INTRODUCTION

He remembers the day they left, June 27, 1960. The memory is still vivid.

They loaded the family car, a brown-and-white 1958 Oldsmobile sedan, with as many belongings as they could fit into it. Then they closed the door to their two-story three-bedroom cinderblock home in suburban Reparto Flores, a block or so from the rocky edge of the Gulf of Mexico, and set out on the early-morning drive to the Port of Havana and the ferry to Key West.

His father Licinio Alvarez had prepared in secrecy. He knew the risks, the barriers they would face as they made their way out of the country with all the possessions they could take in the car and a few pieces of furniture he had surreptitiously shipped to Miami. Licinio was the general counsel of an import-export company in Havana that engaged in the extensive commerce between Cuba and its number one trading partner, the United States, but he had gone to law school with Fidel Castro and feared the changes that Castro would make after gaining power.

Licinio had traveled to the US before, on business and family vacations. On this trip he and his wife Isola were taking their three sons, Cesar, thirteen; Arturo, twelve; and Carlos, ten; and their daughter Ana, five. They had visas to enter the US, but this journey would be different: they were leaving not for a vacation but to escape a terrifying revolution.

"It was a nice day, a typical day in June in Cuba," Carlos remembers. "It didn't feel hot because you have sea breezes in Havana. Probably the hardest thing was getting in the car—the first step in this unknown journey, not fully appreciating what we were doing—and moving away from the house, thinking, I may not see this again. That was hard."[1]

Fruit vendors at the port were setting up their stands with mangoes, papaya, and plantains. In the terminal the family's papers were checked, probably by

armed militia or *milicianos*, against a list of persons not allowed to leave the country after the insurrection that had ended in sudden victory the year before. Then Licinio drove the car into the open-air vehicle hold of the SS *City of Havana*.

Built in 1943 at Newport News, Virginia, to ferry armored vehicles for amphibious landings during World War II, the ship saw action on only one day, June 6, 1944, off the coast of Normandy. After the war it was sold, renamed, and refitted as an automobile ferry by the West India Fruit and Steamship Company of West Palm Beach, Florida. In 1956 the company deployed the *City of Havana* to compete in the thriving US-Cuba trade.[2] The ship joined its five-vessel fleet that carried manufactured goods in loaded railroad cars from West Palm Beach or New Orleans to Havana and brought back fruit, vegetables, and refined sugar.[3] Painted white, the 456-foot-long ship carried up to five hundred passengers and 125 automobiles on each crossing of its scheduled three round trips per week. Round trip fares were $76.00 for an automobile and $23.50 per person.[4]

The Alvarez family rode an escalator up to the passenger deck to wait for inspectors to check the vehicles for contraband. "We had packed the car with everything that my parents thought could provide some money to start us off in the US," Carlos recalls, "clothes, silver, every piece of jewelry that my mom could possibly have hidden. All of that was in the car, but a lot of that wasn't allowed to be brought from Cuba. My brothers and I were carrying silverware in our pockets."

From the passenger deck they looked down into the vehicle hold of the big ship. They saw inspectors go from car to car. Sometimes these searches delayed the ship's departure by hours. "When they got to our car, they just went around it," Carlos remembers. "My dad had paid off somebody—which is not unusual in Cuba—so they didn't check it. That's where my dad's shipping business experience helped." With the formalities completed, the vessel's two oil-fired engines cranked into gear. The *City of Havana* pulled away from the terminal and steamed through the port channel, past the drab, weathered walls of the sixteenth-century El Morro Castle at the harbor's entrance, for the seven-hour, ninety-mile voyage to Key West.

As the *City of Havana* entered the Florida Straits, passengers settled into the air-conditioned lounge with food service and a bar. For ten dollars they could enjoy the privacy of a day cabin while the ship cruised along at up to seventeen knots.[5] Or they could just soak up the watery scene from the deck, spotting marine life in the Gulf Stream that courses through the straits, those

warm waters that Hemingway so artfully described as "the great, deep blue river, three quarters to a mile deep and sixty to eighty miles across."[6]

"You looked out the railing," Carlos says. "I remember the flying fish that went by the boat. Every once in a while you would see something else. It was fun being on the ferry."

The weather was fair that afternoon when the ferry docked in Key West. The vessel would make its final voyage from Havana on October 31, 1960, its schedule already reduced from three round trips per week to only one as trade and tourism withered in a deepening confrontation between the US and Cuba.[7] Licinio Alvarez led his family down to the vehicle hold, got behind the wheel of his two-tone Oldsmobile, and drove off the ferry.

After the Alvarez family continued their journey to Miami on the Florida Keys' Overseas Highway, more Cubans followed, on the ferry to Key West or airliners to the mainland or by escaping first to other countries and later making their way to the US. The First Wave ended in late 1962. The Second Wave began in late 1965 and ended in 1973 as the US government chartered airliners to bring more Cubans into exile in an organized mass migration intended to reunify families.

Their story is best understood through the memories of those who lived it—doctors and laborers, seamstresses and lawyers, bankers and librarians, musicians and accountants, architects and journalists, artists and business executives, clerks and politicians, teachers and government officials, college presidents and homemakers. All are rememberers.

When they talk to children, grandchildren, and friends about their lives, these are the memories they share: of fear, suspicion, and betrayal as their tropical home vanished in an all-consuming revolution; of anguish, despair, and heartache at leaving behind spouses, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends, not to mention homes, belongings, livelihoods, and for some part of their identity; of struggle, hardship, and indignity as they started life all over in a different language; and of generosity, opportunity, and hope in a new home ninety miles and a lifetime away.