

Resolving Issues with Confiscated Property in Cuba, Havana Club Rum and Other Property

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Resolving Issues with Confiscated Property in Cuba Hearing

My name is Lilliam Blanca Escasena. I am a Cuban born American citizen and this is my story.

My family left Cuba in November of 1960, before Fidel Castro prohibited travel outside of Cuba. During those times there was a lot of uncertainty, fear, and confusion. My family silently planned their exodus for fear of torture and persecution. They had to plan our family's escape in complete secrecy from everyone around them, including neighbors and friends. It took a year of planning of how the four families on my mother's side would sneak out 10 children, ages ranging from 2 to 11. They had to plan financially how they would all survive this exile. No matter how terrified they were of their immediate future, their mentality was that this would not be permanent and that they would return to their beautiful island once again.

Castro's regime of terror started by confiscating properties from big land owners, arresting and accusing innocent individuals of being against the government, sending these individuals to the firing squad, without trial, and lining up hundreds of innocent Cubans and sending them to jail. Castro would stop at no cost to make his message of power clear. No person would stand in his way.

My grandfather, Federico, on my mother's side came from a humble beginning. He was born in Caibarien las Villas, Cuba, lost his dad at the age of 9 and in order to help his mother provide for him and his 4 siblings he worked on the docks after school everyday. He would finish high school before he began working full time. As he continued to work, the reality became that he would not be able to hold a higher more prestigious position if he did not learn English. While the struggle to maintain his family continued he saved what he could and was able to come to the United States for almost a year. He would return to Cuba a bilingual determined to make a name for himself. Federico married my grandmother, Blanca at the age of 24. They would have four children together.

While his future looked promising, the financial crisis in 1929 left him jobless. He refused to allow this to deter his sense of pride and hope for his family. He took all the savings he had, his experience and contacts, and became a Steamship Agent, opening his own office as a Customhouse Broker in Caibarien, and some years later in Havana, Cuba. He would then open sub-agencies in every key port in Cuba and an office on Wall Street, N.Y. In 1938, his success in Cuba would get him recognized by the U.S and make him a Consular Agent. My grandfather had finally built a name for his family and their future generations.

My mother, Myriam, would end up marrying a man with the same kind of aspirations, hopes and dreams. They had four children's together.

My father, Manolin, started at the age of 10 working along side his dad to help create and build the family business. My grandfather, Manolo, started a company of explosives

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that would later be contracted for mining and the creation of roads throughout the entire island. Their growth and success would soon move their main factory and operations to a town on the outskirts of Havana, Cuba. My father would become the head of the business shortly after his dad passed. The business continued to flourish and my father continued making large investments aiding the growth and expansion.

The communist revolution hit, Castro's propaganda machine flooded the radio stations. Havoc was on the horizon. It was palpable. The Cuban reality came knocking at my Dad's business, literally, when Castro's men came searching for my father at gunpoint. Their demands were simple. They would take my father's business, his factory, equipment and offices, and all of the land.

My grandfather, Federico, was stripped of his four homes in Miramar, his business and commercial property. The regime took; tug boats and steel barges and all other equipment, the marina and pier from which he ran his operations from, freights and storage facilities, Cash and over a dozen lots of land. Not only did Castro steal physical property that belonged to my family but also destroyed the legacy that they worked their whole lives to build and, someday, pass on to the children and grandchildren. And even though the Castro brothers and others said they would pay the family for this, they never did. They stole it all, as the world would learn later, as part of a Communist plot.

My family was not the only one to suffer this fate. Hundreds of thousands Cuban families, and Americans were forced to leave their homelands and everything they built to escape death, torture and poverty. Some were better off than others financially, but we had one thing in common: we cherished freedom, respect for private property and family. They could take the first two and tried to destroy the last and were it not for America, they may have succeeded.

After over 55 years the same Communist continues to destroy the beautiful Island that more than a million of Cuban Americans used to call home. America took us in when we had nowhere else to go. And, as Americans, we worked hard, as we did in Cuba, to pay back that debt.

So that these things never happen again. I am urging you to help these families rectify the wrongs of an evil, corrupt, heartless criminal Communist syndicate that stole, murdered and impoverished the people of Cuba. The time is long over due for the US government to acknowledge and demand restitution for all the Cuban Americans and so many other victims of Cuban Communism. We have pledged our allegiance to this beautiful country and ask, one more time, that our country help us secure justice.

The scars of exile are deep, especially for our older relatives. I grew up watching my parents deal not only with the loss of their home and country but also rebuild and start from nothing. While the properties that were stripped from us may hold a monetary

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value, the pain and suffering of my parents and my entire generation is far greater than any dollar amount. My parents longed to return to Cuba, the country that they adored; to smell the ocean in Varadero, to walk El Malecon, to feel free once again in their ancestral homeland. They passed never being able to fulfill these dreams. Although my parents couldn't fulfill these dreams, I am here to see their dreams out for them and for every Cuban American family. These dreams are not driven by money; they are driven by the need for justice. The same kind of justice the U.S. advocates to the people of this country.

Today, I feel you have offered our family and others like it, an opportunity to help to start to right these wrongs and begin to heal very old wounds. You honor the memory and sacrifice of our families and for that, we thank you. Please help all victims of Cuban Communism seek justice.

Thank you.