

Tiempo para todo bajo el sol

A Time to Every Purpose

Guillermo A. Belt

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*A los nietos, bisnietos y tataranietos de mis padres,
y especialmente a Julia, para que el ejemplo de su
bisabuelo le alumbre el camino por el campo de las
ciencias políticas.*

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Son deudas de amistad que no podré pagar como es debido.

tiempo para todo bajo El sol

Hay un tiempo señalado para todo, y hay un tiempo para cada suceso bajo el cielo: tiempo de nacer, y tiempo de morir; tiempo de sembrar, y tiempo de arrancar lo sembrado; tiempo de matar, y tiempo de curar; tiempo de derribar, y tiempo de edificar; tiempo de llorar, y tiempo de reír; tiempo de lamentarse, y tiempo de bailar;
Eclesiastés 3:1-4

¿por qué?

Doble interrogación, y no sólo en el signo ortográfico. ¿Cuál es la razón de ser de estos textos, y por qué el segundo de ellos está en inglés? En la respuesta a la primera pregunta va implícita la contestación a la segunda. Me propuse escribir una historia de nuestra familia, cuyos protagonistas serían mis padres, en la esperanza (la que nunca muere, la de *hope springs eternal*, como se dice al comienzo de *A Time to Every Purpose*) de que algunos de sus nietos, bisnietos y hasta tataranietos, que viven en los Estados Unidos, habiendo nacido casi todos en este país, la leyeran algún día.

Al emprender esta tarea me vi ante una triste realidad: en primera instancia yo aspiro, esperanzado, a conquistar lectores que no manejan con soltura la lengua de Cervantes, por decirlo así, caritativamente. Mis padres eran tan cubanos como las palmas, y para hacer justicia a sus vidas habría que contarlas en español. Pero para regalar su recuerdo a hombres y mujeres que llevan su sangre, sin que en muchos casos hayan tenido el privilegio de conocerlos personalmente ni la suerte de nacer y vivir en Cuba, he debido recurrir a la lengua de nuestros antepasados ingleses y estadounidenses para entendernos mejor.

Desde luego, esta realidad la comparten muchos padres y madres hispanohablantes de nacimiento, hoy radicados en Estados Unidos, sea el padre, por español, llamado especialmente a conservar nuestra lengua, o proceda la madre de una de las repúblicas de América Latina, orgullosa de su patria como de la cultura y las tradiciones que nos son comunes.

Por mucho que nos esforcemos los de mi generación para mantener vivo el español en el ámbito familiar, nuestros descendientes crecen y se educan en un ambiente principal aunque no exclusivamente angloparlante, con la consiguiente prevalencia de esta lengua sobre la nuestra materna. Por eso, cuando logramos que hijos y, sobre todo, nietos nos hablen de vez en cuando en español, aunque sea con las inevitables

palabras intercaladas en inglés, nos sentimos felices de haber ganado, si no la batalla al menos alguna que otra escaramuza.

Un trabajo bilingüe, en español e inglés, podría resolver el dilema entre lo justo y lo práctico: hacer dos versiones, la original y la traducida, y publicarlas en un solo volumen, o por separado. Sin embargo, esto resultaba excesivo para un texto pensado desde el inicio como un aporte a la memoria de la familia, sin mayores pretensiones. Gracias a la benevolencia de dos buenos amigos, expertos en la materia por más señas, surgió la solución: una presentación en español, seguida de un resumen del texto original, redactado en la lengua de mis padres, de los abuelos por los cuatro costados, de las bisabuelas paterna y materna, y de mi bisabuelo John Benjamin Belt, quien la aprendió por amor y necesidad a mediados del siglo XIX cuando tuvo el acierto de echar su suerte en Cuba.

Sin más, vamos a ello.

prEsENtaCIÓN

Dize que es aquella isla la más hermosa cosa que ojos hayan visto, llena de muy buenos puertos y ríos hondos, y la mar que parecía que nunca se devía de alçar, porque la yerva de la playa llegaba hasta cuasi el agua, lo cual no suele llegar adonde la mar es brava.

CRISTÓBAL COLÓN [Diario del primer viaje]

En un valle pequeño y fértil, por donde corre el río Manantiales a unos 200 metros de altitud, enclavado en la Sierra del Rosario de la provincia de Pinar del Río —lugares y nombres para la poesía— entre 20,000 variedades de orquídeas florecen unas 200 de América Central y del Sur junto a las 130 endémicas de aquella isla que el Almirante de la Mar Océano, embelesado, descubrió para felicidad o desdicha de sus habitantes y del mundo.

El fundador del Orquideario de Soroa en 1943, un canario trasplantado a Cuba con tanto éxito que allí devino abogado, luego político, más tarde poeta y coleccionista de arte, y finalmente para gloria suya protector de orquídeas, sería un modelo a seguir por quienes de tierras descubiertas y exploradas por españoles se trasladaron por millones a los Estados Unidos. Pero la verdad es que son las flores las que mejor se adaptan a un suelo extraño, a un sol menos abrasador, a un cielo más gris, porque no guardan añoranzas del pasado, ni temen a las cartas ocultas de un porvenir incierto.

Entre esos millones están los que vienen a este país en busca de mejores oportunidades de trabajo, o mayor seguridad que la imperante en su lugar de origen, o ambas cosas; otros quieren expresar sus opiniones libremente, sin represalias temidas o sufridas; y quizás algunos llegan con la ilusión de alcanzar una vida cómoda y fácil que, pronto lo sabrán, sólo existe en su imaginación desbordada.

Un joven de El Salvador vino a los Estados Unidos en la década de 1970 junto con su esposa y el hijo de dos años de edad. Ingresaron al país cruzando el Río Grande, sin documentos y sin hablar una palabra de inglés. Se instalaron provisionalmente en casa de un pariente, residente legal; con su ayuda comenzaron a trabajar casi enseguida y tan pronto como fue posible legalizaron su situación inmigratoria. Desde el comienzo se propusieron darle al hijo la educación que ellos no tuvieron. El

chico era muy inteligente, y sus padres encauzaron su talento con mano firme y cariñosa. Hoy, el hombre y la mujer siguen trabajando, tienen casa propia, un automóvil cada uno y viajan todos los años a El Salvador. El hijo se graduó de la universidad con excelentes calificaciones y se desempeña exitosamente como ingeniero aeronáutico.

En 1960, un hombre de 26 años llegó a Miami con visado de turista. Como no venía a hacer turismo, poco después solicitó la condición de “parolee”, figura que amparaba a los cubanos que por aquellos años pedían asilo como exiliados políticos. Un año después obtuvo un contrato de tres meses en un organismo internacional con sede en Washington, D.C., seguido de otro más largo en virtud del cual se le concedió el visado G-IV que el gobierno estadounidense otorga a funcionarios internacionales. Todo esto, creía él, era temporal, una escala imprescindible en el camino de regreso a la patria.

A diferencia del salvadoreño, el cubano hablaba inglés con acento pero sin dificultad, y lo leía y escribía bien, gracias a sus maestros en la escuela secundaria donde había cursado cuatro años de estudios cuando siendo adolescente vivió en la capital de los Estados Unidos. Además, llegaba con el título de Doctor en Derecho, que si bien no lo habilitaba para ejercer la profesión en los Estados Unidos le sería útil para abrir algunas puertas.

Aunque hay historias de inmigrantes más representativas del éxito en los Estados Unidos, estas dos destacan la diferencia principal entre quienes se trasladan de su país a otro por motivos económicos y quienes lo hacen por razones políticas. Todos son inmigrantes, pero no todos sufren por igual los efectos del trasplante. Los primeros pueden regresar –satisfechos si lograron su meta de una vida mejor en el país de acogida, cabizbajos de lo contrario– pero el regreso a la patria no les está vedado. Los segundos sólo pueden poner pies en ella si cambia para mejor la situación que determinó su exilio.

En un punto del camino se encuentran el exiliado político y el inmigrante económico. Cuando aquél ve como día tras día se aleja la posibilidad del retorno, la realidad lo obliga a abrirse campo en el país de acogida, y no le queda otra opción que dedicar buena parte de su tiempo a lograrlo. Es el momento de

compartir afanes, aspiraciones y preocupaciones con quienes vinieron en busca de mejores oportunidades.

Al inmigrante económico lo anima la esperanza de tener éxito en el nuevo país. El exiliado político sobrevive aferrado a la esperanza de regresar a su patria, y se alimenta de recuerdos cuyos contornos se difuminan con el tiempo. Recuerdos, en mi caso, de una niñez alegre: la casa de los padres, donde nacimos los hijos; la de los abuelos, adonde íbamos caminando por los jardines entre ambas; el sabor de las guayabas, los mangos y aguacates de los árboles que allí crecían; las reuniones los domingos con toda la familia, prolongadas en la adolescencia y la juventud. Y recuerdos compartidos por tantos compatriotas: el azul del cielo, el rojo del flamboyán, el verde de los campos, la blancura de la arena en las playas; la belleza de la palma real; las noches de Cabrera Infante, “Dos patrias tengo yo: La Habana y la noche”.

En las páginas siguientes se recogen acontecimientos que trazaron el rumbo de nuestra familia: desde los orígenes más lejanos en Inglaterra, pasando por el asentamiento en un mundo nuevo donde prosperaron sus patriarcas aún antes de que existieran los Estados Unidos, continuando con el traslado del bisabuelo a Cuba cuando era colonia española para fundar allí una familia, reseñando los aportes de su hijo y nietos a la república recién nacida, hasta el regreso como exiliados políticos a Washington, la ciudad natal del primer Belt cubano.

El narrador anónimo cuenta la historia en inglés porque es la lengua de las nuevas generaciones de la familia, llamadas a custodiar las memorias familiares. Estas palabras preliminares en español, las del resumen que sigue y otras a modo de apuntes al comienzo de capítulos, van en prenda de añoranza de aquella isla tan hermosa que para mí y para tantos vive ahora en el recuerdo. Sirvan, asimismo, para despertar el interés del lector por explorar el entorno bilingüe de esta tierra de inmigrantes, vista antes que otros por ojos españoles.

rEsumEN



Vistas frontal y posterior del asiento de la familia Belt,
Bossall Hall, NRY



I

La familia Belt tiene antiguas raíces en el condado de York, en Inglaterra, cuando el país aún no era Gran Bretaña. Francis Drake, en *The History and Antiquities of the City of York*, nombra a tres Belt en la lista de autoridades de la ciudad: Leonard, sheriff en 1579 durante el reinado de Isabel; su hijo Robert, también sheriff, en 1614 con Jaime I; Sir William, nombrado registrador por Carlos I en 1625, el año de su accesión al trono; y de nuevo Robert, dos veces alcalde de York, en 1628 y 1640, año este último en que fue armado caballero por el mismo rey, como su hermano William.

Pero se puede ir más lejos. En 1828, W.J. Belt afirmaba en un artículo publicado en la revista *Gentlemen's Magazine* que su familia guardaba constancia documental de su asentamiento en York en 1387, siendo rey Ricardo II. Agregaba que su familia descendía por línea masculina directa de la familia Balthi, uno de cuyos miembros había acompañado a Guillermo de Normandía en su incursión a Inglaterra y en su victoria en la batalla de Hastings en 1066, que le ganó para la historia el título de Conquistador, además de la corona inglesa.

Aquellos hombres vivieron en tiempos turbulentos. Bossall Hall, la casa solariega de los Belt a nueve millas de York, estuvo a punto de ser asaltada por unos pobladores de la ciudad que declararon su propósito de incendiarla y, por si fuera poco, ahorcar a Sir William, el registrador. En un poema que por largo tiempo circuló en la familia, titulado *A Legende of Ye Dame Goodeth of Bossall*, se cuenta con sentido del humor la estratagema de la mujer de Sir William, quien luego de despachar al marido al galope en busca de ayuda, logró salvar la casa

ofreciendo a los asaltantes tentadoras comidas y bebidas sobre mesas dispuestas junto a los anchos fosos de Bossall.

Bossall Hall sirvió de escenario a otro poema, en este caso sobre Sir Robert. Luego de haber vendido parte de sus objetos de oro y plata, donó el dinero al Rey Carlos para su ejército en la primera guerra civil (1640-1646). Cuando York cayó en poder de las fuerzas contrarias en 1644, el nuevo gobernador de la zona destituyó a Robert y le privó de sus derechos civiles como castigo por su lealtad al rey. Poco después los rebeldes confiscaron Bossall Hall, entregándola a uno de sus generales. Sir Robert murió en 1656, en Flaxton, a tres millas de su casa.

Bossall regresó de pleno derecho a la familia en 1660 al acceder al trono Carlos II. Más de un siglo después, unos sirvientes descubrieron casualmente 29 monedas de oro y otras tantas de plata enterradas en los fosos de Bossall por instrucciones de Sir Robert. Lo cual demuestra que no siempre el tiempo destruye todas las cosas, como reza el lema sobre las armas de Sir Robert Belt: *tempus edax rerum*.

II

El 23 de junio de 1635, el *America* zarpó del puerto de Gravesend en el Támesis rumbo a Jamestown, Virginia. Cinco hombres viajaban bajo la protección de William Clarke en calidad de “indentured servants”, es decir, con sus pasajes pagados por él. Uno de ellos se llamaba Humphrey Belt (Humfrey, en la lista de pasajeros), de 20 años de edad.

Los cinco estaban obligados a trabajar para Clarke, sin sueldo, a cambio de techo y comida, según el contrato firmado por cada uno. Al cabo del tiempo estipulado de entre cinco y siete años, Clarke estaba obligado a entregar cierta cantidad de tierra, alguna ropa, un arma de fuego (con suerte) y algo de dinero. En esto consistía la “indentured servitude”, un tipo de servidumbre desconocido en la colonización española.

En 1641, un tribunal de Virginia ordenó entregar a Humphrey las prestaciones correspondientes al término de su contrato. En 1646, Humphrey compra 150 acres en el condado de Lower Norfolk, Virginia; tres años después, recibe 50 acres por transportar a su esposa a la colonia; y en 1654, 220 acres por traer a cinco personas más. Así, 13 años después de cumplir su contrato, el pionero de la familia Belt en el Nuevo Mundo era dueño de casi 500 acres.

Humphrey no se conformó con sus adquisiciones en Virginia. En 1663 obtuvo 200 acres adicionales en St. Mary’s, Maryland, para sus hijos John, Anne y Sarah. La suerte le acompañaba. Cuando la tribu Powhatan mató a unos 500 colonos en 1644, Humphrey salió ileso. Al alcanzarlo la muerte, lo habrá encontrado en su cama, en Anne Arundel, Maryland, su último paradero conocido.

Su hijo John, nacido en 1645, comenzó haciendo barriles, un oficio provechoso porque casi todas las mercancías se transportaban en barril. Pero un buen día decidió seguir los pasos del padre. Le gustaban los ríos; en 1675 compró 101 acres sobre el río Patuxent, Maryland, y diez años después otros 300, en el condado de Baltimore, en la cabecera del Gunpowder, propiedad que acertadamente nombró “Belt’s Prosperity”. Finalmente se estableció con su mujer, Elizabeth Tydings, y sus hijos en su plantación Velmead, en Anne Arundel, donde murió.

Elizabeth continuó viviendo en Velmead y comprando tierras. Su hijo mayor, John, fue comerciante en Maryland. Su hermano Joseph nació, vivió y murió en el condado de Prince Georges. A los 40 años era bien conocido: fideicomisario de la primera escuela pública gratuita en Maryland; uno de los fundadores de la Iglesia Episcopal de Rock Creek; miembro de la cámara de diputados (House of Burgesses) de 1725 a 1737; juez presidente de la corte del condado (1726-1728); y coronel al mando de la milicia de Prince Georges en 1728 durante la guerra franco-india, prestando servicios en la misma hasta 1761.

Fue también propietario de muchas tierras, y en julio de 1725, Carlos, segundo Lord Baltimore, le donó 560 acres en lo que se llamaba Cheivy Chace, hoy Chevy Chase, donde edificó una casa. En su memoria puede verse una placa en Chevy Chase Circle, cerca de la línea divisoria entre Maryland y el Distrito de Columbia.

Un hermano de John “el viejo”, Higginson, dio la libertad a 14 esclavos de una de sus propiedades en el condado de Montgomery, Maryland, el 23 de febrero de 1781. No fue el único Belt en dar lustre a su apellido. Richard, sargento del Continental Army, cayó en la batalla de White Plains, el lunes 28 de octubre de 1776. Jeremiah empuñó las armas en Maryland durante esa guerra, y su hijo John Sprigg Belt, capitán de la 4ª Compañía del 1er Regimiento de la Maryland Line, fue miembro de la Society of the Cincinnati, la organización patriótica más antigua de los Estados Unidos, fundada en 1783 por oficiales del Continental Army. Otro nieto del Coronel Belt, Ja-

mes, comandó tres buques de guerra, sucesivamente: *Johnson*, *Montgomery* y *Lively*.

En la cuarta generación de la familia surge un tabernero, Joseph, nieto del primer John, dueño de la King's Arms, en el hoy elegante barrio de Georgetown, en Washington. En la quinta hace su entrada en escena un Belt, bautizado Middleton por el apellido de soltera de su madre. Pudo haber sido pirata, para mayor variedad en los personajes de esta historia, pero sólo fue el segundo de a bordo en el bergantín *Duke of Marlborough*, protagonista de un encuentro con otro barco, como quedó registrado en los archivos de Maryland denominados *The Black Books*.

En 1784 nace Benjamin Middleton, el primer Belt que vino al mundo en Washington. Benjamin Middleton se alistó en la milicia del Distrito de Columbia en la guerra de 1812 contra Gran Bretaña. Casado con Elton Smith Drane, tuvieron seis hijos. El menor, John Benjamin Belt, también nacido en Washington, no moriría como sus padres y hermanos en la capital de los Estados Unidos, sino que en una isla donde algunos años después de su llegada estallaría una larga y sangrienta guerra por la independencia.

III

Novelesco puede parecer el viaje a Cuba de John Benjamin Belt, descendiente directo de Humphrey, aquel aventurero exitoso. De hecho, John Benjamin figura con nombre y apellido en una novela histórica, *The Chess Players* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cuhady, 1960). La autora, Francis Parkinson Keyes, relata una conversación en París entre el campeón de ajedrez Paul Morphy y John Slidell, representante de la Confederación de Estados del Sur de los Estados Unidos ante la corte de Napoleón III. Hablaba Morphy de su viaje a Cuba (documentado en la época por el Diario de la Marina) y mencionó haber conocido al Capitán General Serrano. Slidell le preguntó si también había conocido a John Benjamin Belt. Morphy respondió: ¿El tutor de los hijos del Capitán General? Seguidamente afirmó haberlo conocido, agregando que era un secreto a voces que había logrado despertar la simpatía de las autoridades por la Confederación, a tal punto que sus barcos eran bien recibidos en La Habana para reabastecerse o hacer reparaciones.

Belt llegó a Cuba con una carta de presentación del arzobispo de Baltimore a su colega en La Habana, en latín, destacando sus conocimientos de cuatro idiomas. La carta le sirvió para obtener empleo y para mucho más. Conoció en el Palacio de los Capitanes Generales a Carmen Muñoz Baena y Romay, hija del marqués de Santa Olalla, cuyo abuelo materno, el Dr. Tomás Romay, había introducido en Cuba la vacuna contra la viruela. John Benjamin y Carmen se casaron en 1842 y tuvieron seis hijos. El mayor, Jorge Alfredo, nació en La Habana el 4 de octubre de 1868. Seis días después, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes ordenó tocar la campana en su finca La Demajagua,

cerca del pueblo de Yara en la provincia de Oriente, dando inicio a la Guerra Grande que duraría diez años.

Graduado en Derecho de la Universidad de La Habana en 1887, Jorge Alfredo fue juez de dos tribunales civiles en la capital hasta 1902, cuando el primer presidente de Cuba, Tomás Estrada Palma, lo nombró Secretario de la Presidencia, cargo creado ese año en el gabinete. En 1906 renunció para regresar al ejercicio profesional. Fue abogado de importantes empresas y hasta su muerte en 1932 se desempeñó como registrador de sociedades anónimas. De su matrimonio con María de los Dolores Ramírez Kavanagh nacieron tres hijos: Jorge Alfredo, el 26 de mayo de 1903; Alberto, el 24 de junio de 1904; y Guillermo, el 14 de julio de 1905.

Los hermanos Belt llegaron al mundo junto con la República de Cuba. Crecieron muy unidos; los tres estudiaron en el Colegio De La Salle, en El Vedado, no lejos de la casa de sus padres en la calle Paseo número 4. El 23 de diciembre de 1917 sufrieron la pena de la muerte de su madre tras una larga enfermedad. Su padre contrajo matrimonio años después con Consuelo García Echarte, quien supo llenar el vacío admirablemente. Los fuertes lazos de afecto entre los hermanos habrían de durar toda la vida.

IV

A diferencia de la república recién nacida, La Habana a comienzos del siglo 20 sumaba cuatrocientos años de vida. Fundada en 1515 por Diego Velázquez en la costa sur de la isla y trasladada por sus pobladores en dos ocasiones a sitios más saludables, la antigua Villa de San Cristóbal de La Habana, Llave del Nuevo Mundo y Antemural de las Indias, como reza su escudo de armas, reconstruida y fortificada tras su destrucción por piratas, adquirió el rango de capital en 1556.

Guillermo y sus hermanos eran habaneros. De niños, cuando visitaban la ciudad con su padre, aprendieron los hábitos y costumbres heredados de la villa colonial. Caminaban en La Habana Vieja por la acera de la sombra, o bajo los portales de la que Alejo Carpentier llamó la ciudad de las columnas, disfrutando de los pasodobles de los organilleros y escuchando los pregones de los vendedores ambulantes. Visitaron el Palacio de los Capitanes Generales, donde su abuelo John Benjamin había trabajado cuando aún funcionaba como tal, y su padre desde el inicio de la república el 20 de mayo de 1902, como mano derecha del Presidente Estrada Palma.

La suya fue una adolescencia plena de enseñanzas impartidas por Jorge Alfredo, muy admirado por sus hijos. Los tres se sentían orgullosos de su padre por la decisión de separarse de su profesión para ocupar un cargo público, sin aspiraciones políticas y sólo por el sentido del deber para con su patria. El mayor y el menor siguieron su ejemplo: estudiaron Derecho en la Universidad de La Habana y ejercieron la abogacía. Alberto fue corredor de aduanas. Años después, todos, cada uno a su manera, tendrían ocasión de emular el patriotismo del padre.

Tres anécdotas de juventud, contadas por Guillermo a sus hijos, les quedaron grabadas. Dos, sobre la temporada de ópera, tuvieron lugar en La Habana, y la tercera en La Coruña. Todas dicen algo de su vida en Cuba en las primeras décadas del siglo 20.

Como recordó Carpentier en *Sobre La Habana (1912-1930)*, publicado en *El amor a la ciudad* (Alfaguara: Madrid, 1996), hasta 1921 la capital de Cuba fue sede de temporadas de ópera con figuras estelares como Caruso, Lucrecia Bori, Tita Ruffo y Giovanni Martinelli, entre otras. La anécdota de Guillermo es sobre este último. El tenor italiano, procedente de la Metropolitan Opera de Nueva York, fue agasajado en un restaurante de La Habana Vieja al concluir su presentación en el Teatro Nacional. Se bebió mucho champagne. Terminada la cena, el joven Alberto Belt, entusiasmado, le dio un lavado de cabeza a Martinelli con una botella de “Veuve Clicquot”. Al día siguiente, desde la cubierta del barco que lo llevaría de regreso a Nueva York, el gran tenor preguntaba a gritos a los admiradores que le decían adiós desde el muelle: “¿Dónde está el rubio?”, mote afectuoso de su nuevo amigo cubano.

El personaje central de la otra anécdota es Enrico Caruso. Cantaba el papel de Radamés en *Aida* cuando explotó en el teatro un petardo, artefacto explosivo sin metralla, diseñado sólo para hacer ruido. Caruso salió a toda carrera por la calle, vistiendo su aparatosa túnica. Un policía que no sabía nada de ópera lo detuvo, preguntándole qué hacía disfrazado para los carnavales cuando no era la época. Por no saber español y sin poder hacerse entender en italiano, Caruso fue a parar a la estación de policía, de donde fue rescatado a su debido tiempo por el cónsul de Italia. De todo lo cual, muchos años después, dejó constancia Alejo Carpentier en sus recuerdos mencionados.

A los 17 años Guillermo hizo un viaje con su padre, madre y Alberto a La Coruña. Zarparon de La Habana en el vapor Lafayette para visitar al almirante Emiliano Enríquez Loño, Capitán General de El Ferrol y pariente de Jorge Alfredo Belt Muñoz. Don Emiliano les hizo un recibimiento espléndido. Con él fueron invitados a una cacería de perdices donde conocieron a Alfonso XIII. El rey ganó la partida y lo celebró con champagne, patatas y chorizo.

El 14 de julio de 1925, al cumplir la edad mínima marcada por la ley, Guillermo Belt Ramírez prestó juramento como abogado. Inició la carrera en el bufete de su padre, dedicándose al Derecho Civil. Al año fue nombrado Notario Público, cargo de designación por el Ministro de Justicia, y abrió su propia oficina en la calle Empedrado, en La Habana Vieja. Guillermo había alcanzado la mayoría de edad, pero las instituciones democráticas en que se sustentaba la flamante república estaban como quien dice en pañales. A poco Cuba habría de sufrir las consecuencias.

V

Por las venas de Elisa Martínez Viademonte y Silverio –bautizada con el nombre de su madre y abuela y desde niña apodada Cuquita– corría sangre española y cubana. Su abuelo paterno, Ramón, asturiano, vino a Cuba como tantos miles de sus compatriotas, conservó su nacionalidad de origen, y cuando nació su hijo José Agustín lo inscribió en el Consulado de España. Su madre, nacida en Cuba, era hija y nieta de cubanos. Cuquita recordaba a su abuelo materno, Nicasio Silverio de Armas, médico y catedrático de Física en la Universidad de La Habana, como hombre caritativo que atendía gratuitamente a los pobres y regalaba juguetes a los niños.

Su padre, José Agustín Martínez, quien generalmente usaba la versión abreviada del apellido, fue un célebre abogado criminalista, autor en 1935 de cuatro de los cinco libros del Código de Defensa Social, como él nombró al sucesor del Código Penal de 1870, promulgado en España y vigente en Cuba hasta entonces. En el ámbito familiar fue un padre amantísimo de la hija única, excelente guía en los viajes a Europa y los Estados Unidos, y máxima autoridad en su casa. A su madre Cuquita la describió en sus memorias como una mujer bonita y alegre, con excelente gusto en el vestir y para la decoración de su casa. Amante de todo lo bello, Elisa Silverio de Armas fue una de las patrocinadoras de la Orquesta Filarmónica Nacional.

La casa de Nicasio Silverio y su mujer, Elisa Saíenz de Rosas, en la calle Samá número 10, Marianao, tuvo su historia durante la guerra de 1868. Federico Incháustegui, joven colega del Dr. Silverio, se casó con Andrea, hermana de Nicasio, y dos semanas después se unió a las fuerzas cubanas que luchaban por la independencia. Andreíta continuó viviendo en

casa de su hermano. Pasado algún tiempo, recibió una noche la visita sorpresiva de Federico. Alguien ajeno a la casa avisó a las autoridades y pronto llegaron soldados a Samá 10 para investigar si había un alzado escondido allí. El Dr. Silverio era muy respetado, por lo que los militares esperaron unos minutos para que su esposa y hermana terminaran de vestirse, tiempo que aprovechó Federico para enrollarse en una alfombra colocada en lo alto de un escaparate enorme. Ni dentro del escaparate, ni bajo las camas, ni detrás de las cortinas, ni en el jardín encontraron al médico recién casado.

Incháustegui salió con vida de la Guerra de los Diez Años, que terminó con el Pacto de Zanjón. Cuando estalló la guerra nuevamente en febrero de 1895, Federico, viejo y enfermo, empuñó las armas otra vez. En la guerra del 68 había sido Coronel Jefe de Sanidad Militar, y en la del 95 insistió en participar en los combates. Cayó mortalmente herido en Dos Bocas, Manzanillo, provincia de Oriente, el 2 de septiembre de 1895. Antes de morir pidió que lo enterraran sin ceremonia, y que una compañía disparara al enemigo las tres descargas de fusilería que como saludo final le correspondían.

En una fiesta en casa de amigas el 31 de diciembre de 1930, las anfitrionas repartieron a las invitadas unos papelitos, cada uno con el nombre de un muchacho. A Cuquita le tocó el papel con el nombre de Guillermo. Esa noche hablaron mucho y bailaron poco. Cuquita comentó privadamente después que Guillermo era muy simpático, pero como no sabía bailar no iría con él a ninguna otra fiesta. Lo cual no impidió que el 14 de julio de 1931, cumpleaños del novio, Guillermo y Cuquita formalizaran su compromiso de matrimonio, celebrándolo con amigas el 23 del mismo mes, cumpleaños de la novia. El 2 de abril de 1932 se casaron en la Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, conocida popularmente como la Iglesia de Reina por el nombre de la calle de La Habana Vieja donde se encuentra.

VI

Al regreso de su luna de miel en Nueva York los recién casados se alojaron en Paseo 4 mientras finalizaba la construcción de su casa, regalo de bodas de los padres de Cuquita, adyacente a la de José Agustín y Elisita y rodeada de jardines que comunicaban una con la otra, en el nuevo barrio residencial de La Coronela.

Guillermo y sus hermanos se habían unido a la oposición a Gerardo Machado desde que éste, tras haber sido electo presidente democráticamente en 1925, logró que el Congreso en 1927 le extendiera su período de cuatro a seis años y autorizara la reelección presidencial, reformando la Constitución de 1901. Reelecto sin oposición por seis años en 1928, Machado, que había gobernado bien al comienzo, combatió a la creciente oposición con medidas sangrientas.

En agosto de 1931 el ex presidente Mario García Menocal y el popular dirigente del Partido Liberal, Carlos Mendieta, veteranos de la Guerra de Independencia, se alzaron contra su antiguo compañero de armas. Los rebeldes tomaron Gibara, en la costa norte de Oriente, pero fueron desalojados por el asalto de 3,000 soldados y el bombardeo de la aviación. La policía secreta de Machado, conocida como “la porra”, mataba a dirigentes sindicales y estudiantiles. Por su parte, la organización clandestina ABC comenzó a matar a personajes del régimen.

El 27 de septiembre de 1932, el presidente del Senado, Clemente Vázquez Bello, aliado de Machado, fue muerto a tiros a la salida de su club. Esa misma tarde, siete hombres vestidos de civil llegaron a casa de Gonzalo Freyre de Andrade, en la calle B entre Calzada y Línea, El Vedado. Gonzalo, profesor de Derecho y miembro de la Cámara de Representantes, había

sido el abogado defensor de muchos opositores. Dictaba algo a su hermano Guillermo cuando cayó abatido por los primeros disparos. Guillermo, herido, se lanzó sobre los pistoleros y fue muerto también. El tercer Freyre, Leopoldo, ni vio al asesino que le disparó siete tiros por la espalda.

Dos o tres días después, un hombre llegó apresurado a la casa de Guillermo y Cuquita, recientemente estrenada. Como tenía por costumbre, Guillermo había venido de su bufete para almorzar con su mujer, encinta del primer hijo. José, el jardinero de Jorge Alfredo Belt, venía a advertirles que la porra había llegado a Paseo 4 buscando a Guillermo. Seguros de que la policía no tardaría en averiguar su nueva dirección, salieron de inmediato en el coche de Guillermo, sin rumbo definido, Cuquita en bata de casa.

En el trayecto decidieron probar suerte en el Central Pilar, del general Rafael Montalvo, muy amigo de los padres del matrimonio. El veterano de la Guerra de Independencia los recibió cordialmente, indicándoles que para despistar los presentaría como sus sobrinos recién llegados de Chile. La estratagema funcionó y permanecieron allí hasta el 27 de octubre, cuando José Agustín Martínez les avisó que el padre de Guillermo había sufrido un infarto cardíaco. Poco después de llegar ellos a Paseo 4, Jorge Alfredo falleció. Tenía 64 años.

Cinco días antes, el *New York Times* informaba que la Legación de Panamá en Cuba había concedido asilo político (“refuge”) al Dr. Alfredo Belt, hijo del prominente abogado cubano Dr. Jorge Alfredo Belt y uno de los dirigentes de la oposición. Continuaba citando la noticia, publicada en el *Heraldo de Cuba* del 29 de septiembre, del arresto del Dr. Alfredo Belt como uno de los asesinos del Dr. Vázquez Bello. Agregaba el diario estadounidense que el *Heraldo de Cuba* había sido suspendido y su editor encarcelado por varias horas. Terminaba la nota del *Times* así: *Dr. Belt is said to have gone into hiding at that time, together with his brothers Guillermo and Alberto.* (Se dice que el Dr. Belt se había escondido entonces, junto con sus hermanos Guillermo y Alberto.)

Cadáveres en las calles y lugares apartados; bombas casi a diario: una explota cuando la policía, buscando armas supues-

tamente ocultas en una casa, según denuncia anónima, contesta el teléfono; falla el plan de detonar por control remoto los explosivos colocados bajo el mausoleo de la familia Vázquez Bello en el Cementerio de Colón, cuando Machado asistiera al entierro, porque la viuda decidió enterrarlo en la Santa Clara natal. Caen más líderes estudiantiles: dos, muertos a tiros de fusil en la Avenida de los Presidentes, cacería presenciada por la corresponsal del *New York Times* desde el balcón de su apartamento. A comienzos de 1933, huelga de los trabajadores azucareros; retirada del embajador de Estados Unidos, allegado a Machado; llegada del nuevo embajador, compañero de clase en Harvard del Presidente Roosevelt, con la misión de encontrar una salida a la crisis.

El 7 de agosto corre un rumor: Machado ha renunciado. Una multitud avanza hacia el Capitolio. La porra no logra contenerla a palos, abre fuego, mata a 22 personas y hiere a 170. Cuatro días después el ejército se vuelve contra el dictador. La noche siguiente, Machado vuela a Nassau. Llevaba consigo cinco revólveres, siete bolsas cargadas de oro y cinco amigos en ropa de dormir. O así lo cuenta Joan Didion en el libro titulado *Miami*.

VII

Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Quesada, hijo del patriota que inició la Guerra de los Diez Años, asumió la presidencia provisional el 12 de agosto de 1933. Guillermo Belt, miembro de la Unión Nacionalista del coronel Carlos Mendieta, fue nombrado Secretario de Instrucción Pública (luego denominado Ministro de Educación). Comenzaba su vida política; en casa, Cuquita había dado a luz a su primer hijo, el 25 de marzo, bautizado unas semanas después con el nombre del padre.

Céspedes, veterano también de la Guerra de Independencia, era un hombre respetable pero no contaba con el respaldo del ejército ni con la simpatía de muchos activistas estudiantiles y de los elementos radicales de la oposición. Surge entonces un sargento del ejército, conocedor del funcionamiento del Estado Mayor porque asistía a sus reuniones, observaba sus deliberaciones y tomaba notas como taquígrafo oficial.

Fulgencio Batista tenía facilidad de palabra. El 4 de septiembre arengó a los soldados rasos, cabos y sargentos ante el rumor sin fundamento de una rebaja de sueldos para paliar la difícil situación financiera. El golpe de estado, disfrazado de revolución de los sargentos, tuvo el apoyo de los elementos más radicales entre los grupos de oposición a Machado, del estudiantado y algunos profesores. Este conjunto de fuerzas civiles y militares concibió la Pentarquía, poder ejecutivo colegiado integrado por Ramón Grau San Martín, decano de la Facultad de Medicina de la Universidad de La Habana; Porfirio Franca, conocido banquero; el periodista Sergio Carbó; el abogado José María Irisarri y Guillermo Portela, profesor de

Derecho Penal. El gobierno provisional daba comienzo bajo un manto revolucionario.

Un despacho de la Associated Press del 7 de septiembre, publicado al día siguiente en *The Baltimore Sun*, decía que el nuevo gobierno había pedido el apoyo de Guillermo Belt, ex miembro del gabinete, y citaba a Belt diciendo que para él, Céspedes seguía siendo presidente. Ese día, la corresponsal del *New York Times* citaba la misma declaración, agregando que Belt consideraba que el nuevo gobierno no representaba la voluntad popular.

Guillermo no tenía discrepancias políticas con Grau. Por el contrario, compartía su rechazo a la llamada Enmienda Platt, impuesta a los constituyentes de 1901 durante la intervención militar de los Estados Unidos al terminar la guerra de 1895. La disposición limitaba la capacidad de Cuba para suscribir tratados internacionales y concertar préstamos, supeditándola a la aprobación por Estados Unidos. Además, reconocía el derecho de este país de intervenir en Cuba para salvaguardar su independencia y mantener la estabilidad de su gobierno.

Al tomar posesión, asomado al balcón del Palacio Presidencial y de cara al pueblo aglomerado enfrente, Grau abrogó unilateralmente la odiada Enmienda Platt. Guillermo contaría a sus hijos con satisfacción, años después, ese gesto de aquel 10 de septiembre, aclamado por la multitud. Sin embargo, su lealtad a Céspedes le impidió aceptar el ofrecimiento de participar en el gobierno surgido tras su derrocamiento.

No obstante su popularidad inicial, el gobierno no pudo controlar la situación. Dirigentes estudiantiles chocaron con miembros de la pentarquía e impusieron a Grau como presidente, dando fin al experimento colectivo. Batista no había sido confirmado en la jefatura del ejército. A pocas horas del golpe de los sargentos, unos 250 oficiales depuestos se instalaron en el Hotel Nacional, situado en un promontorio frente al mar. El 2 de octubre Batista lanzó un ataque con tanquetas y artillería. Los oficiales contaban con 37 rifles. El combate terminó con la rendición de éstos. Cuando los últimos oficiales salían del hotel, soldados y civiles abrieron fuego, matando a 11 e hiriendo a 22.

Destruída la oficialidad profesional, Batista se proclamó coronel y nombró a sargentos, cabos y soldados rasos para ocupar las vacantes. Al mismo tiempo, los estudiantes peleaban contra el ABC y aumentaba el terrorismo por otros grupos. Hubo más brotes de rebeldía en las fuerzas armadas. Las guarniciones de los cuarteles de San Ambrosio y Dragones, en la capital, se pasaron a los rebeldes, junto con varias unidades de la policía. Los rebeldes se concentraron en el Castillo de Atarés, la antigua fortaleza colonial. Batista los atacó con artillería pesada. Hubo ametrallamiento de los rendidos y un coronel fue asesinado a la vista de todos. Reinaba el caos.

VIII

En enero de 1934 Batista le pide la renuncia a Grau, quien se niega asegurando que sólo renunciará ante los estudiantes que lo habían elegido. La transacción consiste en designar a Carlos Hevia, un profesional respetable, quien presta juramento el día 16. Una huelga de protesta comienza al día siguiente. Hevia renuncia el 18, y Carlos Mendieta toma posesión de la presidencia, aclamado por una multitud esperanzada.

El 29 de mayo se cumple una vieja aspiración: la Enmienda Platt es abolida por el tratado de reciprocidad entre Cuba y Estados Unidos, que establece un trato preferencial para el comercio entre ambos países. Aumentan las exportaciones de ron, tabaco, frutas y vegetales.

La familia de Cuquita y Guillermo sigue creciendo. El 31 de mayo nace el segundo hijo, José Agustín, como su abuelo materno. Cuquita recordaba que ese mismo día Guillermo tuvo que asistir a una reunión del Consejo de Estado, como uno de los 15 miembros de ese cuerpo asesor del Presidente de la República, para el cual lo habían nombrado a comienzos de año.

En enero de 1935 Guillermo recibe una nueva prueba de confianza. La crisis política y social impedía la celebración de elecciones. El cargo de alcalde de La Habana, la segunda posición política del país, había quedado vacante por renuncia de su titular. Cuando el presidente Mendieta lo nombró, Guillermo pasó a ser el alcalde más joven en la historia de la capital.

De inmediato puso manos a la obra. Ese año inauguró el Hospital Municipal de Infancia, primero de su clase en el país, que brindaba servicios gratuitos a personas no pudientes. En julio creó el cargo de Historiador de la Ciudad y nombró a

un intelectual revolucionario, Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring. Poco después, a propuesta del historiador, el alcalde restituyó el nombre tradicional a 105 calles de La Habana y restauró la Plaza de Armas, sita en el lugar donde se fundó la ciudad. Asimismo, autorizó la publicación y distribución gratuita de los Cuadernos de Historia Habanera sobre temas de interés local.

El 22 de noviembre se publicó la Ley Decreto 416, a propuesta de Guillermo, declarando exenta de impuestos a la Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País. Esta institución, autorizada por Carlos IV en 1792 a pedido de varios intelectuales cubanos, fundó en 1793 la primera biblioteca pública gratuita en Cuba. A comienzos del siglo 19 quedó encargada primero de supervisar y luego dirigir la educación primaria en el país, y en 1818 fundó la Academia de Bellas Artes de San Alejandro, cuyo primer director fue el pintor francés Jean Baptiste Vermay. Con el tiempo sería la cuna de prominentes pintores y escultores cubanos.

El presidente Mendieta renunció el 12 de diciembre luego de una serie de huelgas y meses después de sobrevivir a un atentado, entregando la presidencia a su sucesor constitucional, el ministro de Relaciones Exteriores José A. Barnet. El 25 de diciembre se celebraba el bautizo de Noel, el tercer hijo de Cuquita y Guillermo, en casa de los abuelos maternos y en presencia del nuevo presidente, quien desempeñaría sus funciones hasta las elecciones de 1936. Guillermo Belt decidió renunciar como alcalde tan pronto como fuese posible, en solidaridad con Mendieta, y así lo hizo el 5 de febrero de 1936. Una vez más, salía del mundo de la política para reanudar su carrera profesional.

IX

Las elecciones, ganadas por Miguel Mariano Gómez con Federico Laredo Brú de vicepresidente, debieron marcar el inicio de la consolidación del proceso democrático, pero no fue así. Batista había logrado la aprobación del gobierno provisional para designar a personal del ejército como maestros en las nuevas escuelas rurales que se estaban creando. Muchos vieron la medida como una intromisión indebida de las fuerzas armadas en la educación civil. El presidente Gómez vetó una ley de impuestos a la venta de azúcar para financiar nuevas escuelas rurales bajo control militar. La Cámara de Representantes pidió la destitución de Gómez, el Senado la aprobó por amplia mayoría, y en diciembre Laredo Brú era presidente.

Cuando el 24 de enero de 1937 nació Marilys, única hija de Cuquita y Guillermo, a su bautizo poco después asistieron el presidente y su esposa. Laredo había sido compañero de gabinete de Belt en la presidencia de Céspedes y las relaciones entre ambos eran cordiales.

Guillermo se mantenía al tanto de los acontecimientos políticos pero estaba completamente dedicado al ejercicio del Derecho. Sin embargo, el 11 de marzo su nombre figuró nuevamente en las páginas del *New York Times*. Según el titular, el ex alcalde de La Habana había sido arrestado como cabecilla de una conspiración. El diario estadounidense recogía afirmaciones (*It is asserted...*) de que Belt encabezaba una comisión encargada de establecer contactos con oficiales del ejército de alta graduación para inducirlos a derrocar a Batista. El *Times* citaba noticias de la prensa cubana sobre el arresto del Dr. Belt y otras dos personas.

