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TAMAHRA CALZADILLA
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CUBA, 1959
AGE UNKNOWN

NASH: Today is September 18, 1974 and I am speaking with a young woman who came to the United States in 1959 from Havana , Cuba where she was born. Her name is Tami. Tami, what do you remember about Havana?

CALZADILLA: I remember it was quite a tourist country. I remember very little about it. I remember circumstances before I left, but other than the way the city looked or I remember the municipal building and it was a very beautiful building at one time before it was bombed, and that was in 1959. I remember Castro coming into power.

NASH: How did that feel?

CALZADILLA: Well, it was quite scary. I remember my father coming in early, at dawn, and we all woke up, and he just told my mother, "I'm leaving. I'm going to pack up some of my things and I am leaving. I have to go," and he said he would be taking a plane at 4 o'clock in the morning and gave my mother instructions to take us at 6 o'clock in the morning, the chauffeur would come to pick us up, and we went to a farm to hide.

NASH: Why did you have to hide?

CALZADILLA: Because my father belonged to the Batista government and he has to leave in exile before he was shot with Castro's people. It was a terrifying experience, that much I remember. I can't place in words of how bad it was and how disgusting it looked and how the city looked and how all the peasants, mainly the peasants were the ones who were for Castro, and they just tore up everything as soon as Castro came into power. I remember leaving at 6 o'clock that morning. The chauffeur came to pick us up, we went to the farm, and we just took with us what we had on and

whatever jewelry we had on. In the afternoon my aunt came to pick up our clothes at our house and everything was stolen. Everything including furniture and clothing and jewelry, whatever was left in that house was stolen by the people that were for Castro. Those people with the knowledge that my father was part of the Batista government, of course, they hated him. And Castro was looking for my father and a lot of other Batista people. It was just very terrifying. I remember we didn't have anything to wear. I remember we were at the farm and I had to wear the owner's of the farm, his underwear, and that's all I had for clothing with the exception of what I had brought with me. And after about a month we came back into Havana and stayed in hiding in my aunt's house in Havana. And we were children. I have three sisters, three older sisters, and my two older sisters,of course, knew what was going on, but the third one and myself, we didn't know and we were children. We weren't allowed to go out in the street and play because they were looking for us. My mother was with us at all times and my father had already come into the United States. He came into Miami. It was something that was expected. The Batista government expected this to happen because they knew that

Castro's power was and they knew that a lot of American people were giving Castro money to get into power, to buy rifles, etc. And we just had to leave. I remember we came into the United States and before we came to the United States we had to use my mother's maiden name to leave the country. We just--there were five of us, my mother and my sisters and myself, and we had to get passports under my mother's name. We couldn't use my father's last name because otherwise they would have never let us out of the country. We came into the United States with nothing to wear at all. My mother, before we left Havana, along with her sisters, they sewed some cotton pajamas, and my third sister and myself had to wear double pajamas because it was freezing. It was March, March 15th we came to the United States in 1959. And we came into Miami. We stayed in Miami for a day.

NASH: You flew?

CALZADILLA: We flew, yes, we flew from Havana Airport, right?

NASH: Was it hard to get out?

CALZADILLA: Well. as long as we had my mother's maiden--using my mother's maiden name and getting the passports, as long as we had all the papers in order, it wasn't hard to get out at that time because Castro had just come into power so he hadn't put all those regulations that Cuba has no. We came into Miami, and being that we didn't have any clothing, we had to see whoever we knew in Miami. My godparents were in Miami and they went to the Salvation Army in Miami and got us some clothing, some spring clothing, and we came into New York where my father was and my father had already been working in a factory. My father never in his life worked in a factory. And he was working in a toy factory and we came to New York City and the first thing that I thought of when I saw my father, he had a very heavy ski jacket on, and in Cuba it is always a tropical season, you know, and I was young and I saw my father with a ski jacket on and I knew that there was something going on. I knew that there was trouble and, you know, that my father was in danger of his life, but once he came into New York City, being that he wasn't a resident, he could have been sent back from the United States to Cuba. We came and we didn't have any money. We didn't have anything, nothing at all. Actually, my parents started from scratch with no knowledge of the English language. My sisters didn't know any English and we just came and we went to the Bronx, we lived in the Bronx. My father found a little apartment in the Bronx, and it wasn't really an apartment. The bathroom was outside of the apartment. We had a very small kitchen. There were six of us living in one room and we had to sleep three in each bed. My father worked nights. When I came my father had already had in a little plastic bottle, milk bottle, which

