

Book Review:
Cuba Diaries: An American Housewife in Havana

By Isadora Tatlin
by
Henry Pérez, Ph.D.

If you are looking for a different perspective on Cuba, this book is a winner, not because it is typical, but because it comes from the rare point of view of a privileged individual living under Castro's communist regime. Isadora Tatlin is an American citizen living temporarily in Cuba; her husband is a foreign energy expert and his nationality remains a secret throughout the text in order to protect his diplomatic connections. The "diary" is divided into four parts; one part for each school year that her children attend school in Cuba. The husband works for a company that sends them, from abroad, a forty-foot container full of merchandise for their stay on the island, chock full of the type of things that are very difficult to purchase in Cuba due to the U.S. embargo. Among the huge list we find 64 gallons of fabric softener; 6,000 paper napkins; 2,400 feet of aluminum foil, 260 pounds of Tide powder detergent, 1,200 bottles of wine, and the inventory goes on and on. Tatlin not only brings provisions with her, but she also travels out of Cuba several times to purchase needed essentials. Tatlin and her family are permitted to rent a mansion abandoned by a Cuban exile; the Cuban government assigns them six "helpers" for cooking, cleaning, driving, gardening, and babysitting. The Tattlin family is allowed to purchase any goods that they need at the "Diplomarket," a special store where only dollars are accepted; in 1993, the possession of dollars became decriminalized in Cuba. The amazing thing about reading this book is that one learns, vicariously, through this couple, as they get to know the help and send their children to school, how difficult the life of the average Cuban really is since Castro's takeover of the government in 1959. Even for Tatlin and her family, life in Cuba is difficult, due to the constant struggle and energy needed in trying to secure every single thing necessary in order to survive.

Cuba's standard of living used to be among the highest in Latin America, however, after more than forty years of Castro's communist regime, the island now has the lowest standard of living in the western hemisphere. The 1990's, the period in which the Tatlins reside in Cuba happens to coincide with what Castro calls the "'special period in time of peace,' a time in which Cuban people were asked to endure shortages for the sake of the survival of the socialist revolution while their government adjusted to new realities" (vii). This adjustment is due to the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of state subsidies to Cuba by the Kremlin.

The first year of their stay in Cuba is spent getting used to life in the tropical island, learning Spanish, and getting adjusted to the layout of the country. They travel, several times, outside of Havana on escorted and unescorted trips. Away from Havana the amenities are fewer and fewer: they encounter luxury hotels without toilet seats, hot water, or decent food. Isadora is shocked when she is suddenly surrounded by a group of women begging her, a tourist, for soap. The Tattlins not only meet other foreigners living in Cuba, but they also get to meet high-ranking members of the Cuban government who are involved with Nick Tattlin's position as an energy

expert. We learn that living life as a member of the government includes many privileges, but even they have to deal with the constant lack of goods in Cuba.

The Tattlins get acquainted with a lot more people after their first year in Cuba. There are more descriptions of the “paladares,” small home restaurants that they visit with their new friends. The food at the “paladares” is good because the owners have pride in the service that they offer; while state restaurants, where workers get no incentive for good service, are badly managed. The number of electrical blackouts occurring in Cuba, due to the lack of oil, increase during their four year stay. The Tattlin’s daughter develops a skin irritation and the reader feels the family’s frustration with the lack of appropriate medical supplies on the island. Only by paying the doctors in dollars can they get the necessary help needed for their daughter. Doctors in Cuba work for the government and they are paid less than what a waiter makes, with tips, at a tourist resort.

During their fourth year, their last year in Havana, the Tattlins have a special dinner guest, Fidel Castro, and the reader gets a behind-the-scene view of the security precautions for Castro’s visit. The Tattlins also experience the historical visit of the Pope to Cuba. As Isadora Tattlin packs to leave Havana, she realizes that she will miss the country, although she will not miss the cumbersome daily trials involved in obtaining the daily essentials, normally taken for granted, and now scarce, under Castro’s regime.

Biography

Henry Pérez, Professor of Foreign Languages, is a native of Cuba. He graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in English and Spanish. He received his Ph. D. in Spanish and Latin American Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Dr. Pérez is a former chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Manchester College in Indiana. He has taught at Henderson since 1991.

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