Una vez más la prensa reportaba falsamente el arresto de uno de los hermanos Belt. Se especulaba en círculos contrarios al gobierno que la supuesta conspiración y las acusaciones lanzadas en la prensa contra figuras de la oposición eran un pretexto para postergar las elecciones de miembros de la Asamblea Constituyente a convocarse ese año.

Afortunadamente no fue así. La asamblea comenzó a sesionar en noviembre de 1939. La coalición opositora, presidida por Grau San Martín, obtuvo 42 delegados; la de Batista quedó en minoría con 35. Los delegados, procedentes de todas las corrientes políticas e ideológicas, aprobaron la Constitución de 1940. Algunas disposiciones en materia laboral –pago de salario a los trabajadores equivalente a 48 horas semanales por 44 de trabajo, un mes por año de vacaciones pagadas, por ejemplo– eran tan avanzadas que en el mundo altamente competitivo de hoy muchos querrían repensarlas. Sus disposiciones sobre derechos individuales, en cambio, fueron casi todas incorporadas en la Declaración de Derechos Humanos menos de una década después.

Laredo Brú completó su mandato en 1940. Ese año Batista se presentó como candidato a las elecciones presidenciales y las ganó. Mal que bien, el país caminaba de nuevo por la senda electoral, y había motivos para pensar que los asesinatos por la policía y las bombas de represalia eran cosa del pasado.

X

En su vida pública, Guillermo actuó en política sin ser político profesional. Su profesión era el ejercicio del Derecho, y al igual que su padre prestó servicios públicos cuando fue requerido para ello, regresando a la abogacía una vez completada la tarea encomendada. Pero, ¿quién era este joven abogado cuando estaba en casa?

Era la figura tradicional del padre, como se entendía entonces. En lo financiero, era el soporte de su mujer y los cuatro hijos nacidos en los cinco primeros años de matrimonio. Sus ingresos le permitieron dar a su familia una vida cómoda pero sin lujos. Desde pequeños los hijos veían al padre salir temprano a su bufete en La Habana, conduciendo su automóvil, regresar al mediodía a almorzar, y luego de vuelta a la ciudad para completar la jornada de trabajo.

No fue esa la única lección sin palabras. Guillermo solía visitar con Cuquita y los hijos la tumba del Lugarteniente General Antonio Maceo, en el Cacahual, lugar cercano a Punta Brava en las afueras de La Habana y muy cerca de donde cayó combatiendo, el 7 de diciembre de 1896, el más heroico de los guerreros cubanos. La visita anual en el aniversario de la muerte del Titán de Bronce inculcó en los hijos el respeto por el valor y sacrificio de los próceres de la independencia.

Asimismo, Guillermo les transmitió su orgullo por la actuación de su padre junto a don Tomás Estrada Palma y la amistad entre ambos. Recordaba el éxito del padre al reanudar su profesión de abogado, tanto como su amor por sus tres hijos y demás parientes.

Cuquita también cumplía un papel tradicional. Guillermo enseñó a sus hijos a amar a su madre, como él amó a la suya en los pocos años que la tuvo. Los niños aprendieron a res-

petarla: nada de levantarle la voz, discutir sus decisiones, ni hacer una mueca de desagrado, por muy disimulada que fuese. El manejo de la casa, la crianza de los hijos, la ayuda con las tareas escolares, los modales en la mesa y con las visitas, todo eso correspondía a Cuquita. La disciplina corría por cuenta del padre. La madre era esperanza de perdón y fuente de consuelo.

Cuquita hablaba muy bien el inglés y el francés, aprendidos en la niñez y adolescencia. Hizo buen uso de ambas lenguas extranjeras en varias oportunidades, en La Habana y mucho después en Washington. Acompañaba a Guillermo en las recepciones y otras actividades oficiales, y además trabajó en proyectos como la decoración del comedor del Hospital Municipal de Infancia, asemejándolo a un jardín, con pequeñas mesas y sillas en colores alegres para los niños.

En sus responsabilidades domésticas tuvo una ayuda extraordinaria en la persona de Ernestina Mederos. En una primera conversación telefónica, Cuquita quiso contratar a esta “manejadora” (como llamaban en Cuba a las niñeras), muy bien recomendada. Ana (como le diría el mayor de los hijos de Cuquita y Guillermo al no poder pronunciar su nombre completo) contestó: “Pero, señora, ¿cómo sabe usted que vamos a ponernos de acuerdo sin siquiera habernos visto?” El 4 de julio de 1933, tres meses después del nacimiento del primogénito de los Belt, Ana llegó a Villa Marisol, en La Coronela, para nunca más apartarse de la familia que ese día adoptó como propia.

Los niños crecieron en un entorno agradable. Por los jardines de las dos casas, la de los padres y la de los abuelos, cercados por un muro de piedra, la imaginación infantil corría a rienda suelta. Los niños jugaban a la sombra de grandes árboles de mango, entre las palmas arecas, escondiéndose detrás de los setos de buganvillas, cazando lagartijas, estudiando a prudente distancia las arañas peludas y los alacranes bajo las piedras. Había perros, gatos, gallos y gallinas con sus pollitos, vacas y hasta un venado. En casa de los abuelos, dos fuentes con peces pequeños y una torre de piedra, parecida a las de los libros de cuentos, pero que en realidad cubría un pozo de abastecimiento de agua.

En el hogar de Guillermo y Cuquita la vida transcurría plácidamente, hasta un día de verano.

XI

Qué cosa más rara, pensaron los niños, jugando al aire libre esa mañana calurosa de agosto, cuando Ana y Rosa María, contratada para cuidar a Marilys, les ordenaron entrar en la casa y guardar silencio. No es la hora de la siesta de papá, pensaron. Y qué raro, además, que mamá anda tan preocupada en estos días, cuando hace una semana estaba tan contenta celebrando su cumpleaños.

La explicación la daba el *New York Times* del 30 de julio de 1944. Aunque los niños estaban enterados de acontecimientos importantes –por ejemplo, sabían por su padre que el doctor Grau había ganado las elecciones presidenciales “a sombrerozoz” (expresión recién aprendida) contra el candidato de Batista– no leían periódicos todavía, y menos el *New York Times*. Así que no sabían que el director interino del *Diario de la Marina* había retado a duelo a su papá.

Tampoco sabían que en la prensa cubana se especulaba con el probable nombramiento de Guillermo Belt como ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, dado que por encargo del presidente electo estaba gestionando un acercamiento de los Estados Unidos con el antiguo profesor universitario a cuyo gobierno provisional Washington había negado el reconocimiento en 1933.

El periodista había retado a Guillermo porque alegaba su “interferencia” en críticas hechas al embajador estadounidense. En la década de 1930, los periodistas cubanos tomaban lecciones de esgrima en las salas de armas del *Diario de la Marina*, como en los periódicos *El Mundo*, *La Lucha* o *La Discusión*, escribe Carpentier en sus recuerdos de La Habana, antes citados, por si llegaban a tener una “cuestión personal”

debido a un artículo y los retaban a duelo. En este caso había sido al revés: era el periodista quien retaba.

Encerrados en la casa sin saber porqué, los niños escucharon unos sonidos procedentes del jardín del fondo. Aficionados a los programas radiales Los Tres Villalobos y El Llanero Solitario, donde se daban tiroteos frecuentes, gritaron: ¡son disparos! Nada de eso, imaginaciones de ustedes, les dijo Ernestina, tajante, inapelable. Ya adolescentes se les revelaría la clave del misterio. El general Quirino Uría, oficial de carrera del ejército, amigo del padre de los niños, hacía esa mañana de agosto varios disparos al aire para acostumbrar a Guillermo al estampido, preparándolo para el duelo inevitable.

El 3 de agosto, el *New York Times* (¡otra vez!) informaba que a primera hora del día anterior, en una finca en las afueras de La Habana, se había librado un duelo a pistola entre el Dr. Guillermo Belt, buen amigo y asesor del presidente electo Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín, y Eugenio de Sosa, director del matutino *Diario de la Marina*. Agregaba que ninguno de los dos resultó herido.

Las dos familias se reconciliaron en los 1950 por intermedio de sus hijos. Una de las hijas del matrimonio Sosa celebraba los 15 años y los tres hijos varones de los Belt fueron invitados. Cuquita les dio permiso, los muchachos asistieron a la fiesta y todo quedó para el recuerdo.

En 1959, Eugenio de Sosa fue arrestado y luego de un juicio amañado, condenado a varios años de cárcel por conspirar contra el gobierno de Fidel Castro. Años después salió al exilio. A un amigo le contó del duelo. Él había disparado primero, errando el blanco. Guillermo Belt, que según las reglas pudo haberse tomado todo el tiempo necesario para apuntar cuidadosamente y disparar, lo hizo al suelo. No siempre se lava con sangre el honor.

XII

Ramón Grau San Martín tomó posesión como Presidente de Cuba el 10 de octubre de 1944. Diez días después firmaba el decreto designando a Guillermo Belt Ramírez embajador ante el gobierno de los Estados Unidos. Apenas dos semanas habían transcurrido tras el nombramiento cuando el 14 de noviembre Cuquita dio a luz a Juan Alberto Benjamín.

Eran días de gran movimiento en la familia Belt. Guillermo viajó a Washington el 27 de noviembre, presentó credenciales al presidente Roosevelt, se instaló en su despacho en la embajada de Cuba y en diciembre regresó a La Habana para el bautizo de Juan y pasar la Navidad con su familia. Cuquita alistaba a los hijos para viajar a una ciudad desconocida para ellos tan pronto comenzara el nuevo año.

El 1 de enero de 1945, gracias a una gentileza del secretario de Estado Edward Stettinius, abordaron un avión militar que de otra manera habría volado sin pasajeros de Miami a Washington luego de desembarcar en la ciudad de la Florida a un contingente de soldados rumbo a la segunda guerra mundial. De noche y con frío llegaron a la base aérea Andrews. Guillermo y Cuquita viajaban con sus cinco hijos, más Ana, Rosa María, Miss Devereux, la antigua institutriz de Cuquita, y Martín Iglesias, contratado para asistir al personal de servicio de la embajada. De este grupo, aparte de Cuquita y Guillermo, la única persona que hablaba inglés era Miss Devereux.

El día siguiente lo dedicaron los niños Belt a explorar la que sería su casa durante los próximos años, ¿quién sabía cuántos? ¡Qué distinta era de aquella donde jugaban, a veces con amigos, o si no tenían visita entre ellos mismos, corriendo y gritando por grandes espacios al aire libre! El edificio de la

embajada, construido en 1917 en la calle 16 de la capital, era de estilo Luis XV, como alguien les diría. Para ellos resultaba un poco sombrío, demasiado formal y hasta aburrido. Pero tendrían que vivir aquí por un buen rato, y lo mejor sería acostumbrarse rápidamente a esa idea.

En el tercer piso, los tres varones compartían un cuarto, Marilys tenía el suyo y Juan dormía en su cuna, cerca de Ana. Hasta aquí, muy parecido a La Coronela. Lo nuevo estaba en el segundo piso. Además del comedor y las salas de recibo, había un salón de baile a lo largo de la parte trasera del edificio. Precioso salón, iluminación indirecta, piso de madera pulida y lustrosa, ideal para su cometido pero nada adecuado para los saltos y carreras acostumbrados en Cuba.

Algo había que hacer con aquel espacio, aprovechando su poco uso para jugar allí en días fríos y nublados. Alguien, seguramente Cuquita, les sugirió aprender un juego nuevo. Bád-minton, se llamaba, y se jugaba con unas raquetas livianas y una cosa que parecía una media pelota pequeña coronada de plumas. Menos mal que nunca lo sabrían sus amigos, tan lejos y añorados, porque se morirían de risa si pudieran verlos: “¡qué barbaridad!, cómo han cambiado esos niños.”

XIII

Fue el alcalde más joven en la historia de La Habana, y en los 1940 se le consideraba joven para ser embajador. Joven cuando a los 39 años su presidente lo había nombrado representante personal ante otro Jefe de Estado, con cartas credenciales de Embajador Extraordinario y Plenipotenciario. Joven cuando las presentó al presidente del país que en los meses postreros de la guerra surgía como la primera potencia mundial, un destino usualmente reservado para diplomáticos en la cumbre de su carrera, o políticos de reciente y destacada presencia en los altibajos de la vida nacional.

Guillermo y Cuquita llegaron a Washington cuando acontecimientos de consecuencias históricas pondrían a prueba su estreno en la vida diplomática. En febrero de 1945 Roosevelt se reunía en Yalta con Churchill y Stalin. Entre otros acuerdos se fijó el 25 de abril como fecha de inicio de la conferencia internacional que crearía la Organización de las Naciones Unidas. Roosevelt, como Moisés, pudo ver la tierra de promisión pero no logró llegar a ella, escribiría Henry Kissinger. FDR murió repentinamente poco antes de inaugurada la conferencia de San Francisco; el vicepresidente Harry Truman le sucedió.

El 8 de mayo terminó la guerra en Europa. En agosto, tras las bombas atómicas con las que Estados Unidos destruyó Hiroshima y Nagasaki, Japón se rindió. La Carta de las Naciones Unidas se había firmado el 26 de junio. Los vencedores proclamaron la alborada de un nuevo mundo de paz, cuyos pilares se habían acordado previamente en Washington entre los Estados Unidos, el Reino Unido, la Unión de Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas y China.

No todo era miel sobre hojuelas. En febrero se celebraba en México la Conferencia Interamericana sobre Problemas de la Guerra y de la Paz con el fin de intensificar la participación de América Latina en la futura organización mundial, preservando, eso sí, el Sistema Interamericano y la solidaridad económica continental. Muchos delegados, el embajador Belt entre ellos, regresarían de la capital mexicana resueltos a hacer valer sus puntos de vista en San Francisco.

No tardó mucho en producirse el primer choque entre América Latina y los “Cuatro Grandes”. En Yalta, Estados Unidos y Gran Bretaña habían aceptado una exigencia de Stalin, quien pidió tres escaños en la futura ONU: uno, desde luego, para la Unión Soviética y dos para sus satélites, Ucrania y Bielorrusia. Al presentarse la propuesta en San Francisco, los países latinoamericanos se opusieron, deponiendo su actitud cuando la URSS prometió apoyar el ingreso de Argentina.

Los rusos se salieron con la suya, primero, y cuando se planteó la admisión de Argentina se opusieron firmemente. América Latina lanzó una campaña a favor de Argentina. El ministro de Relaciones Exteriores soviético Molotov tildó de fascistas a los dirigentes de la campaña. Un veterano periodista del *New York Times*, Russell Porter, salió en defensa de las convicciones democráticas de Guillermo Belt, a quien identificó como uno de los líderes del grupo latinoamericano, “... bien conocido de este reportero como opositor revolucionario del ex presidente Machado, quien hasta su derrocamiento en 1933 fue un Hitler caribeño de poca monta, dando una imagen anticipada del fascismo con su Gestapo, llamada la porra...” (*The New York Times*, May 12, 1945. Traducción del autor.)

Al inicio de la conferencia, los jefes de delegación, en su gran mayoría ministros de Relaciones Exteriores, eligieron a Guillermo Belt relator de la comisión coordinadora de la reunión. Cupo a esta y otras comisiones de trabajo casi toda la tarea, haciendo posible que dos meses después de inaugurada, la conferencia concluyera exitosamente con la firma de la Carta. El joven embajador cubano, actuando de igual a igual entre cancilleres, presentó el documento formalmente a la Asamblea General. Su firma es la única por Cuba en ese instrumento histórico.

Cuquita acompañó a Guillermo en San Francisco durante toda la reunión. La juventud de ambos despertó simpatía entre los delegados y fue objeto de comentarios favorables en la prensa. Aún más importante, les permitió llevar un tren de actividad muy intenso. En septiembre de 1945, cumpliendo sus obligaciones bilaterales, Belt comenzó negociaciones con el Departamento de Estado en Washington para la devolución de las bases militares construidas en Cuba por Estados Unidos durante la guerra mundial.

Por nota del 1 de abril siguiente, el Secretario de Estado James Byrnes le comunicó que su gobierno devolvería las bases el 20 de mayo de 1946, conforme lo había solicitado Cuba. Así se celebró otro aniversario de aquel día en 1902, cuando los aplausos de la multitud saludaron a la bandera de la estrella solitaria, ondeando por vez primera sobre el Castillo de los Tres Santos Reyes del Morro.

XIV

En la segunda sesión de la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas, celebrada en Nueva York, el embajador Belt fue electo vicepresidente de la Asamblea, derrotando al candidato soviético, Dimitri Maniulski. En este caso no sólo perdió la URSS. El periódico *The Baltimore Sun*, en un despacho del 16 de septiembre de 1947, calificó la derrota del ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Ucrania y ex presidente de la Internacional Comunista como un revés a los planes de los países que manejaban la conferencia tras bambalinas para distribuir las siete vicepresidencias entre los Cinco Grandes (Francia para entonces admitida al club exclusivo), más una para Ucrania y la otra para México.

En la primera votación el delegado de Cuba obtuvo 27 votos con fuerte apoyo de los latinoamericanos, quienes recordaban su defensa del ingreso de Argentina. Maniulski, respaldado por los Cinco Grandes y sus aliados, también obtuvo 27 votos. El recién electo presidente de la Asamblea, Oswaldo Aranha, ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Brasil, aplicó el reglamento y decidió el empate por sorteo. La suerte favoreció al candidato latinoamericano.

El nombre de Guillermo Belt ya era bien conocido en Naciones Unidas. En agosto de 1946, el jefe de la delegación de Cuba había solicitado formalmente una sesión extraordinaria de la Asamblea General para eliminar el privilegio del veto. El representante cubano desafiaba a las grandes potencias creadoras del organismo mundial, entre ellas el país ante el cual estaba acreditado.

Estados Unidos defendió el veto. Colombia y Australia apoyaron a Cuba en la oposición al privilegio de los Cinco

Grandes. La Asamblea envió el tema a estudio por una subcomisión creada al efecto. Hasta hoy se sigue debatiendo la conveniencia de desechar esta reliquia de la segunda guerra mundial.

Otro tema importante enfrentó a Cuba con los Estados Unidos. Anticipándose al término del mandato británico en Palestina, el gobierno de Truman gestionaba la partición del territorio con el fin de asegurar un estado para el pueblo judío. Guillermo Belt, en declaraciones citadas por *The New York Times* el 17 de octubre de 1947, sostuvo que Cuba se oponía a la decisión mayoritaria de la Asamblea General por considerar que la partición no sería una solución justa y duradera, y además podría poner en peligro la paz. De los países de América Latina, Cuba fue el único voto en contra. Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras y México se abstuvieron. Los demás votaron a favor. La Asamblea aprobó la partición de Palestina por 33 votos a favor, 13 en contra, 10 abstenciones y 1 ausente.

El jefe de la delegación cubana contaba con muy buenos colaboradores. El Dr. Ernesto Dihigo, catedrático de Derecho de la Universidad de La Habana, redactó el primer borrador de la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos, y Guy Pérez Cisneros, diplomático de carrera, presentó los argumentos de Cuba para su aprobación. En Londres, en enero de 1946, al iniciarse las sesiones de la comisión preparatoria de la Asamblea General, los delegados cubanos recibieron un consejo del ex primer ministro Winston Churchill. Enterado por Truman de su intención de nombrar a la viuda de FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, representante en el Consejo Económico y Social de Naciones Unidas, Churchill les aconsejó acercarse a ella y buscar su apoyo en el tema de los derechos humanos. Buen consejo, pues en abril Eleanor Roosevelt resultó electa para presidir la Comisión de Derechos Humanos.

Cuba también encabezó las negociaciones sobre la materia en el ámbito regional. El 30 de abril de 1948, en la reunión de Bogotá que adoptó la Carta de la Organización de los Estados Americanos, se aprobó la Declaración Americana sobre los Derechos y los Deberes del Hombre. En septiembre, durante la reunión de la ONU en París, Cuba propuso el instrumento

de la OEA como base para la declaración mundial. Muchas de las recomendaciones contenidas en el borrador del Dr. Dihigo fueron incorporadas en la Declaración Universal el 10 de diciembre de 1948.

Además, la delegación de Cuba copatrocinó la Convención para la Prevención y la Sanción del Delito de Genocidio, adoptada por las Naciones Unidas el 9 de diciembre de 1948. A Raphael Lemkin, prominente jurista internacional en Polonia antes de la guerra, se debe esa figura jurídica. El diplomático cubano Valentín Riva, quien había llegado a la Embajada de Cuba en Washington junto con Guillermo Belt, le presentó a Lemkin en Lake Success, Nueva York, sede del primer período de sesiones de la Asamblea General, en octubre de 1945. Belt decidió copatrocinar la resolución correspondiente, sumándose luego India y Panamá. En un artículo publicado en *American Journal of International Law* (1947, Vol. 41 (I):144-151) Lemkin escribió: *The writer expresses his deep gratitude to H.E. Guillermo Belt, Ambassador of Cuba, to the Hon. Mrs. Viyaja Lakshmi Pandit, Chairman of the Delegation of India, and to H.E. Dr. Ricardo J. Alfaro, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Panama, for sponsoring the resolution.*

XV

A fines de 1948, durante el tercer período de sesiones de la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas, en París, Cuba fue electa por unanimidad miembro no permanente del Consejo de Seguridad. En sus memorias Cuquita recogería una frase dicha a la prensa por el estadista francés y a la sazón ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, Robert Schuman: es un voto de confianza a Belt y a Cuba en el parlamento del mundo.

Además de presidir la delegación de Cuba en Naciones Unidas, el embajador Belt fue jefe de todas las acreditadas en las conferencias interamericanas celebradas durante su misión en Washington, con excepción de la reunión en México citada antes. En esa calidad asistió en 1947 a la Conferencia Interamericana para el Mantenimiento de la Paz y la Seguridad del Continente, celebrada en Brasil, donde se redactó el Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Recíproca.

También allí su actuación dejó huella en el derecho internacional. En su discurso a la tercera sesión plenaria, Guillermo Belt propuso que en el capítulo del TIAR sobre amenazas y actos de agresión se incluyeran las de naturaleza económica. Debe considerarse como amenaza la mera notificación por un Estado a otro de que aplicará sanciones o medidas coercitivas si no accede a sus demandas, agregó.

Esta iniciativa se fundamentaba en la defensa de la cuota azucarera de Cuba en el mercado estadounidense ante presiones que el poderoso vecino pudiese ejercer por razones políticas o económicas. Así lo entendieron las demás delegaciones, y muy especialmente la de Estados Unidos, que opuso objeciones de forma a la propuesta cubana, alegando que los

temas económicos debían tratarse en una reunión a realizarse en Bogotá y no en esta, convocada para la defensa colectiva.

La tesis de la agresión económica no prosperó en Brasil, pero el año siguiente, en la Novena Conferencia Internacional Americana, quedó plasmada en el artículo 16 (hoy artículo 20) de la Carta de la Organización de los Estados Americanos: “Ningún Estado podrá aplicar o estimular medidas coercitivas de carácter económico y político para forzar la voluntad soberana de otro Estado y obtener de éste ventajas de cualquier naturaleza.”

El diplomático español Félix Fernández-Shaw dio a esta prohibición el nombre de Doctrina Belt (*La Organización de los Estados Americanos (O.E.A.), Una nueva visión de América*. Madrid: Ed. de Cultura Hispánica, 2ª ed., 1963, p. 425). Guillermo prefirió llamarla Doctrina Grau en honor del presidente que le había otorgado, junto con plenos poderes, toda su confianza.

El 9 de abril de 1948 estallaron en la capital colombiana los hechos conocidos en la historia latinoamericana como “el Bogotazo”. Alrededor de la una de la tarde de ese día, el líder del Partido Liberal, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, fue asesinado de cuatro disparos a la salida de su oficina cuando caminaba por la calle hacia un almuerzo con amigos. La multitud rápidamente congregada agarró al asesino y lo mató a golpes allí mismo.

La reacción al asesinato del popular dirigente causó más de 300 muertes y gran destrucción de edificios. En medio de los incendios y tiroteos se hallaban cuatro jóvenes cubanos, estudiantes de la Universidad de La Habana. Fidel Castro era uno de ellos. Tras una semana en Bogotá, los cuatro, junto con dos estudiantes mexicanos y un camarógrafo venido de Cuba para filmar los eventos, volaron de regreso en un avión de carga que había traído unos ejemplares para una feria ganadera en la capital colombiana. Los detalles de estos acontecimientos y de la participación que cupo en ellos a Guillermo Belt los consigna, muy bien documentados, el profesor universitario Antonio Rafael de la Cova en *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

En Washington, el presidente Truman había invitado al presidente Grau a hacer uso de la palabra en la sesión conjunta del Congreso que el 19 de abril se celebraría para conmemorar el cincuentenario de una declaración de Estados Unidos abogando por la independencia de Cuba. Grau decidió no asistir y en su representación nombró al embajador Belt, quien debió viajar a la capital estadounidense antes de la clausura de la conferencia. Guillermo no pudo firmar la Carta de la OEA, si bien su nombre figura en las actas de la reunión. En cambio, pasó a los anales de los cuerpos legislativos de Estados Unidos como uno de los dos dignatarios extranjeros que hablaron en una sesión de este tipo. El otro fue el embajador de Francia Andre de Laboulaye, el 20 de mayo de 1934, en el centenario de la muerte del marqués de Lafayette.

XVI

Al igual que en Cuba, la vida familiar de los Belt en los Estados Unidos es un telón de fondo a la vida pública de Guillermo Belt Ramírez, bien acompañado en ambas por Elisa Martínez Viademonte de Belt. En Washington, los niños –así les seguían llamando cariñosamente– tendrían que adaptarse a una lengua nueva, a escuelas donde no tenían amigos como en el Colegio De La Salle, al clima tan distinto, y aún a ciertas normas de comportamiento heredadas del protocolo diplomático. Al mismo tiempo, los padres velarían porque el español no cediera ante el inglés, y asegurarían que los hijos tuvieran presente el eventual regreso a su país.

En su nueva casa los niños hablaban en español con sus padres. También, con Ana, Rosa María y Martín Iglesias, qué remedio. En la escuela, inglés a toda hora, inmersión total. Y se acabaron los uniformes escolares; para los varones, chaqueta de esa tela de lana llamada *tweed*, cuello y corbata; abrigo, bufanda y guantes porque el frío aprieta.

El hijo mayor, al cumplir los 13 años, a tomar clases de baile, contra su voluntad, desde luego. Había que dominar los misterios del vals y del *foxtrot* antes de ir a fiestas; la tarjeta de invitación se contestaba por escrito, nada de llamar por teléfono. A esa misma edad vistió de *smoking* para su primera cena formal. En el mundo diplomático los adolescentes imitaban a sus mayores.

Como siempre, además de las obligaciones caseras, Cuquita apoyaba la gestión de Guillermo en lo correspondiente a la esposa del embajador. Recordaba mucho tiempo después la asistencia de la señora del presidente Truman a un té ofrecido en la embajada, a pedido del comité de damas de un hogar de

ancianos, y el éxito de recaudación resultante. Otro recuerdo, copiado de sus memorias, muestra su talento diplomático.

La reina sin corona, en rango aparte de las tres señoras B, era Alice Roosevelt Longworth, hija del famoso Teddy, el de los Rough Riders de Cuba. Alice era inteligente, mordaz, súper snob. Su deleite mayor era hacer eso que los franceses llaman “epatar a los burgueses”.

Alice decidió “adoptarnos”. Le interesó vivamente saber que mi madre, siendo niña, vivía en Samá, a una cuadra de lo que entonces era la Legación Americana, cuando ella pasó allí los primeros días de su luna de miel y recordaba las serenatas de guitarra que cantaban los guajiros en honor de la hija del Presidente Teddy Roosevelt. Además, pude contarle quién compró en París el maravilloso collar de perlas que Alice nunca se quitó, y con el cual el Gobierno de Cuba la obsequió con motivo de su boda: era “Pepito” Barnet, que en aquella época formaba parte de la Legación de Cuba en Francia. (Más tarde él fue uno de los muchos presidentes provisionales en Cuba, y gran amigo de mis padres y nuestro.)

Los hijos de Cuquita y Guillermo crecían sin pausa, aprendían inglés poco a poco, y sin olvidar sus raíces se adentraban en un mundo extraño de la mano de sus padres.

XVII

Carlos Prío Socarrás, destacado líder estudiantil en la década de 1930 y primer ministro del gobierno de Grau, fue electo presidente por amplia mayoría en junio de 1948. En calidad de presidente electo viajó a los Estados Unidos en abril de 1949. El embajador Belt y señora ofrecieron en su honor una recepción con la asistencia del presidente Truman y muchas personalidades del mundo político y social de Washington.

En esa ocasión Prío tuvo la amabilidad de ofrecerle a Belt la jefatura de la misión diplomática de Cuba en Londres, que éste agradeció pero no aceptó porque quería regresar a La Habana y reanudar sus actividades profesionales. Guillermo Belt tenía muy claro un nuevo reto: recomenzar de cero porque había cerrado su bufete de abogado al asumir la embajada en 1944. El tiempo, apremiante, no admitía un desvío a la capital del Reino Unido.

En su edición del 7 de febrero de 1949, el semanario *Time* publicó un artículo sobre la próxima partida del embajador de Cuba, bajo el titular *Happy Days*. Luego de resumir los logros de su gestión –defensa de la cuota azucarera de Cuba en el mercado estadounidense, planteamiento en Rio y Bogotá de la tesis contra la agresión económica, campaña por la abolición del veto en Naciones Unidas y contra la partición de Palestina– la revista recordó un incidente. En una ocasión, el embajador de Cuba pidió cita con el secretario de Estado George Marshall. Se le informó que lo recibiría el subsecretario. Belt respondió que si no era recibido por Marshall al día siguiente, renunciaría, dando cuenta del motivo a la prensa. *Time* cerró la anécdota con tres palabras: *Marshall saw him*.

Incidentes como este no eran populares en el Departamento de Estado, pero ello no desvirtuaba el hecho de que Belt probablemente había sido más conocido e influyente que ningún otro embajador de Cuba destinado a Washington, escribió el redactor de *Time*. Por su parte, el embajador Belt, citado textualmente por *Time*, resumió su gestión así: Creo que he hecho mucho para mantener la amistad con los Estados Unidos sobre una base de dignidad e igualdad. (*I think I have done a great deal to maintain U.S. friendship on a basis of dignity and equality.*)

En su actuación, los hombres y mujeres que hacen de la diplomacia una carrera cultivan, por lo general, buenas relaciones de trabajo con el ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, su jefe en el servicio exterior. Un embajador político tiene hasta cierto punto mayor latitud, dado que su futuro no depende del ministro. Cuando un embajador, de carrera o político, goza de la confianza absoluta del presidente, sus decisiones y declaraciones, al reflejar fielmente el pensamiento del jefe de estado, constituyen la política exterior con respecto al país donde está acreditado. Guillermo Belt, acreditado ante el gobierno de los Estados Unidos, la Organización de las Naciones Unidas y la Organización de los Estados Americanos, hizo política exterior en los tres ámbitos.

Concluida esa amplísima tarea, el embajador de Cuba regresó a La Habana en los primeros meses de 1949 y sin pérdida de tiempo, como era costumbre en él, se dedicó de lleno al ejercicio del Derecho Civil.

XVIII

La reinscripción de un adolescente en su país al cabo de varios años en el extranjero puede ser complicada, especialmente en lo tocante a la escuela. Por ejemplo, el hijo mayor de Cuquita y Guillermo salió de Cuba en 1945 a mediados del penúltimo año de primaria, y al regresar en 1949 sus antiguos compañeros de curso estudiaban el tercer año de bachillerato. Antes del inicio del nuevo año escolar en septiembre tendría que aprobar el año de Ingreso a la segunda enseñanza, y los tres primeros de bachillerato, si quería emparejarse con sus amigos.

La reválida de sus estudios en los Estados Unidos la hizo ante profesores del Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza del Veda-do porque la enseñanza privada estaba bajo la supervisión del Ministerio de Educación. Esos profesores no tenían muy buena opinión del sistema educativo estadounidense, exigiendo exámenes en las asignaturas de Geografía e Historia Universal, además de los evidentemente necesarios en las de Historia y Geografía de Cuba, Cívica y Español. Con mucho esfuerzo y la ayuda de un tutor, el joven superó estos obstáculos, al igual que sus hermanos Sonny (apodo de José Agustín), Noel y Marilys.

Los cuatro habían salido de Cuba cuando su vida social se limitaba a piñatas y cumpleaños. Ahora, las invitaciones eran a reuniones informales con músicaailable, los llamados “guateques”. Sus amigas y amigos dominaban la rumba y otros bailes como el cha cha cha y el mambo, para ninguno de los cuales servían aquellas clases de baile en Washington. Con paciencia y mucha buena voluntad de los amigos lograron salir adelante en este aspecto, importante también.

Guillermo, por su parte, abrió su oficina en un edificio moderno en la calle Morro número 158, frente a un parque adyacente al Palacio Presidencial, donde retomó sus funciones notariales y se dio a la tarea de recuperar viejos clientes y hallar otros nuevos. Su nombre figuraba en la publicación *Who's Who* y en el directorio legal Martindale-Hubbell. En estos años Cuba era atractiva para inversores extranjeros, de manera que pronto comenzaron a llegar clientes estadounidenses y europeos, referidos por bufetes de Estados Unidos y por las muchas relaciones personales que había establecido durante su tiempo en Washington.

La vida familiar de los Belt recobraba su ritmo. Cuquita asumía una vez más el manejo de la casa, con la ayuda de Ana, quien había rechazado varias ofertas de trabajo en Washington para seguir cuidando a Juan, así como a sus otros dos “niños” (aunque ellos creyeran haber dejado atrás los cuidados de su manejadora). Guillermo, el soporte financiero, consolidaba su bufete de abogado.

En la década de 1950 la economía de Cuba estaba en fase de despegue. El 23% del presupuesto nacional de 1958 destinado a la educación era el porcentaje más alto en América Latina. Le seguía Costa Rica con el 20%, según la publicación “América en cifras”, de la OEA. Había tres universidades públicas, 114 instituciones de enseñanza superior pre-universitaria, y 900 escuelas privadas, incluyendo tres universidades, todas supervisadas por el Ministerio de Educación. Para una población de 6.630.921, el sistema hospitalario contaba con una cama por cada 190 habitantes, cuando la meta para países desarrollados era de 200, según Naciones Unidas. La misma fuente estadística situaba a Cuba en tercer lugar (después de Argentina y Uruguay) en el consumo de carne por persona, segunda en la región en consumo calórico per cápita, y primera en el número de médicos por persona, con 1 por cada 957 habitantes.

Sin embargo, las instituciones democráticas no habían alcanzado un grado de madurez comparable al desarrollo económico y social. El 10 de marzo de 1952, Fulgencio Batista, candidato a la presidencia en las elecciones de junio, decidió no esperar por la voluntad popular y dio un golpe de estado al frente de sus compañeros en la asonada de los sargentos de

1933. Sin disparar un tiro derrocó a Carlos Prío, quien se asiló en la embajada de México. Ese día el almanaque se retrasó 20 años, como aquella mañana dijera Guillermo Belt a sus hijos.

La reacción al cuartelazo no tardó en manifestarse. De nuevo estallaron bombas como en los años 30, y de nuevo la policía, excediéndose sin freno en la represión, comenzó a matar. El 26 de julio de 1953, un grupo de 82 hombres atacó el cuartel Moncada, del ejército, en Santiago de Cuba. El líder de la operación, Fidel Castro, fue arrestado días después, juzgado y condenado a 15 años de prisión. Antes de dos años fue indultado y viajó a México, desde donde habría de regresar en diciembre de 1956 para cambiar a peor el rumbo de la historia de Cuba.

XIX

La República de Cuba tenía 56 años de existencia cuando se derrumbó la presidencia ilegal de Batista el 31 de diciembre de 1958. El ex sargento, llegado a la presidencia en 1940 mediante elecciones relativamente limpias, había regresado de la Florida en 1952, ostensiblemente para aspirar de nuevo a la primera magistratura pero en realidad para dar un segundo golpe de estado. Cayó sin gloria esa madrugada de fin de año, cuando tras despedirse de un grupo de amigos cercanos en el campamento militar de Columbia tomó un avión allí mismo y dijo adiós a Cuba para siempre.

Guillermo Belt no había apoyado a Castro, en cuya reputación de activista estudiantil había oscuras lagunas debido a las acusaciones por asesinato e intento de asesinato de rivales en la Universidad de La Habana. Además, el ex embajador recordaba la igualmente oscura participación de Fidel Castro en el “Bogotazo”. Sin embargo, no temía ser objeto de represalias, ya que se hallaba alejado de la política y en todo caso no había respaldado en forma alguna a Batista.

Como tantos otros cubanos, Cuquita, Guillermo y sus hijos continuaron haciendo su vida normal. El 27 de enero Guillermo viajó a Miami para reunirse con un cliente importante que había comprado grandes extensiones de tierras en Isla de Pinos unos meses antes. Regresó a La Habana, y el 3 de febrero viajaba de nuevo para la firma en Miami de documentos relacionados con la transacción, combinando ese viaje con uno a Nueva York para ver a otros clientes. De todo ello dejó constancia en su agenda de 1959.

Una compañía reaseguradora alemana, cuyos asuntos legales en Cuba atendía el doctor Belt, lo había invitado a partici-

par en la reunión de su junta directiva a mediados de marzo en la sede principal en Múnich. Guillermo invitó a Cuquita para acompañarlo junto con Juan, el hijo menor adolescente, en un viaje a Europa durante el cual visitarían varias ciudades antes y después de su reunión de trabajo. El 8 de marzo se reunieron los tres en la ciudad estadounidense y dos días después volaron a París, primera escala en el trayecto a Múnich.

El 28 de abril se encontraban de regreso en Nueva York. Guillermo había dejado a su hijo mayor, que ejercía como abogado junto al padre, encargado del bufete en La Habana. Los fusilamientos de reales y supuestos enemigos del régimen, algunos televisados en directo, eran frecuentes. Los juicios previos, cuando se celebraban, eran macabros espectáculos de circo, sin asomo de garantías legales para el acusado. El imperio de la ley había cesado. No había nada que hacer para los abogados en Cuba. Su hijo le pidió a Guillermo Belt que aplazara el regreso a Cuba, al menos por el momento.

Cuquita regresó a La Habana con Juan a mediados de mayo. Mucho le quedaba por hacer para sus hijos en la casa de La Coronela y para su madre, en su casa de al lado. Su esposo se encontraba en Nueva York el 20 de mayo. Se cumplía un aniversario más de la independencia de Cuba en momentos de gran incertidumbre para el país que, sin él sospecharlo, Guillermo Belt no volvería a ver jamás.

XX

A diferencia de Humphrey Belt, el antepasado que en 1635 vino al Nuevo Mundo desde Inglaterra para emprender vida nueva en una tierra abierta a muchas oportunidades, Guillermo Belt no salió de Cuba en 1959 por motivos económicos. Tampoco se trataba de recorrer a la inversa el camino aventurero de su abuelo John Benjamin Belt, quien en 1840 viajó de Washington a La Habana portando excelentes recomendaciones que le abrieron muchas puertas, incluyendo la del matrimonio con una dama cubana, descendiente de antigua familia española.

Buenas razones tenía Guillermo para pensar que a Cuba le esperaban tiempos difíciles. Sabía que nada podría hacer dentro del país para influir en los acontecimientos. Los nuevos gobernantes habían tirado por la borda el imperio de la ley, junto con la alternancia del poder político que se venía dando desde 1940. Por el momento, en su patria no había sitio para él como abogado, ni como diplomático o figura política.

¿Cuánto podría durar esta situación? Nadie lo sabía. Le tocaba comenzar desde cero una vez más. Había reanudado exitosamente su actividad profesional en Cuba y ahora el Derecho no funcionaba más. Se estableció por el momento en Nueva York y, lleno de energía y optimismo como de costumbre, se dedicó a buscar trabajo.

En julio llegó Cuquita para reunirse con él. Una tarde, de regreso al apartamento luego de comprar comida, encontró a su marido sentado a la mesa frente a una máquina de escribir alquilada, tocando las teclas a tuestas, los ojos vendados con un pañuelo. “Pobre Gui, se ha vuelto loco, la tensión de comenzar la vida otra vez le ha quitado la razón”, pensó, y lo

recordó mucho después con una sonrisa que asoma en sus memorias. Nada de eso. Guillermo Belt aprendía mecanografía por sí solo.

Una de sus primeras cartas mecanografiadas la dirigió al dueño de una empresa constructora, a quien había conocido en una conferencia internacional sobre América Latina. En la ocasión habían conversado sobre el interés del conocido ingeniero —su compañía había participado en la construcción del puente Golden Gate, en San Francisco— de trabajar en México. El 5 de octubre Guillermo Belt llega a San Francisco; tres días después está en Ciudad de México. En su agenda anotó todas sus reuniones en la capital mexicana, sus gastos de hotel y comidas. Llevaba las cuentas claras para su rendición oportuna al nuevo cliente.

El 19 de octubre está de regreso en Nueva York, declarando como experto en legislación cubana ante un tribunal federal en un juicio civil. Tres días después lo vemos (gracias a su agenda) en una cena en la Universidad de Columbia para la presentación del premio Maria Moors Cabot. Asiste invitado por un buen amigo y colega en sus años de diplomacia, el embajador José Antonio Mora, del Uruguay, entonces Secretario General de la OEA. Allí tiene el gusto de conversar con otro amigo, también antiguo colega en Washington, Galo Plaza, ex presidente del Ecuador. Guillermo Belt está de vuelta en un mundo que pensó había quedado atrás.

También ha recobrado su ritmo de trabajo. Vuela a San Francisco el 2 de noviembre, a México el día siguiente, y días después se reúne en Nueva York con sus clientes de Múnich. El 22 de noviembre está de nuevo en la capital mexicana. Allí llegan a reunirse con sus padres, procedentes de Cuba, Juan y Marilys, ella con su marido y tres hijos.

El ritmo acelerado le pasa la cuenta a Guillermo Belt. A las 8 de la noche del 31 de diciembre, finalizando su primer año en el exilio, se le presenta una hernia. Con Cuquita a su lado enfrenta otro desafío, esta vez en Ciudad de México.

XXI

La intervención quirúrgica resultó tan exitosa que doce días después Guillermo se encuentra inspeccionando unos terrenos en las afueras de la ciudad, y el 16 de enero vuela a Guatemala por asuntos del cliente de San Francisco. En medio de estas actividades se mantiene en frecuente comunicación con su bufete en La Habana.

Las tres fuerzas motoras a lo largo de su vida –su familia, el trabajo y Cuba– siguen marchando a todo vapor en esta etapa que ya se perfila como exilio. Juan, el hijo menor, escolar adolescente, y Marilys, la única hija, con su propia familia, pasan a vivir con Cuquita y Guillermo en una casa arrendada en la capital mexicana. Cuquita y Guillermo están atentos a los planes de sus otros tres hijos, siempre pendientes de reunirse todos de nuevo en algún lugar, en tanto esperan el ansiado e imprevisible momento del regreso a Cuba.