was a toy, he had filled up pennies for my third sister and myself, and he had toys for us. And I remember we had one window with three funeral homes in front of it. And being that we didn't know anybody and we couldn't go out in the street because we didn't have any coats and it was freezing at that time, and it was snowing and we saw the first snowflakes, we would always look out of the window and see the first snowflakes in our lives and we would take turns looking out the window and look out and see the funeral and see the caskets coming in and out of the funeral home, and that's all we had for about five or six months. That's all we had. My mother never worked in her life. She had to work in a factory and up to this day she is still working in a factory. My parents, my father had to start from scratch, like I said, and he worked in a toy factory first. He was a Mason and being that Masons stick together no matter what country they are, he got several connections and then we opened up a cleaners, a dry cleaners, and we didn't do too good in that. We moved to another apartment after that in a ghetto area and we lived like that for about four years. We lived with nothing and we would have one pair of shoes per year. I remember going to school with the same outfit every day and telling my friends, "Oh, my mother made me this outfit," and I said, "I have the same one for every day." My older sisters had to start school. We started school, of course, and we lived miserably and poorly whereas we never lived like that in Havana before. We always had everything we wanted in Havana. We lived nicely and well-to-do. We were more of the well-to-do class in Havana. Well, like I said, being my father had quite a bit of connections a lot of people helped us out. And we got better and better and

my father started studying to become an electrician from the National School, and he became an electrician and he opened up his own corporation because he had to support six women, and my mother just couldn't do it by herself. My mother was working in a factory. I remember my mother bringing boxes of lace to cut and it was like two cents a yard that she would get for it and every night we would sit at the house and cut the lace for just two cents a yard. But we had to do it and it was a terrifying experience. I even remember--the one incident I remember very clearly when we were in Havana before we came to the United States was when I was in the farm and Castro, that day that Castro came into power, I remember hearing very far away the sound of like a parade and we were sleeping on mattresses and I looked out the window to see what was going on and I told my mother, I said, "Oh, there is a parade in Havana." And my mother said, "No, there isn't. That isn't a parade, that is just Castro coming in and the peasants enjoying the fact that they finally got rid of Batista." Most of the men in power knew that they were going to have to leave in exile so they already had their money in Switzerland and they had transferred their money in Miami, but my father being one of the very few honest people there, he just didn't bring anything with him. We all went to school. It was miserable really. We lived very miserably.

NASH: How was it in school? Were there many Cubans? Were most of the students--

CALZADILLA: At that time there weren't too many Cubans in the United States. At that time when everybody started going into exile. But we were one of the very first Cubans into the United States with the exception of the ones that stayed in Miami. But the ones that came to New York City, very few, and there were a lot of Puerto Ricans and a lot of Blacks there. And I remember learning the English numbers from one of my Puerto Rican girl friends and the students laughing at my English, and it was even more so for my sisters because they always had an accent. When you are young you can learn the English much faster, but my sisters were older so it was very hard for them so they had quite a bit of problems in school. My sister went to Morris High School, which isn't one of the best high schools there, the oldest one, and I remember she was beaten up quite a few times by students themselves, where at that time Morris High School had the gangs, and she was beaten quite a few times in Morris High School. She didn't know any English so she just let them beat her and she just couldn't do anything about it. She would always come home and cry. I had to stay--being my mother was working in the factory, I had to stay next door with my neighbor and I got very sick all of a sudden because of the change of climate and

we didn't have any money to go to the hospital, and we didn't have any money to pay for doctor bills, and I got one illness after another after another and my father just had to look for the money, and I broke my arm, I remember that, and he took me to the hospital and they put a cast on and after the first time that they put a cast on he asked the doctor to show him how to put a cast on and for the months that I had to wear a cast he would put it on me because we didn't have the money to go to a doctor every time to have anew cast put on. It was quite an experience that I don't wish anybody to go through. My mother has thirteen brothers and sisters. My mother only has four of them here in the United States. Her father died in Cuba after the six years we came her, my grandfather died of cancer, and my mother received a phone call that night and, of course, she was going to be awfully upset because she wasn't there to see her father die. Her mother is still there and my aunts and uncles have children and they have gotten married and there is a lot of my family that I still don't even know. I don't even remember them.

NASH: Can you write?

CALZADILLA: I can write Spanish and read it. Not as fluently as I would like to, but I can never forget it. My mother doesn't speak any English as yet and we have been living here for fifteen years.

NASH: Can you write to your family in Cuba?

