

Priest helped bring Cuban families to freedom

By Marty Denzer
Catholic Key Reporter



Marty Denzer/Key photo

Maria Rovirosa shows the rosary Father Tobin gave her 50 years ago when she arrived in Kansas City as a little girl.

PARKVILLE — They started arriving in the United States in trickles, but within a short time, the trickles grew into a flood. Many Cubans, increasingly concerned and fearful following the 1959 takeover of the island's government by the communist

revolutionary Fidel Castro, sought freedom in America. By mid September 1962, an average of 2,000 people a week boarded jam-packed planes, small motor boats or even inflatable rafts to cross the 90 miles of Atlantic Ocean between Havana and the Florida coast.

Most landed in Miami, some in New Orleans and a few elsewhere. After registration with local authorities, the Catholics among them registered with Catholic Relief Services, one of the four resettlement agencies assisting the U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare (now Health and Human Services) in Miami. Some found temporary

housing; others lived in tent cities, sometimes for months, awaiting word of where they would be resettled. In Kansas City and St. Joseph, Catholic parishes and organizations including Catholic Charities, the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women and the Council of Catholic Men, stepped up with open arms to sponsor and welcome refugee families.

Father Patrick Tobin, then assistant-director of Catholic Charities and the agency's resettlement director, was instrumental in bringing more than 120 Cuban families to the diocese. He stayed in touch with many of the families over the years and on May 23, several hundred Cuban Kansas Citians gathered at St. Therese Church in Parkville to honor him and remember 50 years ago.

There were as many stories as there were families. Father Tobin, who will celebrate his 80th birthday in June, remembered the day the first families arrived at Municipal Airport downtown.

“The weather was 0 degrees. We bundled people into cars and drove to their new apartments as fast as we could. The next morning I got a phone call from one of the women. ‘Father Tobin,’ she said, ‘my husband is very ill! He’s breathing smoke.’ They had never seen their breath before.”

He told of another woman who thought her new neighbors didn't like them: “They've soaped our windows. They're all white!” Father Tobin had to explain to the panicked new arrival what frost was.

Nerita Benitez said she and her husband brought their daughters, one an infant, the other a toddler, to America “because we didn't want to raise our family in a communist country. Here is freedom!”

She nodded emphatically. “We did not know the language or the customs, but we worked hard and studied hard and made this our new country.”

Father Tobin flew to Miami three times over the course of several months under the sponsorship of CRS to interview families — get their names, the names and ages of their children and learn the skills of the parents. Back in Missouri, he worked tirelessly recruiting sponsorship and jobs in Kansas City and St. Joseph.

In Sept. 1962, Kansas City Mayor H. Roe Bartle's Committee on Cuban Refugees announced that the Housing Authority had agreed to provide public housing at \$25 a month (for the first 3 months, then \$50/month) for families resettling in Kansas City under local sponsorship. Sponsors were described by then-Catholic Charities head Father Lawrence McNamara as someone who assumed the obligation of providing temporary housing and support for a refugee family, such as rent, utilities and food. Sponsors also helped arrange job interviews and acquainted the families with their new community, schools, customs, language tutoring and friendship. The federal government paid the transportation costs to Kansas City and Catholic Charities allocated \$100 for each family for personal expenses.

Before they arrived, sponsoring parishes and organizations were busy cleaning the apartments in Guinotte Manor near Holy Rosary Church, shopping for food, getting furniture, appliances and clothing donated and arranging for utilities to be turned on. Detailed information about a family would be given to their sponsoring group including the type of profession of the father or mother and the date they would be arriving. A half century later, the families still remembered the happiness and excitement of moving in. Mrs. Benitez remembered Father Tobin cradling her one-year old daughter while showing the other little girl her new bedroom.

As soon as the new families were sort of settled, Father Tobin began driving a school bus to take them to English classes held at West Junior High School at 18th and Summit, Garfield Elementary School at 4th and Wabash and Westport High School on 39th and Warwick. Dr. Luis Angeles, a specialist in internal medicine in Havana, helped with both the treatment of minor illnesses and translations. He had taught himself English by reading The Saturday Evening Post, Dr. Angeles recalled with a smile.

Father Tobin said he remembered taking sick families and children to Dr. Angeles late at night as the refugee's credentials were not recognized by the United States. He had to take an entrance exam in English and licensing exams in Missouri, Kansas, Illinois and Florida. Dr. Angeles was accepted as a resident intern at the old Menorah Hospital on Rockhill Road while waiting the six years it took for

licensing, credentials and attendant paperwork to be accepted so he could practice medicine. He and his wife began raising 14 children while learning about their new country and studying to become citizens.

“I had a green card,” Dr. Angeles said. “So we had the right to stay. We were some of the last ones to leave Cuba with our passports.” Castro ordered the confiscation of passports, watches, rings and other things of value, usually at the airport. Children under the age of 16 were allowed to leave, but their parents and other adults had to have completed applications for permission to join them approved within 4 months after the children departed or they would have to start the process all over. It took some families five years to be reunited.