En mayo de 1960 Guillermo viaja a Washington en compañía de Cuquita. Al llegar inicia sin pérdida de tiempo una serie de reuniones con personalidades del gobierno estadounidense y del cuerpo diplomático. En su agenda deja anotados nombres, lugares y fechas, pero no el tema de las reuniones. Pronto se sabrá por la prensa capitalina que el ex embajador de Cuba ha regresado a Washington para exponer el peligro que a su juicio corre su país bajo un régimen crecientemente dictatorial. El tema de esas entrevistas, obtenidas merced a las excelentes relaciones que había forjado en el curso de su gestión diplomática, resulta evidente.

En octubre Cuquita acompaña a su marido en una aventura nueva. Es necesario volver a México para completar unos trabajos. Guillermo considera llegado el momento de comprar

automóvil y, una vez hecho esto, decide estrenarlo en el viaje, como conductor único puesto que Cuquita nunca había aprendido a manejar. A su debido tiempo llegan a buen puerto, pero no sin alguna que otra borrasca en el largo trayecto.

Concluidas las actividades de trabajo en México, Guillermo y Cuquita acuerdan instalarse en Washington, decisión lógica pero difícil si uno cree que segundas partes nunca fueron buenas. Guillermo sabe que allí encontrará resistencia a sus esfuerzos por exponer la realidad cubana. Hay en Estados Unidos muchos simpatizantes de Fidel Castro, beneficiario de una figura romántica inventada por la prensa de Washington y, sobre todo, la de Nueva York.

Guillermo Belt habla sobre Cuba siempre que encuentra, o fabrica, una oportunidad. En un club de Washington denuncia al régimen como instrumento de la Unión Soviética. El diario *The Washington Post*, recogiendo sus declaraciones el 8 de diciembre de 1961, recuerda sus antecedentes diplomáticos. Al hacer una pregunta al presidente Kennedy sobre Cuba durante una conferencia de prensa en marzo de 1963, un periodista cita al ex embajador Guillermo Belt, "*the Ambassador from Cuba to the United States in the old days*", quien había afirmado que Castro no podría sobrevivir sin el petróleo soviético. El 8 de mayo del mismo año, *The Washington Post* lo cita de nuevo como participante en un panel sobre Cuba, junto con miembros de la Cámara de Representantes.

Veteranos funcionarios del Departamento de Estado, al leer estas y otras noticias sobre el embajador de Cuba "en los viejos tiempos", probablemente comentarían, no muy diplomáticamente, algo así: Ahí va Belt de nuevo, siempre con sus cosas, creándonos problemas. Y recordarían, con mal disimulada molestia, su oposición al veto y a la partición de Palestina, en Naciones Unidas, y su tesis sobre la agresión económica, consagrada en la Carta de la OEA, todo ello navegando, casi en solitario, contra fuertes vientos del norte.

XXII

A lo largo de su casi medio siglo de existencia, Cuquita había vivido en sólo dos casas propias: la de sus padres, y la suya cuando se casó con Guillermo. Al llegar a Washington su primera preocupación fue encontrar una casa donde toda su familia pudiera recuperar lo que de momento quedaba fuera de su alcance en Cuba. Muy cerca de la demarcación entre Maryland y el Distrito de Columbia, en Bethesda, la encontró. En cuanto a precio y ubicación, la casa en 5224 Elliott Road era una excelente compra, pero el factor decisivo, como ella recordaría en sus memorias, fue el número de cuartos, uno para Guillermo y ella, y los suficientes para acomodar a Juan, Marilys, más el marido y cuatro hijos de este matrimonio.

Pronto pasó a ser lugar de encuentro preferido de los amigos de los Belt, cubanos exiliados y viejas amistades de la capital estadounidense, especialmente los 25 de junio cuando Cuquita celebraba el día de san Guillermo. También venían, en visita de agradecimiento, cubanos hasta entonces no conocidos del matrimonio, cuya situación inmigratoria Guillermo Belt había ayudado a regularizar, gracias a sus buenas relaciones en Estados Unidos, actuando de abogado informalmente y a título gratuito. No faltaban combatientes contra la dictadura en Cuba, dedicados a la lucha armada o política, discretos los primeros, elocuentes los demás, llegados en busca del apoyo y consejo que nunca les fue negado.

Algún tiempo después fueron arribando a Washington, en distintas fechas, el hijo mayor y el tercero. Excepto José Agustín (Sonny), el último en salir de Cuba, quien viajó a Madrid y se estableció allí, los hijos de Cuquita y Guillermo vivieron

por el resto de la vida de sus padres muy cerca de esta “Villa Marisol” en el exilio, nuevo centro de reunión familiar. Allí comían casi todos los domingos, de manera informal porque ya no cabían en la mesa del comedor con sus mujeres e hijos. En las ocasiones festivas ayudaban a atender a los invitados, como les había enseñado su madre años atrás, algo muy útil ahora que no se contaba con el servicio doméstico de antes.

Faltaban unos toques, como los del pintor al cuadro antes de poner su firma. Ana había quedado en Cuba, defendiendo sin más armas que su presencia y valentía la casa en La Coronela, a la que había mudado a su admirada señora Elisita para cuidarla en sus últimos días. Cuando murió la madre de Cuquita, no teniendo a nadie más por quien velar, Ana viajó a Washington vía Madrid, y un día feliz dio el toque final al hogar de los Belt, que un cuarto de siglo atrás ella había sabido adoptar como propio.

Guillermo Belt, sin función oficial alguna, seguía trabajando todos los días a favor de su país. Cuquita, como siempre, manejaba su casa y era refugio y consuelo de hijos y nietos. Mucho había cambiado en la vida de ambos, pero la familia, el trabajo y Cuba, siempre Cuba, marcaban el rumbo para no perder el camino en los vericuetos del exilio.

Epílogo

¿Dónde está, oh muerte, tu aguijón?

¿Dónde, oh sepulcro, tu victoria?

I Corintios 15:55

El 17 de abril de 1961 fue un día fatídico para Cuba. Unos 1,400 exiliados cubanos, integrantes de la Brigada 2506, desembarcaron esa mañana en Playa Girón, en una zona aislada de la costa sur de la isla, conocida como Bahía de Cochinos. Mucho se ha escrito sobre esta operación y las consecuencias de la falta del apoyo prometido por Estados Unidos a los cubanos que allí pelearon y murieron. Injusto sería intentar siquiera un resumen de esta tragedia.

En la agenda de Guillermo Belt Ramírez correspondiente a 1961 consta su actividad intensa en las semanas anteriores y meses posteriores a Playa Girón. Si leyéramos los nombres de las figuras del exilio cubano con quienes se reunió, en Washington y Miami, o los de altos funcionarios del gobierno de John F. Kennedy, dos cosas quedarían muy claras: el ex embajador de Cuba en los Estados Unidos recurrió a todas sus amistades y relaciones para presentar sus argumentos por la liberación de su patria de la dictadura castrista, y sus gestiones no tuvieron éxito.

No obstante, nunca se dio por vencido. En conversaciones, conferencias y entrevistas de prensa continuó exponiendo los peligros que para los Estados Unidos y los países de América Latina representaba el régimen de La Habana. En más de una ocasión tuvo un ríspido intercambio de opiniones con funcionarios del gobierno de Kennedy. La reacción del Departamento de Estado no se hizo esperar. Una tercera persona entregó verbalmente un mensaje al hijo mayor del ex embajador Belt,

que era funcionario de la OEA: recuerde a su padre que el Secretario de Estado puede revocarle en cualquier momento su estatus inmigratorio. Guillermo Belt Ramírez continuó criticando, pública y privadamente, la falta de acción del gobierno estadounidense con respecto a Cuba, como lo comprueban las noticias de prensa referidas anteriormente.

En los primeros años de su vida Guillermo Belt Ramírez logró mucho. A los 21 años se había graduado con honores de la Universidad de La Habana, comenzando de inmediato a ejercer como abogado. Poco después de casarse con Elisa Martínez Viademonte participó en el derrocamiento de un presidente que había prolongado su mandato inconstitucionalmente. Antes de cumplir los 30 había sido nombrado alcalde de La Habana, el más joven en la larga historia de la capital; ya era padre de dos hijos, y había sembrado en el jardín de su casa una palma real que se convirtió en cinco palmas de un solo tronco, una por cada uno de los hijos que con Cuquita llegarían a tener.

No había cumplido 40 años cuando Cuquita le dio tres hijos más. A los 39, el Presidente Ramón Grau San Martín, que había derrotado al candidato gubernamental por una montaña de votos, lo designó embajador de Cuba ante el gobierno de Washington. Disfrutó de la confianza absoluta del presidente a lo largo de su gestión diplomática y sentó las bases de la política exterior de Cuba respecto de los Estados Unidos, las Naciones Unidas y la OEA.

Concluida su misión como embajador, volvió a Cuba y en diez años reconstituyó y amplió su bufete de abogado. Junto a Cuquita vieron crecer su familia y dieron la bienvenida a los primeros nietos. La vida de los Belt había recobrado su ritmo normal. Un buen día en 1959, Guillermo viajó de La Habana a Múnich por asuntos de un cliente. A punto de cumplir 54 años, no pudo imaginar que el suyo sería un viaje sin regreso.

Tampoco pensó que sería el comienzo de un exilio muy largo, en el cual necesariamente habría luces y sombras. Guillermo y Cuquita se asomaron de nuevo al mundo diplomático. En la agenda de 1964 los vemos despidiendo el año en la embajada de España, y la de 1967 comienza con la anotación de haber sido invitados en la misma ocasión a la embajada de Venezue-

la. Pero el 2 de abril de 1967, aniversario de matrimonio, Guillermo ingresa en el hospital de Providence para una cirugía no especificada, evidentemente exitosa porque diez días después está en Miami.

En junio del mismo año surgen nuevos problemas médicos, recogidos en breves citas:

- 14 de junio “Cuca (el apodo por el que siempre llamó a su mujer) ingresó en el hospital.”
- 15 de junio “Cuca fue operada.”
- 19 de junio “Cuca ingresó nuevamente en el hospital.”
- 20 de junio “Cuca fue operada.”
- 21 de junio “Me llevaron al hospital.”
- 28 de junio “Salimos del hospital.”

Por escueta, la anotación del 28 de junio no revela todo lo sucedido ese día. Al cabo de una semana en el Georgetown University Hospital, Guillermo decidió que volvería a su casa sin necesidad de autorización médica. Se levantó de la cama, se vistió y pidió un taxi por teléfono desde su cuarto. Cuando las enfermeras, asombradas, trataron de detenerlo en el pasillo les dijo sencillamente que se iba a casa, y acto seguido lo hizo. Su hijo mayor, que presenció esta escena sin poder impedirla, organizó la salida autorizada de su madre, convaleciente de sus operaciones quirúrgicas, y muy pronto el matrimonio estaba de vuelta en el número 5224 de la calle Elliott, en Bethesda.

Tiempo de llorar, y tiempo de reír

Al año siguiente, otra sombra. El jueves 28 de marzo de 1968 Guillermo Belt escribió: “Murió mi pobre hermano Jorge Alfredo. Tenía al morir 64 años, 10 meses y dos días de edad.” En esa página de su agenda guardó un recorte del *Diario Las Américas*, del 7 de abril, titulado así: “Víctima de un Ataque Cardíaco Murió Jorge Alfredo Belt en la Ciudad de La Habana”. El periódico daba el 28 de marzo como fecha del fallecimiento y nombraba a su viuda y demás deudos, incluyendo

a su hermano Alberto Belt y su esposa Julia Alonso de Belt, “ambos presos en Cuba”.

Mucho tiempo después, Cuquita recogería en sus memorias estos detalles. Jorge Alfredo había ido a visitar a unas parientes de avanzada edad en su casa en la capital. Esperaba en el portal a ser anunciado, caballeroso hasta el último instante, cuando la muerte lo encontró sentado en la mecedora. Su padre había muerto a los 64 años, y a esa edad moría el mayor de sus tres hijos.

El año 1971 comenzó con una buena noticia. Ana cablegrafió avisando que el 25 de enero llegaría a Madrid, escala obligada en su viaje a Washington, adonde llegaría justo a tiempo porque Guillermo y Cuquita pasaban por tiempos difíciles con algunos nietos. Tanto así que el 4 de marzo, al anotar que ese día había caído otra nevada, Guillermo agregó: “Primavera o invierno, el frío lo llevo en el corazón.”

Sumada a las fallas físicas, la tristeza por problemas familiares comienza a mellar la salud de Guillermo y Cuquita. Alberto Belt y su esposa están presos en Cuba, acusados de actividades contrarrevolucionarias. Ambos han sido condenados a largas penas, lo que hace suponer que morirán en la cárcel. Guillermo hace todo lo que puede para lograr su libertad; escribe una carta al papa, apela a todos sus amigos influyentes, o a cualquier persona que pudiera tener acceso al régimen cubano. Le envía un cable a Fidel Castro: “Alguna vez pude hacer algo por ti. Ahora, haz tú algo por mi hermano.” No recibe respuesta, ni dan fruto sus gestiones.

Tiempo de sembrar

El 14 de julio de 1971, día de su cumpleaños, Guillermo escribe que siempre quiso morir de repente, como su hermano Jorge Alfredo, pero creía que no vería colmados sus deseos. Dos años después, en la página correspondiente al 27 de octubre recuerda la muerte de su padre, 41 años atrás. Y en 1977, de nuevo el día de su natalicio, afirma: “Nunca pensé ni deseé llegar a los 72. La vejez es peor que la muerte. La

gran compensación que tiene es poder hacer algo por nuestros descendientes.”

Tiempo de lamentarse

El golpe más duro de todos estaba en acecho. El 14 de junio de 1983, José Agustín Cristián Belt y Martínez Viademonte, conocido y querido por todos como Sonny, murió en Madrid. Tenía tan solo 49 años. No hay mayor dolor para los padres que perder a un hijo. Este dolor acompañaría a Cuquita y Guillermo hasta su último día en el reino de este mundo.

Para Guillermo la muerte no llegaría de repente. El 2 de julio de 1989, faltando dos días para cumplir 84 años, libró su última batalla. Jamás perdió su amor a Dios, por su familia y por Cuba, y nunca se rindió. Tendría que esperar 20 años para reunirse nuevamente con su mujer. Cuquita murió en su casa, la de Elliott Road, como ella quiso, y murió en sueños, el rosario entre sus dedos, en las primeras horas del 2 de agosto de 2009, madre hasta el último día de sus cuatro hijos sobrevivientes y dejando recuerdos imborrables a 11 nietos, 20 bisnietos y un tataranieto.

Nada de lo escrito aquí logra hacer justicia a la memoria de ambos. Pero hay un tiempo para callar, y ha llegado el tiempo de hablar.

a tImE to EVERy purposE

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to
every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to
plant, and a time to pluck up that which is
planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to
break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to
mourn, and a time to dance;*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4
KING JAMES VERSION

Foreword

This is the story of a family which several times chose to move, not only from the Old World to the New but also from the sheltering environment where it had long lived to places sometimes foreign and always challenging.

It begins in England, for certain in the 14th century, but according to some “antiquaries” as early as 1066. It continues in the United States in the 1600s. About two hundred years later, in the adventurous spirit of the country and the times, a member of the family strikes out for a new land where the old and the new are soon to collide. He settles in Havana, marries, has children, and establishes himself there with success.

In the 1960s, a grandson of the founder of the Cuban branch, his wife, their children and grandchildren make the return trip to the United States. This time it will be a temporary move: in fairly short order they will go back to Cuba. Or so they believe, because, as the saying goes, hope springs eternal.

Chapter I

Bossall is situated on the west bank of the Derwent, about ten miles from York. Although it is now only a small hamlet, it was once an important centre for secular and religious leaders of the nation. The palace of King Edwin, the first Christian king, was at Bossall. There are many tales of battles and assassinations surrounding his court. When Edwin decided to move his court into York, he donated his Hall at Bossall to the Church and became a Christian. He erected a wooden shrine on the site of the present York Minster, and was baptized there at Easter AD 627. The first church at Bossall was erected soon after this, in the south-west of a field now known as Old Bossall, and dedicated to St Botolph. The third Bishop of York, Boza, took up residence in the Hall in AD 678, and it was probably from him that the village took its name. The present church was erected between 1180 and 1185 by Paulinus de Bossall and his wife Julianna, and much of the original fabric remains; particularly the superb crossing arches and piers.

From the *North Yorkshire Village Book*, written by members of North Yorkshire Federation of Women's Institutes and published by Countryside Books.

De casta le viene al galgo. La vocación de servicio público le corría por la sangre al caballero inglés. Su padre se había desempeñado como Town Clerk de la ciudad de York por veinte años. Este cargo, cuyos orígenes al-

gunos autores remontan a tiempos bíblicos, se había creado en Londres en 1272 para llevar los archivos de las deliberaciones del concejo municipal. Y él, fiel a la tradición familiar, había sido nombrado Recorder (Registrador) de York en 1625, cargo reservado en la Inglaterra medieval para que personas versadas en la ley sirvieran de enlace entre las autoridades locales y el rey. En reconocimiento de esos servicios, el rey, de visita en York en 1633, lo armó caballero.

En ocasiones la lealtad sale muy cara. Los partidarios de aquel rey tuvieron que pagar un precio alto al estallar una revuelta popular en el país. En York, una multitud marchó sobre la mansión del registrador, resuelta a tomarla por asalto y ahorcar al funcionario. El caballero y la casa sobrevivieron gracias a la esposa del registrador, cuya estratagema sirvió de inspiración a un poema que por muchos años circuló de mano en mano en la familia.

Sir William no pudo imaginar que tres siglos después, en 1925 por más señas, un miembro de su familia, con el mismo apellido y nombre de pila, pero éste en español, se graduaría de abogado en una isla muy distinta de la suya, y emprendería una carrera al servicio de su país luego de participar en actividades revolucionarias para restablecer la frágil democracia que alumbró su ingreso como república independiente en un mundo ya no tan nuevo.

*

“The family of Belt is one of the most ancient now existing in Yorkshire.” This statement, found in the “Account of the Belt Family, of Bossall, in the County of York”, published in 1828 in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, continues: “The oldest record in its possession, as to its settlement in that county, is dated in the reign of King Richard II, A.D. 1387.”

The History and Antiquities of the City of York, by Francis Drake, its first historian, in the Catalogue of the Mayors and Bailiffs, Lord Mayors and Sheriffs of the City of York, lists three Belts: Leonard, Sheriff in 1579 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth; his son Robert, Sheriff in 1614 under James I; Sir William, Knight, Recorder in 1625 under Charles I; and again

Robert, twice Lord Mayor, in 1628 and 1640 (knighted this year), also in the time of King Charles.

In a footnote to the family account of 1828, W.J. Belt wrote that his family "...descended in the direct male line from the Balthi (Alaric's family,) who gave their name to the Baltic..." He added: "Our ancestor was the *only* brother of Raymond IV, the last *Prince of Orange* of the race of *Athemars* line ..." The Gentlemen's Magazine gives additional information on this ancestor and on the origin of Bossall manor. Edwin, King of Northumbria (the North of England), was baptized in 627, together with his family and many of his nobles. The article states: *Edwin gave to the See of York his palace and lands which he had ceased to reside at, and it was afterwards known as 'Boza's Hall', or 'Bozhall,' from Boza the third Bishop of York, as it is named in Domesday book, where it is mentioned as then belonging to Hugh Fitz-Baldric, (a cadet of the Balthi des Baux family, who came over with other adventurous knights from all parts of France, Burgundy, and Provence with William of Normandy.)*

William of Normandy, known to history as William the Conqueror, defeated Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and on Christmas Day of that year was crowned at Westminster as William I. The first Norman king commissioned the Domesday Book, a detailed survey of the land holdings in his kingdom. This national treasure of Great Britain, the original of which survives to this day, can be consulted online, where the cadet (i.e., younger son) of the Balthi family is named as an owner of Bossall.

The Belt story is one of adventure. It is also a history of devotion to the land, to the country of birth, and about loyalty against all odds. Devotion and loyalty trump adventure anytime, anywhere, but all three have their place in this tale. Take, for example, "A Legende of Ye Dame Goodeth of Bossall". The wife of Sir William Belt, Recorder of York, is the heroine in this poem, set in Bossall Hall, here quoted in part:

When civil commotion was wasting the land
 And folks scarce knew what to believe,
 Men only held, what they possessed, by their hand;
 And what they could hide in their sleeve.

The author (W.J. Belt) goes on to tell us that a “road battered messenger” rushed to Bossall Hall from the city of York, nine miles away, with the alarming news:

He told how the townsmen had risen in ire
 And were coming forthwith in disorder;
 How they’d threatened his Hall should be food for the fire,
 And had sworn they would hang their Recorder.

Dame Goodeth urged her husband to ride at once for help, and in the meanwhile she “stayed to consider what means she should try to free the old house from the scrape.” The messenger had warned them that, “though broad be your moat, and though deep,” it could not hold off the thousands of angry townsmen expected the following day. So Goodeth took action:

First, she ordered that barrels of ale should be rolled
 To a meadow that bordered the Fosse;
 And to spread the provisions, both smoking and cold,
 Where the mob would endeavour to cross.
 Then they spread out the Ale, and the Oxen and Pork;
 And raised up the drawbridge again; --
 And soon the wild burghers came trooping from York;
 A lawless, disorderly train!
 Dame Goodeth, she spoke to the crowd as they came,
 And she said that “her lord was away:
 But that since they had come there, she thought ‘twere a shame
 If they would not rest for the day.”

Then, the lady of the manor told her uninvited guests that she hoped they would make themselves “quite at home”, and attack the roast beef and the beer.

They looked at the moat, and they saw it was deep!
And they looked at the “nutty-brown Ale!”
Till the viands soon lulled their resentment, to sleep;
And hunger, forced valour to quail!

Goodeth’s descendant recounts her legendary courage with British humor. The situation at the time in England, however, was far more serious than the poem would lead us to believe. Charles I reigned. He was the second son of James I of England (VI of Scotland) and Anne of Denmark. His elder brother, Prince Henry, had died when Charles was 12 years old, thus making him heir to the throne of the Three Kingdoms: England, Scotland, and Ireland.

When he succeeded his father as the second Stuart king in 1625, Charles did so with a strong belief that kings were appointed by God to rule by Divine Right. Winston Churchill, in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, describes the prevailing mood:

A great political and religious crisis was overhanging England. Already in King James’s time Parliament had begun to take the lead, not only in levying taxes but increasingly in the conduct of affairs, and especially in foreign policy. The furious winds of religious strife carried men’s thoughts afar. The English people felt their survival and their salvation were bound up for ever with the victory of the Reformed Faith, and they watched with straining, vigilant eyes every episode which marked its advance or misfortune. (p. 171)

War, and politics, can sometimes hinge on a personal slight. The Duke of Buckingham, a favorite courtier of James I who had benefited greatly from the king’s affection, accompanied Charles, then Prince of Wales, on a visit to Madrid in 1623. They hoped to arrange a marriage between the prince and the Infanta María, sister of King Philip IV of Spain. This match was very unpopular with English Protestants, and when the negotiations broke down Charles and Buckingham returned to England in humiliation.

Buckingham persisted in seeing to it that Charles was married off to a Catholic princess. True, this was royal policy, but nevertheless the duke had tempted fate once more. The story is best told by Churchill:

No sooner was the Spanish match broken off than Buckingham turned to France for a bride for Charles. When he and the Prince of Wales had passed through Paris on their way to Madrid, Charles had been struck by the charm of Marie de Medici's daughter, Henrietta Maria, sister of Louis XII and then in her fourteenth year. Buckingham found the negotiations agreeable to the French Court, and especially to Queen Marie. A marriage with a Protestant princess would have united Crown and Parliament. But this was never the intention of the governing circle. A daughter of France seemed to them the only alternative to the Infanta. How could England face Spain alone? If we could not lean on Spain, it seemed that we must have France. The old King wanted to see his son married. He said he lived only for him. He ratified the marriage treaty in December, 1624. Three months later the first King of Great Britain was dead. (p. 162)

Churchill gives us in a few words the far-reaching consequences of the Spanish misadventure:

King Charles and Buckingham were high-spirited men in the ardour of youth. The King was affronted by the manner in which he had been slighted in Madrid. He was for war with Spain. The war went badly. Buckingham led an expedition but it accomplished nothing. On his return Parliament resolved to unseat the glittering, profuse, incompetent Minister. Buckingham was impeached, and to save his friend the King hastily dissolved Parliament. (p. 172)

Fundamental secular issues also stood between the Crown and Parliament. Both resorted to "ancient rights in the mists of Anglo-Saxon monarchy" (Churchill) in support of positions which were increasingly irreconcilable. Charles was convinced that he ruled by Divine Right; Parliament was equally convinced that the past, including Magna Carta, provided an

almost written Constitution which the king was getting ready to ignore.

The first phase of the contest ended with Charles dismissing his third Parliament in 1629 and declaring his intention to rule alone. So began the period of Personal Rule, which went on for nearly eleven years until, in need of money to fight a Scottish rebellion against the forced adoption of the English Prayer Book, the king decided to summon Parliament. The Short Parliament, as it became known, was hostile to the monarchy. The result, as stated by Churchill, was that "... by an act of extreme imprudence it was dissolved after a few days. Its calling had served only to incite and engage the whole of England in the controversy."

After the Scottish army invaded England, encouraged by the Parliamentary and Puritan movements, Charles was forced to summon Parliament once again. This time he had to accept a different relationship with the people, writes Churchill, and:

Thus on November 3, 1640, was installed the second longest and most memorable Parliament that ever sat in England. It derived its force from a blending of political and religious ideas. It was upborne by the need of a growing society to base itself upon a wider foundation than Tudor paternal rule. (p. 178)

From here onward events took increasingly dangerous paths. The impeachment and trial of the Earl of Strafford, the king's principal minister and the one most hated by the opposition, resulted in his execution. This, in turn, gave rise to another rebellion, in Ireland, where hungry masses fought landowners and Protestants with a ferocity practiced on all sides. The Puritans thought that the same fate would be theirs under an absolute sovereign – or so they claimed.

The leaders in the House of Commons challenged royal authority. The member for Cambridge, Oliver Cromwell, began to gain prominence. On 4 January 1642, King Charles, accompanied by several hundred swordsmen, went to the House of Commons in order to arrest five of his main opponents. "Never before had a king set foot in the Chamber", writes Churchill. The five, having been warned, had already left. Infuriated

mobs gathered in the streets of London and shouted outside the palace. Charles and his Court escaped to Hampton Court. Then, by stages, he withdrew to Newmarket, to Nottingham, and to York. Churchill ends this sad chapter:

There were now two centres of government. Pym, the Puritans, and what was left of the Parliament ruled with dictatorial power in London in the King's name. The King, round whom there gathered many of the finest elements in Old England, became once again a prince with sovereign rights. About these two centres there slowly assembled the troops and resources for the waging of civil war. (p. 182)

*

Having set the stage in some detail thanks to Churchill let us return to Sir William Belt, his brave wife Goodeth, and Bossall, their manor house nine miles from the city of York, at the time almost as large as London. Sir William was appointed Recorder of York in 1625, the same year Charles I acceded to the throne. Recorders in medieval England were persons trained in the law and many acted as the top legal counsel in their city or town. Some, such as Sir James Hobart, Sir John FitzJames, and Thomas Cromwell gained national prominence. Having access to the king when representing his town's interests, the recorder played a key role in communications between the sovereign and local authorities.

Many of the angry townsmen in the Dame Goodeth poem would have been keenly aware of Sir William's loyalty to King Charles I. In the *History of Yorkshire*, by Thomas Allen (London, 1832), there is a reference to one of the king's visits to the city: *Charles, in a progress to Scotland, visited York, May 24th, 1633... The next day the king dined with the lord mayor at his house in the pavement, and knighted him (Sir William Allenson) and the recorder (Sir William Belt).*

Also, the Belt family had been prominent in local affairs for many years. William's father, Leonard, was Town Clerk of York from 1571 until 1590, and sheriff in 1580-1581, ac-

ording to the book *Walks through the City of York*, by Robert Davies (London, 1880). His brother Robert became Lord Mayor of the city for the first time in 1628, three years after William's appointment. No wonder, then, that in such troubled times townsmen who had "risen in ire" at York would set out to hang their recorder and set his house on fire.

A story about Robert Belt is also told in a poem and the setting is the same: Bossall Hall. The family seat plays a leading part in this tale, as shown by these proud, melancholy recollections. On his first visit to the old house in the summer of 1848 W. J. Belt wrote these *Lines*:

I stood by the Mansion my Ancestors reared,
 And I gazed on its time-stricken wall,
 And I thought how deserted the chambers appeared,
 For but strangers now people the Hall!
 The lands which my Ancestors held as their own,
 Now hear as a rumour their name;
 And strangers unheeding regard not its tone,
 Nor think of Devotion and Fame.
 Save still, that the walls of yon time hallowed fame
 Bear record to those who are earth;
 And monuments speak of a race without stain;
 And emblazon their loyalty and worth.
 And relics of greatness and power still survive,
 And legends still live, but in story;
 And history still lends her pages to give
 Meed due to devotion and glory.

The moat, the same one that together with the food and drink offered by Dame Goodeth deterred York's irate townsmen from storming those walls, appears once more in "A Legend of Bossall":

Sir Robert, so hight, was a worshipful knight
 And with loyalty, courage, and zeal,
 He fought for King Charles, when pitiful "carles"
 Were striving his honours to steal.
 His silver he sold, and the most of his gold

He sent him to further his cause,
 Then neglecting his pelf, he hastened himself
 To fight for "the king and the laws."
 But knowing 'twas true, that a calm would ensue,
 And averse to his family's fall;
 He buried the rest, where he thought it was best;
 By the side of his old, moated Hall.

The situation in 1642, when King Charles again came to York, was very different from 1633. Then, he had had plenty of time to dine with the Lord Mayor and the Recorder and to knight them both. Now, early in the First Civil War (1640-1646), he set up his court in the city on March 19. York became the base for gathering supporters and would continue to be the main Royalist stronghold after the king's departure in July.

Sir Robert Belt, knighted two years before, had been Sheriff of York in 1614 and elected alderman in 1623. In the Belt family account extracted from the *Gentlemen's Magazine* we learn that upon the taking of the city in 1644 by the anti-Royalist forces, the newly appointed Governor "... procured John Goldart, S.W.T.D. &c. &c. to be chosen Aldermen for their *eminent disaffection* to the King in the places of Sir Robert Belt, Sir Roger Jacques, &c. &c. displaced, and even disfranchised, for their *loyalty* to their Sovereign; which deserves a more lasting memorial than I am afraid my pen can give them." The compliment is by Francis Drake, the author of *The History and Antiquities of the City of York* (p. 171).

The writer of the family account in *Gentlemen's Magazine* tells the true story that inspired "A Legend of Bossall":

When Sir R. Belt had been (as above mentioned) "displaced and disfranchised for his loyalty," he retired to his estate at Bossall, on the river Darwent, nine miles from the city, where he had built himself a mansion house; and there, anticipating further spoil, he buried in the shelter of his garden such parts of his wealth and rich plate as he had not occasion to contribute for the King's service. His forebodings were soon accomplished, for the rebels quickly confiscated his estate, and bestowed it upon one of

their own Generals, who entered into possession of the mansion house erected by Sir Robert, and then but lately completed.

Sir Robert died in 1656, three miles from Bossall, in the village of Flaxton. He was buried in the parish church adjoining his former domain. His daughter later erected a monument to his memory. At its top appear his arms. The lengthy inscription was copied by the meticulous chronicler. It begins: “*Near this place lies interred the body of Sir Robert Belt, knt. twice Lord Mayor of the City of York, who died the 4th day of September, 1656, and of Dame Grace, his wife, who died Aug. 11, 1664, by whom he had issue 13 children.*”

Contradicting the Belt family motto, *Tempus edax rerum* (Time devours all things), this story ends on a happy note:

Possession of the Bossall estate was afterwards re-obtained by Sir Robert Belt's next descendant but one; upon the terms, however, of paying a monthly composition to the Usurping Powers. This of course ceased upon the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, and the estate and mansion house thus built by Sir Robert are now [1828] in possession of his lineal descendant. The house, although abridged of its ancient dimensions, is extensive, and has been so modernized as to be a commodious family residence. It is within a pleasure-ground forming an island of the space of two acres, and surrounded by a moat. Upon this their paternal seat have the successive heads of this, the elder branch of the Belt family, lived, died, and been interred.

But what about the silver and gold buried at Bossall? More than a century later this question was answered in “An Account of a Silver Medal Found near Bossall-House, in the County of York, the Seat of Robert Belt, Esq.” The article begins with a memorandum “... made by the present Mr. Belt, of Bossall, on the day after its discovery.” The memorandum reads as follows:

6th of June 1779. Some of the servants, in rowing round the moat, observed a few pieces of gold exposed to view upon its North-western bank, not far from the house. Upon due search,

29 pieces of gold were discovered, and about as many of silver, consisting of the current coin of King James the First, and of Queen Elizabeth, together with a large Silver Medal, of considerable thickness, and in excellent preservation. Several layers of empty money-pots were also discovered, some broken and others entire. This discovery served to confirm a long existing tradition, that money and rich plate had been hidden by our ancestor Sir Robert Belt, during the civil wars, in that part of the pleasure ground; and that, after his death, it had been purloined by his confidential servant, who, from having been a poor man when he came into Sir Robert's service, purchased, upon a sudden, after his death, some farms adjoining to our estate, which his descendants, the Pearsons, still enjoy."

Sir Robert Belt paid a steep price indeed for his loyalty to Charles I. He was removed as alderman, disfranchised (i.e. disenfranchised, deprived of his civil rights), and his house was confiscated. He lived to hear of King Charles' execution in 1649. Death spared him from one last piece of sad news: the betrayal by the man he had trusted to safeguard what little remained of his "wealth and rich plate".

Chapter II

George III was, or thought he was, an Englishman born and bred. At any rate he tried to be. "George, be King," his mother had said, according to tradition, and George did his best to obey. That he failed in the central problems of his reign may, in the long run of events, have been fortunate for the ultimate liberty of England. Out of the disasters that ensued rose the Parliamentary system of government as we now know it, but the disasters were nevertheless both formidable and far-reaching. By the time that George died America had separated herself from the United Kingdom, the first British Empire had collapsed, and the King himself had gone mad.

Winston Churchill, in *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1995, p. 263.

Tenía veinte años recién cumplidos, con todo un futuro incierto por delante, muy poco o ningún dinero pero el corazón lleno de esperanza y la cabeza de ilusiones. No había nacido cuando Inglaterra firmó la paz con España, ni cuando sus compatriotas, con retraso de un siglo, volvieron la vista a tierras descubiertas por los españoles y hasta bautizadas por ellos, como Ponce de León en 1513, cuando vio la Florida cerca de la desembocadura del río St. Johns y le dio su nombre para siempre. Al zarpar en el America el 23 de junio de 1635, entre tantos miles lanzados a la aventura de un nuevo mundo, no tenía ni idea que la Florida era española desde 1565, reclamada oficialmente por Pedro Menéndez de Avilés.

A cambio del precio del pasaje se comprometió a trabajar para otro inglés durante varios años, sin sueldo pero con techo y comida. Y aquí entraba la esperanza. Al cabo de su contrato en Virginia, además de alguna ropa, algo de dinero que le daría su amo y con suerte una escopeta, el joven tendría la oportunidad de hacerse con tierras trayendo a la colonia a otros como él, a razón de 50 acres por cabeza.

Siete años trabajó en esas condiciones, talando árboles, arando la tierra, sembrándola, recogiendo sus frutos, en fin, haciendo lo que hiciera falta. Llevaba dos años libre de su contrato cuando los pobladores originales de aquel lugar hicieron una matanza de más de 500 colonizadores. Sobrevivió la masacre, y antes de cumplir los cuarenta era padre de familia y dueño de unos 700 acres. Murió como nació, un tanto rodeado de misterio porque no se conocen las fechas ni los lugares exactos. Pero dejó una descendencia de 12 generaciones, y dos siglos después, uno de sus descendientes en línea paterna directa emprendería otro viaje, mucho menos azaroso que el suyo, pero viaje de descubrimiento al fin y al cabo, con parecida afición por la aventura.

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Many in Great Britain were “without advantage, hope, or livelihood” (Churchill) owing to the conditions prevailing at the beginning of the 17th century. After James I made peace with Spain in 1604, the idea of establishing colonies in the New World as a solution to these problems gained new adherents in both the government and what today is called the private sector. In 1606, a royal charter was granted creating the Virginia Trading Company and the race to greener pastures and a life of greater religious and political freedom was on. By 1640 there were five main English settlements in North America: Virginia, Plymouth, and the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.

Over 80,000 persons crossed the Atlantic in this emigration, the largest national movement, Churchill tells us, since the Germanic invasions of Britain: “Saxon and Viking had colonised England. Now, one thousand years later, their descendants were taking possession of America.”

Among those thousands a Belt turned up in Virginia. Humphrey is a rather mysterious character. If one looks him up on the Internet, the question “Who is Humphrey Belt?” will pop up in one site and thousands of words will lead to, at best, tentative answers. Regarding his departure from England and destination in America, however, there is documentary evidence, uncovered by a group of patient and devoted researchers, the “Belt Team”. Dione Coumbe, a professional genealogist from Kent, England, cited in “Humphrey Belt plus Five Generations, Notes for Humphrey Belt” (<http://humphreybelt.net>), found his name (spelled “Humfrey”) listed as one of the passengers to be transported from Gravesend to Jamestown, Virginia, on 23 June 1635. Humphrey was 20 years old and he sailed on the ship *America* “under the protection of William Clarke as one of 5 men he paid to transport as indentured servants.”

The early settlers had plenty of land but few people to work it. Passage from England to America was expensive and beyond the reach of skilled and unskilled laborers. Therefore, the Virginia Company developed indentured servitude as a system to attract workers. An indentured servant would sign a contract by which he obligated himself to work for his master in America for between five and seven years. In exchange, the master would pay his ship fare and provide him with food and lodging during the length of the contract. Upon its completion the servant would be paid “freedom dues”, a form of prearranged termination payment that might include land, a gun, and clothes, in addition to money.

Furthermore, in order to encourage planters to import more workers the colonial leaders in Virginia and Maryland established the “headright system”. For each laborer brought from England the planter was awarded 50 acres of land. Wealthy plantation owners were thus able to increase their land holdings in a very meaningful way, at the same time reaping the benefit of additional manpower.

There were different reasons for coming to America as an indentured servant. James Horn, Director of the John D. Rockefeller Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in his essay “Leaving England: The Social Background of Indentured Servants in the Seventeenth Century,” (at <http://>

www.virtualjamestown.org/essays/horn_essay.html), cites this one, among others: *After having his entire estate confiscated by Parliamentary forces during the English Civil War, Nicholas Fussell, a bookseller of London, was "reduced to such necessity that he was forced to send two of his Sons [as] Common Servants to Virginia."*

This would not have been the case with Humphrey Belt. While some believe that he might have been related to the Belts of Bossall, the matter is still in dispute. It seems that no record has been found of his birth anywhere in England, or in Scotland, which could prove or disprove this contention. So although there is a parallel between the London bookseller and Sir Robert Belt of Bossall Hall, both of whom suffered confiscation during the English Civil War, Humphrey most probably traveled in search of the greater opportunities available in America. In any event, even if he had been somehow related to the Bossall branch, Humphrey left England seven years before Sir Robert was disenfranchised and his estate confiscated.

One thing is certain: Humphrey was a young man in a hurry, determined to seize the moment. In 1641, James Warner, who had acquired William Clarke's indenture for transporting Humphrey to America, was directed by the court to provide "cloathes and necessaries" to Humphrey Belt upon completing the full term of his contract. In 1646 Humphrey buys 150 acres in Lower Norfolk County, Virginia; three years later he receives 50 acres for having transported his wife, Margery Cragges, to the colony; and in 1654 he is given 220 acres in Linhaven Parish of Lower Norfolk County for having transported five persons.

So, nineteen years after landing in Virginia, with seven of those years spent working for another man according to the contract that financed his travel to the New World, Humphrey owns almost 500 acres of land. He does not stop there. In June 1663, he is at St. Mary's, Maryland, claiming for himself and for his children John, Anne, and Sarah another 200 acres.

This does not mean that Humphrey had an easy time of it. True, when he arrived in 1635 he found Jamestown a safer and more prosperous settlement. It was quite different from the primitive fort, church, and huts built in 1607 by the 105 set-

tlers who came on the three Virginia Company ships, the *Godspeed*, the *Discovery*, and the *Sarah Constant*, half of whom were dead within the year. Captain John Smith, a military man of considerable experience and strong character, saved the fifty-three starving survivors, negotiated with the Indians, and in 1608 was elected president of the Jamestown council, “the earliest example of popular democracy at work in America,” in the words of Paul Johnson (*A History of the American People*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1998, p. 25.)

A relief convoy in 1609 met a similar fate. Of the 400 settlers that made it to Jamestown, only about sixty were still alive in 1610 after a terrible winter of famine and sickness. The Indians, seeing the weakness of the strangers who kept trying to make a go of it in their ancestral lands, became hostile. In 1622 they massacred approximately 350 colonists in the Jamestown area.

On the positive side, in early 1634 a group of twenty English Catholics and two hundred Protestants arrived in “Mariland”, the new colony so named by King Charles I in honor of his wife, Queen Henrietta Maria. A Catholic courtier, George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, obtained a patent from the king for the land on both sides of the Chesapeake Bay north of Virginia. Cecil, the second Baron Baltimore, inherited this grant from his father and, offering land in exchange for colonists who would pay their own passage or that of others, made it possible for these settlers to establish St. Mary’s, the “cittie” where almost thirty years later Humphrey Belt would request additional acreage after moving to Maryland from Virginia.

Something else is certain about Humphrey: Fortune smiled upon him. When the Indians carried out a second massacre in 1644, killing more than five hundred colonists throughout Maryland and Virginia, he and his family were saved along with others living in Lower Norfolk County. He died peacefully (we hope,) survived by his children, in Anne Arundel County, sometime after 1663, exact date unknown.

Humphrey and Margery’s only son, John, was born in 1645, ten years after his father came to America, in Linhaven Parish, Lower Norfolk County. In approximately 1677 John married Elizabeth Tydings. John began to work as a cooper, that is, a

barrel maker. This was enough to keep him busy since most goods were at the time transported in barrels. But at some point he decided to follow in his father's footsteps and began buying land. In 1675 he purchased 101 acres, part of a tract known as "Friend's Choice", on the ridge of the Patuxent River. Ten years later, official records show his purchase of 300 acres in Baltimore County at the head of the Gunpowder River. He re-surveyed the tract and named it "Belt's Prosperity". John, his wife and their children settled down on their own plantation, Velmead, in Anne Arundel County, Maryland.

John Belt wrote his will in May, 1697, and died sometime in 1698, in Anne Arundel. Elizabeth continued living at Velmead with her children. She, too, bought land. In 1700 Elizabeth purchased 100 acres, part of the tract named "Good Luck", from Col. Ninian Beall; then she bought another 200 acres, this time from the property known as "Addition to Good Luck", all of it in Prince George's County. One year later she conveyed a portion of "Friend's Choice" to one of her sons, Joseph, electing to deed this land to him during her lifetime rather than having him wait to own it upon her death, according to the terms of his father's will.

