



{THE EXHIBIT}

HISTORY REMEMBERED

A new exhibit explores the Operation Pedro Pan exodus that forever changed the lives of 14,000 children, their families—and Miami.



On October 19, 1961, María del Carmen Pérez Cancelas left Cuba accompanied only by her two younger brothers: Raúl, 11; and Carlos, 7. She was 15, and, from that day on, she began to feel and act like a mother to them. The very next day, “Carmencita,” as many still call her, sat down and wrote to the parents she had left behind. This is how she dated the first of many letters to come: “Miami, Free Territory of America, October 20, 1961.”

That letter and others like it, along with dozens of artifacts, pictures and even items of clothing will be on display, beginning June 26, at the HistoryMiami museum in downtown Miami. The exhibition “Operation Pedro Pan: The Cuban Children’s Exodus” tells the story of more than 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban boys and girls who, with the help of the U.S. government and the Catholic church, left their country between 1960 and 1962 to escape Communism. It remains the largest recorded exodus of children in the Western hemisphere. Most went to live with relatives and friends and were soon reunited with their parents, but others were sent to foster homes or orphanages and waited years to see their parents again, and, in some cases, never did.

It is a chapter in history that is well known in all its complexity in Cuban Miami, but less so beyond Miami-Dade County. The idea for the exhibition came two and half years ago from members of the organization Operation Pedro Pan Group, primarily from Carmen Valdivia and Carmen Romanach, the now 69-year-old “Carmencita” who left Cuba as a teenager. “We realized that, if we didn’t tell our own story, those stories would be lost, and we knew this was an important legacy we were leaving for our children, our grandchildren, and future generations,” said Romanach, who has four children and eight grandchildren.

Jorge Zamanillo, the museum’s director, said this is the first comprehensive exhibition that addresses Operation Pedro Pan. The museum has recorded the stories of 16 Pedro Pan “children”—among them, Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado. Their voices and narratives will guide visitors through the stages of their collective experience: getting the news they were leaving Cuba, the actual departure from the island, the arrival and settling in the U.S., and, lastly, their reflections more than 50 years after what for many of them remains the most traumatic event of their lives. Most of the interviewees, Zamanillo said, saw their experiences as necessary and positive, even if initially painful. “They are very protective of their parents,” he said. Romanach describes her parents’ decision as “an unconditional act of love,” one she understood as it was happening. “It was a very tense time,” she said, referring to the years immediately following Fidel Castro’s takeover of the government in 1959.

Because the children left Cuba with very little luggage, and because so many years have gone by, there are few original artifacts from the exodus. Still, Zamanillo said he is happy to be able to show rare, personal items belonging to some of the boys, who are now prominent adults. Yale professor and renowned author Carlos Eyre loaned the museum a red and white short-sleeve shirt sewed by his mother, while former senator Mel Martinez loaned a Boy Scout shirt, also made by his mother. Zamanillo said he was particularly touched by Romanach’s letters. “You can tell she was suffering, but she doesn’t want to tell her parents,” he said. “She was taking care of her brothers, being a responsible adult when she was only 15.”

Romanach, who was reunited with her parents after a year of living— together with her brothers—with relatives in Puerto Rico, said she found the letters accidentally, as she was going through some documents when her mother was near death in a hospital in April of 2010. “I never knew she had kept my letters,” she said. “She never told me.” Soon her private letters and thoughts will be shown for all to read. Just like that long ago exodus, they have become part of history.

TEXT BY MIRTA OJITO

Operation Pedro Pan: The Cuban Children’s Exodus opens June 26 at HistoryMiami, 101 W Flagler Street, Miami; 305-375-1492; historymiami.org.