CALZADILLA: I don't write to them because I don't know them. My mother writes to them. My mother--well, now there is a new ruling and in order to send packages to Cuba, they don't have any food, they don't have anything in Cuba because they have cut down all the trading from the United States and that was our main resource, and my mother in order to send packages to Cuba she has to send them to Spain and they have to be brand new of everything. No matter what she is going to send, she has to buy it brand new and she has to pay Spain eight hundred dollars--let say depending on the pound, how many pounds it is, she has to send Spain--she had just sent a package, let's say, and she spent eight hundred dollars. When my aunt receives it in Cuba she has to pay Castro a thousand dollars to get it out and they check it out and they look at it and if they want anything they take it, and then they give them whatever they feel that they need. They don't have--one of my aunts just came here with her two daughters and when they came--they came here about two years ago--and they came here, they looked in the refrigerator, they hadn't drank milk in years. After you are two years old in Cuba, you do not get anymore milk. They don't have any chicken, they don't have

any pork which was one of our main resources, which is one of the things that we used to raise in the farm. They don't have any pork. They only give it to the Russian tourists. They don't have anything in Cuba. My cousins were so skinny that they looked like a pole. They went crazy when they saw food. They didn't have any eggs, they don't have anything, they don't have any rice. Everything is rationed. You can only buy rice the day you are designated to but it and you can only buy certain pounds depending on your family, that's how many pounds you get. Let's say if you have a family of three you only get four pounds a month. It is worse than when I left it because, like I said, the trading and the cutting down of the relationship between the United States and Castro. And it is too expensive for them to trade with Russia because they are so far away and to export anything and import anything it would be too expensive for them. They don't have the money in Cuba. Castro keeps the Russian tourists, it seems like from what I hear, it seems like the Russian tourists have it all. And the laborers, which are the Cubans themselves, the Cuban peasants, want and steal any kind of food, they go right into jail and that jail is not just for one year, you are jailed for ten years, eleven years, depending on whatever they feel like giving you.

NASH: Let me ask you some questions about yourself. Do you feel Cuban?

CALZADILLA: I think I will always feel Cuban. I was born in Cuba and right now I am a resident of the United States, but even

if I become a citizen of the United States, I will always feel Cuban. Of course, my culture won't be as such like a Cuban coming from Cuba right off the boat, like you would say, but my culture would be more Americanized, but as far as being Cuban, my nationality will always be Cuban. I will always be proud of being a Cuban. I don't think I would ever go back to Cuba and live there. I don't think I could do that, not after being used to living in the Unites States, but I will a;ways feel Cuban and I would go visit them. I would go visit my family if the relationship with the United States changes I would go and visit my family in Cuba to know how they are even though I know they would look at me very strangely because I am so Americanized that they would think of me strange. But I will always be Cuban. That is one definite thing, always.

NASH: Could you become a citizen now if you wanted to?

CALZADILLA: Oh, definitely. I have been here for fifteen years. I just haven't put in the process. I have to put my intention papers into the Immigration Department and then they ask you several questions about Communism and that is it.

It is very easy to become a citizen for me. For a person who, like my mother for instance, who doesn't know any English, for her to become a citizen she would have to know how to write certain things that they ask you. Like they ask you where do you live, you have to write it down in English and you have to answer them in English and you have to answer them in English, you know, before they give you the citizenship papers, but for me it would be very easy to become a citizen. I just haven't bothered I guess. I never needed to. I guess if the necessity arises that I have to be a citizen for some reason or other, I would do it.

NASH: Do you find conflicts between you and your parents in terms that they come from another tradition or another culture?

CALZADILLA: Definitely. I have had so many problems with my parents because of the simple fact that my father still feels that he is living in Cuba. I could understand his point because he is old. When you come into the United States and you are an older person, you are going to keep your cultures and you are going to keep your customs. My older sisters, of course, being that they were older could understand

the culture a little bit more, but with myself I had a lot of conflict. I am always rebelling against them because he wants me to keep the culture. He wants me to keep the customs of having a chaperon going out with me. And I remember I had to chaperon my sisters, you know. I remember my older sister, before she got married her husband had to ask my father for her hand about three times before my father finally said yes. I can see, if that happened to me I would just go ahead and get married because I am Americanized, but my sister wasn't so she had to, of course, she went along with my father. But the culture is entirely different. We are stricter in the sense of raising a child, girl especially. A girl is not allowed to wear stockings or put on make-up until you are fifteen years old. We celebrate our fifteenth birthday like a bar mitzvah, or sixteenth birthday here. And we have a very big ceremony. It is like given in a hall and we dance the walls with fourteen other couples and they dress in gowns and I dress in my own gown, the fifteen dresses in her gown, and we dance the walls, and we dance a traditional dance that we had was dancing, which is like a slow two-step dance. And I would go along with some of their customs. My morals in some ways are from parents' background

because I was brought up that way, but as far as American customs, I believe very strongly in them and when I have my own children I will teach them those customs instead of teaching them--you know, I could teach them both. You see it is a good thing to know both sides because then you are in the middle and you can always work them both out the same way.