The Belts were now established in Maryland. John and Elizabeth's eldest son, named after his father, was born in Anne Arundel (1678) and died in Prince George's County in 1761. This grandson of an indentured servant became a merchant, and in 1710 inherited 200 acres at Velmead, the plantation founded by his father. Fourteen years later he sold Velmead; in 1725 he bought 50 acres in Prince George's, and the following year moved to Baltimore County. From his marriage to Lucy Talbott Lawrence (1702) were born four boys and five girls.

Another grandson of Humphrey, John's brother Joseph, was born, lived, and died in Prince George's County. He led a long life, by the standard of the times, and an active and fruitful one. Born in 1680, he married Esther Beall, daughter of Colonel Ninian Beall and Ruth Moore, in 1704.

Colonel Beall gave them as a wedding present a house located in the general vicinity of today's Chevy Chase Circle. After Esther's death sometime in 1727, Joseph married Margery Wight Sprigg. By his early forties Joseph Belt was one of

the county's well-known citizens and most influential leaders. He was named trustee of the first free public school in Maryland; was one of the founders of Rock Creek Parish Episcopal Church; served as Member of the House of Burgesses (1725-1737); Presiding Justice of Prince George's County Court (1726-1728); and Colonel commanding the Prince George's County Militia (1728) during the French and Indian War, serving in the militia until 1761.

His properties included "Friend's Choice" (the portion deeded to him by his mother), "Belt's Hunting Quarter", "Good Luck", "Addition to Good Luck", "Oronoko", "Seneca Hills", "Friendship", "Arthur's Seat", "Belt's Pasture", and the plantation "Chelsea". Furthermore, on "this tenth day of July Seventeen hundred and twenty five", Richard Tilghman, Keeper of the Greater Seal at Arms of Charles, Absolute Lord and proprietor of the provinces of Maryland and Avalon, Lord Baron of Baltimore, signed the grant from Lord Baltimore to Joseph Belt of 560 acres in "all that part or piece Land Called Cheivy Chace".

The entire text of this document is reproduced in the book *The Chevy Chase Club, a History, 1885-1957*, by John M. Lynham, published by The Chevy Chase Club in 1958 (pp. 125-127). The author, a former president of the club, writes that its first permanent home was in the Bradley Farm House, as it was known in 1894. This was particularly appropriate, he states, "since research disclosed not only that it was situated on the original 560-acre 'Cheivy Chace' tract, but also that it had been erected by Colonel Joseph Belt (1680-1761) who had acquired the tract by patent direct from Lord Baltimore in 1725." (Pp.15-16).

In the last few days of his life Colonel Belt suffered the greatest loss a parent can bear. His third son Joseph (the eldest was named Humphrey; the second, John) died at the age of 43. Joseph Jr. died in his home near Upper Marlborough on 6 June 1761. The colonel died twenty days later, at 81. The Maryland Gazette published this notice on July 2nd: "Died, Friday night last at his plantation in Prince George's County, aged 86 [*sic*] years, Col. Jos. Belt whose death is supposed to be occasioned by grief for the death of his son a few weeks before."

Joseph Belt left one half of Chevy Chase to his 6-year old grandson William. The will was written on 14 June 1761, eight days after the death of his son Joseph. No doubt the old colonel, who had plenty of land to leave his heirs, gave half of what might be called his flagship property to William because this child was the most in need of protection, having lost his father at such a tender age.

The memory of Colonel Joseph Belt is literally set in stone. A bronze plaque, set into a large stone at Chevy Chase Circle, very near the demarcation line between Maryland and the District of Columbia, in the elegant Washington neighborhood that still bears the name of the tract of land granted him by Lord Baltimore, reads:



The 18th century had just begun when John, the third in the direct Belt line to bear this name, was born in Baltimore County, in the year 1703. He, too, was a landowner. At the age of 24 he received 375 acres from his father, and in his will of 24 September 1788 he left 222 acres to his son, John Higginson

Belt, as well as “Aquila’s Reserve” to other sons, and 64 acres on a fork of Piney Run to his three daughters.

Back then, land ownership came with slaves, a regrettable fact of life, even in this new, promising country that would become the United States. Higginson Belt, a brother of John “the Elder”, acting on principles of conscience, freed 14 slaves on 23 February 1781. Higginson owned several properties in Montgomery County, Maryland. The total of slaves who worked in those farms or plantations is unknown, but the decision to free 14 of them is praiseworthy.

The tradition of military service was carried on by several family members. Richard Belt was a sergeant in the Continental Army, and fell at White Plains. Jeremiah Belt rendered patriotic service in Maryland during the Revolutionary War (DAR Patriot Index, Vol.1). Jeremiah’s son from his marriage to Mary Sprigg, named John Sprigg Belt, was a captain in the 4th Company, 1st Regiment of the Maryland Line, and became a member of the Society of the Cincinnati.¹ Another of Colonel Belt’s grandsons, James, saw naval service during the Revolutionary War as commander, successively, of the “Johnson”, the “Montgomery”, and the “Lively”. While returning from the West Indies aboard the “Lively” he was chased by an English fleet but succeeded in beaching his vessel and making his escape. The ship fell to the enemy, but was retaken by the militia before she could be floated.

In the fourth generation of the Belts, Joseph, a grandson of the first John, born of the marriage between Benjamin Belt and Elizabeth Middleton, played a role in the development of Georgetown, today a fashionable suburb of Washington. In

¹ The Society of the Cincinnati is the nation’s oldest patriotic organization, founded in 1783 by officers of the Continental Army and their French counterparts who served together in the American Revolution. Its mission is to promote knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence and to foster fellowship among its members. Now a nonprofit educational organization devoted to the principles and ideals of its founders, the modern Society maintains its headquarters, library, and museum at Anderson House in Washington, D.C.

1751, the Frederick County Court granted Joseph a license to open a tavern at the “mouth of Rock Creek”. It is thought that the tavern was located 150 feet below the canal on the West side of Wisconsin Avenue. Joseph must have been quite successful because in 1771 the following item appeared in the September 19 issue of *The Maryland Gazette*: *The Subscriber continues to keep a House of Entertainment in George-Town, at the King’s Arms, and as he is provided with Good Entertainment, Stabling, and Provender for Horses, would be obliged to all Gentlemen travelling and others for their custom, and they may depend on kind usage, by their most Humble Servant. Joseph Belt.*

Among many landowners, several soldiers, a Navy captain, a barrel maker and a tavern keeper, in the fifth generation we find a colorful Belt character who might have been a pirate. A grandson of Benjamin and Elizabeth who bore his mother’s maiden name, Middleton Belt sailed to England and there married Mary Ann Dyer, at St. John’s in Surrey. Back in America, he appears in the following 1761 entry of the Maryland archives:

MD State Papers, the Black Books: Middleton BELT, examined before Governor Horatio SHARPE & the Council, 16 Mar. 1761. Middleton BELT was mate and David CARCAUD captain of the brig Duke of Marlborough, hailed by a schooner under Capt. MULKERE. MULKERE was shown CARCAUD’s papers. Later CARCAUD and his whole crew were ordered aboard the schooner. BELT & a member of his crew, Laughlin DONNALON, seized two cutlasses and had MULKERE & crew tied up. The brig’s crew returned to their own ship and later allowed five men from the schooner to leave in a boat. Signed John Ross, Clerk of the Council, printed in Archives of MD 31:462-466.²

Middleton, who was born sometime between 1740 and 1745, died (again, we hope it was peacefully) in January 1807,

² Cited in www.humphreybelt.net, compiled by Jefferson D. Belt, Southland, New Zealand.

in Montgomery County, Maryland. His wife Mary Ann died in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., in December 1830. Not to spoil a good story, but out of fairness: it is by no means certain that Middleton Belt was a pirate. As pointed out by several members of the "Belt Team", in the encounter between the brig and the schooner perhaps both captains thought the other was a pirate.

In the mid-18th century a great-great-grandson of the first Humphrey came into the world. Another Middleton, he was born in 1754. On 27 August 1782 he married a cousin, Anne Belt, daughter of Joseph Belt and Anne Sprigg, in Prince George's County. On November 10 of the following year their son Joseph was born, and sometime in 1784 they had a second son, Benjamin Middleton, born in Washington, D.C. At the age of 18 the young man was apprenticed to a cabinet maker, William Worthington, Jr., for 3 years and 13 days, with the consent of his father.

In 1809 Benjamin Middleton married Sarah Burch, at Christ Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C. Three years later, when the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain broke out, Benjamin joined John Davidson's Company in the D.C. Militia. Sarah died in 1817 and shortly afterwards he married Elton Smith Drane, again in Christ Episcopal Church, on September 9 of that year.

In her application for a pension as the widow of an 1812 veteran, Elton Drane described Benjamin Middleton as about 5 feet 10 inches tall, with black hair and eyes and a dark complexion, a cabinet maker by occupation. According to the 1822 Washington Directory they lived in a house on the North side of Pennsylvania Avenue, between 9th and 10th Streets.

In 1830 this Washingtonian by birth left the city and went to live in Clear Springs, Washington County, Maryland, returning to the land of his ancestors because of ill health. He died there, seven years later. To this day we can see a sample of his cabinet work in the Supreme Court of the United States.

Benjamin Middleton and Elton had six children in ten years. Alfred Columbus was born on 1 August 1818; two years later, on September 1, they had twin girls, Amanda Malvina and Ann Rosina. On 29 January 1823, William was born; and on

29 March 1828, twins again: a girl named Elizabeth Elton, and John Benjamin. All the children were born in Washington or in the capital area, and all save one died there. John Benjamin Belt, a native Washingtonian like his father, would die at the age of 66 in another country, a nation in the making where a long and bloody fight for independence would begin soon after his peaceful arrival there.

The story of the Belts who came from England to “the colonies,” summarized in regard to the direct line that leads to Cuba, makes no pretense to genealogy. Therefore, although he is not part of this branch, Thomas Belt, whose name appears in a reference to Bossall Hall, will have a place among the interesting characters in this story. Thomas, born four years after John Benjamin, traveled to many countries, both in the Old World and the New. His words, in the Preface to the First Edition of *The Naturalist in Nicaragua*, portray a determination that, together with a spirit of adventure, is characteristic of those early members of the Belt family:

The following pages have been written in the intervals between arduous professional engagements. Begun on the Atlantic during my voyage home from Central America, the first half relieved the tedium of a long and slow recovery from the effects of an accident occurring on board ship. The middle of the manuscript found me traversing the high passes of the snow-clad Caucasus, where I made acquaintance with the Abkassians, in whose language Mr. Hyde Clark finds analogies with those of my old friends the Brazilian Indians. I now write this brief preface and the last chapter of my book (with Bradshaw's Continental Guide as my only book of reference), on my way across the Continent to the Urals, and beyond, to the country of the nomad Kirghizes and the far Altai mountains on the borders of Thibet; and when readers receive my work I shall probably have turned my face homewards again, and for weeks be speeding across the frozen Siberian steppes, wrapped in furs, listening to the sleigh bells, and wondering how my book has sped.

Thomas Belt's book sped very well indeed. Charles Darwin, in a letter to Sir J.D. Hooker, wrote: “Belt I have read, and I am

delighted that you like it so much; it appears to me the best of all natural history journals which have ever been published.” (In *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, quoted in the Introduction to *The Naturalist in Nicaragua*, p. vii.) To this one may add that Thomas Belt was a naturalist in his spare time; he was a mining engineer by profession. In 1852, when gold had just been discovered in Australia, he sailed for Victoria and there, in this rough “school of mines,” acquired the practical experience that would later serve him well as manager of mining companies in Nova Scotia, New Wales, and Nicaragua, with a side trip to Brazil. From his arrival at San Juan del Norte in 1868 and during five years in Nicaragua working for the Chontales Mining Company, he rode a mule and crossed rivers and lakes in a canoe, all the while noting specimens of the flora and fauna, and especially of the tropical insects that piqued his particular interest. Some of those specimens found their way to the Natural History Museum in London, and his book is consulted by entomologists to this day.

On one of several trips to the United States Thomas Belt died in Colorado, on 21 September 1878, at the early age of 45. John Benjamin’s son Jorge Alfredo, the first Belt to be born in Cuba, was at the time a few days short of his tenth birthday.

Chapter III

Guillermo's family had come to the United States from York, England, in the 1600s. The arrival in Cuba of his grandfather John Benjamin seems like a novel and, in fact, he appears in one: "The Chess Players", by Frances Parkinson Keyes, published in New York in 1960. The author of this historical novel recounts the conversation that the chess champion Paul Morphy, scion of a prominent New Orleans family, had in Paris with John Slidell, who represented the Confederacy of the Southern States of the US in the Court of Napoleon III, in which he discussed his recent trip to Havana. When Morphy mentioned that he had met the Captain General there, Slidell asked him if he had also met John Benjamin Belt, to which Morphy replied: "Tutor to the Captain General's children? I did, indeed. He seems to be a very general favorite." Morphy then went on: "It is an open secret that he was charged by Jefferson Davis to swing the sympathies of Cuban officials to the Confederate cause, if he could, and that he's been very successful at it. Southern ships don't seem to be having any trouble at all about finding space in Havana Harbor for refueling or making repairs. And the Captain General is getting medical supplies, which are very badly needed, through to our army."¹

*This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea ...
King Richard the Second, Act II, Scene I.*

¹ Frances Parkinson Keyes, *The Chess Players: A Novel of New Orleans and Paris*. Farrar, Straus and Cuhady, New York, 1960, p.381. This paragraph is from "Notes and Scribbles", the privately published memoirs of Elisa Martínez Viademonte de Belt.

Recién cumplidos los 37 años, y unos pocos después de haber llegado a La Habana procedente de su Washington natal, era ya conocido y respetado en los círculos políticos y sociales de la “siempre fiel” isla que por esos tiempos comenzaba a dar señales de descontento con la potencia colonial. Excelentes referencias personales y una carta de presentación de un obispo a otro (en latín, desde luego) le abrieron muchas puertas, entre ellas las del Palacio de los Capitanes Generales.

La tarde en mayo de 1865 era fresca y, aparte del clima, tan buena como cualquier otra para visitar a un amigo banquero, ajedrecista de talla, tanto así que fue en su casa donde el campeón Paul Morphy, venido de Nueva Orleáns, retó en varias partidas a los mejores jugadores del país, de todo lo cual había dado cuenta el Diario de la Marina en octubre de 1862. Pero el joven compatriota de Morphy no venía a conversar de ajedrez, sino de fondos urgentemente requeridos para pagar a los 125 marineros del acorazado Stonewall, surto en el puerto habanero, última escala de su accidentado viaje desde Copenhague, pasando por Dover, Ile d’Houat y La Coruña, en vano intento de alcanzar las costas sureñas de los Estados Unidos, frustrando la última esperanza de la Confederación, ya para entonces derrotada.

Obtuvo los fondos para una causa perdida, pero lo apremiante era la cuestión humanitaria. Los tripulantes del ironclad no perdieron la guerra, ni siquiera llegaron a pelear en ella; eran compatriotas desvalidos y había que hacer algo por ellos. Lo hizo, y nunca lo contó. Un siglo después, en una novela histórica, el relato de su exitosa entrevista con el banquero ajedrecista salió a la luz, casualmente cuando los descendientes del joven visitante de aquella tarde de mayo vivían, aunque temporalmente, en la ciudad natal del ilustre antepasado.

*

The Republic of Cuba was little more than three years old when Guillermo Belt Ramírez was born. On 20 May 1902 the Cuban flag was hoisted over Morro Castle in full view of cheering crowds, and the flag of the United States, which had flown there since 1898 at the close of the War of Independence, was

ceremoniously taken down. On 14 July 1905, this grandson of John Benjamin Belt, a U.S. citizen who had settled in Havana and married a Cuban lady, came into the world in the capital of a country ravaged by three wars and now free at long last to be master of its own fate.

On that May 20th, Tomás Estrada Palma, President of the Republic at Arms during the war, was sworn in as President of Cuba. Guillermo's father, Jorge Alfredo Belt, a respected lawyer and former judge, was appointed Secretary to the Presidency in Estrada Palma's first cabinet (a position created in June 1902, similar to that of chief of staff today, and which Jorge Alfredo was the first to hold). His relationship with Estrada Palma was more than official. They were good friends, as shown in the letter of 30 September 1906 which Estrada Palma wrote to Belt on the latter's departure from public office in order to return to the practice of law:

“Los dos podemos decir que estamos fundidos en una sola pieza, porque en el pensar i en el sentir recta i honradamente nos hallamos por completo identificados.” [We can both of us say that we are cast from a single mold, because we are as one in the truth and honesty of our thoughts and feelings.]

Guillermo Belt was born at home, as was the custom, in his parents' house at Paseo 4, in El Vedado, a residential district of Havana. Many years later he recalled in typewritten, informal notes that Dr. Manuel Varona Suárez, a renowned obstetrician, arrived at the house a few minutes after the baby came into the world, prompting the proud mother to say later on: “My son has never needed help, even to be born.” Guillermo commented modestly that this was the benevolent opinion of an exemplary mother, and, humorously, that from that day forward he was always early for every appointment.

Oral family history, when learned from a reliable source and kept alive for future generations, provides the color and insight that no formal account can offer. Guillermo's bride-to-be, Elisa Martínez Viademonte, heard family stories from her future father-in-law, who frequently invited her to accompany him on “paseos”—automobile trips around the city, during

which they would talk so he could get to know her better. Here, in her own words, set down in writing many years later, is some of that history.

Guillermo's parents were Jorge Alfredo Belt and María Ramírez Kavanagh. She was the daughter of Gabriel Ramírez and Asunción Kavanagh, and a first cousin of the famous Cuban composer Ignacio Cervantes y Kavanagh. My father-in-law's father was John Benjamin Belt, a Southern gentleman who went to Cuba in the 1850s. He carried a letter of introduction, in Latin, from the Archbishop of Baltimore to his counterpart in Havana, which for many years we kept in our house until leaving for exile. In the letter the American archbishop asked his Spanish colleague (Cuba was still a Spanish colony) to help this young man, who spoke four languages.

The Archbishop of Havana took John Benjamin to the palace of the Captain General of Cuba, Serrano, who was known as the "handsome general". Serrano asked Belt to be tutor to his children and to live in the palace. This is how John Benjamin got to meet his future wife, Carmen Muñoz Baena y Romay, daughter of the Marquis of Santa Olalla, Juan Muñoz Baena y Fernández de Castro, whose father Juan had been Minister of Royal Properties and a member of the audit court of the King of Spain in Venezuela, and who later moved to Cuba.

Carmen Muñoz Baena was the daughter of Tomasa Romay, who had an illustrious father: Dr. Tomás Romay, a famous physician who introduced in Cuba the vaccine against smallpox. In order to convince the unbelieving of the efficacy of the vaccine, Dr. Romay took his own children to the hospital and there, to the amazement of his colleagues, vaccinated them by making a scratch on their arms and placing on it the secretion from the sore of a patient afflicted with this terrible sickness.²

John Benjamin went to Cuba at a time when travel between the U.S. and the island was not uncommon. Otto Olivera, in his book *Viajeros en Cuba, 1800-1850* (Miami, FL: Ediciones

² "Notes and Scribbles" p. 77.

Universal, 1998), gives numerous examples of persons who for a variety of reasons visited the nearby Spanish colony. It is known that John Benjamin studied at St. Mary's College, Baltimore, together with some Cuban young men sent abroad by their parents. They might well have awakened his curiosity. In any case, he carried an excellent introduction, as pointed out by Mrs. Belt in her memoirs, which together with his language skills opened many doors for him in Havana.

John Benjamin's son, Jorge Alfredo Belt, was born in Havana on 4 October 1868. Six days later, in the early morning of October 10, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, 49, born in Bayamo, the second oldest city in Cuba, a lawyer, sugar planter and outspoken opponent of Spanish colonial rule, ordered the bell rung at his small plantation, La Demajagua, near the town of Yara, in the island's easternmost province of Oriente. Over one hundred fellow patriots and thirty slaves answered the call. So began the war for independence that would rage for ten years and devastate Cuba, until ending in a peace pact with Spain, only to resume in 1895 in the finally successful three-year war that marked the end of the Spanish empire in the New World.

The Grito de Yara, as Céspedes' shout for freedom is known in the history of Cuba, marks the beginning of the Ten Years' War, by far the longest of the country's three wars of independence. Courage and determination ruled the day. Céspedes had to improvise a flag. Tradition tells us that he chose three pieces of cloth: red, from his lawyer's toga; blue, from the robe on a statue of the Virgin Mary; and white, from his wife's wedding dress. Candelaria Acosta, "Cambula", the 17-year old daughter of La Demajagua's foreman, sewed them together.

The army of 147 men failed to take Yara the following day, due mainly to the lack of weapons and of military experience. But by the end of the month Céspedes had 12,000 men, and after a 3-day battle took Bayamo, and later Holguín, both more important objectives. The war quickly spread beyond Oriente.³

³ From the blog Cuba: Birth of a Nation, by Guillermo A. Belt.

Jorge Alfredo was the eldest of John Benjamin's children, so when his father died he became head of the family although he was only 17. His mother lived with him from then on until her death. Of his siblings, Carmita had died at 15 from cholera; the others lived under his roof until each was married. Mary married a man whose last name was Vals and had five children: Gustavo, Armando, Ana María, Mercedes, and Rita. Guillermo married Matilde Reyna, and Benjamin married Amparo Bullit and had two daughters, Amparo and Consuelo. Another sister, Chea, never married and lived with Jorge Alfredo all her life.

As a child Jorge Alfredo had been enrolled in the school of Professor Zambrano, one of the best private elementary schools at the time. After high school at the public Instituto de La Habana he studied law and graduated from the University of Havana in 1887. The family responsibility that had fallen on his shoulders left no time for leisure. On 30 August 1889 he was already a judge on the civil court of El Cerro, a district of the capital. Afterwards he held the same position in the Western district of the city, and resigned from it upon his appointment in 1902 as Secretary to the Presidency. After his return to the private practice of law in 1906 he appears in a 1910 registry of the main enterprises in Cuba as president of the Hershey Cuban Railway, which a few years later would connect Havana and Matanzas by electric train. He went on to represent the company that built the sewer system in Havana, and was later appointed registrar of corporations for the city, a post he held until his death.

Jorge Alfredo had three sons. The eldest, born on 26 May 1903, was named after his father and resembled him the most physically. Of medium height, as was the Cuban norm at the time, he was graced with handsome features. In later years it was said of him in family circles, very respectfully, that he had been romantically (and quite properly) involved with several of the renowned beauties of his youth, including the writer Anais Nin.⁴ Alberto, born on 24 June 1904, had very blond

⁴ Angela Anaïs Juana Antolina Rosa Edelmira Nin y Culmell, (February 21, 1903 – January 14, 1977), daughter of a Spanish father and French

hair and bright blue eyes, the only one of the brothers who could easily be mistaken for an American, like his grandfather. He had a happy, affectionate personality and was loved by all who knew him.

Guillermo, too, was of medium height, with dark hair combed straight back, brown eyes, and a trim, athletic physique. His sons, recalling their teenage years, remember that he liked to exercise in the morning before setting out for work in downtown Havana. He had a personal trainer, Troadio Hernández, who came to the house often and led his calisthenics routine. There were breathing exercises, with arm movements that dilated the chest; throwing a weighted ball back and forth; and working on the legs with scissor jumps. He used light weights, sufficient to make the workout a bit more strenuous but not with any body-building in mind. The weights were mostly rectangular iron slabs, with handles on either end.

His other regular exercise was swimming. He liked to swim in the sea, not in pools. He would go to the Havana Yacht Club and swim out from the long pier on the right to the sand bar that kept the beach safe from big fish, especially sharks. Both types of exercise gave him a body with very little fat. In the last years of his life he weighed almost the same as in his twenties.

The three Belt boys grew up in the sheltering environment of a strong family life. They were very close and made their First Communion together on 30 January 1913 in the chapel of their school, the Colegio De La Salle. Four years later their happiness was shattered. In 1917, two days before Christmas, their mother died after a long illness. Her suffering must have been great, weighing more than the sands of the sea, says the quotation from Job on the back of the prayer card which her youngest son kept in his Missal all his life. She was baptized María de los Dolores in honor of Our Lady of Sorrows, and the front of the card carries a drawing of the weeping Mother of Christ on the way back from Calvary.

mother, married her first husband, Hugh Parker Guiler, in Havana on 3 March 1923.

Two other quotations reveal the deep love María Ramírez de Belt had for her children and her faith in God. From Saint Augustine, “Her sons were until her last breath the focus of her tender care.” And an anonymous one, probably written by her husband and here translated from the Spanish, reads:

You were a virtuous woman, most loving mother and steadfast friend. Your stoic courage in facing your suffering can only be compared to your exemplary death, in which you showed your faith in God, your acceptance of His will and the goodness and essence of your soul, because you had words of gratitude for all who lovingly tried to sweeten till the last moment the final days of your life.

Guillermo was by his mother’s bedside when she died. Many years later he would share this and other, happier memories with his wife and children. María Ramírez de Belt had a sweet, discreet personality. She was completely devoted to her husband and three sons. Guillermo remembered her brown hair shining gold and copper in the sun, and thought that her great-granddaughters Mimi, Cuqui, and Titi resembled her in this regard. Nora María, another great-granddaughter, would as a teenager occasionally help her grandfather organize his papers, and Guillermo often told her that her hair reminded him of his mother.

When Guillermo’s children were very young they did not understand their father’s sadness as Christmas drew near. Several times during the year, but especially at Christmas, he would say to himself in a low voice, “Pobre Mamá” (my poor mother,) and sometimes the children overheard him. Their mother told them the reason, very gently, banishing the fear that the tragedy their father suffered at the age of twelve could befall them also.

Fifty years after his mother’s death Guillermo Belt, as if talking to himself, wrote about her in a notebook in his clear, even hand:

El 23 de diciembre de 1917 murió mi madre, mujer ejemplar: valiente, madre modelo, esposa ejemplar. Murió sin temor algu-

no; tal vez la muerte fue su liberación de tanto sufrimiento debido a su cruel enfermedad. No exhaló una sola queja, y aceptó sus horribles sufrimientos con resignación cristiana. [On 23 December 1917 my mother died, an exemplary woman: brave, a model mother and wife. She died without any fear; perhaps death liberated her from the great suffering caused by her cruel illness. She did not utter a single complaint, and accepted her horrible suffering with Christian resignation.]

The Belt brothers were fortunate that when their father remarried some years later, Consuelo García Echarte turned out to be the opposite of the stepmother stereotype. She was an intelligent, compassionate lady who understood their pain and did everything she could to ease it. Their life as young adults resumed in a family setting, with their father at its center. His influence on them was strong. Alfredo (as he was called) and Guillermo would become lawyers after graduating from the University of Havana. Alberto became a customs broker. All three did well in their careers, married, and cherished the memory of their parents and of growing up together at Paseo 4, the family home in El Vedado, an elegant residential suburb of the capital.

Many years later Guillermo would tell his teenage sons a story that would raise their admiration for their Tío Alberto to new heights. The young men's father had rewarded them with a trip to Europe – the grand tour – before they settled down to work and family. One night in Paris, on a visit to a Montmartre cabaret, they were watching a show that featured a ventriloquist. The man was halfway through his act when Alberto jumped onto the stage, grabbed the dummy and ran out the door, followed by a good number of laughing spectators who thought this was part of the performance. The nightclub owner managed to catch up to Alberto and persuaded him to return the dummy to its owner. And then, rather than scolding the young stranger, he invited him to return any time he wished, drinks on the house, and repeat his feat, which had been such a huge success with his patrons.

Chapter IV

My vital Havana, the boisterous Havana of the republic, committed to its ideals and to the pleasure of its spaces ... Nights always refreshed by the wind, open-air cafés in El Prado with all-women orchestras, leisurely walks through the streets, concerts in the parks, and the shoulder of the Malecón in a strong north wind, battered by the waves.

From *My Faraway, Lost World*, the Introduction to *Havana: History and Architecture of a Romantic City*. María Luisa Lobo Montalvo. New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2000.

In the 16th century Havana was the most important military outpost of the great Spanish empire “on which the sun never set”. Its magnificent harbor was the meeting place of the Spanish galleons carrying treasure from the newly discovered lands before setting out on the return voyage to Spain. This laid the foundation for the growth and prosperity of Havana. The original Villa de San Cristóbal de La Habana was founded by the conquistador Diego Velázquez in 1515, on the South coast, near present-day Batabanó. The 50 original colonists who lived in this place decided in 1518 to move to the healthier North coast, where they founded a second villa at the mouth of the Almendares River. One year later they moved again, this time to its present location, where they built rustic wooden dwellings along the seashore. The town was destroyed twice by pirates, in 1538 and 1555, and afterwards was rebuilt and

fortified. In 1556 it became in fact the capital of the island. By the end of the 16th century Havana had achieved city rank. Its coat of arms proudly bore the inscription Llave del Nuevo Mundo y Antemural de las Indias (Key to the New World and Gateway to the Indies). It had then a population numbering 4,000.

En el vientre de su madre ya era rey, así que cuando entró llorando en el reino de este mundo bastó con proclamar su majestad heredada, sin que nadie atribuyese al llanto del recién nacido un presagio de lo que sería el triste final de su vida.

Gracias al Capitán General, el pariente en cuya casa se alojaron, los dos jóvenes y su padre conocieron al rey en una cacería de perdices, a poco de llegar de la isla natal. Muchos años después, uno de los jóvenes anotó en sus recuerdos de juventud que el triunfo del soberano como el mejor tirador de la partida de caza se había festejado con chorizo y papas y, desde luego, con champán.

En 1950 el autor de ese recuerdo conoció en La Habana a un diplomático español, Agustín de Foxá. Cuando le contó su encuentro con el rey, el diplomático, que era poeta, recitó el romance de su autoría que comienza así:

*Por las calles de Madrid
no llevan al rey de España,
ni cuatro duques, de luto,
van curvados con su caja:
que ha muerto en el extranjero,
allá, en la Roma del Papa.*

Y, hacia el final del poema:

*En el cuarto de un hotel
está muerto el Rey de España,
con el manto de la Virgen
y la cruz de Calatrava.*

*No están sus alabarderos
de blanco, con su alabarda,
entre los cirios llameantes,
ni están sus Grandes de España.*

*Con tierra en que no ha reinado
le cubren sin hacer salvas;
soldados que no son suyos
le están presentando armas.*

*

Guillermo graduated from law school in 1925 with top honors. The tribunal that examined him was made up of three distinguished Havana University professors: José Antolín del Cuetto, a former president of the Supreme Court, University rector and dean of the law school; Francisco Carrera Jústiz, author of the law governing the municipalities of Cuba; and Pedro Cué, who taught procedural law and was later elected Senator.

Guillermo was sworn in as an attorney on 14 July 1926, his 21st birthday, the minimum age required by law. He joined his father's law firm and went on to specialize in civil and corporation law. The following year he was appointed a Notary Public for the City of Havana. The *Código Notarial*, i.e., the law that in 1929 regulated this office, defined the notary public as a public officer appointed by the Minister of Justice. To hold the office one had to be a Cuban citizen of good moral character with a law degree. These positions were much sought after, particularly in the city of Havana where the business activity of the country was concentrated. Most contracts between individuals were formalized before a Notary Public, who drew up the instrument, drafting its provisions according to law and witnessing the parties' signature. The role of the notary in Cuba was in consequence far superior to the one it has in the United States.

Guillermo's first office was on Empedrado Street, in the old quarter of the city known as *La Habana Vieja*. There were many small businesses in the area and he soon had a good number of clients. As a matter of fact, he wrote in his notes

that on 27 September 1927, his very first day as a notary, he drew up and signed three public documents for a total of \$100, “and I considered myself a rich man.” Talking about that time with his offspring he would recall that as a young, single man he enjoyed having lots of money in his pockets at the end of the week. Many of his clients paid him in cash because their businesses operated on this basis, credit not being widespread in the 1920s. This arrangement, which may seem quaint to us nowadays, was familiar to him. Guillermo was fond of recalling that his father, often named by a friend or client as executor of his last will and testament, would invite the beneficiaries to his house and, seated around the dining room table, distribute piles of gold coins to each one according to the wishes of the deceased.

Havana, the city Guillermo knew as a child, perhaps on visits with his father and brothers from their house in El Vedado, had many customs and habits inherited from colonial times. The great Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier first became aware of this in 1912, when he was seven years old: the age, he wrote, at which one begins to see things with an incipiently analytical mind. Four decades later, Guillermo Belt would share his own first impressions with his children: hearing the *organilleros* (organ grinders) who played Spanish music while walking through the streets; how one walked on the *acera de la sombra*, the sidewalk that by design fell in the shade during the peak hours of the unforgiving tropical sun.

Although the children’s father usually projected a somewhat severe image, no doubt meant to instill a sense of purpose and responsibility that would serve them well in later years, he also liked to tell amusing anecdotes, revealing glimpses of his life as a young man. He never appeared in them, as if he had not been there at all. In the funny stories about their boyhood and youth his brother Alberto took center stage, as in this one.

Alfredo, Alberto, and Guillermo were young men when the opera season at the Teatro Nacional was in its heyday. Carpentier writes that the top Italian singers came to Havana in the 1920s; he names, among others, Caruso, Tito Ruffo, Lucrecia Bori, and Martinelli. Guillermo’s story was about the latter. In 1913 Giovanni Martinelli was invited to join the Metropolitan

Opera of New York and it was probably from there that he came to sing in Havana a few years later. A farewell dinner was given in his honor at a restaurant in Old Havana. Champagne flowed. Alberto had his share, and perhaps more. Martinelli's fine head of hair had caught Alberto's eye. Towards the end of the dinner Alberto got up, champagne bottle in hand, and proceeded to give the tenor an unsolicited Veuve Clicquot shampoo. Martinelli thought this was so much fun that when a group of Cubans went to see him off at dockside the next day, the tenor, leaning on the rail, shouted at the top of his marvelous voice, "*Dónde está el rubio?*" (Where is *el rubio*? -- the "blond one," as Alberto was nicknamed because of his golden blond hair.)

Our favorite uncle was Tío Alberto. He was very blond and had blue eyes, and did not look much like his two brothers. We visited him and Tía Beba (Julia Alonso) quite often in their lovely house in the Country Club neighborhood, not far from us. Tía Beba had lost their only son shortly after birth and could not have any more children. Tío Alberto and Tía Beba were godparents to a large number of persons, sons and daughters of their many friends, and they all called them "uncle" and "aunt". But they were truly ours, and we were very proud of it.

They had a huge Doberman, Cid, who obeyed them without hesitation, and only them. More than once I went to their house with Mimi, who was a little over one year old. Tío Alberto would call Cid, have him stand quietly, and put Mimi on top of the dog for her to ride, as if Cid were a pony. You could tell that Cid did not enjoy this role because the minute Mimi got off he would disappear and hide until we had left.

Guillermo also told his children another story about the heyday of opera in Cuba. Caruso was singing the role of Radames in Aida at the Teatro Nacional when during a matinee performance a noise bomb, called a *petardo*, exploded in the theater. Caruso, terrified, ran into the street in full, flowing costume. A policeman, who knew nothing about opera, stopped him demanding to know why this stranger was dressed as if for a Havana carnival, when it was not carnival season. Caruso

did not speak Spanish; his attempt to identify himself in Italian failed. He ended up at the police station, and was eventually rescued by the Italian consul.

The Belt children would always remember these stories. Several years later, the one about Caruso would earn a place in Cuban literature: it appears in Alejo Carpentier's recollections, *Sobre La Habana (1912-1930)*, published in *El amor a la ciudad* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1996).

Yet another story was about a trip to Spain when Guillermo was 17. With his father and stepmother and brother Alberto he sailed from Havana on the steamship Lafayette, of the French line, and ten days later they arrived at La Coruña, where they were met by Admiral Emiliano Enríquez Loño, Captain General of El Ferrol, and a relative of his father. This was a very important position – there were five captains general in the country – and through him the Belt family met King Alfonso XIII at a pigeon shoot, which the sovereign, an excellent shot, won handily. Many years later Guillermo remembered the food served on that occasion: potatoes, *chorizo* (the Spanish sausage) and champagne.

Guillermo's law practice continued to flourish, now at Amargura 102, corner of San Ignacio. He was in his twenties, good-looking and successful, with the future in wait. And then something happened on New Year's Eve, 1930.

Chapter V

During the Christmas holiday in 1930-1931 I was invited to a New Year's Eve party at the farm of the Párraga sisters. Although they were all much older than me, they were related to my friend Chea and I suppose for this reason they asked me. I went with Cusa Carrillo, whose mother, Micaela Mendoza, drove us. We hardly knew anyone there, as the guests were quite a bit older than we were. The Párraga sisters had a great idea: they placed folded slips of paper in a hat, and each girl had to pick one in order to find out who would be her partner for the evening.

When I read mine, I could not understand it. It said: "Hold your BELT tight!" I read it aloud, puzzled. "Oh", someone said. "That means your partner will be Guillermo Belt." And so it was. I saw the New Year in with him and we talked all night. On the return trip home, Micaela told me: "You are very lucky! You drew one of the most popular young men. He is a great catch." After all this time I still remember my reply: "Yes, he is charming. But he can't dance! That is why I will never go to a party with him again."

Nació en la casona colonial de sus abuelos maternos, él profesor universitario y médico muy querido por la atención generosa que brindaba a sus pacientes, especialmente los pobres; ella, fundadora y primera presidente de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paúl, en Marianao, donde

vivían. La bautizaron en el aposento de su abuela y madrina, que sufría sus últimos días de vida. “A su muerte poco después todo Mariano se vistió de luto, y al paso de la carroza fúnebre tirada por caballos la gente se arrodillaba en los portales.”

Fue hija única, llevaba el nombre de la abuela y de su madre, y su padre la quiso entrañablemente. Una vez le dijo: “Yo he logrado casi todo lo que me he propuesto en la vida. Mi único fracaso has sido tú: traté lo imposible de malcriarte y jamás lo logré.”

Hizo la Primera Comuni3n el día de san José, el santo de su padre, en la iglesia de El Salvador, pequeña y sencilla, junto con doce niñas pobres, “todas con sus trajes tan bonitos como el mío”, donados por sus padres, quienes las invitaron a desayunar después de la misa en la casona de Samá 10.

Al año siguiente estaba en París, celebrando su octavo cumpleaños en el Hotel Majestic con una gran torta blanca adornada de flores rosadas, y luego en la juguetería famosa a la cual llevaría a su hijo menor, muchos años después, por su cuarto cumpleaños. La celebración culminó en L’Opéra Comique, donde vio los Cuentos de Hoffman por primera vez. Dos veces más disfrutaría de la misma ópera: durante su luna de miel, en Nueva York, en la Metropolitan Opera, y nuevamente en París, un cuarto de siglo después, invitada con su marido e hijos al palco del Presidente Auriol, gentileza del mandatario francés que ella vio como un reconocimiento a la actuación de su marido, el embajador cubano, en la reunión de Naciones Unidas.

Más de medio siglo duró su matrimonio y sólo la muerte los separó. Ella recogió sus banderas, primero la de jefe de familia y luego la de su amor por la patria perdida, manteniéndolas en alto como él hubiese esperado de quien lo había acompañado siempre. En el ocaso de una vida que como la de tanta gente buena tuvo tristezas que matizaron, sin empañarlos, los recuerdos de tiempos felices, su aspiración fue no estorbar. Por eso se quedó dormida por última vez, sin hacer ruido, sin alarmar a nadie. Se cree que murió soñando, quizás con la abuela tan querida por todos; seguramente con sus padres, posiblemente con aquella torta de cumpleaños en París, o con los Cuentos de Hoffman; sin duda con su marido y sus hijos, con Cuba, su cielo y sus palmas.

*

Guillermo Belt was not given to wasting time when he wanted to achieve something. He liked this young girl and after talking to her all night – it was very much in character that he would rather talk than dance – he determined to win her heart. He was so successful that the following summer, on his birthday, July 14, Guillermo and Cuquita became engaged. They celebrated their engagement with friends on July 23rd, her birthday, and were married on 2 April 1932 in the beautiful Iglesia del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, in La Habana Vieja.

Cuquita was as proud of her parents as Guillermo was of his. Her father, too, was a prominent attorney, but José Agustín Martínez, who customarily used the shortened version of his patronymic, was better known for his work in the area of criminal law. His father, Ramón Martínez Viademonte, born in Asturias, was descended from a German officer who had served in the personal bodyguard of Emperor Carlos V of Germany and I of Spain. Viademonte, Cuquita says in her memoirs, is a literal translation of his German surname.

Don Ramón retained his Spanish citizenship when he moved to Cuba, so when José Agustín was born in Havana he automatically acquired Spanish nationality under the principle of *jus sanguinis*, which grants this right to offspring of Spaniards regardless of the place of birth. At the same time, José Agustín became a Cuban national according to *jus soli*, the legal principle governing in Cuba, which grants nationality to all born in the country regardless of the nationality of the parents.

Cuquita liked to tell an amusing story about her father's dual nationality. Once, when serving as a cabinet minister, he realized that he needed his *cédula* (voter ID card) to vote in upcoming elections. He asked an assistant to go to the electoral registry. The man came back rather embarrassed, saying: "Minister, I am so sorry, you will not be able to vote. You are registered as a Spanish citizen." The minister, well versed in the law, invoked *jus soli* and prevailed.

José Agustín Martínez lost his mother when he was still a child. At a very young age he entered the Colegio de Belén, the venerable Jesuit school founded in Havana in 1854. Cuquita

writes that her father saw the school as his home. His father was not wealthy, so José Agustín was usually short on cash. Being an excellent student, he remedied this situation by tutoring other kids and helping with their homework. Those who could pay paid him in cash for his help; from those who could not he accepted postage stamps, and so began a collection which he enlarged as a hobby over the years into adulthood and old age. After graduating in 1900 from high school he kept in touch with Belén for the rest of his life.

He went on to the University of Havana, where his love for criminal law was awakened. Many years later, when his first grandson was studying law and interested in the same field, Papa Buddy (so nicknamed by this grandson, as a child, because the admired grandfather used to greet him with a cheery "Hello, buddy!") passed on some good advice. A famous university professor had told his student José Agustín to learn Italian first if he was serious about studying criminal law because most of the great treatises had been authored by Italians. So he went ahead, learned the language, graduated with a doctorate in 1908, and in due course became the best criminal lawyer in Cuba.

His intelligence and determination to succeed in his chosen profession served him well. In the 1950s, while serving as technical advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Sociedad Colombista Panamericana, one of the many organizations to which he belonged, published his curriculum vitae in booklet form. It shows two more degrees: a doctorate in Public Law (1931) and a degree as a professional journalist (1952). He was a member of 43 cultural and professional associations, in Cuba, Latin America, the United States, and Europe. His public and private sector positions, 31 in total, range from municipal judge (1911) and director of the daily "El Derecho" (1929-1930) to Minister of Education, Minister without Portfolio, and Minister of Foreign Affairs (all in 1942), as well as chairman of the committee created in 1954 to review the criminal code of Cuba. Between 1926 and 1956 he participated in 27 international conferences and congresses, most often representing Cuba in meetings dealing with criminal law matters.

José Agustín's crowning achievement as a jurist came in 1935 when he wrote three (I, II and IV) of the four books of the Cuban criminal code, which he named Código de Defensa Social. It replaced the 1870 Spanish penal code that had been in effect in Cuba since colonial days.