“We were legit,” Dr. Angeles said. “We came to stay.”

Kansas City pediatrician Dr. Granville E. Clark also assisted Father Tobin in helping the new arrivals get moved in, and helped care for their children.

Ana Maria Arango Linton and her twin sister Sylvia Arango Smith were among the children sent to America alone in 1961 to escape the new regime. “We came over two months before the Bay of Pigs,” she said. The two girls, aged 12, attended a boarding school in San Antonio and later lived in Florida for a time when their parents and sister were able to join them

“We didn’t understand everything that was going on, but we knew there was trouble. It was hard at first,” Linton recalled. “We called home every night: ‘Come get us!’”

After settling in Kansas City, the girls attended Holy Rosary School where their father, Blas Arango, a bank teller, taught English to refugee children. They lived in a furnished apartment in Guinotte Manor for about a year, she said.

“Most families were sponsored by parishes or parish groups. Our sponsor was McGilley Funeral Home. We had towels that said McGilley Funeral Home! But they were good to us, gave us a little spending money and helped us get started in the city.”

In a very short time, the fathers were all employed, although

because Cuban professional licenses and credentials were not recognized by the U.S., their jobs more often than not were in other fields. After getting jobs, feeling more comfortable speaking English and learning to understand business practices in their new city, many Cuban families moved north of the river. The Arango twins and many others graduated from St. Pius X High School.

“Our mothers didn’t get used to the new customs as quick as we children did,” Ana Maria Linton said, laughing. “We went to a dance at DeLaSalle High School. In Cuba girls could not go out without a chaperone. So there we were, at a table with all our mothers sitting with us. Nobody asked us to dance.” She said the mothers stayed home after that.

An airlift program known as “Pedro Pan,” the Peter Pan airlift, operated from 1960 through 1962, and brought more than 14,000 Cuban children to new lives in the United States. About 90 percent were eventually reunited with parents and other relatives. Jose “Joe” Artigas was one of the Pedro Pannees.

Artigas and his sister boarded a Pan Am jet in 1961, aware that there was turmoil in their country, but not sure what it meant. Their father and an uncle were in the military and the family still hoped that Castro’s revolutionary government would be toppled, he said. The children were to stay with an aunt and uncle who lived in Miami.

He remembered waiting in the airport in Havana, a little nervous, a little scared and a lot bored. “A man in a Pan Am uniform came and sat next to me. He didn’t say anything at first, just pulled a stick of Juicy Fruit gum out of a pack and handed it to me. Then he said, ‘Don’t worry, it’ll be alright.’ That was all. He got up and left but I knew then it was going to be OK.”

Artigas recalled that there were two Pan Am flights every day, filled with Cubans fleeing communism; about 60 percent of the people on each flight were children, he said. “The Americans in Miami were good to us,” Artigas said. “At first we slept in an army barracks; they took us swimming and to the movies, I remember Robinson Crusoe, and after a while I went to a Jesuit boarding school.”

His parents were able to come to America about a year later,

and then for a while “I was a rolling stone; we lived in Pittsburgh, then in Steubenville, Ohio. Finally we came to Kansas City.”

The family flew into Municipal airport on one of the fabled Constellations. “It was bitterly cold,” Artigas said, “not like Miami or Cuba. We had very little and knew nobody, but everybody helped each other.”

“Soon after we got here,” he recalled, “some of our new friends invited us out to dinner, to eat Cuban food. I was so excited. We went to a Mexican restaurant. What were tortillas and enchiladas? We had no idea.”

While the Cuban families were learning about American foods and customs, they also taught their new friends and neighbors about their homeland, which kept memories alive. Many, especially older, adults still speak rapid-fire Spanish.

Artigas’ father, an attorney in Cuba, worked 25 years at Macy’s. “Our parents did what they had to do to survive in this country,” Joe Artigas said. “Cubans have the lowest percentage of welfare recipients in this country. It’s a work ethic our parents passed down to us and we pass down to our kids.” Joe Artigas, who graduated from Bishop Lillis High School and then the University of Missouri, is the director of Mexico and Latin America Business Development for Poet Nutrition, a South Dakota-based biofuels company. His father, now 95, and mother both attended the reunion honoring Father Tobin.

About 500 Cuban families now call Kansas City home, and they credit Father Tobin and Doctor Clark for helping them get started. The priest and the doctor were presented with engraved plaques in gratitude. Father Tobin’s reads “In grateful recognition for all you’ve done for the Cuban community in Kansas City for more than 50 years.”

Father Tobin described the efforts of Kansas City, St. Joseph and many other cities across the country to assist families who were fleeing communism in Cuba, a tremendous migratory program. The Cuban families brought their customs, their religious faith, their hopes and dreams and stitched them into the fabric of society in their new communities. Joe Artigas summed it up when he said, “Migration is what keeps this country vibrant.”

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