NASH: What are the rich things that your parents taught you or the things that you like to think about when you think about Cuba? What are the things that your parents say about Cuba, the things that they want you to treasure about the memory of Cuba?

CALZADILLA: They will always want me to keep certain traditions, like for instance, the fifteen year old. That I would keep, that tradition I would keep. Teaching them Spanish. I would teach them my own Spanish. To raise them a certain way. Morally there is a lot of difference in certain morals that the American people have that our culture has that American people don't have. Cultures like having my child come up to me and ask me and ask her father for the hand of her daughter. If I don't approve, you know,

they would go by my rules. Like my father always told me. "As long as you are living under my roof, you will have to do what I tell you to do." And that is exactly what I had to do. I can't say I didn't rebel, but I had to do it. I would take some of the traditions with me. I would definitely keep at all times some of the traditions. Offhand I really can't pinpoint one in particular, but--

NASH: What about food?

CALZADILLA: Oh, the food definitely. I can't eat American food. I can't stand it. It is too dry. Cuban food is delicious. We have traditional pork that we roast and that is delicious. I don't think any American person can do it the way the Cubans do. And the black beans and rice, of course. We have platents and we have stuffed cabbage done a certain way other than Greek may do it. It is the same kind of food, but everybody cooks their own way. Cubans have a lot of seasoning in their food and we mainly use a lot of garlic whereas like an Italian will use a lot of oregano. But I would always keep my food. I would never change my food.

NASH: What about your music?

CALZADILLA: Music, of course. I like American music, but there will always be Latin music around. I love Latin music. There is nothing like the rhythm of Latin music. Even the soul music is nothing to the Latin soul that we have in Cuba. We had carnivals in Cuba. In the small countries, my mother came from Anti Oriente, and that is a small town in Cuba, and they had carnivals and it is a traditional--it is considered Latin soul carnival because there were a lot of black people that would go down the aisles and we would dance the rumba and we would wear the traditional clothes and you could join them if you wanted to. I remember that very clearly because I remember going to my grandfather's farm and we had a carnival at one time and I remember dancing with all of them down the road. It was like a dirt road. You know, they don't have any pavements like they have here in the United States. They have a dirt road and we would dance down the aisle with the traditional music, and it was a festive occasion, you know, like the Mardi Gras. We would throw firecrackers and we would dance and have our pork, and in Cuba they

cook the complete pork in like a pit and you would cook it and it would be the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Cuba had a lot of, I don't know, I doubt it very much if they still have the happiness they had at the time that we had the relationship with the United States because all the tourists came from the United States to Havana and they would go into the casinos. We had beautiful casinos, we had beautiful hotels, and most of them were bombed by Castro. It has probably just all gone down to ruins.

NASH: Is salsa a Latin word or a Puerto Rican word?

CALZADILLA: Well, when you say Puerto Rican ar Latin, to me it is the same thing. We all speak the same language only it is a different dialect. Salsa is the flavor of music. You know, you have that flavor grow into you, and I don't think there are too many Spanish people who don't have any salsa. A lot of Spanish are considered--I would put down Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexican, no matter what it is.

NASH: What is salsa?

CALZADILLA: Salsa is flavor.

NASH: Just applies to dancing?

CALZADILLA: No, it doesn't apply to dancing. Salsa literally means sauce, but when you apply it to music, it means the flavor of music.

NASH: Does life have salsa or people have salsa?

CALZADILLA: At one time they did. I don't think they do now, not in Cuba. I think they live very miserably in Cuba. Actually, the peasants are realizing what they have done and there is nothing they can do now and they can't even shoot him because you have to have a lot of money to have all these people with you and you have to have weapons which they do not give out. They have secret police in Cuba. And when you leave Cuba you are not supposed to take anything that you own with you except for what you have on, and very clothing that they give you. And you are supposed to leave all your furniture. You can't even give it to your own family. You have to leave it there for the next person they decide to give it to. Nothing belongs to you in Cuba and I don't think that is a free

way of living. There is nothing like democracy and that is why I would never leave the United States. And a lot of people in the United States don't realize that they down democracy in certain ways, but there is nothing like it. Socialism, Communism, anything other than democracy is like nothing to me. And you never know, you can't compare the both unless you experience it.

NASH: Is that why you work in the union?

CALZADILLA: Mainly I enjoy working very much in the union. I love working in the union because you deal with members and you are helping the members. You (?) the fact that you cannot use a person no matter what the kind of labor they are doing, you cannot use them because they have a union backing them up, and that power is the democracy power that not too many countries have nowadays, and like I said, the comparison of both of them, you could never know unless you experience it. You experience one then you know what democracy really stands for and