Cuquita remembered her mother, Elisa Silverio de Armas, as "a pretty woman, spoiled and gay, with exquisite taste in clothes and for the decoration of her house (she was the first client in Cuba of the House of Jansen in Paris). My mother really loved all things beautiful: the garden, flowers, music. She was one of the founders of the committee that launched the National Philharmonic Orchestra." Cuquita wrote lovingly of her parents' meeting for the first time:

My mother told me how they met. Both were visiting the Mesa family in Marianao, by coincidence on the same day, when Elisa, who was in the garden watching some children at play, suddenly felt a kiss on her cheek. "Startled, she turned around quickly, and found that standing there was her darling Joe, as she was to call him always, the man who would be her greatest passion. That kiss was unheard of, daring, impossible to believe. She stayed there, trembling, without saying a word. So began the love that would rule her life until death.

Cuquita was also very proud of her maternal grandfather, Dr. Nicasio Silverio de Armas, the only grandfather she knew personally. He was a respected physician, as well as professor of chemistry and physics at the University of Havana, a chair he held for more than twenty years until his death at the age of 64. "He was generous with poor people whom he would heal without charge, giving them medicines for free", she recalls in her memoirs. And adds: "If his patient was a child he would give him a toy, more often than not from the large collection that I, as an only daughter, had."

There is a love story in Dr. Silverio's life, and no one tells it better than his granddaughter:

My maternal grandfather married Elisa Saínz de Rozas y Calderín. He told me how they had met. He had gone to Mar-

ianao from Havana to visit a family who lived on Samá Street, across the way from the house where my grandmother was born (and later where my mother and I were born also). The gentleman he had come to visit was not at home, so he decided to call on my great-grandmother, Sabina Calderín, who invited him to a cup of coffee while he waited for his friend to arrive.

He told me that while at Sabina's house he heard the charming voice of a young woman who, on entering by a side door that led from the central patio of the house, exclaimed: "I am so hungry!" It was his future wife, Elisa, who was coming back from Mass after receiving Holy Communion, as was her daily custom. It was thus that he fell in love with her voice, even before he saw her. They met and after their engagement were married in the old Marianao Parish. They had eleven children; my mother Elisa was the eldest and, as far as I know, her father's favorite.

Cuquita's maternal grandmother was a unique and extraordinary person whose obligations to her eleven children did not keep her from helping, consoling, and visiting the poor. Elisa was the founder and first president, in Marianao, of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, the charitable association which Belén Martínez Campos, Cuquita's paternal grandmother, headed in Havana. She usually wore ribbons in her favorite light violet color (and was therefore called Lila by her husband), loved to play the piano and, suffering from the cancer that killed her at 49, "when my grandfather was about to come home from the University she would take an extra dose of medication for her pain, put on her prettiest dress, and play the piano so that he would find her happy and contented, as she had always been."

Elisa was Cuquita's godmother at baptism; by then she was so sick that she could not leave the house, so the child was baptized in the grandmother's bedroom. "After she died, all of Marianao went into mourning. When the horse-driven hearse carrying her body came into view, people would kneel down on the porches along the street."

Nicasio and Elisa lived in tumultuous times, as shown by this incident that took place during the war that broke out on 10 October 1868. It, too, is a story of young lovers, but it is

more than that: the tale touches on patriotism and sacrifice, and highlights the respect earned by Dr. Silverio, which was accorded him even by the enemies of the Cubans fighting for their country's independence.

A young medical colleague of Dr. Silverio, Federico Incháustegui, had met and fallen in love with the physician's sister Andrea, called Andreíta in the family. Federico and Andreíta married when she was only fifteen. After a two-week honeymoon Federico joined the Ejército Libertador, the armed forces of the Cuban patriots. Andreíta continued living in the old colonial house at Samá 10, in Marianao, with Elisa and Nicasio. And then,

He came one night to visit her secretly. Early the following morning several Spanish soldiers knocked on the door. They had come to search the house, acting on a tip that someone was hiding there. Because my grandfather was a highly respected figure as the "famous" town doctor, they gave him a few minutes for his wife and sister to get dressed before searching the bedrooms. Those extra minutes saved the life of Federico Incháustegui. When the soldiers entered Andreíta's room they found her alone. There was no one under the bed, or behind the draperies, or in the huge old armoire. The Spanish soldiers made their excuses to my grandfather and withdrew. When calm was restored, they all thanked God. Federico had hidden behind a rolled up rug that was stored on top of the very armoire the soldiers had searched. The following evening he said goodbye to his wife and rejoined the Ejército Libertador in the field.

Federico is, even today, a revered part of Cuban history. Born in Havana on 3 May 1838, as attested by his baptismal certificate in the Iglesia del Espíritu Santo, he was a few months short of thirty years old when the Ten Years' War broke out. During the conflict he attained the rank of colonel and was appointed Jefe de Sanidad Militar (chief of the military health service). The war ended in 1878 with the peace treaty known as the Pacto de Zanjón. When war broke out again in February, 1895, Colonel Incháustegui, despite his poor health and age, took up arms once more. According to contemporary accounts,

he insisted on taking part in combat; fellow officers would try to keep him out of the fighting.

On 7 September 1895 he died in the action at Dos Bocas, Manzanillo, in Oriente province. Dr. Horacio Ferrer, a medical doctor and major in the Ejército Libertador, in a tribute to the army medical services (*Homenaje a la Sanidad Militar del Ejército Libertador*, Havana, 1927), wrote that Federico asked to be buried without ceremony and requested that a Cuban company advance on the Spanish lines and fire at the enemy the three volleys that would have been fired in salute over his grave. He was posthumously awarded the rank of brigadier general for his service during the two wars.

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Bossall Hall figures prominently in the accounts of the legendary Belts of York. The Silverio de Armas casa solariega¹ at Samá 10 in Marianao claimed a history of its own: it was the site of a memorable episode related to the country's wars. Much later, two smaller dwellings would also play an important part in the life of the two families.

In 1920, upon returning from an extended trip to Europe with her parents, during which Cuquita celebrated her eighth birthday in Paris, the three of them moved from Samá 10, in Marianao, to the nearby suburb of La Coronela into a house designed by her mother. Mrs. Martínez's ideas for Villa Mirasol were advanced for her time. The reception areas were separated from each other by wide doors that would slide into the wall. Next to the formal living room she created a space very much in keeping with the climate: "A sort of greenhouse, with many windows, lattice on the walls, wicker furniture and Japanese birdcages of red lacquer hanging in the four corners, holding canaries that sang gaily." In the dining room a large window looked out on the garden to the rear (the house was surrounded by gardens). The view was unobstructed by

¹ The house in which lived the first person to bring honor, fame, or distinction to a family.

curtains; to soften the bright sunshine, jasmine vines wound themselves on the window grill.

The main library was to the left of the entrance hall. It had a chimney, lead glass windows, and comfortable leather furniture. This style of decoration was British rather than Cuban, and it was easy to forget that you were in a tropical climate when sitting in Papa Buddy's library. I went there many times. I remember reading the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the books by Jules Verne, among others.

My grandfather had catalogued all his books. My mother says that he had about 40,000 books, but my father thought this number was exaggerated. Whatever the total, it came to many thousands. When I could not find a book I would telephone Papa Buddy at his office, who was usually patient enough to take my calls. I would ask him where the book was and he would tell me on what shelf I would find it.

I have two other vivid memories of this library. The main room opened to a smaller one towards the left side of the house, and also to a third room, which had a door on the hallway leading from the dining room to the kitchen. From this room one walked into the fourth one, where Papa Buddy had a desk. He would sit there and do both hardback and cloth binding on his books. He used the most beautiful endpapers I have ever seen. He had learned bookbinding, I don't know where, so he could do this himself on books whose binding was not to his liking.

The other recollection is of the days before Christmas, when Papa Buddy would lock himself in the library, accompanied by Francisco, the butler. We could hear the sounds of hammering, but were not allowed to go in until the day before Christmas. Our grandfather spent many hours setting up the Nacimiento (Nativity scene), a marvelous construction of wood covered by papier-maché (what we usually call construction paper), complete with mirrors laid flat to simulate lakes; it had mountains, trees, and other landscape features.

The figures of the Child Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, the Reyes Magos (the Three Kings), shepherds, angels, and animals in the manger were large and beautiful. Our grandfather was following the tradition of Belén, his old school, where every year a

magnificent Nativity scene was set up, so spectacular that it even had the anachronism of a toy electric train running through it.

After Cuquita's engagement to Guillermo, her father had a house built for them on the grounds of Villa Mirasol as a wedding present. These two young people would now form their own family and live in Cuba, the country chosen by their elders, a nation where the winds of independence blew fresh, if not as steady as they hoped.

The house, which Cuquita called Villa Marisol (originally spelled Mar-y-Sol), was Spanish Colonial in style, with a Cuban tile roof and antique tile floors. It sat on two and one-half acres of land adjacent to her parents' house, which occupied four acres. The two properties were entirely surrounded by a stone wall and a paved path ran through the gardens from one to the other. The driveway, flanked by rows of *arecas*, the ornamental palms then found in many Cuban homes, led from a tall iron gate that was locked at night to the garage. The first floor had an entrance hall, living room, library, dining room, powder room, pantry, kitchen, laundry room, three rooms and two and one-half bathrooms for the servants. Tiled porches with mahogany ceilings ran the length of two sides of the house. On the second floor there were five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a dressing room, and two porches. The third floor was a storage attic. The library held about 400 books, including four volumes of *Las Siete Partidas*, which were over four hundred years old, and a four-volume edition of *Las Leyes de Indias*, more than three hundred years old, all in prime condition.

It may sound like it, but these houses in La Coronela were not mansions. In May, 1920, Cuba experienced the so-called *Danza de los Millones*, when the price of sugar in the world market shot up to 22.5 cents per pound from 7.3 in November, 1919. Millions of dollars flowed into the economy and fortunes were made overnight. Luxurious houses were built, for example, in El Vedado, where at 502 17th street stood the palace of the Countess of Revilla de Camargo (born María Luisa Gómez Mena, widow of Agapito Cajiga, who obtained the title, and sister of José "Pepe" Gómez Mena, owner of four

sugar mills, who had the French classical-revival house built for her in 1926).

María Luisa Lobo dedicates eight pages of color photographs to this mansion in *Havana: History and Architecture of a Romantic City* (pp. 200-207). She mentions that the house appears in the novel *Consagración de la primavera*, by Alejo Carpentier. The novel's main character, who is probably modeled after a nephew of the countess, describes in vivid and unfriendly detail a lavish party in which a faux Place Pigalle was created for the enjoyment of the guests. María Cajiga, as she was known among her friends, did give many lavish parties. Guillermo and Cuquita would attend several of them, as we shall see later on in their story.

In La Coronela one could find large tracts of land and build comfortable houses surrounded by gardens, suitable for families with several children, as Guillermo and Cuquita's would turn out to be. Many houses similar to theirs could be found in the sprouting suburbs of the old city. As pointed out by Alfredo José Estrada in *Havana: Autobiography of a City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), the population ballooned after the eradication of yellow fever (no cases in 1902) and as the result of a huge immigration of Spaniards – 200,000 arrived between 1902 and 1910; by 1930 the total reached one million.

The republic was off to a good start, and prosperity was the order of the day.

Chapter VI

If you serve time for society, democracy, and the other things quite young, and declining any further enlistment make yourself responsible only to yourself, you exchange the pleasant, comforting stench of comrades for something you can never feel in any other way than by yourself. That something I cannot yet define completely but the feeling comes when you write well and truly of something and know impersonally you have written in that way and those who are paid to read it and report on it do not like the subject so they say it is all a fake, yet you know its value absolutely; or when you do something which people do not consider a serious occupation and yet you know, truly, that it is as important and has always been as important as all the things that are in fashion, and when, on the sea, you are alone with it and know that this Gulf Stream you are living with, knowing, learning about, and loving, has moved, as it moves, since before man, and that it has gone by the shoreline of that long, beautiful, unhappy island since before Columbus sighted it and the things you find out about it, and those that have always lived in it are permanent and of value because that stream will flow, as it has flowed, after the Indians, after the Spaniards, after the British, after the Americans and after all the Cubans and all the systems of governments, the richness, the poverty, the martyrdom, the sacrifice and the venality and the cruelty are all gone as the high-piled scow of garbage, bright-col-

ored, white-flecked, ill-smelling, now tilted on its side, spills off its load into the blue water, turning it a pale green to a depth of four or five fathoms as the load spreads across the surface, the sinkable part going down and the flotsam of palm fronds, corks, bottles, and used electric light globes, seasoned with an occasional condom or a deep floating corset, the torn leaves of a student's exercise book, a well-inflated dog, the occasional rat, the no-longer-distinguished cat; all this well shepherded by the boats of the garbage pickers who pluck their prizes with long poles, as interested, as intelligent, and as accurate as historians; they have the viewpoint; the stream, with no visible flow, takes five loads of this a day when things are going well in La Habana and in ten miles along the coast it is as clear and blue and unimpressed as it was ever before the tug hauled out the scow; and the palm fronds of our victories, the worn light bulbs of our discoveries and the empty condoms of our great loves float with no significance against one single, lasting thing – the stream.

Ernest Hemingway, in *Green Hills of Africa*.

Hacía calor, esa tarde a comienzos de agosto, cuando los dos hombres jóvenes entraron a la Casa Stein, en la esquina de Obispo y San Ignacio, una sastrería en la parte antigua de la ciudad, tan antigua que la calle del Obispo databa de la fundación de la Villa de San Cristóbal de La Habana. Uno de ellos iba a la segunda prueba para un traje de dril cien, hecho a la medida, y el otro a que le hicieran una guayabera de lino irlandés, también a la medida.

Los atendía el sastre principal porque eran buenos clientes, y mientras conversaban los tres, el muchacho que hacía la limpieza del local salió a la calle para fumar un cigarrillo. No le costó encender el fósforo de cera, no se mueve ni una hoja, pensó, y acababa de aspirar el humo del tabaco negro con

que se fabricaban los cigarros, que así les llamaban a estos de fabricación nacional, nada de cigarrillos, esos insípidos que fumaban los turistas, cuando vio que un carro de la policía se detenía a pocos pasos de la entrada, por Obispo, y al mismo tiempo, qué casualidad, otro tanto hacía un automóvil particular, con cuatro tripulantes, la punta de los cañones de las armas de dos de ellos, parecían escopetas recortadas, asomando por sobre el borde de las ventanas delantera y trasera del carro, las que daban a la acera, la de San Ignacio.

Corrían tiempos peligrosos, y con ellos los rumores de boca en boca. El hombre está a punto de caer, ni los militares lo aguantan ya, no, viejo, qué va, no creas eso, está más fuerte que nunca, este sí que no se raja, a este no lo tumba nadie del caballo. De eso mismo hablaban los dos clientes con el sastre, ellos eran de los que estaban seguros que el dictador estaba a punto de caer, pero a lo mejor lo decían porque eran gente de la oposición, y bien conocidos los dos. El muchacho oía los rumores pero nunca hacía comentarios. A la Casa Stein llegaban muchos clientes, y no todos pensaban como los dos que habían llegado apenas diez minutos antes, de manera que en boca cerrada no entran moscas, como dice mi mamá. Pero una cosa es no meterte donde no te llaman y otra muy distinta es no avisar al jefe si por casualidad uno ve algo raro, así que tiró al suelo el cigarro a medio fumar, aplastó la colilla con la punta del zapato y entró a la tienda sin apurarse demasiado, por si las moscas.

El sastre escuchó atentamente lo que el muchacho le dijo al oído, le indicó con un movimiento de cabeza que podía retirarse, y con otro movimiento, abriendo un poco los ojos, invitó a los dos buenos clientes a seguirlo hacia la parte trasera del local. Allí, a media voz, les contó lo que el muchacho había visto. Los hombres le dieron las gracias al sastre, le estrecharon la mano y salieron sin prisa por la puerta del fondo a un callejón de tierra donde los vecinos botaban la basura, caminaron hasta la otra esquina y esperaron unos minutos por la máquina de alquiler que los llevó, también sin prisa, a sus casas respectivas.

Nueve días después, al perder el apoyo del ejército, cayó el hombre fuerte. Del palacio presidencial se fue a su finca y esa noche voló a Nassau para no volver jamás. Dicen que llevaba consigo cinco revólveres, siete bolsas con lingotes de oro y cinco amigos en ropa de dormir.

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Los caminos de mi Cuba nunca van a donde deben.
From a song by Carlos Puebla.

On the political scene of Cuba in the twenties and thirties there is a man who started out on the right foot but soon took a wrong turn. Gerardo Machado had fought in the war of 1895 and attained the rank of general. After the war he turned to private business and became quite wealthy. In 1925 he ran for the presidency as the candidate of the Partido Liberal and was elected in May. His campaign slogan was “agua, carreteras y escuelas” (water, roads, and schools). Machado delivered on his promises during his first term, 1925-1929, building the central highway and the Capitol and enlarging the University of Havana.

But storm clouds soon darkened the sky. On 20 August, Armando André, also a veteran of the War of Independence and a newspaper owner, was murdered while trying to enter his house in Havana. The killer had jammed the front door lock with a toothpick, and as his target tried to turn the key fired a sawed-off shotgun at point blank range. A few days earlier, a cartoon published in Andre’s paper had hinted that Machado’s daughter was a lesbian. The general reaction to the murder, which reveals much about the times, was expressed in these words: *Bien muerto pero mal matado* – deservedly killed (for insulting a lady) but not like that (shot in the back by a hired killer).

Many thought Machado was behind André’s murder. Soon other killings would follow. Later that year a series of strikes broke out; the police fired on the strikers and several leaders were shot. Julio Antonio Mella, a Communist student leader

(the Communist Party of Cuba had just been founded), made a speech accusing Machado of deliberately targeting the most prominent labor leaders. Ignoring the growing violence, Machado took steps to strengthen his power. In December he had Congress pass a resolution forbidding the creation of new political parties and the reorganization of existing ones. His public works program was rife with corruption, but the president managed to cultivate the image of an honest politician. Machado had not only promised water, roads, and schools; he had also pledged no presidential reelection. But in early 1927, the Congress, also tainted by the generalized corruption, called for a constitutional amendment extending the president's term (and their own) by two years without a new election.

In 1928, Havana hosted the Sixth International American Conference. It was a triumph of Cuban diplomacy that the country was chosen as the site of the meeting, especially because the preceding conferences had been held in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, all much larger countries with a longer life as independent nations. Machado seized the opportunity to burnish his credentials, traveling to Washington and inviting President Calvin Coolidge to come to Havana and inaugurate the meeting. Coolidge came, the conference went off without a hitch, and some of its resolutions became part of the history of the inter-American system. But shortly after Coolidge's departure more killings took place.

In April a constitutional convention modified the 1901 Constitution to allow reelection of the president. In November, 1928, Machado was reelected without opposition for the already unpopular six-year term. Thereafter many professionals joined the opposition, the Belt brothers among them. Cuba's economic situation began to deteriorate. The U.S. stock market crash on Black Tuesday, 29 October 1929, impacted the island heavily. The price of sugar that year fell below 2 cents per pound. Determined to stay in power, Machado increased repression while negotiating loans with his contacts in the United States.

In August, 1931, former president Mario García Menocal and Carlos Mendieta, a colonel in the War of Independence

and beloved leader in the Liberal party, launched a military effort to overthrow their former comrade in arms, who by now was widely regarded as a dictator. Forty men landed at Gibara, on the north coast of Oriente province, took the town and distributed weapons to the population. Led by Emilio Laurent, an army officer, they withstood for three days the assault of 3,000 troops dispatched from Havana by train. Machado ordered the air force to join the fight. Laurent, manning a machine gun, shot down several planes and fired on the warship *Patria* in the harbor. Before superior government forces finally prevailed, the air force bombed Gibara. For the first time in this part of the world a town had been bombed from the air.

A clandestine organization named the ABC began to kill Machado henchmen in reprisal for the murder of opposition leaders. On 27 September 1932, Clemente Vázquez Bello, President of the Senate and a trusted Machado ally, was shot and killed shortly after leaving the Habana Yacht Club. His death was to be the trigger of a plot to kill Machado himself. The plotters had rented a house across the street from the Colón cemetery, dug a tunnel under the street to the burial vault of the Vázquez Bello family, placed a large amount of explosives under the vault, and sat in the rented house, binoculars and detonator at hand, waiting for the dictator to attend the funeral of his close friend. But fate intervened. The family of the deceased decided to have him buried in his native Santa Clara. Several days later, a gardener working on the Colón cemetery grounds saw the wires leading from the explosives and the plot was discovered.

It was three o'clock in the late summer afternoon when the men sauntered up to the piquera, the taxi stand, with its two cars sitting there in the elegant suburb of El Vedado. One driver was sleeping in his taxi, the other leaning idly on the hood of his car. Some of the men wore guayaberas, others had sport shirts hanging outside their trousers, and you could see the bulge the guns made under the shirts because they didn't really care if you knew who and what they were. The only one in a jacket asked the taxi driver: Where is the house of Freyre de Andrade?

The driver looked up briefly, careful not to stare, and pointed to the two-story house with the small garden in front, halfway down the street. The man who had asked the question looked at the taxi driver – a hard look, out of habit – did not thank him and moved on, followed by the other six men. The sleeping driver, awakened by the one-way conversation, waited until the men were almost at the house before whispering, “la porra”.

One of the men knocked twice with the lion’s head brass knocker. A maid opened the door, but not fully because she did not recognize the strangers. She asked, politely, whom she might announce. The one who had knocked shoved the door open and in one single, practiced move grabbed the maid by the arms, while the others rushed up the staircase to the second floor. Almost immediately a burst of shots rang out, followed by seconds of silence, and then more shots. The terrified maid asked the man holding her: “Los van a matar a todos?” (Are you going to kill them all?) “No,” he answered, “we’ve come only for Gonzalo.”

This is a true story. At three o’clock in the afternoon of the day Vázquez Bello was killed, seven men in civilian clothes walked up to the residence of Gonzalo Freyre de Andrade, a young lawyer, law professor and member of the House of Representatives, at B street between Calzada and Línea avenues, in El Vedado. Gonzalo had been defense counsel for many of Machado’s opponents who had been brought before military courts despite being civilians. He had denounced Machado’s abuses in speeches to the House.

Gonzalo was standing beside his younger brother Guillermo in his study upstairs, dictating something, and his brother was typing. Gonzalo was the first to fall, shot five times. Guillermo, although also wounded, rushed towards the killers and tried to grab one of them, but was cut down. Leopoldo, who also lived there with his brothers, did not even see the gunmen. He was leaning down in front of a bookcase in another room, looking for a book, when one of them shot him seven times in the back.

The murderers were members of the *porra*, a goon squad created to break up demonstrations against the regime, usually with truncheons, hence its nickname. They had license to kill, and had indeed been ordered to kill Gonzalo. They were also authorized to kill his brothers, who lived in the same house, to make sure they got the right man.

When Guillermo Belt and his wife came back to Havana after their honeymoon in New York they stayed with his father at Paseo 4, in El Vedado, while construction of Villa Marisol was in the final stages. Shortly before the Freyre de Andrade murders they moved to La Coronela. Cuquita wrote in her memoirs about the tragedy:

Of the tumultuous last days of his dictatorship I recall an incident that took place shortly after we moved to our house. One day Guillermo and I were in his car driving to Havana when, traveling on Calzada Street in El Vedado, we saw several cars parked on the sidewalk in front of the house of the brothers of Carmen Freyre de Andrade (who today is the grandmother of our Lamadrid grandchildren). "Let's see what is going on", said Guillermo, turning the car around and parking near the entrance. Just at that moment, Alberto Mendoza y Freyre was coming out; when he saw us he drew near and said to Guillermo in a low voice: "Don't get out, leave this place. My three uncles have just been murdered."

The *Heraldo de Cuba* was a newspaper subsidized by the Machado regime. Therefore, it got all the scoops, but published only what Machado wanted known. On the day of the Freyre de Andrade murders the following item appeared in the government's mouthpiece:

He aquí, textualmente copiado, el suelto en que el «Heraldo de Cuba» anunció, el 27 de septiembre, la muerte de los Freyre de Andrade, de Aguiar y de Dolz :

— ' —

Muertos Dolz, Aguiar y Freyre.

«El doctor RICARDO DOLZ Y ARANGO, catedrático de la Universidad, ex senador; el doctor MIGUEL ANGEL AGUIAR, representante a la Cámara; el doctor GONZALO FREYRE DE ANDRADE, también representante a la Cámara, y dos hermanos de este último, fueron muertos a tiros en la tarde de hoy.

El doctor FREYRE y sus hermanos murieron en el tiroteo, en la calle B, entre Calzada y Línea, en el Vedado.

A la hora en que escribimos estas líneas, no sabemos dónde fueron muertos los doctores DOLZ y AGUIAR.»

[The headline reads Dolz, Aguiar and Freyre killed. And the text: Doctor RICARDO DOLZ Y ARANGO, University professor, former senator; doctor MIGUEL ANGEL AGUIAR, member of the House of Representatives; doctor GONZALO FREYRE DE ANDRADE, also a member of the House, and two brothers of the latter, were shot to death this afternoon. Doctor FREYRE and his brothers died in a shootout at B Street, between Calzada and Línea, in el Vedado. At this writing, we do not know where doctors DOLZ and AGUIAR were killed.]¹

¹ Translation by author.

The paper came out at 1 p.m., two hours before the Freyre de Andrade murders. Aguiar, too, was killed that day, in his house, at about the same time as the Freyre brothers. The *Heraldo* had reported killings that had not yet taken place. To make matters worse, Ricardo Dolz had managed to escape his would-be assassins, warned by an influential friend who told him: "Run! Hide! I have just come from the presidential palace. They are going to kill you!" As soon as the incriminating news item appeared the police tried to pick up the entire edition. Having failed to destroy every copy, they took out their anger on a couple of the paper's reporters, arresting them and beating them up for good measure.

A couple of days later, José, the gardener at Paseo 4, rushed to Villa Marisol to tell Guillermo, who was having lunch at home with his wife, pregnant with their first son, that the *porra* had come looking for him at his father's house. These hired killers showed no arrest warrant, nor did they say why they were looking for Guillermo Belt, who was a known oppositionist. Fortunately, their information was not up to date; they thought the newlyweds were still living at Paseo 4.

There was no time to waste; the *porra* would soon find the new address. Cuquita described the situation concisely: "In the heyday of the Machado *porra*, to be accused was tantamount to a death sentence. Therefore, the only defense was to flee." They got into their car – Cuquita still in her dressing gown – and "sped away on the road to Arroyo Arenas, without a fixed destination in mind." Suddenly, an idea: they would go to the Central Pilar, the sugar mill owned by General Rafael Montalvo, a close friend of José Agustín Martínez, who was also his lawyer, and of Guillermo's father.

The general, a veteran of the War of Independence, was pleased to help out the young couple. He came up with a cover story: they would be introduced as his nephew and niece, visiting from Chile. It would have been useless to hide them because many people habitually visited the large house at Central Pilar, he explained. So he hid them in plain sight.

The ruse worked. Guillermo and Cuquita stayed with General and Mrs. Montalvo until October 27, when an urgent telephone call came from Cuquita's father: Jorge Alfredo Belt had

suffered a heart attack. They immediately got into their car and drove to Paseo 4. Jorge Alfredo died a short time after they arrived. Just as he had been at his mother's bedside when she died, Guillermo now fulfilled the same sad duty for his beloved father.

Guillermo's eldest brother had asked for asylum at the Legation of Panama in Havana the week before their father's death. An item dated 21 October 1932, published the following day in *The New York Times*, tells us why:

The Panamanian Legation informed the Secretary of State today that Dr. Alfredo Belt, a son of the prominent Cuban attorney Dr. Jorge Alfredo Belt and an Opposition leader, had taken refuge in the legation. El Heraldo de Cuba on Sept. 29 reported that Dr. Alfredo Belt had been arrested as one of the assassins of Dr. Vasquez [sic] Bello, President of the Cuban Senate. The paper was suspended and its editor was held in jail for several hours. Dr. Belt is said to have gone in hiding at that time, together with his brothers Guillermo and Alberto.

From the second paragraph of the *Times* story it is clear that reporters at *Heraldo de Cuba* were desperate for scoops. They must have known that orders had been given to arrest one, or all, the Belt brothers, and they rushed to publish the "news" of Alfredo's arrest as one of Vázquez Bello's killers. So, while Guillermo and Cuquita were temporarily staying at General Montalvo's sugar mill, Alfredo and Alberto were in hiding elsewhere, until Alfredo ended up at the diplomatic mission of Panama.

The fight against Machado raged on. Murders of members of the opposition took place almost daily. Bodies would turn up on the streets and in isolated locations. In retaliation, bombs were going off all over Havana. One bomb plot went like this. Opponents, probably the ABC, set up explosives in an empty house, called the police and reported that weapons were stored there. When a police officer, finding nothing, picked up the telephone to call headquarters, the house blew up as planned, killing the policemen inside.

Then, in early 1933, the sugar mill workers went on strike. The U.S. government under Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected president in March, began to take another look at Cuba. Two Communist labor leaders, fearful of U.S. intervention, approached Machado, made a pact to support him, and unsuccessfully called for an end to the strike. The ABC and the students, in disagreement with the Communists, increased their attacks and Machado ratcheted up his repression. In April, Carlos María Fuertes, a student leader, was arrested and later shot for his alleged participation in the Vázquez Bello killing.

On Good Friday two other student leaders, the Valdés Daussá brothers, were gunned down in the street. Ruby Hart Phillips, wife of the New York Times correspondent in Havana, tells the story in her book, *Cuba, Island of Paradox*. Mr. and Mrs. Phillips lived in a house across from the Castillo del Príncipe, an old Spanish fortress then being used as a jail. They were in the bedroom after lunch, her husband reading and she playing with her puppy, when they heard several shots.

They rushed to the room's balcony in time to see a young man running and weaving wildly in the middle of the Avenue of the Presidents, which at that point cut through two cliffs. The boy was shouting "no tiren más, no tiren más" (don't shoot anymore). A volley of shots from the cliff hit him in the back; he stumbled, the second fusillade struck him in the head and shoulders, and he fell. Mrs. Phillips' husband rushed downstairs, got into his car and drove up to the dying boy. The two killers, casually trailing their rifles on the ground, came down from the cliff and looked impassively at the body.

On that February night in 1933 the weather was cool, chilly for Cuba, and the docks of the Habana Yacht Club were deserted. Two men, both members, wearing dark sweaters and carrying fishing gear, walked unhurriedly to their Chris Craft launch moored on the right-hand dock, got in, started the engine, and drove off slowly. When the land was almost out of sight they turned off the running lights, revved up the engine and sped off over the water, across the Gulf Stream. Once out of Cuban ter-

ritorial waters they slowed to cruising speed, turned the lights back on, and without incident reached Key West.

They walked to a nearby shop, had a weak coffee, so different from the strong, fragrant Cuban version, and arrived at the post office as it was opening for the day. The clerk took the claim check, looked briefly in the shelves behind him, and handed over a rectangular box about five feet long, wrapped in heavy packing paper. The men thanked him in good English, walked back to their boat, and went fishing in the plentiful Florida straits. They were experienced sport fishermen, and in due course had a good catch. The package in its original wrapper lay at the bottom of the icebox, covered with red snapper and grouper. That evening, after an uneventful crossing, the men in the boat arrived back at their club.

When Guillermo Belt opened the package his two friends and fellow anti-Machado conspirators brought him, they were surprised and happy to see it contained one Thompson submachine gun with a 50-round clip and extra ammunition. There was no return address on the package; there had been none on the envelope containing the post office claim check, which had come in the mail a few days before, addressed to Guillermo at his office. The gun was turned over to the ABC men of action, who were willing and able to put it to good use.

The mysterious donor remained anonymous. One night, some years later, Guillermo and Cuquita were having dinner with their good friends, Ellis O. Briggs, on his second diplomatic posting in Havana, and his wife, Lucy. The guest of honor was Ernest Hemingway, who had come to Cuba in 1933 for the first of many visits. In the course of conversation Hemingway asked Belt whether he remembered receiving a package from Key West, back in the day, and when Guillermo said yes, the famous writer said: "I sent you that machinegun."

In May 1933, Sumner Welles, a Harvard classmate of President Roosevelt, arrived in Havana to replace Harry Guggenheim, the U.S. ambassador, who had been very close to Machado. Welles was a seasoned diplomat with experience in Latin America, but his trump card, as Estrada says in *Havana: Au-*

tobiography of a City, was having the ear of his old classmate. Welles was tasked with mediating a solution to the conflict.

Sumner Welles would not succeed, and history has therefore treated him unkindly. Historians have called him a proconsul, in reference to the days when the United States ruled in Cuba after the defeat of Spain in 1898 through military governors who were indeed as powerful as the Roman proconsuls. Estrada, commenting on Welles' arrival in Havana, describes him: "Tall, patrician, immaculately dressed in a three-piece wool suit despite the withering heat, he was the object of fevered fascination by the Cuban press."

In her memoirs, under the heading "Events in 1933," Cuquita Martínez de Belt gives her own description of the man

We met and often saw the U.S. ambassador, Sumner Welles. I was quite impressed by his importance, of which he was well aware, and by his aristocratic bearing and apparently cold, Anglo Saxon manner. But soon I realized that he was a human being as warm as any other, and I then lost forever the fear of important people.²

The Belt name appeared again in the U.S. press in relation to the turmoil in Cuba. On 4 August 1933, The Baltimore Sun reported from Havana that an attempt had been made the day before "to assassinate Dr. Guillermo Belt and Dr. Cayetano Fraga, members of the opposition junta, as they emerged from a tailor shop at San Ignacio and Obispo streets." It further stated that two cars were waiting for them outside the shop: one was a police car; the other carried armed men and a banner reading Communist Party of Cuba. However, the two men were warned of the danger and were able to escape unharmed.

Three days later, a rumor on the radio claimed that Machado had resigned. The ABC called on the people to take to the streets, and a large demonstration marched toward the Capitol. The *porra* were unable to disperse the crowd and the police opened fire. Estrada tells us that the students then rushed the

² Cuquita was 21 years old when she met Sumner Welles.

barricades around the Capitol and the police fire intensified. As many as 22 persons were killed and 170 wounded in the massacre.

The army finally turned against Machado on 11 August. The once popular politician, now the man behind so many murders, had become a liability. The next morning Machado left the presidential palace in a car, the crowds in the streets watching him go in silence. He first went to his farm. That night he took a plane for Nassau, never to return. He took with him “five revolvers, seven bags of gold, and five friends, still in their pajamas”, wrote Joan Didion in *Miami* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1988, p. 11).

Former members of the hated *porra* were hunted down and killed by angry civilians; several top police officers met the same fate; the houses of the most prominent figures of the regime were sacked. On 12 August, which incidentally was his 62nd birthday, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Quesada, son of the patriot who had launched the war of 1868, was sworn in as provisional president.

This chapter in the early married life of Guillermo and Cuquita had come to a happy ending. Sadly, the same could not be said of Cuba.

Chapter VII

A small group of boys of probably ten to twelve years, poorly dressed, some of them barefooted, came solemnly across Zulueta Street carrying a Cuban flag. They marched quietly up to Martí's statue in Central Park and waited while one of their number climbed the tall statue, no small feat in itself, and put the flag in Martí's outstretched hand. Then the small boy climbed down and they all walked quietly away.

From Cuba: *Island of Paradox*, by R. Hart Phillips

Casada el año anterior, había cumplido 21 años apenas un mes antes y tenido su primer hijo en marzo de ese año turbulento. En medio de tantos acontecimientos familiares se las arreglaba para acompañar a su joven marido en sus actividades políticas, recién estrenadas al cabo de la caída del presidente, aquel que empezó su gestión tan bien para terminarla sin gloria.

Fue así que asistió a la ceremonia de toma de posesión del presidente provisional, la cual en vista de los tiempos revolucionarios no tuvo lugar en el palacio presidencial sino en la residencia del mandatario, ubicada en un elegante barrio, cercano al malecón que pronto pasaría a ser emblemático de la capital. La esposa del flamante presidente había dispuesto una mesa en el portal para firmar los documentos de estilo y, acostumbrada a la vida diplomática, recibía a sus muchas amistades sociales, además de los inevitables invitados del mundo oficial.

La joven esposa y madre reciente conversaba con un distinguido caballero francés cuando una ráfaga de disparos rompió la apacible tarde de agosto. Los asistentes, ella y el invitado francés corrieron hacia el interior de la casa. El caballero, aunque visiblemente asustado, guardó las formas y la dejó pasar primero a la sala, donde acto seguido se hincó de rodillas y comenzó a rezar en francés. Ella, con los modales aprendidos en su niñez, se arrodilló también y se unió a la oración, en perfecto francés. Luego, excusándose, se dio a buscar a su marido y lo encontró, junto con otro invitado, revolucionario como él, en el portal, de donde no se habían movido, tratando de identificar el origen de los disparos que por caprichos del destino no hicieron blanco en ninguno de los presentes en aquella ceremonia para la historia y el recuerdo.

*

Not all would be smooth sailing for the young republic, or for the young men and women trying to steer the ship of state. The vacuum left by Machado's departure had to be filled, and quickly. Guillermo Belt, a member of Colonel Mendieta's Unión Nacionalista (Nationalist Union) movement, was named secretary of public instruction, as the post of minister of education was then styled. Nicasio Silverio, one of Cuquita's uncles and also very active in the opposition to Machado, was secretary of communications. Céspedes' cabinet included at least two founders of the ABC movement: Joaquín Martínez Sáenz and Carlos Saladrigas.

The provisional government set out to end the violence. However, from day one this proved to be impossible. In her memoirs Cuquita recalls that she and Guillermo attended a ceremony at the president's house, which sat on a hill overlooking the Malecón, Havana's famous seawall. The reception was to celebrate his swearing-in. Some of the guests were standing on the front porch, in search of the breeze from the sea, the only available relief from the heat in the absence of air conditioning, when a machinegun burst rang out. Cuquita dove to the floor, along with several other guests, while her husband

and Carlos Saladrigas “did the opposite: they went out on the porch to see who had done this awful deed.”

Like his father, Céspedes had taken up arms for Cuba’s independence. In the war of 1895 he had attained the rank of colonel. Subsequently he served in the House of Representatives and later in diplomatic posts in Latin America, the United States, and Europe. He was respected but lacked the backing of the army, several of whose officers wanted one of their own to occupy the presidential chair, and of many students and the more radical elements of the opposition to Machado. A strong and ruthless leader had left a power vacuum; the thirst for vengeance was far from being sated; some disgruntled factions, especially those left out of the provisional government, began plotting against Céspedes from the start.

Into this volatile environment now came one man, an army sergeant who having learned shorthand was privy to the workings of the officer corps because he attended many of their meetings as note keeper. Fulgencio Batista could make a good speech and used this gift in speaking up for his fellow noncommissioned officers. On 4 September, seizing on an unfounded rumor that their pay would be cut owing to the difficult financial situation, he managed to mount a coup, henceforth known as “the sergeants’ revolt”. Batista was smart enough to realize that he could not pull off his grab for power on the basis of a strictly military movement, so he welcomed the support offered by the students, the radical elements of the ABC, and a few university professors.

To cement their alliance these strange bedfellows devised an equally strange mechanism called the *Pentarquía*. Ramón Grau San Martín, dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Havana; Porfirio Franca, a well-known banker; Sergio Carbó, a journalist; José María Irisarri, a lawyer; and Guillermo Portela, a professor of criminal law, made up the new provisional government under a revolutionary mantle.

Guillermo Belt, 28, was out of government as quickly as he had entered public service. Cuquita recalled that Grau offered her husband to stay on but he declined, saying that Céspedes had fallen and he would fall with him. An Associated Press

dispatch from Havana on September 7, quoted in The Baltimore Sun the following day, states: "*Guillermo Belt, one of the former cabinet members whose support was sought today by the new regime, said in this connection:*

'As far as I am concerned, De Céspedes is still president.'" The New York Times correspondent in Havana, J.D. Phillips, cabled as follows on the same day:

Dr. Guillermo Belt, Secretary of Public Instruction under Dr. de Cespedes, said today he considered Dr. de Cespedes still President of Cuba and said he had refused to accept a position as Under-Secretary of the Department of Education, owing to his own belief that the present government did not represent the popular will.

Guillermo was not opposed to Grau on ideological grounds. On the contrary, he was very much in agreement that it was time to address a grievance of most Cubans dating from the U.S. military occupation at the end of the War of Independence. In 1899, the U.S. government had wanted to include an addendum to the Constitution of Cuba concerning the new country's relations with its powerful neighbor. This had met with stiff resistance from the outset. By majority vote the delegates to the constitutional convention rejected the limitations on Cuban sovereignty implicit in the proposal.

Meanwhile, in the United States Senator Orville Platt introduced an amendment to the Army appropriations bill, according to which no government in Cuba could enter into treaties with any foreign power that might tend to impair the independence of Cuba without the consent of the United States. Neither could any Cuban government assume or contract any foreign debt in excess of its capacity to pay. Cuba would also have to consent that the U.S. had the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence and the maintenance of stable government adequately protecting life and property.

Furthermore, Cuba would have to ratify all the acts of the U.S. military government, and would grant naval bases to the United States on Cuban soil. After General Leonard Wood, the head of the U.S. military occupation, assured the convention

delegates that President McKinley would not withdraw U.S. troops from Cuba unless the Platt Amendment was included in the new constitution, the text was adopted by 16 votes in favor, 11 against, and 4 delegates absent.

Opposition to the Platt Amendment was a feature of the country's politics during the first thirty years of the Cuban republic. On taking office on September 10 Grau unilaterally abrogated the amendment. As Guillermo Belt would relate to his children years later, when the members of the Supreme Court went to the presidential palace that day to swear Grau in, the new president invited them to come out onto the balcony with him. There, facing the huge crowd below, Grau swore the oath of office in front of the Cuban people, and right away announced he was abrogating the Platt Amendment. This was a master political stroke, to be sure, but one that would cost him dearly.

Guillermo was very proud of Grau's stand on this matter; he was equally set on doing away with the limitations imposed on Cuba's sovereignty. No doubt he would have been happy to serve in the new cabinet, but his loyalty to the deposed Céspedes prevented him from doing so. A strong sense of loyalty was, after all, a long-running trait in the Belt family.

From a political perspective Guillermo's decision turned out to be the right one. The *Pentarquía* had been sworn in, but real power lay with the army and the army was not securely in Batista's grasp – not yet. Hours after his coup, a number of deposed army and navy officers began moving from their barracks into the Hotel Nacional. Built on the site of the 1797 Santa Clara Battery (two of its cannons are preserved in the gardens overlooking the sea), the lavish hotel had opened on the Malecón, in El Vedado, in 1930. At first the officers were apparently following Colonel Sanguily, who was ill and for this reason had moved to the hotel where he would have better access to medical care. Some have speculated that because Sumner Welles was staying there the officers could have been seeking protection from a possible attack by Batista's men. Whatever the case may be, by September 7 about 250 officers had settled rather precariously into their improvised quarters at the Nacional.

The following day, shortly before midnight, a group of sergeants showed up to search the hotel for weapons. Welles told the sergeants that if they tried to enter the hotel shooting would break out and the lives of U.S. citizens staying there would be placed in jeopardy. Shortly afterwards a call came from the presidential palace saying the troops would be withdrawn. However, at dawn the same thing happened all over again.

