits honoring José Dolores and his predecessors, Nestor Ponce de León and Vidal Morales y Morales, for their foundational work in the archive after Spain's departure.

After the tour, Luis whispered, "Can't talk comfortably here . . . Come to our home on Saturday."

They lived just a few blocks from the archive on Calle Habana between Paula and Merced. That Saturday, my family and I got off the bus at Paula Street by the José Martí birth house museum across the street from the Central Railway Station, where we saw the remains of the walls that had once enclosed the city. This, I later learned, was the neighborhood where my family lived when they had returned to Cuba in 1899. The Poyo family lived at 66 Cárdenas Street, which intersected with Arsenal Street at the central train station. The Martí house was a cherished place the family occasionally visited and a reminder of their history with the Cuban liberator in Key West.

We walked up Paula to Habana and turned left along narrow streets framed on each side with a continuous line of two-story colonial buildings set on the edge of the curbs. Voices of neighbors in conversation echoed off the walls as we moved along. They watched us with curiosity from their windows or standing in the large entrances to the buildings that periodically appeared as we passed. Not many foreigners wandered these streets. People also stood on their balconies talking to others below or shouting loudly across the narrow divide to neighbors on balconies across the way. Laughing kids played stickball, avoiding the accumulated, smelly garbage in bags waiting for collection, many ripped open by dogs. We found the entrance to Luis and Nieves' home, a four-plex at 923 Habana.

Reaching the top of the marble staircase, we turned to apartment C and knocked. Dogs barked and then Nieves' voice echoed from within, "*¡Ya llegaron!*" Nieves opened the door and greeted us warmly and excitedly with hugs for everyone, especially tight for the kids. Never having had children, she fell in love with Jeremy and Noel and eventually referred to them as her grandchildren. Behind her stood Luis, for whom I would become the son he never had. The dogs con-

tinued barking with even more enthusiasm. "*Cállense*," she yelled at the dogs, which I still didn't see. We entered a large sitting room with a high ceiling. Family portraits hung on the walls, large bookcases overflowed with books, magazines and newspapers, and several tables displayed a doll collection Nieves had accumulated over the years, before the Revolution.

At the front of the apartment, a balcony looked over the street, but we turned toward the interior.

"Come," she said, "see our home, such as it is."

To the left of the entrance hall was a study packed with more books and papers, and to the right a dining room with a long table and chairs. Before the Revolution, Nieves reminisced, she and Luis had hosted large dinner parties. We entered a dark corridor, and I saw three small skinny dogs of mixed pedigrees at the end of it behind a little wooden fence. A strong scent of urine filled the air, and the intensity of the barking increased. "*Cállense*," Nieves yelled again. Suddenly, the wall on the left gave way to a large open space and the sky above. I looked down over a railing and saw a patio belonging to the apartment below. Spanish-Moorish architecture, I thought. We walked past the bedrooms and the bathroom at the end of the corridor. To the left of the bathroom where the open space ended was the kitchen. Nieves let the three little mutts out to greet us, tails wagging and noses sniffing. "They are my babies," she said.

This had been a grand home before the Revolution, but now stained and water-marked walls with peeling paint spoke of difficult times. Due to a lack of supplies, the marble floors had not received a thorough cleaning in years, and the sound of water leaking in the toilet only stopped when the city cut off the water for the customary five or six hours each day. In the dining room, the ceiling sagged, and when I walked onto the balcony a little later, Nieves warned me not to lean on the banister. It could collapse. I handed Nieves several packages of coffee I had bought at the *diplotienda*, stores for foreigners not available to Cubans. She thanked me profusely and told Luis to take us back to the front sitting area while she prepared the coffee and brought some *galletas* for Jeremy and Noel.

Sipping coffee, Luis proudly told me that his father, Bolívar Alpízar Poyo, had also worked in the archive and had encouraged him to do the same. Named in honor of Simón Bolívar, a hero of the Poyo family, Luis' father began his career in 1902, inventorying the archive of the Junta Superior de Sanidad containing the city's public health records of the Spanish era that José Dolores had found hidden away somewhere in Havana and transferred to the National Archive. Luis felt an obligation to carry on the family legacy in the archive and developed a deep historical knowledge of the institution and its holdings. Along with Nieves, who also dedicated her entire working career to the archive, Luis helped me interpret the very complicated place that was revolutionary Cuba.

Like previous Poyo generations, Luis and Nieves idolized José Dolores Poyo. Nieves talked more about him than the history of her own people, who were tobacco growers in Cuba's westernmost province, Pinar del Río; their crops probably ended up in Key West cigar factories, generating money for the nineteenth-century independence movement. Both of Luis' parents were also born in Key West's legendary nationalist community.

"Surely, José Dolores must have left his papers in the National Archive," I commented.

"No, he didn't," Luis explained. "My father told me that Pancho had the bulk of his father's papers, so I went to see him in the late 1950s."

José Dolores' only son, Francisco Andrés Poyo, known as "Pancho," had agreed to let Luis see the collection. While examining the papers, Luis casually asked if he would consider donating them to the National Archive, with assurances that he would personally care for and process the documents. Pancho not only rejected the idea on the spot, but, Luis complained, Pancho even became suspicious and refused to leave him alone with the papers for a single minute. When Pancho died in 1961, the papers disappeared.

We usually visited Luis and Nieves on Saturdays, but spent most Sunday afternoons with Margo Valmaña, my grandmother's cousin. Nana had gleefully greeted the news of my impending trip to Cuba in March 1979 and gave me Margo's address. She would connect me to

others, Nana said. My first awareness of Cuba came from Nana, who introduced me to her homeland with her stories when I was six years old. Cuba became a mythical place for me then. One day I awoke with painful bloated cheeks and fever: the mumps. My family had planned a vacation in the popular resort town of Girardot, a few hours from Bogotá where we were living. Disappointed that the trip may be cancelled, Nana immediately told my parents to leave as planned: "*Váyanse*." They did, and she and I stayed behind. She regaled me with stories of Cuba, especially of Caimito de Guayabal, where she had been born.

A petite woman in her seventies, slender and fragile looking, Margo wore her hair short and stylish. All I had was an address, 3611 1/2, *avenida 33, entre calles 36 y 42*, in Almendares. No telephone number, so I appeared at her home unannounced. A widow without children, she lived alone. Dressed in her well-preserved pre-revolutionary wardrobe that included a pearl necklace that she was never without, her lips glistened with carefully applied lipstick. She exuded an aristocratic manner and, when I introduced myself, she spoke very formally, enunciating every word deliberately and clearly (unlike most Cubans). Though she had a hard time containing her excitement, she was composed, smiled carefully and extended her hand to invite me in. Holding my arm and elbow, she escorted me to a couch in the living room and sat down beside me. She asked about Nana and then wondered who my father was.

"*Ay,* Sergio," she exclaimed when I told her, loosening up a bit. "He was so sweet," she remembered.

Margo lived just two blocks from my grandfather's and great-grandfather's homes.

"Let's take a walk," I said excitedly.

It seemed a fantasy not only to be in my father's childhood barrio but right outside his boyhood home. Communist *dirigentes* now lived in Nana's house, but I was more interested in great-grandfather Pancho's home.

"I wonder what happened to all of Pancho's belongings and papers after he died," I said.

Margo smiled, "Let's ask!"