Evidently the army and the revolutionary government were not in total agreement. So much so that on 9 September, with the standoff at the Hotel Nacional still in place, a group of sergeants offered Céspedes that Batista would support him for president if he in turn would confirm Batista as head of the army. Céspedes did not agree. In the meantime, infighting between the students and the *Pentarquía* ended with the former imposing their will. They elected Dr. Grau President of Cuba, thus putting an end to the attempt at five-man executive rule.

Although the sergeants and soldiers surrounding the Hotel Nacional cut off water and electricity, forcing Sumner Welles and the other U.S. citizens who had moved there for safety to evacuate the building, the officers held out. Meanwhile, all through September civilian leaders kept looking for a solution to the political crisis. Grau's unipersonal regime was no more popular than the *Pentarquía*: they were both the result of a *golpe* (coup) within the armed forces and therefore lacked democratic legitimacy. Batista was increasingly seen as a man bent on securing absolute power for himself, and many of his original backers began to turn against him. Adding to the general state of uncertainty, the U.S. government had not recognized the Grau government. The specter of the Platt Amendment took shape with the presence in Cuban ports of about 30 U.S. warships, ready to land troops if things got completely out of hand.

Anti-U.S. feelings were based not only on the Platt Amendment, which would be formally abrogated in 1934, but also on the meddling in Cuban politics widely attributed to Sumner Welles. Dr. Grau was a hero to the students and the more radical, non Communist elements. He did not let them down, in his rhetoric or in his nationalism. Reforms that were radical for the times were initiated, many by executive decree: the eight-

hour work day; at least 50% of the industrial and commercial work forces had to be made up of Cuban citizens; the limitation on the purchase of land by foreigners, among others. These measures did not fit Welles' conception of what the new government needed to do in order to obtain recognition by the United States.

The standoff at the Nacional came to a head on October 2nd. Batista decided to attack the hotel. Firing broke out between an armored vehicle and the officers, followed by an all-out attack, first with light artillery and later with heavy guns and even an old cruiser, the *Patria*, which directed its inaccurate but impressive batteries at the perfect target the hotel made on its promontory by the sea. The officers were armed with a total of 37 Springfield rifles, with 60 to 80 rounds each, but the many good marksmen in their ranks took a heavy toll on the soldiers, killing over 100 and wounding about twice this number.

A ceasefire was arranged later in the day while the officers considered an offer by Batista to guarantee their lives if they left the hotel unarmed. Fighting resumed after an officer was shot before the ceasefire ended. Finally, around 5 p.m., the officers surrendered. They were lined up by the soldiers outside the hotel while a crowd gathered and began shouting for the troops to kill them. As the last officers were coming out of the building, a total of 11 were killed and 22 wounded by fire from soldiers and from some persons in the crowd.

The destruction of the officer corps strengthened Batista, who promoted himself to colonel and appointed sergeants and even enlisted men to the ensuing vacancies. The disastrous consequences for Cuba's armed forces would be felt decades later and ultimately result in Batista's downfall. On the other hand, Grau's government was weakened. By the end of October, 1933, as Luis Aguilar recalled in *Cuba 1933: Prologue to Revolution*, all hope for reconciliation was lost, terrorism in Havana increased, "and the two most important sectors of the anti-Machado forces – the students and the ABC – were openly attacking each other."

On November 8, part of the air force and several army units rebelled against the government, led by enlisted men and newly minted officers. Several planes flew over Camp Columbia,

seat of the high command, and one bombed the installations, causing more confusion than damage (the bombs were 25 pounds each). Some of the military plotters were members of ABC, and soon 2,000 or so civilian members of this organization gathered at the Miramar Yacht Club, were armed there and then went to the airport, which was in rebel hands. Their march on Camp Columbia was prevented by a force of Batista soldiers which surrounded the airport. In the fire exchanged during the dawn hours about 20 men were killed. After their surrender in the morning, approximately 400 were taken prisoner, while the rest managed to escape.

In Havana, meanwhile, police headquarters and several police stations were taken over by the rebels. The Cuartel de San Ambrosio and the one at Dragones, both army barracks, also joined the rebellion. The elite garrison at the Castillo de Atarés, the fortress built in colonial days (1763-1767) by Spain shortly after the British occupation of the city, went over to the rebels. The news of the failure to take Camp Columbia caused the rebels to concentrate their forces at Atarés, although more experienced fighters, such as Colonel Blas Hernández, an old guerrilla leader close to Colonel Mendieta, opposed this decision fearing another Hotel Nacional debacle.

Actually, it turned out to be much worse. Batista, who reportedly had shown much fear during the Camp Columbia bombing, reacted and concentrated artillery around the old fortress. The castle sits on a hill overlooking Havana harbor, so again Batista used the *Patria*, now reinforced by the cruiser *Cuba*, to shell the fort. The shelling from sea and land batteries went on for over six hours, destroying much of the inside of the castle, particularly as the result of mortar fire. In the early afternoon, the major commanding the rebel forces shot himself. Over the objections of Blas Hernández and other officers, a white flag went up over Atarés.

Batista's infantry advanced on the fortress. When the gates were opened and the surrendering men came out, the soldiers mowed them down with machinegun fire. When the shooting stopped another group of prisoners came out under guard. Blas Hernández, who had been wounded, stood among them near the gate. Mario Alfonso Hernández, a recently appointed cap-

tain, walked up to the group and asked, "Is Blas Hernández here?" The old fighter replied, "I am Blas Hernández." As related by a rebel lieutenant who was standing next to him, the captain pulled out his revolver and without a word shot the surrendering prisoner in the head.

The weeks remaining in 1933 brought no improvement. Grau's government took over two large sugar mills to ensure their participation in the rapidly approaching harvest. There were strikes and riots in the streets. Batista kept on purging the officer corps, thereby solidifying his control of the armed forces. In December, Jefferson Caffery arrived as the new U.S. ambassador, indicating right afterwards that there would be no change in his government's policy, and this of course included non recognition of the government.

Once this was made clear to Batista, he decided to withdraw his support of Grau. At a meeting in January Batista asked Grau to resign, but the president said he would only submit his resignation to the students and members of the *Pentarquía* who had elected him. Batista wanted Colonel Mendieta to replace Grau because he had very good reason to believe that Mendieta would be acceptable to the United States. However, the students were opposed.

Carlos Hevia, a respected professional, was the compromise selection, and he was sworn into office on January 16. A protest strike began the following day. On 18 January Hevia was out and Carlos Mendieta took the oath of office in his stead, acclaimed by large crowds, hopeful that peace would now come to Cuba at last. Less than one week later, the United States recognized the new government.

Chapter VIII

As destiny would have it, the Office of the Mayor was at the time located in the very beautiful palace where the first Captains General of Cuba resided, and where his grandfather, John Benjamin Belt, had lived. Years later this building was the Presidential Palace in the time of our first President, Don Tomás Estrada Palma, and his father, Jorge Alfredo Belt, had his office there as Secretary of the Presidency under don Tomás. Now Guillermo would have his office in the same place – the third direct descendant to do so.

From “Notes and Scribbles”.

Nació en 1810, en Isla de León, San Fernando, durante el asedio francés a la plaza de Cádiz, y el estruendo de los cañones le acompañaría durante buena parte de su vida. Ingresó en el ejército español en 1822, combatió en la Primera Guerra Carlista, fue ascendido por méritos y a los 29 años de edad era brigadier. Dio el salto a la política y llegó a tener tanta influencia sobre la reina Isabel II – era conocido como el general bonito – que sus adversarios maniobraron para hacerlo nombrar capitán general de Granada y alejarlo de la Corte.

Diez años después lo encontramos en el Palacio de los Capitanes Generales, su nueva sede en la capital de Cuba, donde el arzobispo de La Habana le presenta a un joven recién llegado de los Estados Unidos, portador de una elogiosa carta del arzobispo de Baltimore a su colega español. A Francisco Serrano le interesan las calificaciones del desconocido, realizadas

por el prelado extranjero, sobre todo los cuatro idiomas que domina, y le ofrece contratarlo como tutor de sus hijos. John Benjamin Belt acepta complacido.

Ni el capitán general ni el joven visitante pudieron imaginar que un hijo de éste llegaría a tener un despacho en ese mismo palacio, en los inicios del siglo 20, como miembro del gabinete del primer presidente de la flamante República de Cuba. Mucho menos que uno de los tres hijos de Jorge Alfredo Belt también tendría allí sus oficinas como alcalde de La Habana, cuando Guillermo Belt Ramírez fue nombrado en su primer cargo público tras la caída de otro presidente, cuya ambición de poder condujo a su derrocamiento.

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Even critics of Mendieta's administration recognize his major achievement: On 29 May, Cuba and the United States signed a reciprocity treaty to govern their relations, which abolished the Platt Amendment although it did allow for the continued use of Guantánamo Bay as a U.S. naval base. This treaty also established a preferential trade treatment between the two nations and a tariff reduction on Cuban goods imported by the United States, boosting rum, tobacco, fruit, and vegetable exports.

In 1934, in an early decision of the Mendieta government, Guillermo Belt was appointed to the Council of State (Consejo de Estado), a 15-member advisory body to the President of Cuba. He would serve in this capacity until 1938. He was once again in the executive branch and from this vantage point saw the end of the hated amendment imposed on the Constitution of Cuba.

Guillermo and Cuquita's family was growing. Their first son, Guillermo, had been born on 25 March 1933, in the dangerous final months of Machado. Then, on 31 May 1934, his wife gave birth to a second boy, named José Agustín after his maternal grandfather, henceforth known among family and friends as Sonny. In her memoirs Cuquita recalled that on the day Sonny was born his father had to attend an afternoon re-

ception at the Presidential Palace as a member of the Consejo de Estado.

Dr. Miguel Mariano Gómez, the son of former president José Miguel Gómez, had been appointed mayor of Havana, and upon his resignation President Mendieta appointed Guillermo in January, 1935, to replace him. (The turbulence that followed the overthrow of Machado prevented the holding of elections, so the post had to be filled in this manner.) A few months short of his 30th birthday, Guillermo Belt found himself in what had always been considered the second most important political office in the country. He was the youngest person to hold this position in the city's long history.

In his characteristic way, Guillermo wasted no time in getting to work. Havana did not have a pediatric hospital. As a matter of fact, there was no children's hospital on the entire island. There was, however, a building specifically built for a hospital but never furnished as such. Instead, it was occupied by women schoolteachers called the "maestras normalistas", who were students at the Escuela Normal, established in 1915 to prepare the large number of teachers required by the newborn Republic of Cuba. These young women had been revolutionaries opposed to the Machado government, like so many of their generation. They were there to stay and, as stated in a 1935 publication on children's medicine in Cuba, proceeded to turn the spaces meant for the operating rooms into recreation areas for themselves, and the clinics into meeting rooms for their political discussions.

The new mayor explained to them that the building was needed for its original purpose and offered to move them to a suitable location. The schoolteachers refused, secure in their revolutionary credentials. Guillermo Belt then called on the city's firemen, who, as Cuquita wrote, were very grateful for the new fire trucks and other equipment the mayor had recently purchased. Guillermo explained the benefits of having a municipal children's hospital, with free services to those unable to pay. The firemen signed on to the project. On a weekend they moved the books, desks, chairs, and blackboards to another building, and when the students showed up for class on Monday they found workmen adapting "their" building to the

requirements of a hospital. In 1935, the mayor inaugurated the Hospital Municipal de Infancia de La Habana.

On 1 July 1935 Guillermo appointed Dr. Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, a well-regarded revolutionary intellectual, to the position of city historian. This was a precedent-setting measure: there had been no such position prior to this date. Roig de Leuchsenring soon proposed that traditional names be restored to many city streets that had been haphazardly renamed over the years for political reasons. The mayor approved the measure and in January, 1936, a government decree restored the old names to 105 streets.

Another measure proposed by the historian and approved by the mayor was the publication of brief works on local historical topics, which were distributed free of charge as the *Cuadernos de Historia Habanera*. And, in this same vein, the mayor restored the Plaza de Armas, the city's oldest square located on the site of the founding of Havana, to its original appearance.

Not unlike his earliest ancestors in England and the United States, as a young man Guillermo Belt lived in revolutionary times. His public service career began in a revolutionary government resulting from the fight against Machado. His temperament was suited to the times: inclined to action, he met problems head on and solved them as quickly as possible. But like the Belts who came before him, especially his Cuban father and U.S. grandfather, Guillermo valued the great traditions of his country of birth and in his short term as mayor of Havana did everything he could to honor and preserve them.

In this regard, here is one more example. In December 1792, King Carlos IV of Spain authorized the establishment in Cuba of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País at the request of a group of distinguished Havana intellectuals who were concerned about the backward state of culture, education, trade, and agriculture in colonial Cuba. The society held its first meeting on 9 January 1793. That same year it founded the first public library in the country. Several committees were appointed and its members traveled to more advanced nations, bringing back new agricultural methods and equipment; they introduced new methods for raising sugar cane, promoted the

establishment of a railroad system, and advocated tax exemptions for new industry.

In 1816 the society created an education section, which at first was charged with supervising primary schools and later given the responsibility of directing all primary education. The following year it established a botanical garden in Havana and in 1818 created the San Alejandro academy of painting, drawing and sculpture, which would achieve fame in later years as the cradle of Cuba's most prominent artists.

Guillermo Belt had been in office less than one year when the President of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, Dr. A.M. Eligio de la Puente, wrote him a letter dated 2 December 1935 in which, on behalf of the society's governing board, he thanked the mayor for having proposed, defended, and obtained the approval of Law-Decree No. 416, promulgated on 22 November of that year, by which the society was declared tax exempt regarding the properties it dedicated to charitable and educational purposes, such as the public library and the eight free schools for poor children it was operating at the time.

Dr. de la Puente added that in the more than one century of his institution's existence never before had it received such an important recognition of its work in favor of culture and education, and invited Dr. Belt to attend the ceremony commemorating 143rd anniversary of the Sociedad on 9 January 1936. The mayor accepted and on that occasion was decorated with the society's medal. Many years later, Guillermo would tell his children that of all the decorations he received in the course of public service he held this one in the highest regard.

Mayor Belt's contributions in the area of culture are still recognized today, even in official Cuban publications. In March of 2004, for example, on the occasion of the international book fair held in Havana, an article on the webpage of the Feria Internacional del Libro de La Habana credits Guillermo Belt, together with Roig de Leuchsenring and José Luciano Franco, with the erection in 1937 of a monument to Victor Hugo in a park named after the great French intellectual and strong supporter of Cuba's war for independence, bordered by 19th, I, 21st and H streets in El Vedado, "*que es visita diaria de habaneros*

de todas las edades y refugio crepuscular de los enamorados, como hubiera complacido al gran romántico.”¹

Ten days after De la Puente’s letter Carlos Mendieta resigned as President of Cuba. In June he had survived, unscathed, the explosion of a time bomb as he was addressing the audience after a luncheon at a Cuban navy installation. The attempt on the president’s life was attributed to Joven Cuba, a splinter group that had fought Machado and had opposed every president after him. On top of that, the old warrior, who was an honest man and a proven patriot, had to deal with constant strikes and was criticized for police and army actions to counter the strikers. He then did the honorable thing and on December 12 tendered his resignation in favor of his minister of foreign affairs, José A. Barnet.

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November had been a very busy month for the mayor of Havana. Meanwhile, at Villa Marisol family life continued, not altogether happily. Again, Cuquita remembered:

Not everything was rosy at this time in our private life, however. We suffered our first serious pain: the terrible meningitis that kept our son Sonny (José Agustín) between life and death. He fell ill in July and was not out of danger until September. I never left the house during that time. He was finally cured, thank God.

Immediately following in her memoirs, a ray of happiness on November 25:

The next event was the birth of Noel, our third son. He was baptized at my parents’ house on Christmas Day, with President Barnet and his French wife, at their request, as honorary godparents. His godparents were his uncle Alberto Belt and his

¹ “...which [the park] is visited daily by *habaneros* of all ages and serves as an evening refuge for lovers, as the great romantic would have liked.” Author’s translation.

aunt Bebita Alonso, of whom I will have more to say because Tío Alberto has always been, and is, an exceptional human being: brave, patriotic, warm, and nowadays very pious, taking daily Communion. After the baptism we had a gay and well attended reception, as was fitting for "the son of the Mayor".

Guillermo Belt had no political problems with Barnet, who was the constitutionally designated successor of the leader he had followed faithfully. Furthermore, he had an amiable personal relationship with the new president. Barnet, a career diplomat, was to occupy the presidency until elections were held in early 1936. But loyalty prevailed once again. Guillermo did not wait for the elections. Mendieta had appointed him mayor and he chose to leave the post as soon as possible after the president's resignation. On 5 February 1936 he resigned and went back to the practice of law.

Chapter IX

Their eldest child had turned five that March, and Guillo, as he was called in the family, would remember forever afterwards that his grandmother, Mrs. Elisa Silverio de Martínez (“Mamalíe”, short for Mamá Elisita), had almost drowned in Miami Beach when she went to visit them. The image imprinted on the child’s mind was of Mamalíe caught in a whirlpool close by a long wooden pier, crying for help, and of his mother jumping in the water to rescue her. Someone came rushing onto the pier with a rope and threw it to the two foundering women, who were then pulled out to safety.

La playa se parecía un poco a la que el niño conocía, cerca de su casa, por frecuentes visitas con sus padres, pero era más larga y la arena no tan blanca. De la arena salía como un pasillo de madera, montado sobre unos maderos gruesos y redondos, que entraba a buena distancia en el mar, aquel mar nada transparente, a diferencia del suyo. Es un muelle, le dijo su mamá, y lo usan los pescadores para tirar el anzuelo más lejos de la orilla.

La abuela, muy confiada porque había aprendido a nadar con uno de sus hermanos, ganador de muchas competiciones de natación, se lanzó al agua sin pensarlo dos veces, el mar es el mar, decía, aquí en Miami o en Varadero, pero en las playas de Cuba es más azul y más bonito. El niño miraba como su abuela daba unas brazadas suaves, sin esfuerzo aparente, alejándose lentamente en ruta paralela a aquella armazón que se llamaba muelle. De repente, al acercarse a uno de esos made-

ros llamados pilotes, otra palabra nueva, desapareció la cabeza de la abuela, que era lo único que el niño veía en la distancia. A poco apareció de nuevo pero ahora gritando, gritando una palabra que el niño jamás había oído: ¡Socorro!

La mamá del niño corrió hacia el agua, se lanzó, nadó velozmente hacia su madre y la agarró con una mano, levantándole la cabeza mientras movía la otra mano y las piernas para mantenerse a flote. Madre e hija luchaban juntas contra el remolino, evitando ser arrastradas hacia el fondo pero sin poder salir del movimiento circular del agua. La abuela continuaba gritando aquella palabra extraña. Un hombre pescaba muy cerca de ellas, un poco más allá sobre el muelle. Tiró al suelo la vara, corrió hacia uno de los pilotes, en cuyo extremo superior colgaba un salvavidas blanco con franjas rojas, y lo lanzó, atado a una cuerda, a las dos mujeres. La mamá y la abuela del niño se aferraron al salvavidas; el hombre, tirando de la cuerda, caminó por el muelle hacia la playa, bajó a la arena y ayudó a las dos mujeres a salir del agua.

La imagen de la madre y la abuela luchando juntas en un mar que no era el suyo quedó grabada en la mente del niño, a sus cinco años, y no se borró jamás.

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A few weeks before Guillermo Belt's resignation Cuban women cast their vote in an election for the first time in the nation's history. On 10 January 1936, Provisional President Barnet made good on Mendieta's promise to hold national elections. Miguel Mariano Gómez won, with Federico Laredo Brú as vice president. This should have been the starting point of a process of democratic consolidation in the young republic. However, Batista had achieved his own consolidation of power in the armed forces, and was setting more ambitious goals for himself in the political life of Cuba.

Before Gómez assumed office on May 20, Batista had taken up the cause of greater access to education, the paramount concern that had been evident in the national consciousness since colonial times. From the provisional government Batista obtained a decree authorizing him to appoint army personnel

as teachers in new schools set up in mainly rural areas. This move was seen by many as a dangerous intrusion of the army in civilian life, especially since the teachers, mostly sergeants, were subordinate to the army and only very loosely connected to the civilian educational authorities.

President Gómez shared this view, so when in December Congress approved a tax on sugar to finance the establishment of more rural schools under military control, he vetoed it. The Cámara de Representantes (House of Representatives) voted to impeach the president and the same month Miguel Mariano Gómez was impeached by a large majority in the Senate. Once again, Batista had won. Before the end of 1936 Laredo Brú was the new President of Cuba.

On 24 January 1937, Guillermo and Cuquita's only daughter was born. Marilys was baptized shortly afterwards and on this occasion, too, the President of Cuba and his wife were guests at the ceremony. Laredo Brú had been a member of the Céspedes cabinet and he and Guillermo were on good terms, but by then the former mayor had returned to his law practice and, as Cuquita wrote, "had more time for his children and me." He did not disengage entirely from political events, but he turned enthusiastically and with customary optimism to the practice of his profession.

Guillermo Belt was out of public office but not far from the public eye. On 11 March 1938 his name appeared again in The New York Times in an item headlined, "Ex-Havana Mayor Held Head of Plot." The wireless dispatch from Havana on March 10 began:

Many prominent figures were named by the military intelligence service report issued today as responsible for the revolutionary plot to overthrow Colonel Fulgencio Batista and his regime, which the army leaders claim to have broken up. It is asserted that Dr. Guillermo Belt, former Mayor of Havana in the Mendieta administration, headed the committee composed of the former A.B.C. leader, Alfredo Pequeno, and Edgardo Martin, a lawyer, for establishing contact with high army officials to induce them to join the movement on the ground it was supported by the most

representative and the best civilian element of the island, as well as the United States Government.

In the same dispatch the Times quoted reports in the Cuban press that day of the arrest of Dr. Belt and two other persons listed among the accused plotters. It went on to state that foes of the government thought that the alleged plot and the accusations against opposition figures were no more than a pretext to postpone the holding of elections for members of the Constituent Assembly, which they hoped would be called that year.

In fact, Guillermo Belt was not arrested. Once again, the press in Cuba had falsely reported the arrest of one of the Belt brothers. As far as was known at the time, no one else among the accused plotters was taken into custody, giving credence to the assertion that the whole conspiracy, alleged for good measure to involve the U.S. Government (which the United States ambassador vehemently denied), was indeed a smokescreen put up by Batista.

Sometime in 1938, Guillermo, Cuquita, and their four children took a vacation in Miami. A few weeks later Guillermo and family were back home. The following year, in an item dated in Havana on 27 November 1939, published the following day, The New York Times, which seems to have been following the young lawyer rather closely, reported: "The Havana waterworks was put up at public auction today in proceedings brought by the bondholders, but no bidders appeared." It stated further: "Dr. Guillermo Belt, attorney for the bondholders, said a second auction would be held within thirty days ..." Many years later Guillermo would tell his children that early in his career he had managed the not inconsiderable feat of persuading a court of law to auction off a public utility in order to make good its obligations to its bondholders.

As it turned out, the election for members of the Constituent Assembly did happen: it was held on 15 November 1939. President Laredo Brú had brokered the *Pacto de Conciliación* between opposition leaders and Colonel Batista, which paved the way to the first step in constitutional reform. Former President Grau headed the opposition coalition, which won 42 of

the 77 delegates, leaving Batista's own coalition in the minority with 35.

The delegates came from all political and ideological camps. There were statesmen like José Manuel Cortina and Carlos Márquez Sterling, both of whom made outstanding contributions to the success of the Convention; veterans of the wars for independence; labor leaders; recognized intellectuals; captains of industry; and, inevitably, revolutionary and student leaders: Grau himself, Carlos Prío of the student directorate, Joaquín Martínez Saénz of the ABC clandestine movement that had been instrumental in the overthrow of Gerardo Machado. Even the communists were represented at the Convention. They were on this occasion, as in Machado's time, allied with the strongman of the moment: Colonel Batista.

The Constitutional Convention did its work in short order if one takes into account the sharply divergent philosophical and political positions of the delegates. Three months later Cuba had a new and very advanced constitution. So advanced, in fact, that its most devoted defenders today recognize that in the highly competitive world of the 21st century several conquests of organized labor enshrined in the 1940 Constitution would have to be reexamined, such as paying workers 48 hours of salary per week for 44 hours of work, and guaranteeing every worker one month of paid vacation per year.

A similar caveat does not apply to its provisions on individual rights: most were incorporated in the Declaration on Human Rights less than one decade later. In a word: the Constitution of 1940 was the young republic's greatest achievement and a source of legitimate pride for its framers and for the Cuban people.

Laredo Brú's term ended in 1940. That same year Fulgenio Batista ran for president and was elected for a four-year period. Guillermo Belt had been out of public office since 1936, focusing on his professional life as a lawyer. He was now immersed in his law practice but was able to devote more time to his rapidly growing family.

Chapter X

Another memory is of my father setting out with us to walk around our neighborhood after the great hurricane of 1944, shortly after President Ramón Grau San Martín had taken up his office, and before we all left for the Cuban embassy in Washington. He was wearing boots, a suede jacket (which I still keep), and his holstered Smith & Wesson revolver in .38 caliber. He cut an impressive figure, and not only in our children's eyes.

En algún lugar de la costa oriental de África, sería a mediados del siglo 19, más o menos, vivía una niña que unos meses después recibiría sin quererlo el nombre de Pastora. En otro lugar de la misma costa vivía una segunda niña, alegre y despreocupada como la primera, hasta un día, cuando unos hombres que nunca se habían visto por allí llegaron a su casa, hablaron en voz baja con sus padres, le regalaron unas telas de colores a la mamá, un frasco con un líquido blanco y siete caracoles cauri, tan bonitos, al papá, y se la llevaron a ella, atada por la cintura con una cuerda sucia, llorando desconsoladamente.

De Mozambique, o quizás de Zanzíbar, zarpó el barco que llevaría a Pastora, que aún no se llamaba así, y a la segunda niña, junto con muchísimas mujeres y niños de ambos sexos, y unos cuantos hombres también, a una tierra nunca vista por ninguno de ellos. Unos hombres blancos, cuyas palabras nadie entendía, esperaban en el muelle. Uno de ellos miró fijamente a la niña que todavía no se llamaba Pastora e hizo una seña a otro, blanco también, que había venido en el barco. Luego le

dio unas monedas al del barco y se llevó a la niña a su casa, donde muy pronto aprendería a limpiar pisos y a lavar la ropa de aquella mujer blanca, sonriente, que fue quien le puso por nombre Pastora.

A la otra niña le pasó algo muy parecido, ese mismo día de la llegada al lugar extraño, con un hombre blanco distinto. Como a Pastora, a ella la llevaron a la casa del blanco, la casa más grande del mundo, pensó, no puede haber otra igual. Una mujer blanca, que se veía triste pero se alegró al verla llegar, la entregaría a una negra como las que había allá en África para que la enseñara a hacer muchas cosas en la casa, prácticamente las mismas que aprendería Pastora. Y como aprendió bien y rápidamente, le regalaron el nombre de Inés.

Ernestina Mederos Owens, orgullosa de ser cubana y también de sus dos abuelas, le contaba al niño que ella comenzó a cuidar con tres meses de nacido, y a quien siguió cuidando toda la vida, que Pastora e Inés habían tenido mucha suerte porque las habían traído de África para ser criadas (como se les decía a las encargadas del servicio doméstico) y no para trabajar en los cañaverales de sol a sombra, como los demás esclavos. Prueba al canto de su optimismo invencible.

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Guillermo Belt Ramírez, a second-generation Cuban, was proud of his ancestors, men who had fought for liberty in England and in the U.S. He was even prouder of the country where he was born. As a young man facing the dangers that the unstable conditions in Cuba placed before him, he too chose to put his ideals first. The record shows that he was not found wanting.

But, who is he when he's at home? as John le Carré will sometimes ask of a character in his novels. His political activities notwithstanding, Guillermo Belt was not a politician. He held public office in revolutionary governments that fought dictatorship. The Cuban revolutionaries in the 1930s sought to preserve the democratic form of government in which they believed, as well as their country's total independence, which had cost so much in lives and property in the wars against Spain. They demanded a place for their fledgling republic on

an equal footing in the community of nations, and, particularly, recognition by the United States that Cuba had come of age and would therefore no longer countenance tutelage, however altruistically cloaked.

Guillermo, like his father, had graduated from the University of Havana with the intention of devoting himself to the practice of law. Also like his father, he was called to public service early in his career, just as it was taking off. In the first five years of his marriage to Cuquita they became the parents of three boys and one girl. The responsibility to care for his wife and young children became paramount; the rebuilding of his law practice now took precedence. A lawyer at heart, he was back where he had started, but in a positive way.

At home, tradition was the order of the day. Guillermo was solely responsible for financial matters. He provided enough income to maintain a comfortable but not lavish lifestyle for his family. He ensured their physical safety in turbulent times by the sheer force of his reassuring presence. He was the unquestioned authority figure.

Cuquita's role was equally rooted in tradition. Above all, she was to be respected always and at every turn as the mother who could do no wrong. Guillermo did not tolerate disrespectful behavior in the children towards their mother, however minor it might seem. No raising your voice to her, ever; no sign of displeasure with her decisions, not even behind her back. Cuquita ran the household. Her husband delegated to her the children's upbringing and schooling. When they needed help, it was their mother who gave it. Papá was in charge of discipline. Mamá wiped away the tears: her brief was love, comfort, and forgiveness.

Like so many of her friends, Cuquita was a stay-at-home mom, but she was also called upon to play a supporting role in her husband's public life. Guillermo had chosen his bride well: she had been carefully prepared for the task. From the age of seven until she became a teenager she had been schooled at home. Her first governess, Miss Mary Irene Hartigan, a New York-born former schoolteacher of Irish descent, taught the young girl English, as well as the "three Rs".

Cuquita's command of English would serve her well in the early years of her marriage and throughout her life. After Miss Hartigan went back to New York, satisfied with a job well done but tired of Cuba's tropical climate, Cuquita's mother hired another governess, Miss Charlotte Marie Devereux, who gave the teenager her first taste of French.

Cuquita went on to learn this third language, also to perfection. It came in handy when President Barnet's wife, who was French, graciously asked to be honorary godparents at Noel's baptism. And on another occasion, which Cuquita recalled in her memoirs with amusement:

A French delegation that had just come from celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the acquisition of the Guadeloupe and Martinique islands visited Havana. It was headed by the President of the Senate of France, M. Henri Beranger, and among its members was the Mayor of Paris. Guillermo held a reception for them in the mayoralty palace and received the guests with me standing next to him, as is the custom. It was an elegant and splendid affair, and also fun because music played throughout. On departing, the Mayor of Paris kissed my hand and said: "Quel dommage que vous parents n'out pas pu assister." (What a pity that your parents were unable to attend.) "But they can be proud of you and your brother, who have represented them so well." I then realized that Monsieur le Maire had taken us for the daughter and son of the Mayor of Havana.

During her husband's first years in government service Cuquita was by his side whenever the occasion called for wives to be present. Brought up among her parents' friends and having traveled a good deal in Europe and the United States with her mother and father, she felt at ease with older ladies and gentlemen, as was the case at President Cespedes' reception to celebrate his swearing-in (even marred as it was by that machinegun burst nearby).

Cuquita did more than social and ceremonial work. For example, she took on the decoration of the children's hospital, selecting pretty gowns for the children and happy colors for the wards. In her own words:

I took up some of the decorating chores myself. I remember the hospital gowns we bought for the children: blue and white for the boys, pink for the girls. This was not as practical as all white, but it was so pretty. The outpatient dining room was decorated as if for a party: small tables and chairs, in bright colors, with the walls painted to resemble a garden. The medicine cabinets of the dentists were like large dollhouses; the doors and windows were instrument drawers. Most fundamental of all, the quality of the physicians was the best.

Cuquita's language skills would come in handy again in another facet of her husband's trajectory in the service of his country. In her late teens, her two-year stay in Washington, D.C., where she graduated from Georgetown Visitation School, offered a preview of the city where a decade and a half later she would make her mark as a young wife in yet another challenging environment: the diplomatic circles of the nation's capital.

How, then, one might ask, did she manage to raise all those children? At that time in Cuba and for years afterwards domestic help was available at rates that the successful professionals and businessmen who made up the country's rising middle class could afford. Therefore, three months after the birth of her first son Cuquita hired a nanny for him on the recommendation of an old family friend and based on a single telephone conversation with the candidate, at the end of which she asked Ernestina Mederos to come to work the following day.

The prospective nanny's reply, delivered with a pleasant laugh, reveals much about her personality: "*Pero señora, ¿cómo sabe usted que nos vamos a poner de acuerdo sin siquiera habernos visto?*" (But, madam, how do you know that we will come to an agreement when we haven't even seen each other?) Reassured by Cuquita's optimistic reply, Ernestina showed up at Villa Marisol the following day, July 4. From the second-floor balcony over the main entrance Cuquita saw her: "She was tall, good looking, dressed in white. As she knocked on the door, I heard her murmur (she has always liked to talk to herself): Oh, no! This is very far away. I won't stay here!"

Ernestina was seven years older than Cuquita. No details of their first face to face conversation are recorded, but Cuquita did set down in writing, almost half a century later, a profile of this “unique and extraordinary person”:

She still has faithfulness, courage, and optimism in huge quantities. Without realizing it, she is that “strong woman” of whom the Bible speaks. She has an iron will, but is not bossy. She will not admit even the possibility of something untoward. When I, who tend to be pessimistic and afraid, on kissing one of my children would murmur in her presence, “I think this child has a fever;” this would irritate her no end. Even today, when I want to give advice to a grandchild, I “disguise” it, saying: “Ana thinks that you ...” and the advice is heeded.

On that July 4, 1933, Ana became part of the Belt family, not because its members adopted her but rather because she adopted them right then and there, and for the rest of her life. She appears in every chapter of the Belt family story, an icon of unwavering loyalty and devotion.

Ernestina Mederos Owens is my nanny’s proper name; Ana is another example of my early success with nicknames. Ana came to Villa Marisol on 4 July 1933, and never left. Even after we came out of Cuba as exiles she stayed in our house, taking care of my grandmother until she died. She then went briefly to Spain and from there came to live at 5224 Elliott Road, in Bethesda, Maryland, the second house that my parents have owned in their entire lives. To this day, at 102 years of age, she lives in that house, now taking care of my mother and still looking after her three boys: Noel, Juan and me.

Ana recalls that both her grandmothers – Pastora, on her father’s side, and Inés, on her mother’s – were taken from their mothers in Africa and brought to Cuba to work as domestic servants in the houses of the masters who bought them. Ana always looks at the bright side and she says that her grandmothers were fortunate because they never had to endure the harsh working conditions in the fields, which other slaves had to bear.

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Villa Marisol was one big playground. Without setting foot outside the stone wall that surrounded both their grandparents' house and their own, the children would roam the more than six acres that made up the family compound. Mamalie and Papa Buddy's gardens offered several attractions: an ornamental fountain in the sunny front lawn, with a basin they could wade in up to their knees, the goldfish scurrying every which way. Another fountain at the far end of the garden to the right of the house was shaded by a large tree, and there the mysterious cry of its resident bull frog, *la rana toro*, could sometimes be heard and pondered. In the garden on the left, adjoining their parents' backyard, a vine-covered pergola with a large marble statue challenged their imagination. So did the masonry structure in another part of the grounds, which looked just like the castle towers in their storybooks but in fact served to protect an artesian well.

Animals were part of life at Villa Marisol. Between the two houses there were at any given time three or four dogs. They, too, had free run of the grounds and in the mild Cuban climate spent the night outdoors guarding the property. In a corral in the backyard a young deer fascinated the children with its large, beautiful eyes. Later, when the children were a bit older, they had a sheep and were sometimes allowed to go into its pen. The animal would charge them on sight and knock them down, no harm done.

There was a large chicken coop for Guillermo's prized Rhode Island hens. The children liked to chase them, unsuccessfully. The pretty yellow chicks, on the other hand, were easy to catch. Ana, who had been brought up in the country – she was born in the small town of Agramonte, in Matanzas province, and remembered how the old ladies who went out for a stroll every day threw themselves to the ground in a panic at the approaching sound of the first automobile ever seen there – taught the children to handle the *pollitos* very gently.

Ana had help in running after the four active little Belts. Not long after Sonny's birth his mother had hired Rosa María as a nurse for him. Then, Ana took Noel under her wing, and

Rosa María did the same for Marilys, so that each nanny ended up having two children at this point in time.

Guillermo Belt's love of country life did not end with his beautiful reddish hens. He bought a couple of Jersey cows, famed for the high quality of their milk and bountiful production. They were pastured in the *terrenito*, a parcel of land bought by the revolutionary turned gentleman farmer, which lay to the left of the house, separated by a wire fence from the garden on that side.

Villa Marisol had many trees and some were very tall. The avocado trees stood taller than the house and gave large fruit that had to be picked with a pole with a basket attached. If an avocado fell to the ground it would shatter, so the trick was to pluck the fruit when ripe. But in the *terrenito* there were plenty of guava trees, which were not tall and could be climbed easily. Here, the children did their own picking by hand. The aroma of guava fruit floated over the land, and the memories of all that climbing and picking, and the love of the Cuban dessert, *dulce de guayaba con queso crema* (guava paste with cream cheese), would stay with them always.

La huerta was another piece of land ready to be explored. Here, banana, plantain, and lemon trees shared space with tomatoes, lettuce, sweet potatoes, and other tropical fruits and vegetables. This fruit and vegetable garden, adjacent to the *terrenito*, also Guillermo Belt's project, gave onto a side road that ran along the back of the Belt property. Guillermo had had a frame house built there for *el cocinero* (the cook – no one called him the chef) and his family. The children liked to visit Pedro and his children on his day off. They would walk to his house from theirs without setting foot outside the family compound (no one ever called it that either).

There were unspoken lessons in all these activities. The Belt children played with their friends, many of whom came to Villa Marisol from their houses in the newly fashionable residential suburbs of Miramar and El Country Club. They also played with Pepe, the son of Manuela, who looked after cows for a living on a small farm nearby. They were all equally suitable playmates when it came time to chase the small lizards that populated the grounds, or to challenge each other in foot

races, or stage battles with cap six-shooters and, later on, with Daisy air rifles, where the one inviolable rule was no aiming above the shoulders to avoid hitting the face and especially the eyes of your opponent.

Prominent among these was Ignacio Ariosa, who was born in his family's house directly across the street from ours, five days after I was born. We were friends before we knew it. Our nannies took us for rides in our trams together; we both were taken often to the Habana Yacht Club. We did not however attend the same school. Ignacio's father, who liked us to call him Tío Chicho, was quite a bit older than our father. Tío Chicho's generation went to Belén, the famous old Jesuit school, and there he placed Ignacio. Our father's generation, on the other hand, mostly attended the Colegio De La Salle, and that is where my brothers and I received our first taste of school.

The outdoors at Villa Marisol, where the children spent most of their time in those wonderfully active pre-television days, taught them to deal with scorpions, tarantulas and smaller spiders, bees and hornets, all fairly abundant, and the thin, dark, harmless garden snakes that occasionally showed up in the vast grounds surrounding their house. They learned that *alacranes* (scorpions) will kill themselves with their own stinger when surrounded by fire, and that you had to be careful when turning over a rock or log lest you find one in these favorite hiding places of theirs. The *arañas peludas* (literally, hairy spiders, i.e., tarantulas) could be coaxed out of their small caves by pouring water slowly on the ground above where you figured the main cavity lay; this would make the spider come out and you could poke it carefully with a stick. When two spiders came out and faced each other, this would usually lead them to fight.

The children could tell the difference between bees and hornets and learned, painfully, that it was best to stay away from the latter. As for the snakes, the gardener, a distinguished older man named Santiago Sotolongo, always dressed in a clean, crisp, long-sleeved shirt and a straw hat, a machete in its leather scabbard hanging from his belt, showed the little Belts how

he picked them up by the tail in one smooth movement and cracked them like a whip, all the while sternly enjoining them not to try this trick.

Our father had inherited from his father a 470-acre farm located in the borough of Wajay, ten miles from the city of Havana and three from José Martí International Airport. The farm had over one mile of road frontage on the highway connecting the city of Marianao with the town of Santiago de las Vegas, and also fronted on a road leading to the town of El Rincón.

There were two wooden farmhouses and in 1957 our father built a brick and concrete house that we would use on weekends. This house had three bedrooms and three baths, a large living-dining room, a kitchen, and an L-shaped porch running along two sides. At the same time a guest cottage was built, of the same materials, with two bedrooms and a bath. We liked to go there as often as we could. We would ride horses to a small lagoon on the property. It was a very relaxing way to spend a weekend.

The parents were in charge of the more conventional lessons. Guillermo was as reticent about his achievements as he was reluctant to appear in the amusing anecdotes about his youth. However, he enjoyed telling his children about the time he auctioned off the Havana waterworks in order to pay off the bondholders: it was his way of encouraging them to be bold in the defense of a just cause. The same applied to the story about the municipal children's hospital. The schoolteachers who occupied the building had no legal right to be there; furthermore, a hospital to care for children from lower income families was sorely needed in Havana. Therefore, the mayor acted to redress this unfair situation "*en aras del bien común*" (for the public good).

Guillermo used to take his children to visit the tomb of General Antonio Maceo on December 7, the anniversary of his death in combat. The bravest and most brilliant tactician of all the Cuban patriots, Maceo had fought throughout the Ten Years' War, refused to accept the peace pact that put an end to it in 1878, gone into exile, and returned to fight again early in 1895.

Charging on his horse at the head of his troops, wielding a machete, Maceo took part in over 800 actions and was wounded more than 30 times, on one occasion so severely that his soldiers rescued what they took to be his lifeless body from the field of battle. Having led 4,000 poorly equipped men on a 90-day march from one end of the island to the other, and after fighting in 27 actions against a force of 200,000 Spanish soldiers determined to stop him, Maceo was camped very near the city of Havana on 7 December 1896, planning an attack that night on Marianao.



That night Maceo dreams with his dead father and brothers, all killed in combat. In the morning he recounts the dream to General José Miró. In it he heard voices: "You've had enough fighting, enough glory." An officer turns up with horses and Maceo resumes marching. He decides to prove that he is now in Havana province by attacking Marianao, a town on the outskirts of the capital.

Early in the morning of December 7, Maceo, with 62 men, arrives at a Cuban camp in San Pedro de Hernández, on the road from Hoyo Colorado to Punta Brava. There he studies the map of Marianao, which he intends to assault that night. While having lunch Maceo tells Miró that he wants to send his aide, Francisco

(“Panchito”) Gómez Toro, back to his father, General Máximo Gómez, because he fears for the young man’s life. Another omen, perhaps.

Suddenly, shots ring out. Spanish troops, who believe that Maceo is still in Pinar del Río, attack the Cuban camp. Maceo orders a machete charge, mounts his horse and gallops toward the enemy, which retreats behind a stone wall. Maceo has 45 men with him. He orders a flanking maneuver and tells the men around him to cut a wire fence so he can charge the enemy. The Spanish soldiers fire from the stone wall. Maceo, sitting on his horse, is hit in the face and falls, mortally wounded. He is hit again in the chest as his men raise him from the ground.

Panchito Gómez Toro tries to recover his general’s body, is hit by enemy fire and falls beside Maceo. Under heavy fire other officers, most of them wounded, withdraw. The Spanish soldiers approach the two bodies and finish off Panchito. They do not recognize Maceo, who is not supposed to be in Havana at all. At 5 p.m., some of the 20 Cuban fighters not wounded in the encounter return to the field of battle, recover the two bodies and later that night bury them secretly.

The War of Independence will go on to victory. Its noblest figure, in the words of General Máximo Gómez, has been lost to the fight. But Maceo will live on, as he does today, in the proud and grateful memory of Cuba.¹

On those visits to the hero’s mausoleum Guillermo taught his children unforgettable lessons about love of country, bravery, and sacrifice. Guillermo also told his children about his father. He was very proud of Jorge Alfredo Belt’s service as chief of staff in the Estrada Palma cabinet, as well as of his father’s friendship with the president who became a symbol of honesty in public office. Guillermo spoke with admiration of his father’s successful return to the practice of law, as well as of his love for his three sons and for his extended family.

¹ From Antonio Maceo: Cuban Patriot and Hero, a blog entry by Guillermo A. Belt, no longer available online

He also taught them respect for older persons, both family members and friends, and for their customs and foibles. Guillermo's aunts from time to time would send him and Cuquita delicious homemade desserts, which came on a crystal or a silver platter. The platters had to be returned, but never empty. So the cook at Villa Marisol was kept busy trying to match the aunts' artistry. The children enjoyed the incoming *postres*, looked longingly at the outgoing ones as they departed on the platters, and learned quite a bit about courtesy from the unspoken lesson.

The Belt children grew up around a variety of adult authority figures, with easy access to all of them. They learned to adjust to the ways of their elders. The parents operated on a different schedule from the grandparents. Their father left early each day for his law office in downtown Havana, about thirty minutes away, driving his car. In the Cuban summer, i.e. after April 1st, he would be wearing a white linen drill suit, laundered and starched to the high perfection of a fine damask tablecloth (in the words of an American lady writing about Cuba in the 30s and 40s), a white linen shirt with a conservative tie, and shoes made to order by Amadeo, more comfortable but not necessarily more expensive than U.S. imported ones. He would usually come home for lunch with Cuquita and the children, after which he took a nap. During that 15-minute nap the children made very little noise and played quietly indoors, until it was time to see him off on the return trip to work and happily go back to their routine until dinner time.

Their grandfather, on the other hand, liked to start his day later and, similarly dressed, have his chauffeur drive him to town, eat lunch there, and work into the early evening. The best time to see him was around ten in the morning, when he would have a large breakfast, with plenty of room at the table for one or more grandchildren.

The children could walk over to their grandparents' house at any time. Papa Buddy and Mamalie were always happy to see them. Unwarranted interruptions in the busy social life of Cuquita's parents were easily forestalled. The first line of de-

fense consisted of Ana and Rosa María, who seemed to know everything that was going on at both houses. If the kids wanted to drop in on the grandparents, their nannies would know beforehand if guests were coming that day and would explain why the visit had to be postponed.

Ana was in many ways the keeper of the family history. In her childhood she had learned to write but because her formal education had been limited she tended to spell words phonetically rather than grammatically. Her excellent memory and gift for storytelling made up for this shortcoming. Episodes early in the children's lives and which they might not otherwise remember came to life in her words years later. Ana liked to recall, for example, that when a cyclone was imminent Papa Buddy would send word to several poor families in the area that food and shelter would be available at his house until the storm passed. The people came, were put up in the detached garage, which had rooms on the second floor for the servants, and were fed in shifts at the large kitchen table in the main house where the domestic help ate.

Ana would close this anecdote with humor. When the weather cleared, she said, no one wanted to leave. The food was too good. She always added, proudly, that *en casa de la señora Elisita* (at the house of Mrs. Elisita -- the grandmother was known by the diminutive of her given name) the servants ate the same food that was served in the dining room to Dr. and Mrs. Martínez.

Another story of hers served to fill in the blanks in Guillo's memory of those years. One Saturday, Papa Buddy brought a cage full of birds back from Havana, where vendors sold them on the street, and gave it to his three-year old grandson, who looked at the bamboo cage, opened the little door, and laughed happily as the birds flew out. Papa Buddy kept on bringing birds in their cages on Saturdays over a period of several weeks so the child could set them free. Was this another lesson, this time from the wise, loving grandfather?

Papa Buddy taught Guillo at least two other lessons, and these his grandson would always remember on his own. He had done all his summer homework the first year in school,

save for a series of six drawings. The boy had no talent for drawing, so he kept putting it off until three days before going back to class. As a last resort he went to Papa Buddy for help. The grandfather heard him out with a stern expression and told the child to come back in a couple of days, with no further explanation.

When Guillo returned, Francisco, the butler, told him to go into the library; his grandfather was waiting for him there. Spread out on top of the large leather-covered desk where Papa Buddy did his own bookbinding were six beautiful drawings. The grandfather, smiling now, said he hoped the teacher would believe they had been done by his student. He added: "Next time, don't put off doing something just because it's difficult. And don't wait until the last moment to ask for help if you really need it."

One day, Papa Buddy took Guillo to a toy store. The grandfather told the young boy to pick out anything he wanted. Guillo looked longingly at a large group of lead soldiers, and picked out three. Papa Buddy then told the clerk to wrap up all the soldiers in the display case, and the child became the surprised and delighted owner of a small army.

In due course the Belt brothers were enrolled in the Colegio De La Salle, the school for boys established in Cuba by the Christian Brothers in 1905, which their father had attended. The children's school was in a brand new building in the residential suburb of Miramar, two blocks from the sea. Unlike its sister schools in Marianao and El Vedado, this one had a beautiful outdoor swimming pool, with underground viewing ports and lockers, and airy classrooms with large louvered windows.

La Salle de Miramar opened its doors in September 1940, and Guillo as a seven-year old first grader became one of its founders. His mother had been instrumental in launching the new school. The principal, Brother Nestor María, had sought her help to spread the word about this modern edition of the venerable La Salle. Once again, Cuquita's language skills came in handy. The principal was French, and their conversations took place in his native language. Cuquita organized

a reception to which she invited a number of her friends who had school-age boys. Ana made a champagne punch, a good time was had by all, and La Salle de Miramar was off to a promising start.

We wore a uniform to school: short trousers, of a cloth called “drill” in Cuba, in its natural tan color; a short-sleeved shirt, light blue, with a collar we all hated, quite different from the collar style of our regular shirts; and a tie in a darker shade of blue. We longed for the day when we would be allowed to wear long trousers. At recess we played on school courts covered by fine gravel. We fell often and scraped our knees more than once. The bits of gravel had to be removed with pincers from the bleeding skin, a most unpleasant process.

On weekends the parents took the children to the Habana Yacht Club (which they called, simply, *la playa*, the beach), where they learned to swim, watched at close quarters by Ana and Rosa María who, together with a crowd of other nannies dressed in white from top to bottom, sat on benches ranged on the sand close by the water. These were days to be gently stored in memory, put away for future enjoyment, like maturing wine in a cool, dark cellar.

I remember the doorman, Félix, by then many years into his position, who knew everyone, including the children, by name. There was no better identification to gain entrance than his pleasant greeting. Felix’s rather distinguished air was somewhat marred by a large red nose. This mystified us until, years later, we found out the reason: Félix would often take a nip of brandy from a flask he kept hidden just inside the main doors to the club.

In the summer of 1944, this idyllic scene changed suddenly, without warning, with a bang.



Cuquita, Sonny, Papa Buddy, Guillo, Mamalie, Guillermo.

Chapter XI

Duels were not unusual in Cuba, even in the early years of the 20th century. In his reminiscences of Havana in the twenties and thirties Alejo Carpentier recalled that the management of the top newspapers practically forced journalists to take fencing lessons because they might be challenged to fight a duel on the basis of an insult purportedly given in a piece signed by them.

En Cuba, durante la primera mitad del siglo pasado, veteranos de las guerras por la independencia, periodistas, políticos, médicos y abogados invocaron una cuestión de honor para retar a duelo al autor de una ofensa real o percibida. Alejo Carpentier recordaba numerosos “duelos sensacionales que tenían lugar donde está hoy el bosque de La Habana, tenían lugar en el campo de aviación de la Bien Aparecida...”.

El más sensacional de todos fue probablemente el de Antonio Iraizoz, quien de maestro de primaria en escuelas rurales pasó a ser catedrático de Gramática y Literatura, luego periodista muy destacado, colaborador en reconocidas revistas literarias, diplomático y finalmente presidente de la Academia Cubana de la Lengua. Se batió con otro periodista en un pasillo del teatro Alhambra, dejando un saldo de cinco heridos: Iraizoz y su contrincante; el juez de campo, al tratar de interponerse entre ambos; un espectador, alcanzado por el arma de Iraizoz; y el médico presente para asistir a los combatientes, de una cortada en un dedo al inspeccionar las armas antes del duelo, lo que es de esperar no le haya impedido prestar auxilio

a tanto herido imprevisible. El duelo fue de sables con filo, contrafilo y punta. No era para menos.

*

On a bright, hot morning in August, 1944, a strange thing happened at Villa Marisol. The children were playing outside and making a lot of noise, as usual, when Ana and Rosa María sternly ordered them to go in the house and keep quiet. It wasn't time for their father's nap, so the order didn't make sense to them. Come to think of it, Guillermo was at home on a work day, and this too was unusual. On top of it all, their mother looked sad and worried, and this was stranger still because she had been laughing and having a great time only a few days before, celebrating her 33rd birthday.

The mystery would have been easily solved if the little Belts had read The New York Times. On July 30 the paper carried a United Press story filed from Havana the previous day. It began:

Eugenio de Sosa Jr., acting director of Diario de la Marina, today announced he had sent his seconds to Dr. Guillermo Belt, challenging him to a duel, as the result of Dr. Belt's "interference" in Mr. de Sosa's published attacks against United States Ambassador Spruille Braden. It was reported that Mr. de Sosa based his challenge on the grounds that Dr. Belt, who is mentioned as possible Secretary of State in President-elect Ramon Grau San Martin's Cabinet, defended Ambassador Braden against Mr. de Sosa's charges that the envoy had sought to interfere against the freedom of the Cuban press, and also on the allegation that Dr. Belt had "turned his back on Cuba's best economic interests."

The children were not unaware of current events. They knew that "*el doctor Grau*" had defeated Batista's candidate in the elections earlier that year, winning in a landslide; their father had given them the good news. The university professor, that favorite of revolutionary students in the anti-Machado struggle, had by now mellowed in his attitude towards the powerful neighbor to the north, so he had asked Guillermo to

undertake a delicate diplomatic mission: correct the firebrand label pinned on him by Sumner Welles and others ten years ago. Speculation that the president-elect might name Belt to head the Cuban Foreign Service was therefore well founded.

The challenge to a duel was another matter. Not one word had been said to the children about this. Not even when, corralled in the house on that hot morning, already bored and increasingly restless, with the windows open to catch a breeze that wasn't there, the children heard a series of loud noises coming from somewhere on their now forbidden playground. Their ears, used to the gun battles in *Los Tres Villalobos* and *El Llanero Solitario* (The Lone Ranger), their favorite radio serials, recognized the sounds from outside. But this time the gunshots were for real.

Eugenio de Sosa, trained to wield the épée and the saber by Diario de la Marina's fencing master, was the challenger. Guillermo Belt had the right to choose weapons, according to the Code of Honor of Baron Athos di San Malato, and he chose pistols. Not until they were older would the children learn the reason for the shots in the garden. A good friend, General Quirino Uría, a career army officer, had come to Villa Marisol to prepare Guillermo for the duel. The general had fired several shots into the lawn in back of the house by the pergola with the marble statue, getting Guillermo used to the loud sound of a .45 caliber automatic so that there would be no instinctive flinching the day of the duel at the critical instant of firing and being fired upon.

On August 3, under the heading "Cuban Duelists Unhurt", the New York Times reported that the previous morning a duel had been fought on a farm outside Havana with pistols between "Dr. Guillermo Belt, close friend and adviser of President-elect Dr. Ramon Grau San Martin, and Eugenio de Sosa, director of the morning newspaper Diario de la Marina. Neither contestant was injured."

In the early fifties, reconciliation between the Belt and de Sosa families came about through their children. One day an invitation arrived at Villa Marisol, addressed to Guillo, Sonny, and Noel. One of the de Sosa girls was celebrating her 15th birthday. The boys went to their mother for advice. Cuquita

told them that, although she had suffered much when their father had been challenged to a duel by the girl's father, this was all in the past and, in any event, the young girl was not at fault in the matter. The Belt boys went to the party and had a great time.

In 1959, shortly after Fidel Castro came into power, Eugenio de Sosa was arrested, convicted of plotting the overthrow of the government in a trial conducted without even the semblance of the rule of law, and thrown into prison for several years. What happened to him there, especially at Havana's psychiatric hospital, is well documented in the Cuban exile press.

To close this chapter: When de Sosa was finally able to leave Cuba and go into exile he told a fellow Cuban something about his duel. When the signal to fire was given, de Sosa said he fired immediately, and missed. Guillermo Belt could have taken his time, aimed carefully, and probably wounded or even killed his opponent. Instead, he fired into the ground. You don't always have to wash honor with blood.

Chapter XII

On November 14, 1944, our youngest son, Juan Alberto Benjamín, was born. What a beautiful baby! “He looks like the Baby Jesus”, said Santiago, our faithful and excellent gardener who worked for us until his death many years later. Juan was baptized on Christmas Day by Monsignor Jorge Caruana, the Apostolic Nuncio in Havana. His godparents were his eldest brother Guillo and my cousin Lydia García Mon, the wife of Rogelio Martínez Pedro.

(From Notes and Scribbles)

In September 1944, President-elect Ramón Grau San Martín visited Washington and New York City in his reincarnation as a liberal who no longer thought the United States was Cuba’s worst enemy. Guillermo Belt was part of his entourage not only because, as widely rumored, he would be Cuba’s next ambassador but because he had played a decisive role in the rapprochement between his country and the land of his ancestors.

Judging from the press accounts the trip was very successful. On September 3, The Washington Post carried a glowing description of the “brilliant reception at the Embassy of Cuba, honoring the President-elect of Cuba, Dr. Ramon Grau San Martin.” (Newspapers in the U.S. did not use accent marks back then.) The Post added: “More than 1000 guests thronged the flag-draped reception rooms for a glimpse of the famous Cuban liberal, who will be inaugurated October 10 as the chief executive of his country.”

The New York Times was equally complimentary on September 4 when it reported on Grau's attendance at Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Times said that more than 1,000 Cubans who were waiting on the cathedral steps for the president-elect's arrival entered the church after Grau, "swelling the congregation to nearly 4,000." And, at the end of Grau's U.S. trip, another item carried an appraisal of the president-elect's visit by Spruille Braden, the U.S. ambassador to Cuba: "Dr. Grau has won the high esteem of the country's officialdom and leaves a very favorable impression on the people of this country."

The Times article of September 9 also quotes Guillermo Belt as the next ambassador to Washington: "We are deeply grateful for the reception given to Dr. Grau and the cordiality which went beyond the amenities of protocol." On 10 October 1944 Grau assumed office as President of Cuba. On October 30 he signed the decree appointing Guillermo Belt Ramírez ambassador to the United States. Confirmation by the Senate came days later.

These were fast-moving days in the Belt household. Two weeks after his appointment Guillermo became the father of his fifth child. There was the new baby, plus a job requiring the family's move to a country that for the children was unknown. On 27 November Guillermo flew to Washington and presented his credentials to President Roosevelt. His new career in diplomacy was off to a quick start. After settling into his offices at the Cuban Embassy, he returned to Havana in December for Juan's baptism and to spend Christmas at home.

The day after Christmas the brand-new ambassador was back at work, although still in Havana. In a note to the Secretary of State dated December 28, 1944, Ambassador Braden reported on his conversations with Cuba's Minister of State (i.e., Minister of Foreign Relations) and the Minister of the Treasury regarding Cuba's debt to the U.S. of \$1,400,000 under the Lend-Lease program. These conversations had not borne fruit, wrote Braden, adding:

I mentioned this situation on December 26 to Ambassador Belt, who is at present in Habana. He said that there is "an under-

*standing around generally” that Lend-Lease will never be collected; therefore, Cuba does not wish to pay and later find that others have not been required to do so. I assured Ambassador Belt that he was mistaken and that the United States does expect to be reimbursed in accordance with the terms of the various Lend-Lease agreements. The Department may wish to take an appropriate opportunity to reiterate this point of view to Ambassador Belt.*¹

Lend-Lease was a 1941 law, enacted at Roosevelt’s urging, which permitted the U.S. to sell, exchange, lease or lend any “defense article” to any country whose defense the President deemed vital to that of the United States. The program’s primary beneficiary was Great Britain, as intended by FDR, who used this device to help the mother country while technically maintaining U.S. neutrality.

Because of its strategic position in the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba, one of the first Latin American countries to declare war on the Axis powers, was included in the program. The Cuban military was the most helpful among the Caribbean states during World War II, in the opinion of Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard professor, writer (two Pulitzer prizes) and wartime naval officer. Perhaps Braden did not have this in mind while engaged in his debt collection efforts.

Five days after this exchange the Belts were on their way to Washington. The trip, in Cuquita’s words:

World War II was still raging and transport of all kind was scarce. In a conversation with Secretary of State Edward Stettinius he offered Guillermo the use of a military plane that would take troops to Miami for shipment abroad and return empty to Andrews Air Force Base.

We accepted gratefully, as our group was numerous, without exaggeration. It consisted of Guillermo, Guillo, Sonny, Noel, Marilyns, Juan (who was two months old), Miss Devereux, Ernestina, Rosa María, Martín Iglesias, and I. We left on January 1, 1945,

¹ *Foreign Relations, 1944, Volume VII, p. 918.*

and arrived at Andrews at night. Coming from sunny Cuba only a few hours before, we had to face the cold and dark of a typical winter night.

Guillermo provided interesting details about Secretary Stettinius' kind offer. In the informal notes mentioned earlier he wrote that on arrival in Washington, the U.S. Chief of Protocol, meeting the new ambassador at the airport, gave him the news that Stettinius had just been appointed head of the diplomatic service. Guillermo had met him at the luncheon President Roosevelt had offered to President-elect Grau. At their first meeting after presenting credentials, the Secretary of State asked the Cuban ambassador when his wife would be joining him, to which Belt replied that she would come as soon as he could obtain airline tickets, a difficult matter because of wartime travel priorities. The next morning, the ambassador's secretary told him in some excitement that she had a telephone call claiming to be from the Secretary of State. It was in fact from him, and he offered the use of a military plane to bring the family to the nation's capital from Miami.

The cold to which Cuquita referred was only one of several challenges. Other than Guillermo and his wife, her former governess was the only person in this entourage who spoke English. Neither the nannies nor Martín, the butler, spoke a word. And the four older children had only a smattering of English, acquired in grammar school, similar to the limited Spanish children learn in the United States.

The Cuban ambassador and his young wife arrived in a city they knew, Cuquita from her school days at Georgetown Visitation, Guillermo from earlier trips. Even the house they were to live in for the next four years was familiar to them. Cuquita had visited the Cuban Embassy on 16th Street several times while studying at Visitation, invited by the ambassador and his wife, who were good friends of her parents. Guillermo had been there very recently, during President-elect Grau's visit, and had spent several days and nights at the embassy after presenting his credentials and before returning to Havana to reunite with his family and take them to Washington.

For the Belt children it was another story. They had left behind the house where they were born and raised, their wonderful playground at Villa Marisol; their friends, their school, what seemed like their whole world, in fact, for a city strange to them in a country whose language and customs they did not know, to live in a big formal building, which looked like a palace but was altogether too somber for their taste.

Everyone was too tired to dwell on forebodings, however, so upon arrival at the embassy sleep came easily after the long, tiring flight on the military transport plane, which had benches along the sides of the fuselage instead of seats. The three older boys shared a room and the only girl had her own, just like back home. Baby Juan, whose milk bottles had been warmed next to the plane's engines during the trip by an obliging crew, kept right on sleeping in his cradle, not far from Ana's watchful eye.

What a way to start the New Year! That Tuesday, January 2, was the day to explore *la embajada*, the embassy where they would live for the next four years. The building had three stories. The ground floor was taken up by the chancery – one of the many new words to be learned, which meant their father's office and those of his staff – and it was basically off limits to the children. Their territory was on the third floor, which housed the living quarters. It was cramped by Villa Marisol standards, considering that their old house had been open to them with few restrictions.

The second floor offered intriguing possibilities. Running along the back of the building, the ballroom was an inviting space if they were to stay mostly indoors, a more than likely probability in the winter months ahead. But first they had to figure out how to make the best of this beautiful room. It had a polished hardwood floor, perfect for dancing and completely useless for the rough and tumble ways practiced on the fields and lawns at La Coronela. So, in the course of learning to play in a house built in 1917 in the style of King Louis XV, a house that was not their own but rather, imposingly, the property of the Republic of Cuba, the eldest of the little Belts, approaching his twelfth birthday, his two brothers and their sister, all following closely in age, took up badminton, swinging rackets

to hit (or, more often, miss) the feathered “birds” while caressing the floor in their stocking feet – a sport they would not have been caught dead playing with the friends they missed so much, back in those happy, sun-filled, carefree days that now seemed so far away in Cuba.



Cuban Embassy, 2630 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Chapter XIII

We finally arrived in San Francisco, and I fell in love with the city at first sight: the marvelous eternal spring climate, the flowers, the air, the people. I think that if I had been able to choose where to live for the greater part of my life, I would have said, right here.

We stayed with the entire delegation at the St. Francis Hotel, the most traditional one. Every evening, at the Angelus, you could hear the bells of the Catholic churches, of which there were many. Even the church in the Chinese quarter, St. Mary's, is Catholic. It has an image that I saw carried in procession on Mother's Day: a Chinese Madonna, with the prettiest Chinese Baby Jesus I have ever seen.

From the outset Guillermo was called upon to play an important role in that first General Assembly of the United Nations. On the first day of the session, the Steering Committee met. It was made up of the Four Great Powers: Stettinius, for the United States; Molotov, for Russia; Sir Anthony Eden, for Great Britain; and T.V. Soong, for China. The first decision was to elect a Rapporteur, that is, a recording secretary, and Guillermo was designated, thus becoming the first official chosen by election in the world organization. The committee worked in secret, without stenographers, so that he had to take notes, translate them into English, and submit them to a vote by the Assembly. I took a keen interest in all of this and helped if I could. We worked twelve and fourteen hours a day.

Although he was not part of the Steering Committee, a fifth member was added to the Four Great Powers: Georges Bidault (advised by Paul Boncourt), of France. Guillermo's position put him in daily contact with the four super delegates, all of whom gave dinners in his honor. On the last day of the meeting the Assembly gave a vote of thanks to Guillermo for his work. In this manner he celebrated his Saint's Day, June 25, 1945.

From Notes and Scribbles

In the 1940s events that would literally change the world were underway, one rapidly following the other, and Washington was at their center. On 6 June 1944 the United States and its allies launched the invasion of Normandy and with it the final drive to win the war in Europe. Following the success of that huge military operation the United States met with the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China, at Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington, DC, to make plans for the peace they could see within reach. The meeting lasted from August to October and although key issues were left unresolved it did produce the basic draft for the Charter of the United Nations.

Guillermo Belt and his family settled in Washington as these events were unfolding. On 4 February 1945, a few days after their arrival, President Roosevelt was in Yalta, on the Black Sea, meeting with Churchill and Stalin to negotiate issues vital to the Big Three. The secret agreements they reached would be examined and criticized much later, but one result was made public right away: The U.S., the U.K., and the U.S.S.R. set 25 April 1945 as the starting date of the UN Conference on World Organization, to be held in the United States and, as later determined, in San Francisco.

Roosevelt hoped that the organization envisaged at Dumbarton Oaks would provide peaceful solutions to the grave questions posed at Yalta. However, in the words of Henry Kissinger: "Like Moses, FDR saw the Promised Land, but it was not

given to him to reach it.” (*Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 423.) Thirteen days before the San Francisco gathering he died suddenly. In the photos taken at Yalta Roosevelt’s health appears frail; still, his death took the country, and the world, by surprise. Vice President Harry Truman assumed office, with little or no experience in international affairs and practically no information on the war, much less on the conversations and agreements, mostly tacit, reached at Yalta. But he was willing to take decisions, however difficult they might be.

For openers, Truman decided to go ahead with the San Francisco conference. It was the right decision. On 8 May, two weeks after the meeting opened, the war ended in Europe and V-E Day was proclaimed. The U.S. was still at war with Japan, but the work of setting up mechanisms that would hopefully avert future wars went on until 26 June, when the U.N. Charter was signed.

Now it was Truman’s turn to engage in high-stakes diplomacy. In July the Big Three met again, this time in Postdam. While there Truman received news of the test explosion of an atomic bomb in New Mexico, the successful result of the top secret “Manhattan Project”. In the Postdam Declaration the Big Three called on Japan to surrender unconditionally. Four days later, in the first week of August, a B-29 named the *Enola Gay* dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, a city of some 250,000, with devastating results that included 80,000 dead. On 9 August the U.S. dropped a second bomb, on Nagasaki, causing almost total destruction. The following day Japan surrendered.

In the first half of 1945 mankind saw the end of World War II and the beginning of a new system to govern affairs among nations. The men and women who were called upon to play a role in those momentous days had a choice: they could play it safe, or they could meet the challenges to the full extent of their ability. Guillermo Belt chose the latter course.

For diplomats throughout the world this was a very busy season. In late February 1945, Guillermo was in Mexico City attending the Inter-American Conference on Problems of War and Peace. Invited by the Mexican government, the delegates

at this extraordinary meeting were asked to consider “the manner of intensifying their collaboration and the participation of America in the future world organization, and the further measures that should be taken to strengthen the inter-American system and the economic solidarity of the Continent.”

The meeting’s main purpose was to preserve the role of the regional system which the twenty countries of Latin America, and the United States, had set up decades before. The conference was convoked at the ministerial level, that is, each delegation would preferably be headed by the country’s foreign minister. Gustavo Cuervo Rubio, Cuba’s minister of foreign affairs, was the chief delegate, followed by Guillermo Belt and fourteen others – a larger group, according to the official documents, than the U.S. delegation. It would be the first and only time that Ambassador Belt would not head the Cuban delegation to an international conference while posted in Washington.

Of the sixty-one resolutions approved by the conference between 21 February and 8 March 1945, Resolution XXX, titled “On Establishment of a General International Organization”, contains the Latin American position regarding the future world body. In an introductory paragraph it states: “In the present Inter-American Conference, the Republics here represented which did not take part in the Dumbarton Oaks conversations have formulated a certain number of suggestions which in their opinion would contribute to the perfecting of the above-mentioned Proposals;” (i.e., the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals). The participants resolved to transmit to the San Francisco conference “the views, comments and suggestions which, in the judgment of the American Republics presenting them, should be taken into consideration in the formulation of the definitive Charter of the projected Organization, ...” (*The International Conferences of American States, Second Supplement, 1942-1954*. Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, General Secretariat, Organization of American States, 1958, pp. 96-97.)

The lines were clearly drawn. It would be a battle of ideas between the four countries with the principal roles in World War II – the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and Nationalist China – whose representatives had

drawn up the first draft of a new peace organization, and the twenty nations that, together with the U.S., had long ago created their own mechanism for collective resolution and were now trying to preserve it.

The first encounter in this battle between Latin America and the Soviet Union was the fight over the admission of Argentina to the United Nations Conference on International Organization, where the UN Charter would be drawn up and approved. Roosevelt and Churchill at Yalta had agreed to Stalin's demand for three seats in the future General Assembly: one, of course, for the Soviet Union, plus one for White Russia and another for the Ukraine, both Russian satellites. When the matter came up at the San Francisco conference the Latin American countries opposed what they considered to be an "appeasement" of the USSR, and relented only when the latter promised to support Argentina's admission.

However, renegeing on the deal, Russian Foreign Minister Molotov strenuously objected to Argentina's entry once he had got his two satellites admitted to the conference. The Latin Americans then mounted a campaign in favor of Argentina. The Soviets, true to form, tried to discredit Argentina's backers by calling them fascists. While the Argentine government under General Perón did have rather clear tendencies to fascism, Latin America's motives were very different than sympathy for this strongman, much less for his ideology. Russell Porter, a well-known journalist and experienced Latin American hand, put it this way in *The New York Times* on 12 May 1945:

One of the leaders of the Latin American group is Dr. Guillermo Belt, Cuban Ambassador to the United States, well known to this reporter as a revolutionary opponent of the late President Machado, who, until his fall in 1933, was a small-time Caribbean Hitler giving a preview of fascism complete with a Gestapo under the name of the "Porra," and later an opponent of former President Batista, also a dictator, but one who had Communist support.

In the next paragraph Porter lays to rest the accusation of fascist leanings in regard to Belt:

To observers who were in Havana in the early Nineteen-Thirties, as was this reporter, the Latin Americans point out that nothing could be more ridiculous than to suggest that Dr. Belt, then, as now, a supporter of Dr. Ramon Grau San Martin, who was elected President of Cuba last year, although his provisional government had been refused recognition by Washington in 1933 because of its radical tendencies, had suddenly turned Fascist.

In two paragraphs the Times reporter had established Guillermo Belt's credentials as an opponent of dictatorial rule. Russell Porter also quoted the following statement from Ambassador Belt regarding Latin America's reasons for insisting on Argentina's entry:

We consider that the most indispensable factor for the future security of this continent is its union and solidarity. We stood so firmly in favor of the admission of Argentina to this conference because we consider her presence here indispensable for continental unity and solidarity and because we are convinced that the Argentine people are as democratic as any other in this hemisphere.

The article made it clear that the fight was about preserving the inter-American system, which preceded the nascent United Nations by a good many years. Witness the following paragraphs, with general attribution to "the Latin Americans," but which most likely came from Belt (especially the second):

Drastic measures against the Argentine Government would have complete justification, it was pointed out, when, as and if the other American republics were convinced it actually was a menace to the security of the Western Hemisphere.

It further was stressed that the present inter-American system began with the inauguration of the "good-neighbor" policy by President Roosevelt in 1933, when the Platt Amendment was abrogated and Cuba became a truly independent country instead of a protectorate.

Argentina was admitted to the conference. With the support of the United States, the United Kingdom and several other countries the Latin American position prevailed. Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Carcano was received on May 11 at the San Francisco airport by a US Army honor guard and a Navy band with the customary ruffles and flourishes.

Two weeks before, Ambassador Belt had been elected *rapporteur* of the steering committee, which, made up of the heads of delegation, was responsible for coordinating the work of the conference. This was a key position and an honor won for Cuba, particularly when one considers that its delegation was headed by an ambassador, while several others were presided by a prime minister and most by the country's foreign minister. The post kept the young ambassador very busy indeed, reporting on all the decisions of the steering committee in addition to writing and giving his own speeches and participating in the debates as Cuba's head delegate. When the UN Charter was finally approved, it fell to Ambassador Belt to present the text formally for signature by the representatives of the member states of the United Nations.

This was the first but not the only position to which Cuba's chief delegate was elected in the early days of the UN. On 27 November 1945, the preparatory commission of the General Assembly, meeting in London, elected Guillermo Belt as chairman of the trusteeship committee. The work of this committee led to the creation of the UN Trusteeship System under Chapter XII of the Charter.

Diplomacy is an ancient art, originally practiced between two rulers even before the peoples ruled by them coalesced into nations. Each ruler appointed an ambassador to represent him or her personally before the other. This form is called bilateral diplomacy. In modern times, as nations thought it in their interest to join together in some form of association, multilateral diplomacy arose to complement the older kind, with a delegate representing his country before an international organization.

Ambassador Belt practiced both forms, simultaneously. Furthermore, because he enjoyed the utmost confidence of President Grau he was virtually independent of the Cuban foreign minister. Guillermo Belt would set policy in his dealings

with the US government and also in his role as head of the Cuban delegation to the United Nations and to other international organizations. Unlike most ambassadors who are subject to direction from their foreign ministry, often at a level below that of the minister, he consulted the president directly and mostly in general terms. More than once Grau told him to vote on an issue at the UN according to his best judgment.

So while leading at San Francisco the campaign to preserve the inter-American system as agreed at the Mexico meeting, Ambassador Belt still had business to take care of in Washington. On 24 September 1945 he began negotiations with the State Department for the return to Cuba of all the military bases built by the United States during World War II. The main one was an airfield at San Antonio de los Baños, twenty miles south of Havana, built at a cost of several million dollars during the campaign to counter German submarines preying on commercial shipping in the Caribbean, which at the time was still manned by the US Army Air Forces. Two more bases, vacant by then, were the naval one at San Julián, in Pinar del Río province, and another air force base in Camaguey.

By 1 April 1946, just over six months later, Guillermo had succeeded. On that date Secretary of State James F. Byrnes addressed a diplomatic note to Ambassador Belt agreeing to return the three bases on May 20th, the forty-fourth anniversary of Cuban independence. On that day in 1902, as mentioned before, the US flag had been ceremonially lowered over the Morro fortress and the Cuban flag had been raised to the cheers of a huge crowd. The date, chosen at Cuba's request, therefore had great symbolic value.

The Cuban ambassador greeted the successful end of the negotiations with a diplomatically worded statement published in the New York Times on April 2. Referring to Secretary Byrnes' note he said:

It will also end the malicious campaign which certain political groups have made in Cuba, pretending that difficulties existed between the Governments of Cuba and the United States with respect to the return of the bases.

The cordial and friendly form in which these negotiations have been carried out is one more demonstration of the fact that the Good Neighbor policy is still vigorous and that the friendship between our two peoples is unbreakable.

Although diplomacy is practiced in every country on Earth, the world of diplomats is a small one. The Secretary of State's note was handed to Guillermo by an old friend, at the time director of the office of inter-American affairs at the State Department. Early in his career Ellis O. Briggs had served in Cuba, in the turbulent 1930s, and the two men had met and become friends. On his second Havana posting Briggs had been the *chargé d'affaires* when in 1942 the Cuban government had agreed to the bases. Four years later he was giving his friend the good news of their return.

Ambassador Briggs' son Everett, whom the Belt children called Teddy in the days when he came to play with them at Villa Marisol, became a career ambassador like his father. Many years later, while serving in Panama, he ran into Juan Belt, who was posted there by AID, the US Agency for International Development, in yet another happy coincidence between the two families.

At the second meeting of the UN General Assembly held in Flushing Meadow, New York, Ambassador Belt was elected one of the assembly's seven vice-presidents. On 16 September 1947, Paul W. Ward, correspondent for The Baltimore Sun, wrote about Guillermo's third election by the world body:

The Soviet bloc's candidacy for one of the seven vice presidencies -- Dimitri Manuilski, Ukrainian Foreign Minister and former head of the Communist Internationale – lost out to Cuba's Guillermo Belt.

Mr. Manuilski's defeat, however, represented an upset in the plans of the conference's behind-the-scenes managers. Their arrangements had called for distribution of the seven vice presidencies among the Big Five – Britain, France, China, the United States and Russia – plus Mexico and the Ukraine.

The plan miscarried only in Mr. Manuilski's case. He got but 27 votes, a total that tied him with Dr. Belt in whose support the Latin American bloc demonstrated its strength here.

The Soviet defeat by a Latin American was the second one at that meeting. Oswaldo Aranha, the Brazilian foreign minister, had been elected president of the conference. On the first ballot the Czech foreign minister received only the six votes of the Soviet bloc (composed of the U.S.S.R., two of its autonomous republics – the Ukraine and White Russia – Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia). Aranha got 26, and the Australian foreign minister 23. Election to this position required 28 votes (out of 55 participating countries), so a second ballot was taken. The Soviets, who were strongly opposed to the Australian chief delegate, gave two of their votes to Aranha, just enough to put him over the top, and invalidated the remaining four. Talk about reluctant support.

In his opening paragraph, *The Sun's* correspondent gave a very good sense of the struggle that was already going on among the Big Five:

The Soviet Government, which twenty times has stymied the United Nations Security Council by use of its unilateral veto power, insisted on demonstrating its lack of comparable authority in the world organization's General Assembly as the latter opened its second annual meeting here today.

There was no veto power in the General Assembly for any of the Big Five. In this body the “behind-the-scenes managers” had to rely on their vote gathering ability. Still, the U.S.S.R., and the U.S., Britain, France, and China as well, were trying hard to dominate the Assembly. As pointed out by Ward, they had agreed to distribute the seven vice presidencies to their liking: one for each of the major powers, plus one for Ukraine and another for Mexico. This, of course, meant that the Russians would end up with two vice presidencies, so the Americans countered with Mexico, no doubt a trusted ally.

All that backroom planning was frustrated by Cuba. In the first ballot Guillermo Belt received 27 votes, with the strong

support of Latin America. He had successfully championed Argentina's entry in 1945, so this support should not have surprised anyone. As has been pointed out above, the battle lines between the Latin American countries and the framers of the UN had been drawn early in the struggle to create a new international organization. Brazil's election represented a clear victory for Latin America.

In an ironic twist of fate it fell to a Latin American – the General Assembly's just-elected president – to break the tie between another Latin and yet another Soviet candidate. The rules of procedure called for a decision by lot. The luck of the draw favored Belt. Two strikes for the Soviet bloc.

For Guillermo Belt the taste of triumph was doubly sweet. He had once again led a fight for his region against the Soviet Union, and had won. Furthermore, Cuba had not been the first choice of the United States for the vice presidency of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Mexico, a country bordering the U.S. and much larger than Cuba, was the U.S. favorite. In this sense, Belt achieved a second victory versus one of the Big Five in his third election to high office at the United Nations.

Chapter XIV

French President Auriol invited us to his box in the Opera Comique, where we saw “The Tales of Hoffman” for the second time. Another weekend he invited Guillermo to go hunting, but Guillermo declined, preferring to visit the outskirts of Paris with his family. Upon our return, we received a gift from the President: a brace of pheasants from the hunt. Additionally, the President invited us to his box at the horse races. While we were at the races with the eldest children, we saw a man staring at us with his mouth open. We realized later that he was the Italian who owned a small restaurant near our hotel, and where we frequently took the children for an early dinner before Guillermo and I went out to enjoy Paris la nuit (Paris by night). The next time we went with the children to the restaurant the owner, who had never, ever, given us as much as a “..by your leave..” and, instead, seemed to scorn my children’s simple tastes for meals of spaghetti sans wine, decided to bestow upon us his most fawning hospitality, complete with bows and reverences and all sort of personal attention. This continued until the day we left.

Guillermo Belt was not a man to rest on his laurels. His success in having Argentina admitted to the UN, his first two elections to the world body, the April 1946 return to Cuba of wartime military bases were no reason to stop tackling the major issues of the day. So, in August of 1946

he took on the veto power that the Big Five had reserved for themselves. On August 3, The Baltimore Sun reported that Ambassador Belt had formally requested a special meeting of the General Assembly to “eliminate the so-called veto privilege.”

This was a challenge to the most powerful countries in the world, and particularly to the position of the United States. It was not to Guillermo’s personal advantage to throw down the gauntlet before the government to which he was accredited. True, there were sophisticated US diplomats who could understand that the representative of a small neighboring country, who had been instrumental in patching up the relationship between his president and the major power to the North, was acting on a matter of principle. But there were also in the State Department and in the political arena persons who could not countenance what they considered to be an upstart attitude by the Cuban ambassador. And these people were able to cause Guillermo considerable trouble in carrying out his primary mission in Washington.

Cuba was not alone. Australia, for one, had also opposed the veto. So did Colombia. The United Kingdom had made proposals to soften it, but without giving it up. The US delegate defended the privilege. In the event, the UN did what it later became known for: it passed the buck. On December 2, The Baltimore Sun, in a piece stating that the issue was being sidetracked by sending it to a newly created subcommittee, quoted Guillermo Belt: “The United States defends the veto because there are still, unfortunately, vestiges of isolation in this country.”

Before his appointment to the ambassadorship Guillermo Belt had been accused by his political opponents in Cuba of being too pro-American. It was a cheap and easy shot: his grandfather was a US citizen who had settled in Cuba, he spoke English, and Belt is obviously a *gringo* surname. Cheap shots are commonplace in politics, and not only in Cuba.

The veto was the linchpin of the United Nations, a creation as it was of the Big Five. The battle to end this privilege was doomed to failure, but it had to be fought. When the issue finally came to a vote, the only countries of Latin America to oppose it were Cuba and Colombia. To this day the debate

goes on, with a number of countries seeking to abolish this relic of post World War II.

Another major issue was the partition of Palestine, a scheme mainly engineered by the United States to secure a state for the Jewish people once Great Britain's mandate ended on May 15, 1948. Again, the head of the Cuban delegation took a stand. The *New York Times* on 17 October 1947, in a long piece on the partition plan quoted Guillermo: "Dr. Guillermo Belt of Cuba said his country felt strongly that the majority recommendations would not lead to a just or lasting solution of the problem. He said Cuba also opposed their adoption because of the belief that to approve them might endanger the peace."

Thousands of pages have been written on this subject. The fact remains that the partition of Palestine did not bring about peace between the Jewish people and the Palestinians, and to this day the matter figures on the agenda of those who claim to be striving for the peaceful existence side by side of these two ancient peoples.

Cuba was the only country in Latin America to cast a vote against partition. Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico abstained. The remaining countries in the region voted in favor. The UN approved the partition of Palestine. The Cuban delegation had taken a position on principle, and went down to defeat. There is no disgrace in losing on principle.

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Ambassador Belt had the support of very capable career diplomats and, in the Cuban delegation to the UN, of a jurist and distinguished law professor from the University of Havana, Dr. Ernesto Dihigo, who wrote the first draft of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Guy Pérez-Cisneros, a career diplomat, presented Cuba's arguments in favor of the Declaration. The negotiating process that began at the San Francisco conference continued at the meeting of the UN General Assembly Preparatory Commission in London in January, 1946. There, the Cubans obtained valuable advice from no less an expert on world affairs than Winston Churchill.

At an informal meeting arranged by Willy de Blanck, Cuban minister counselor (Cuba did not have an ambassador accredited to the Court of St. James'), the former prime minister listened carefully to his guests. He then reminded them politely that Cuba, a small Caribbean island he remembered from his visit when it was still a Spanish colony and he a young officer in the British army, would not succeed in its aspiration for a human rights declaration unless it garnered the backing of large countries. He then suggested they lobby the Latin Americans, as well as other countries attending the London conference, as a means of awakening the interest of the larger ones. He further said that President Truman had recently told him that he planned to appoint Eleanor Roosevelt to represent the U.S. on the Economic and Social Council of the UN, where the matter would be discussed, and suggested they approach her.

On 10 January 1946, the first General Assembly was convened at Westminster Central Hall with 51 countries in attendance. Exactly one week later the Security Council met for the first time and adopted its rules of procedure. In the midst of these developments, the Cuban delegation, with Pérez-Cisneros as its representative on the Economic and Social Council, lobbied for President Roosevelt's widow and then continued this effort back in San Francisco. Mrs. Roosevelt was well known and highly regarded as an advocate for social causes during her husband's long tenure, so her reputation won the day and she was elected (with a little help from her friends) chair of the Human Rights Commission in April 1946.

Cuba also spearheaded the negotiations on human rights at the regional level. At the Bogota conference where the OAS Charter was adopted another step forward was taken with the approval of the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man on 30 April 1948. Then, in September, when the UN met in Paris, Pérez-Cisneros proposed that the OAS instrument serve as the basis for the world declaration on this subject. Dr. Dihigo's draft was taken up and many of its recommendations were incorporated in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted on 10 December 1948.

Another successful proposal co-sponsored by Cuba at the UN was the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of

the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948. This international treaty, as well as the word genocide, was the brainchild of Raphael Lemkin, whose profile, is at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) webpage at <http://www.unhcr.org>.

Another very able career diplomat, Valentín Riva, who had come from Havana to the embassy in Washington with Ambassador Belt when he took up his post there, introduced Lemkin to Belt. Many years later, in a conversation with Guillo, Valentín recalled the meeting in Lake Success, on Long Island, where the first session of the UN General Assembly was taking place in October, 1945. Lemkin was lobbying for an international condemnation of genocide and looking for delegations willing to present the matter to the Assembly. Guillermo Belt agreed to be a sponsor and Lemkin found two more: Panama and India.

In the article “Genocide as a Crime Under International Law”, published in the *American Journal of International Law* (1947) Volume 41 (I): 145-151, Lemkin wrote:

The writer discussed the situation with several delegates at Lake Success. Encouraged by their sympathetic understanding, he drafted a resolution which was signed by the representatives [p. 149] of Cuba, India, and Panama as sponsors. With the strong support of the United States delegation, the resolution was placed on the agenda of the General Assembly. Later the matter was referred to the Legal Committee for discussion.

The writer expresses his deep gratitude to H.E. Guillermo Belt, Ambassador of Cuba, to the Hon. Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Chairman of the Delegation of India, and to H.E. Dr. Ricardo J. Alfaro, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Panama, for sponsoring the resolution.

In her memoirs Cuquita recalled another election of her husband at the UN in Paris.

We sailed on the Queen Mary on September 8, the day of Our Lady of Charity, Patroness of Cuba, with a full cast: Guillermo; the five children; Ernestina; Valentín Riva, Secretary of the

Embassy under Guillermo; Ernesto Dihigo, who had recently married his charming Caruca (whose Saint's Day we celebrated on the day we sailed); and I. We all stayed at the Hotel Scribe, next to the Opera Theater.

In Paris Guillermo was very successful: they elected him unanimously to the Security Council of the United Nations. Election by unanimity to the Council had been unheard of and even today, 60 years later, it has never happened again. The French Prime Minister, Schuman, declared to the press: "This is a vote of confidence for Belt and Cuba in the World Parliament."

Chapter XV

As Cuba's representative to the Organization of American States, he chaired the Cuban delegation at many inter-American meetings held at the foreign minister level. He participated so often in these ministerial meetings that many years later, when I began working at the OAS, a distinguished foreign minister of Ecuador, on my being introduced to him, said: "You must be the son of el Canciller Belt", giving my father the customary title in Spanish for a minister of foreign affairs. When I replied that I was the son of Ambassador Belt, the old diplomat corrected me: "Your father was Cuba's foreign minister. I attended more than one meeting of ministers of foreign affairs together with him." I had to let the matter rest.

On 19 August 1947, Guillermo Belt made the front page of the New York Times. The hectic pace of diplomacy had taken him to Brazil, where he headed the Cuban delegation to the meeting that would draft a collective defense treaty to protect the Latin American countries and the United States from aggression by a power outside the hemisphere. The headline of the item in the first left hand column read "CUBA INSISTS PACT FOR AMERICAS BAR ECONOMIC THREATS" and underneath "Challenge to Position of U.S. Set Out by Dr. Belt Before Full Rio Conference."

The item, signed by Milton Bracker on August 18, began:

Cuba this afternoon laid down her expected challenge to the United States on the issue of economic aggression.

Before a plenary session of the Inter-American Defense Conference, Cuba's chief delegate, Dr. Guillermo Belt, demanded the inclusion of terms prohibiting "threats and aggressions of an economic character" in the hemispheric pact that the conference is to write. He was supported by a general plea to the same effect by Foreign Minister Luis Fernando Guachalla of Bolivia.

The Times report, although long (it went on to another page, with more text and photos,) did not transcribe the Cuban ambassador's proposal, quoted below from the official records of the conference:

The Cuban delegation considers that the chapter on threats and acts of aggression will be incomplete and meaningless if it does not include threats and aggressions of an economic nature. The mere notification by one state to another that it will apply sanctions or coercive measures of an economic, financial or commercial nature if it does not agree to its demands should be considered a threat. The unilateral application of such measures should be considered an act of aggression.¹

Guillermo's initiative was based on the need to defend his country's right to its sugar quota in the U.S. market from pressure that its powerful neighbor might bring to bear for political or economic reasons. The participants in the Rio conference understood this clearly. It is therefore not surprising that the United States was opposed to a provision prohibiting economic aggression in the treaty that it wanted to sign with the other governments of the Americas.

¹ Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Continental Peace and Security, "Speech Given by His Excellency Guillermo Belt, Delegate of Cuba, at the Third Plenary Session", CRJ/58, SG/34, 19/8/47-M182, Pan American Union, Washington, D.C., p. 4.

The arguments put forward against the Cuban proposal were of a formal nature. Ambassador Belt rejected them with these words in the same speech:

It has been said that the question of economic relations should not be discussed at this conference, but rather put off until the conference in Bogota. This is not an economic issue. It is precisely a question of threat and aggression and, therefore, this is the right time to debate it, when we are defining threats and acts of aggression.

Cuba did not win the diplomatic battle in Rio de Janeiro. The Rio Treaty was adopted without any reference to economic aggression. But the following year, at the Ninth International American Conference held in Bogota, the Cuban thesis was validated in Article 16 of the Charter of the Organization of American States, as follows:

Article 16. No State may use or encourage the use of coercive measures of an economic or political character in order to force the sovereign will of another State and obtain from it advantages of any kind.

Ambassador Belt also headed the Cuban delegation in Bogota. He had to return to Washington before the end of the Ninth Conference in order to give a speech at the Joint Session of the U. S. Congress to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the resolution adopted on 19 April 1898 on Cuban independence. He was therefore unable to hear the tribute that the Chairman of the Delegation of Brazil paid him:

The Honorable Cuban Delegation, through its distinguished chief (now absent), Ambassador Belt, proposed to the Bogota Conference, as he had done in Rio de Janeiro, the creation of a firm juridical precept of international law, that is, that economic aggression is prohibited, as is political aggression.²

² Ninth International American Conference, *Actas y Documentos*, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, Bogotá, 1953, Vol. II, p. 395.

The President of the Ninth Conference, Eduardo Zuleta Angel, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, likewise recognized the work of the Cuban delegation:

I wish to remind the delegates that the text approved by the Initiatives Committee on the so-called 'economic aggression' has fairly old origins... One delegation, that of Cuba, has worked with much tenacity and care on this matter, presenting the problem in various ways and vigorously defending the incorporation of this principle.³

In defense of the interests of the country Cuban diplomacy achieved a victory that is still recognized today. An authority on international law, Félix Fernández-Shaw, has called the prohibition of economic aggression the Belt Doctrine, stating that it could also be called "the Belt Corollary to the Drago Doctrine".⁴ Guillermo preferred to call it the Grau Doctrine, in honor of President Ramón Grau San Martín.

*

The Ninth International American Conference was underway and Guillermo Belt was in Bogota, heading the Cuban delegation, when an unforeseeable event took place. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the popular leader of the Liberal Party of Colombia, had just left his office around 1 p.m. on April 9 and was walking to have lunch with friends when he was shot four times by a man named Juan Roa Sierra. Gaitán died in the street. At 2 o'clock that afternoon he had an appointment to meet in his office with several Cubans who had come to Colombia to participate in a student congress. One of them was Fidel Castro.

³ *Ibíd.*, p. 466.

⁴ Félix Fernández-Shaw, *La Organización de los Estados Americanos (O.E.A.), Una nueva visión de América*, 2nd ed., Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, Madrid, 1963, p. 425.

Gaitán's assassin was seized by a mob and beaten to death on the spot. In *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution* (University of South Carolina Press, 2007), the author Antonio Rafael de la Cova writes (p. 23): "Thus started the Bogotazo, a devastating riot that cost more than three hundred lives, gutted thirty-five major buildings, and sparked Colombia's ten-year civil war."

In his thoroughly researched book (ten pages of bibliography, hundreds of footnotes, as befits an academic work) Professor de la Cova, writing about the Bogotazo, quotes Enrique Ovares, at the time president of the Cuban university student federation (FEU, Federación Estudiantil Universitaria). The FEU leadership had decided to participate in a congress against colonialism in Latin America, promoted by the Argentine strongman, Juan Domingo Perón, which would coincide with the inter-American conference. Ovares himself went to Bogota as FEU president, together with Alfredo Guevara, also an FEU officer.

Fidel Castro had shortly before flown from Havana to Caracas, fearing for his life after participating in several shooting incidents between rival gangster groups operating in and around the University of Havana. Although Castro did not hold any office in the FEU, one of the organizers of the student congress asked Ovares to appoint him to one of the three two-man committees charged with drumming up support for the congress among Latin American students, taking advantage of his presence in Venezuela. Rafael del Pino, who was not a student but a member of one of the gangster groups, characterized by Ovares as a bodyguard to Castro, joined the latter in Caracas and from there they both traveled to Panama and Colombia.

And so it came to pass that Fidel Castro, known among Havana University activists and the capital police as one of the "gente del gatillo alegre" (trigger-happy people), but largely unknown at the national level, found himself in the midst of a major uprising in Latin America, not because he was a student leader, as he was to claim years later, but because his reputation as a gunman had caused him to flee his country in search of a safer environment.

For his book *De la Cova* interviewed many participants in the events he chronicles. The author recorded his interview with Enrique Ovares on the Bogotazo. Ovares described Gaitan's murder, which he witnessed. He stated that he went to the Cuban embassy and met with Ambassador Belt. He asked Guillermo for help in getting him and Guevara, as well as Castro and Del Pino, out of Colombia and back to Cuba. Belt refused at first, said Ovares, because he knew the Colombian police was looking for the Cubans and felt they would be arrested on trying to leave. Ovares added that, as the result of pressure from students in Havana, President Grau sent a Cuban air force plane to Bogotá to rescue him and the others.

Belt reconsidered in light of Grau's interest. Arrangements were made for the Cubans to board a cargo plane carrying bulls to Havana and, while police kept watch over the Cuban military aircraft, Ovares, Guevara, Castro, del Pino, and a couple of Mexican students flew out of Bogotá and arrived in Havana to a triumphal welcome. Ovares, who at the time of his interview was living in exile in Miami, told *De la Cova*: "Belt se portó bien y yo me quedé eternamente agradecido, y cada vez que había algo del Bogotazo, yo decía que lo consultarán a él, mientras estuvo vivo, y *El Miami Herald* lo entrevistó." (Belt came through for us and I remained eternally grateful, and every time something came up about the Bogotazo, I would say that he should be consulted, while he was alive, and *The Miami Herald* interviewed him.)

Fidel Castro has given more than one version of his participation in those bloody events. Because they are self-serving depictions of his actions in Bogota they will not find space here. Not long after Guillermo Belt returned to Havana at the conclusion of his tenure as ambassador a casual encounter took place in El Vedado, which he described in an interview with a well-known Cuban commentator in Miami, Agustín Tamargo, of *Radio Martí*:

Some time went by and one day, while I was paying a visit in El Vedado, suddenly a man walked up towards me, on one side, and another on the other. One of them was Díaz Balart, Fidel's brother-in-law, and the other was Fidel, [who said]: "I am al-

ways grateful to you for what you did for me.” I never saw him again.⁵

To Tamargo’s question as to whether he had run into any difficulties with the Castro regime, Guillermo Belt answered that he had not, but that his brother Alberto and sister-in-law Julia Alonso de Belt had been imprisoned by the regime. He cabled Fidel Castro: “Alguna vez pude hacer algo por ti. Ahora, haz algo por mi hermano.” (Once I was able to do something for you. Now, do something for my brother.) There was no reply. For six years, Alberto and his wife suffered the torture and deprivation meted out to opponents of the regime, until they were finally set free after a ransom of \$100,000 was paid by Julia Alonso’s relatives, who were exiled in Florida.

Because Ambassador Belt had to return to Washington before the Bogota meeting ended, his signature as head of the Cuban delegation does not appear on the Charter of the Organization of American States, as it does on the Charter of the United Nations. His name does appear, of course, in the official documents of the Conference that created the OAS, and when the Colombian government commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Charter in 1998, his photograph was displayed with those of the other heads of delegation at the 1948 meeting.

President Truman had invited President Grau to address the Joint Session of Congress convoked to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Cuban independence. Grau delegated this honor to Ambassador Belt. So, on 19 April 1948, Guillermo Belt became part of the history of the Congress of the United States as one of only two foreign dignitaries to address such a session.

A personal account of this occasion and the events preceding it was given by Cuquita in her memoirs. As usual, her words make the story come alive:

The last time I had the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Truman while Guillermo was ambassador was at the reception we gave on

⁵ English translation of the recorded interview in Spanish by the author.

the occasion of a Joint Session of the US Congress in honor of Cuba, which was held in April 1948. I had the privilege of attending that session. President Truman made an eloquent speech praising our country. Guillermo replied immediately afterwards, thanking him. That same night we held a large reception at the embassy, to which we invited the President, his entire cabinet, all the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, the Diplomatic Corps, and our many friends in the social, artistic, and literary circles of the capital. In total there were more than 1,000 guests.

While I, rather frightened by the magnitude of the forthcoming event, was looking after the details, Guillermo was away in Colombia as head of the Cuban delegation to the Inter-American Conference held in Bogotá, where the terrible "Bogotazo" took place, making it impossible for me to have any communication with Guillermo for several days. My feelings of anguish were finally relieved by a call from the State Department informing me that he was well and that the situation had been brought under control. Only when he came back did I learn how dangerous those hours had been, following the assassination of the nationalist Colombian leader Gaitán. He had been killed at the start of a Communist revolution, which was put down with difficulty. I drew from my young age the energy required to make preparations for the reception despite my worries. The moment finally arrived, however, and here I was with Guillermo at our post in the drawing room at the top of the embassy's beautiful staircase. Since the reception was in honor of the Congress, next to us stood Senator Vandenberg, who presided the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Senate, and Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House.

The evening ended on a high note when President and Mrs. Truman arrived. They did us the honor of staying for a couple of hours. When they had all left, Guillermo and I went to sleep soundly, happy in the knowledge that all had come out all right on a day as long and filled with emotions as that April 19th.

Chapter XVI

Another quite different picture that is still fresh in my mind is of my father in Washington, dressed in white tie and tails and wearing his decorations, just before leaving the embassy to go with my mother to a diplomatic reception at the White House. He was a handsome man, 39 years old when he was appointed ambassador, with smooth black hair combed straight back, a trim body, not an ounce of fat around the middle, which is the best way to look when wearing tails.

There is always a back story to Guillermo Belt's accomplishments. Following are a few family memories, recorded many years later. They begin with Cuquita's comments upon arrival in Washington.

When we landed, the entire embassy staff was there, including some old friends Guillermo had appointed, such as Carlos Blanco and Bebita. Others were already at their posts, such as Colín Rivero and Raquel, and Joaquín Meyer and Alicia. For me a new life was beginning, an interesting and vital one that would have great impact on me for the rest of my days.

Forty years after the event, Cuquita described Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential inauguration in vivid and not altogether uncritical detail:

A few weeks after our arrival in Washington we attended what would be President Roosevelt's last inauguration.

Due to his ill health the ceremony did not take place in front of the Capitol, as is traditional, but on a balcony at the rear of the White House. The ambassadors and their wives were standing in the garden and, although a wood floor had been set up on the frozen ground, our feet were cold on the snow. On the balcony there was a table on which the Roosevelt family Bible was placed for the President to take the oath of office. He had to be lifted up by two of his sons, one on either side, when the time came to take the oath. For the first time in the country's history the ceremony was blessed by a rabbi and a Catholic priest, in addition to the traditional Protestant pastor.

On the staircase from the balcony to the garden stood all the young members of the Roosevelt tribe, carrying bouquets and wearing boutonnières made of violets, a somewhat imperial touch, it seemed to me.

When the ceremony was over we went up to the second floor, happy to be out of the cold. There, waiting for us, stood the First Lady, who was easily a head taller than Vice President Truman, standing at her side. We right away went in the drawing room, where the President was seated on an easy chair. By his side and almost at his feet, on a cushion, was a beautiful Norwegian princess, Marta, exiled as a consequence of the war, whose sons also wore the Napoleonic violets. The princess was at the time the official "flirt" of this gallant president who easily fell in love, but who owing to the cruel paralysis that had struck him could only dream of love.

The great romance in his life was always the beautiful and sweet Lucy Mercer. He met her after he was married and had fathered several sons, but such was his passion that he wanted to get a divorce and marry her. This happened the summer before his illness. Lucy Mercer was Catholic and refused absolutely the idea of a divorce. She left Washington and even married a much older gentleman. But they kept in touch by telephone and letters, although they saw each other rarely. However, by a caprice of destiny she was by his side when he died at Warm Springs, three months after this inauguration. The presence on that occasion of Lucy Mercer (Mrs. Rutherford) was hidden from the public by issuing an ukase to the press, but it was the subject of much gossip and the comments that one can imagine.

Cuquita wrote that the “cave dwellers”, as the capital’s longtime residents were known, preferred to keep to themselves and did not mingle easily with politicians or diplomats. She records gratefully that, nevertheless, she and her husband were received with open arms, and then gives this portrait of the three most famous hostesses in old Washington society.

The so-called “three Mrs. Bs” formed a triumvirate that ruled society. To be accepted by them was a sort of official accolade, a stamp of approval. When I think about it now with the perspective of time, it seems terribly snobbish, but it was a fact of life. The “Mrs. Bs” were Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, the tiny Mildred, whose mansion was Dumbarton Oaks, which she later donated to Harvard University. At her house we met the Archduke Otto of Hapsburg, who stayed with Robert and Mildred when he came to Washington. Mrs. Robert Low Bacon was the second one, in whose F Street house the famous pianist Arthur Rubenstein always stayed, and whose New Year’s Day parties, which consisted of a formal dinner, were attended by “all” Washington. Virginia was the granddaughter of the last British Governor of Virginia, and was named after this State. The third Mrs. B was Mrs. Truxton Beale, whose residence is today the Naval Museum.¹ Marie Beale had frequent parties at her house, a building in the Federal style, when it would be illuminated only by candles. Her most famous soirée was the one she gave every year after the reception at the White House for the Chiefs of Mission, which at the time was very elegant: the gentlemen wore white tie and the ladies dressed in ball gowns and long white gloves. Mrs. Beale would invite a small group of the Chiefs of Mission, which always included the ambassadors of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, and us. Also, of course, among the guests were the famous “cave dwellers”, as well as writers, literary figures and artists, the latter, I suppose, to lend animation to the event.

Naturally, the Belt children were oblivious to the doings of Washington’s great hostesses. They were, however, very inter-

¹ This building, on Lafayette Square, is today known as Decatur House.

ested in the World War II military leaders whose names were becoming household words. One evening, from their third floor perch in the Cuban embassy, they struck gold:

Our living quarters were on the third floor. There was a marble staircase from the ground to the second floor, in addition to an elevator that ran all the way up. On the third floor was a balcony overlooking the grand staircase. We made good use of this vantage point: we liked to watch guests coming up the staircase to the reception areas, especially when they were attending a formal dinner and came in full regalia.

One time we were watching from the balcony after such a dinner to get a glimpse of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Chief of Naval Operations and a very popular World War II figure. He glanced up and saw us there, whereupon the admiral in full dress uniform slid down the marble banister for our amusement, all the way to the ground floor.

And, from the same child's memory, still vivid half a century later:

Admiral Nimitz, who looked just like the Hollywood version of a top naval officer – white hair, fine features, sparkling blue eyes – had some time before invited us to his official residence, which today is that of the Vice President of the US, on Massachusetts Avenue. On the grounds of the residence is the Naval Observatory, where he took us to look through the telescope. Afterwards he invited us to a game of ping-pong, and in parting gave each of us an autographed photograph and a cap.

I kept his picture (and the cap) for many years after we returned to Cuba. Admiral Nimitz wrote to my parents regularly at Christmas after he had retired and until his death in California. He was a good friend of theirs, and he gave us memories that are still with me today.

Not all was fun and games, though. Here is a different take on a child's arrival in a new country.

I was a couple of months short of my twelfth birthday when we arrived in Washington, and was sent to Georgetown Preparatory School, in Garrett Park, Maryland, a few days after our arrival. I did not speak much English, only what I had learned at school in Cuba, where English was taught more or less the way Spanish is taught here at the primary school level.

It was a miserable, seemingly endless semester. I understood very little of what my teachers said, and hardly made out my classmates when they deigned to say something to me. By June, however, I was doing better and by the following term I was able to communicate with others in the language of this new country, so different from our own.

And here, an indication of the influence Guillermo and Cuquita had on the religious education of their children:

Our parents usually heard Mass at a small church or chapel that was fairly close to the Cuban Embassy. A Spanish-speaking priest said the Mass in Latin. Our parents volunteered Sonny, Noel and me to serve as monaguillos (altar boys).

We did not know the responses in Latin and were given small booklets to read them. I remember that nuns who heard the Mass from behind a screen to the left of the altar would say the responses in a low voice and we would follow them. I did learn the Hail Mary in Latin, which I have not forgotten. I also know the Our Father in Latin, but not as well.

After Mass the priest would give each of us a dollar. On the way out our father would make us put our tip in the collection box at the entrance to the church.

The children of career diplomats face more challenges than the young Belts encountered in their move from Havana to Washington. Guillermo was not a member of Cuba's diplomatic corps; he was appointed by President Grau because he had worked out the rapprochement between the old firebrand and the United States. Grau would not give up his independent stance regarding the powerful neighbor to the north, but he wanted to keep the relations between the two countries on an even keel. Guillermo accepted the ambassadorial post rather

than the job of foreign minister, which Grau offered him, because he shared Grau's approach on both counts.

The little Belts, then, would not be subjected to the more or less frequent transfers from one post to another that career diplomats must impose on their offspring. They had every expectation that upon completion of their father's assignment they would all return to Cuba, back to their friends, their school, and the familiar places temporarily left behind. They could not let their Spanish crumble under the pressure of the English language they now had to learn. In this they had a lot of help: *At home we always spoke Spanish among us. Our parents also spoke to us in our mother tongue, as did Ana and Né, who had no choice in the matter.*

One of the children had more languages to learn:

At Prep (as we all called our school) we had to take four years of Latin and two of Greek. We did not take kindly to this because we were unable to understand how valuable these two "dead" languages would be. Many of us wrote in our Latin vocabulary book: "Latin is a dead language, it's buried in the dust, first it killed the Romans, and now it's killing us."

Georgetown Preparatory School taught more than the language and debating skills so dear to the Jesuits who ran it.

Georgetown Prep also taught me the social skills, which were very useful because for the next four years I lived in the rarefied world inhabited by the children of diplomats. The school held at least two dances every year. The Jesuits invited girls from the nearby Academy of the Sacred Heart at Stone Ridge, since many of us at this early age did not really know any girls to ask to a dance.

Also, Prep had a good number of boarding students from many parts of the US and from several foreign countries, and they did not know the local female population. The dances were chaperoned by our own teachers and by those from the Sacred Heart. We had to be on our best behavior.

Cuquita and Guillermo did their part in the same area:

My parents provided some schooling in the social graces, signing me up against my will in Mrs. Shippen's dancing class. These weekly dances were very stiff affairs. The girls were lined up on one side of the room, the boys on the other. At a signal from Mrs. Shippen we moved forward and picked out a partner.

Most of the boys were as reluctant as I to engage in this exercise. We were taught the waltz, the fox trot, the rumba and the samba (I am not making this up). I profited the most from the waltz lessons; the rumba had to be learned years later, in Cuba, after putting aside everything about it as taught in Mrs. Shippen's fashionable class.

Teaching by example is a powerful tool. Washington at the time was one big school.

As teenagers we followed the social customs of our parents. At 13 I wore black tie (we never said "tuxedo") to a dinner for the first time. We received formal invitations, and replied to them in writing. We sent a handwritten note of thanks to our hostess one or two days after a dinner or party.

Once I was asked by a girl's mother, who knew me well, to come that same evening to a seated dinner (in black tie) because another boy had fallen sick and she did not want to upset the seating plan at the table. I of course accepted at once. The request was made because I was a good friend who had been invited several times to this house, two weeks in advance as was proper except in an emergency like the one my hostess was now facing.

The wife of a diplomat can be an asset to her husband, or a hindrance in his work. Cuquita had shown her skills as the very young wife of a rising political figure in Cuba, and now she called on them again.

I have the most pleasant memories of First Lady Bess Truman. One day I was visited by a committee of ladies who looked after the Home of the Incurables, the sad name given to an old people's home. They raised funds through voluntary contributions, but their principal income was derived from an annual event, the sale of tickets for visits to the houses of political figures and

to a few embassies. The ticket entitled the buyer to have tea at these residences, and this was announced in the newspapers. They asked me to hold the tea in our embassy and I agreed, after consulting Guillermo. I knew that the expense would come out of our pocket, but this would be our material contribution. I also knew that it would involve work, but it was in a good cause. Two days before the visit we had a telephone call from the White House, saying that Mrs. Truman would come to the embassy and receive the visitors. This was published in the papers, and it served as an incentive to ticket sales. The event raised a good deal of money. Among the ladies I invited to the ritual pouring of the tea was Mamie, the wife of General Eisenhower, who had just come back from the war with many honors.

The art of conversation is very valuable. Cuquita, in her unassuming style, alludes to it in referring to the “uncrowned queen” of the day:

The uncrowned queen -- in a league by herself and surpassing even the three Mrs. B's-- was Alice Roosevelt Longworth, daughter of the famous Teddy, known for his myriad accomplishments including heading the Rough Riders in Cuba. Alice was intelligent, caustic and a consummate snob. Her greatest pleasure was in what the French call “dazzling the bourgeoisie.” Alice decided to “adopt” Guillermo and me. She showed a great deal of interest when I told her that as a little girl my mother lived on Samá Street in Marianao, a block away from what was then the American Legation where she, Alice, spent the first few days of her honeymoon. She remembered the guitar serenades given by Cuban peasants in honor of the daughter of President Teddy Roosevelt. Also, I was able to tell her that the person who bought in Paris the fabulous pearl necklace presented to her by the Government of Cuba as a wedding present and which she always wore, was “Pepito” Barnet who, at the time, was part of the Cuban Legation in France. (Years later he was one of the numerous provisional Presidents of Cuba and a great friend of my parents and of ours.)

Building a reputation as a gracious hostess is also part of the diplomatic wife's portfolio. Embassy lunches, dinners, and receptions are held to cultivate personal relationships with host country government officials and other diplomats. They sometimes include prominent members of the society world, but are not meant to make a social splash, nor supposed to be fun. In a word, diplomatic entertaining is an extension of the workday and should be treated as such.

This did not keep Cuquita from trying to lighten the burden.

In those days, dinners in the diplomatic, official, and social circles were equally boring. The guests were a small group so that often, following protocol, one was seated between the same persons. At 10:45 p.m. on the dot the guest of honor would rise and take his leave with the usual pleasantries, after which the rest were happy to follow suit, go home and put on their slippers.

I said to myself, why must we be bored? At the time there was a young accordion player who used to play occasionally at restaurants. I got in touch with him and hired him, for the sum of \$15, to play after dinner. The pleasant young man also played the piano, so he sat down at ours and produced the miracle of music. Everyone started to sing, some to dance, and the more timid ones to tap their feet to the tune. From then on, my only difficulty was getting the guests to leave.

While daring to be a bit unconventional, Cuquita also knew how to set a proper formal table. This skill, learned in her youth, got the Cuban Embassy a prominent place in the pages of Life Magazine, one of the two main ones in national circulation then.

The Life picture came about like this. One afternoon I received a telephone call from a photographer who said that his editor had asked him to take a picture of our dining room table arranged for a formal dinner because the magazine was preparing an article on the social life in Washington, and they knew that our table was very pretty. This was true; we used our own silver and tablecloths, and I always decorated the table with fruits or flowers. I replied that I would be happy to let him take the picture

and that, as we were having a dinner that same night, he could come in the afternoon.

I had forgotten this conversation and our guests were arriving when our butler, Rafael Cortés, whispered that the photographer was here and wanted a word with me. I was a bit bothered by the interruption, but I went to an adjoining room to see what he wanted. He said that if only he could take the picture with the guests seated at the table it would be wonderful, because the photograph would be more interesting that way. I told him to begin taking pictures of the table without guests. When all of them had arrived, I told them of my dilemma and asked their opinion. They all thought it would be great fun, so the picture was taken as the photographer wanted.

The following week the story came out, with a full-page photograph of the table. The text kindly said that the food was better at the Cuban Embassy than at any other, and that its invitations were the most sought after in Washington. We have a clipping of this photograph because one of the guests had framed it, and gave it to us when we came to Washington as exiles.

A reputation for good taste in clothes is also an asset for a diplomat's wife. Although Cuquita grew up admiring her mother's dresses, most of which she bought in Paris, she was never inclined to spend a lot of money on her own wardrobe. She wrote this story of a dress that caught the attention of another famous magazine.

The Vogue story is different. One day I had a call from the magazine's New York office. The editor (a predecessor of Diana Vreeland) asked my permission to publish a photograph taken while I was going up the stairs at the Brazilian Embassy for a dance party. I had not noticed that I was being photographed. The editor wanted to know who had designed my gown. I told her that it was an off the rack model, in silk taffeta. She laughed and said: "All the more reason to publish the picture. You are a wonderful advertisement for our clothing industry!" The picture was published and it turned out very well; the marble staircase made the dress stand out. How I would like to have it now!

Chapter XVII

Able and ambitious, he argued long and well for bigger Cuban sugar quotas. At the inter-American conferences in Rio and Bogota, he made headlines by his insistence on outlawing economic aggression--a campaign aimed at the threat of reduced Cuban quotas in the U.S. Sugar Act of 1948 (TIME, Aug. 18, 1947). As Cuba's spokesman in the U.N., he championed abolition of the veto, favored the Arab cause in Palestine, argued that some way must be found to bring Spain back into the community of nations.

From TIME magazine, 7 February 1949

On 7 February 1949, TIME magazine, under the title Cuba: Happy Days, wrote about Ambassador Belt's forthcoming return to Havana at the completion of his Washington posting. Regarding his tenure as Cuban ambassador to the United States, TIME recounted this anecdote and commented on it:

In the Headlines.

He never let the State Department brass forget that he represented a sovereign nation. Once, when he asked for an appointment with Secretary of State Marshall, he was told that the Under Secretary would see him instead. "If I am not received by the Secretary by noon tomorrow, he insisted, "I shall resign and tell the American press why." Marshall saw him.

Such incidents were not popular with the State Department, but they did not alter the fact that Belt was probably better known

and more influential than any ambassador Cuba ever sent to Washington. With characteristic self-assurance, he said last week: "I think I have done a great deal to maintain U.S. friendship on a basis of dignity and equality."

The article closed with the magazine's interpretation of the reasons behind the end of Ambassador Belt's mission:

Belt's power lay in his rock-solid friendship with President Grau. "Cuba's foreign policy," habaneros used to say, "is made in the Washington embassy, not in Havana." When Grau's first Minister of State, Gustavo Cuervo Rubio, complained in 1945 that Belt was hogging the headlines, Grau fired Cuervo. When his successor, Alberto Inocente Alvarez, tried to give Belt orders, Belt flew to Havana and Alvarez was out of a job.

In the Anteroom.

It was such mixing in domestic politics that finally cost Belt his own job. Last year he tried to get his friend Grau to back him for the presidency. Grau chose eager Carlos Prío Socarras instead. ("That," said Grau last week, "was a mistake.") Prío, who had more than once cooled his heels in an anteroom while Belt took the backstairs route to Grau's office, never forgave his rival.

At week's end, Belt's successor in the Washington embassy had not yet been named. But Cubans were sure that whoever he was, things from now on would be different. Said Havana's Prensa Libre: "Cuban-American negotiations will henceforth be carried on in Havana."

Carlos Prío, who had been prime minister and labor minister in Grau's cabinet, was indeed chosen by the president as his party's candidate and was elected in June 1948. Shortly afterwards he made an official visit to the United States. Ambassador and Mrs. Belt gave a reception in his honor, which was attended by the U.S. president and his wife. On this occasion Prío offered Belt the embassy in the United Kingdom. A London posting is much sought after by most diplomats. Guillermo Belt thanked Prío and turned him down. For the second time he left government service because he wanted to resume his law practice.

Following protocol, Ambassador Belt paid a farewell visit to Secretary of State Dean Acheson. The conversation appears in the Dean Acheson papers.

Before resigning as ambassador, Guillermo and Cuquita took a rare vacation in Havana. Here is her account of the trip.

During the years that Guillermo was the Cuban Ambassador in Washington we had to travel on various occasions so that he could attend the United Nations General Assemblies in San Francisco, London and Paris, which I have mentioned previously, as well as meetings of the UN in Lake Success, which was that organization's first headquarters until its Manhattan facilities were built... There was no time for vacations in Cuba, except for two weeks in 1948.

*Our arrival with all the children, Ernestina and Rosa María coincided with the arrival of Don Juan de Borbón, Count of Barcelona and his wife, Doña Mercedes, parents of the present King Juan Carlos of Spain. I remember entering the kitchen in our home, full of children and servants including Santiago the gardener, when someone read aloud the headlines in the local paper, *El Diario de la Marina*, which heralded: "Don Juan arrives!" And our son Juan, who must have been no more than four years old, exclaiming: "Of course, I am here, I have arrived!" It was his first visit to Cuba since leaving when he was less than two months old. The airplane landed at night and Juan, looking up at the sky exclaimed: "Our stars are more beautiful than theirs, they shine more." The next day the children went to the Havana Yacht Club and Juan grabbed a handful of sand. "Look, Ana", he marveled, "even our snow is warmer than theirs."*

*It was so; the two "Juanes" had arrived in Cuba, ours and the one from Spain. During the two weeks that we spent in Cuba we saw Don Juan and his wife Mercedes quite frequently. They were staying with María Cajiga, Countess of Revilla Camargo, who offered many dinners for them, some where the *Chavales de España*, a famous Spanish orchestra entertained, and in others, various Cuban musical ensembles. Doña Mercedes was fascinated by Cuban love songs, her favorites among them being "Bésame mucho", "La última noche," as well as others similar to these two. Don Juan was a happy man who enjoyed*

everything and danced like a top, especially when it came to "pasodobles."

I was his dance partner on many occasions; he would sing when he danced. I always thought it was miraculous that he never wound up on the floor. When they left Cuba they sent each of us their autographed pictures. I am so sad that these are also among the things that disappeared with the Communist storm that ravaged our island and made "Gone With the Wind" appear to be insignificant.

Chapter XVIII

We flew back in early 1949. For my part I was anxious to reinsert myself in the Cuban educational system as I expected to spend the rest of my life in my country. The Ministry of Education regulated all schools, public and private, and the process of revalidating studies conducted abroad was a demanding one. My first task was to find out the level at which my old La Salle classmates found themselves in school. They were to enter in September the fourth year of the five-year high school (bachillerato) curriculum. That at once became my driving goal.

The Belt children were back at Villa Marisol as the year 1949 began. They had left behind the Cadillac limousine with DPL plates, the butler in striped pants who made their toast the way they liked it, and there would be no more watching from the thirdfloor balcony as famous guests made their entrance or departure on the grand marble staircase. But they were very happy in their beloved house, Ana still keeping everyone on the straight and narrow, their parents also glad to have returned to Cuba, their friends, their life. Washington for all of them had been an episode, a valuable experience to be remembered with pleasure, certainly, but an episode nevertheless.

Many adjustments, however, were required to complete the transition from Washington to Havana. The most difficult one was school.

My parents appointed a tutor for me. I had to sit for examinations in many subjects, going back to Ingreso (the year prior to entry in bachillerato) and covering the first three years of the latter. I of course had to study Spanish grammar and literature, along with Cuban history and geography, and Civics thrown in for good measure. I was able to negotiate acceptance of all my mathematics studies in the US, and those on world history and geography, but not without difficulty.

The teachers at the Instituto del Vedado, the official school which ran my student life for all those months, were quite skeptical of the educational level in the US, but they relented a bit. They were on the other hand very partial to memorization, and I learned then that this is not a good thing. I was required to recite from memory the 126 municipalities of the province of Havana, for example. I remember no more than a few of those names, but can recall vividly that I would practice reciting them as I walked back and forth in the garden of our grandparents' house on a path that led to a vine-covered pergola.

At the end of several months of daily study, I was ready. I took all the exams, one after the other, and was certified for entry in the Cuarto Año de Bachillerato, in which I promptly enrolled at the Colegio De La Salle in El Vedado.

The older Belt siblings also had to adjust to the ways of teenagers in Cuba. For starters, social gatherings were usually much more informal than those in Washington. Although the older boys had to wear black tie on occasion, most events were what they learned to call a *guateque*, a party of young people, generally held at someone's house, with light food and a lot of dancing. The first order of the day was learning to dance the Cuban rhythms. Forget the rumba taught in Mrs. Shippen's class. Here was the real thing, which all the girls and most boys danced expertly.

Cuquita was very helpful in reinserting her children into the social life of Havana. She called up old friends who had boys and girls of the same age as her own. Soon the newcomers, who had left the country when all the parties were *piñatas*, were receiving invitations to many *guateques*. The girls at these dance parties were pretty and patient with these boys fresh out

of Washington who did not know the latest steps. It was a lot of fun to learn with them the mambo, the *cha cha cha* (the word said three times, not two like in the States when this rhythm made it there), the conga (which looked nothing like the American version danced many years later to the hugely popular tune by Gloria Estefan), and the *rumba* (without the h).

Although Guillermo Belt was now a private citizen he retained the respect and admiration of many who had worked with him or knew of his diplomatic success. The chief of the Cuban army, General Genovevo Pérez Dámera, had visited Washington in his official capacity and had been received by Guillermo at the embassy, as protocol dictates. The general had been appointed by President Grau and of course knew of the high regard the president had for his ambassador. Now, when Grau and Belt were both out of office, he invited Guillermo and his boys to lunch.

One day after our return to Cuba the general invited our father and us boys to lunch at Army Headquarters, located in Camp Columbia, on the outskirts of Havana.

We had lunch at his official residence and afterwards, for the amusement of los muchachos, he ordered horses for us and for himself and we rode out to the shooting range. The horses were huge, but grooms were in attendance to make sure that they did not get away from us. We were warned that on the return trip we should keep our mounts on a tight rein, as they would sense that this was the end of their work and would bolt into a gallop on the way to their stables.

At the shooting range we were allowed to fire a Thompson sub-machine gun, as well as .45 caliber pistols. My early love of guns was thus considerably reinforced.

Guillermo Belt, with his usual drive and unflagging optimism, set about reconstructing the law practice he had left unattended for over four years. He was a sole practitioner of the law. Two or three attorneys worked with him from time to time on various matters, but he did not have partners in his law practice. The first item of business was to rent offices. This he did at Morro 158, a new building facing a park at the rear of

the Presidential Palace, a location that on a day in March a few years later would become an extremely dangerous place for several hours.

His success as Cuban ambassador had made Guillermo well known in many U.S. circles, including those of his own profession. He was listed in *Who's Who* and in the *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory*, which in 1896 had begun adding foreign law firms to the U.S. and Canadian ones it listed. It was not surprising, therefore, that one day in 1950 he received a telephone call from a very large law firm in Miami. One of the principal partners wanted to know if Guillermo Belt would take on a new client.

Arthur Vining Davis had retired from active management of the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) at the age of 80, although he continued as chairman of the board until 1957. He had begun to work in the fledgling aluminum industry upon graduation from Amherst, with a job that paid \$14 per week. A few years later, having proved his skill in marketing the newly available aluminum products at competitive prices, he was named president of the company that by the end of World War II produced 90% of all virgin aluminum in the United States.

In 1948 he settled in Florida, but not to play golf or canasta. Rather, he started a spectacular career in real estate. His purchases of 125,000 acres included one-eighth of Dade County. He also bought 30,000 acres on Eleuthera Island in the Bahamas, where he developed a resort. He owned an ice cream plant, vegetable farms, a cement plant, a road building company, a steel fabricating plant, a furniture factory and an airline. He purchased the Boca Raton Hotel and Club for \$22.5 million, and also property in Sarasota on the Gulf coast for \$13.5 million. When asked by a reporter what he had in mind with all these Florida purchases, Davis replied, "Making money. What else? Now go away, let me get on with it."

Davis next cast his eyes on the Isle of Pines, off the southern coast of Cuba. He wanted to buy land there, too. He needed a lawyer in Havana. His legal advisers in Miami had given him a name, and he flew down from Miami to meet Guillermo Belt. Mr. Davis, who at the time was said to be worth around \$400 million, something he never confirmed, had at his beck

and call five airplanes – two DC-3s, two Aero Commanders, and a PBY-- plus two helicopters, as his personal pilot wrote some years later.

He came in a DC-3, brought along one of his helicopters, and went to meet Guillermo. It was very much in Guillermo's character that he did not put up a front to impress the prospective client, so he received the multimillionaire in his not very large office. He could have chosen one of his clubs, the Habana Yacht Club or the Country Club de La Habana, for that first meeting, but he was not self-conscious about the rather modest, traditional furniture at 158 Morro Street, Suite 305. Mr. Davis remarked that he appreciated a lawyer who did not waste money on appearances and retained Guillermo as his attorney in Cuba.

The following evening Mr. Davis came for dinner at Villa Marisol, accompanied by Evelyn Mitchell, his nurse and personal secretary. He was twice widowed, had no children, and it was clear that Miss Mitchell enjoyed his complete trust. Cuquita laid her customarily beautiful table, albeit much smaller than the one that made the pages of Life Magazine. The Belt children, on their best behavior, sat down for the first time in their lives to dinner with a multimillionaire. The homemade fruit ice cream served for dessert in several flavors was such a hit with the guest of honor that he decided to incorporate it in the menu of his plant back in Florida.

The helicopter came in handy when Davis wanted to have a look at the Isle of Pines. He liked what he saw and asked Guillermo to go about finding sellers for a huge area on the south coast. He ended up buying about one third of that coast, and also some beautiful black sand beaches near the town of Nueva Gerona. Guillermo Belt handled all the transactions. Neither Davis nor his Cuban attorney foresaw that an accidental acquaintance of Guillermo's from the 1948 Bogota riots would in a few years frustrate Davis' plans for building an airport and a luxury resort on the island.

Other investors from the U.S. came to Cuba to buy land, although on a far smaller scale. A very nice gentleman, Bryan Ardis Frame, came from Madison, Wisconsin, also with Guillermo Belt's name as a reference. He, too, retained Guillermo

and bought some farmland in Matanzas province. Ard Frame was one of the lucky few on the last plane out of Havana shortly after Fulgencio Batista fled the country on the night of December 31, 1958, leaving it in the hands of destiny, as the saying in Spanish goes.

Guillermo Belt had ten years to work at rebuilding his law practice and he made good use of them before disaster struck his homeland. A Swedish industrialist, Axel Wenner-Gren, came to Havana in search of new opportunities. He had made a fortune after World War I when he realized that the industrial vacuum cleaner could be adapted for domestic use. Wenner-Gren then persuaded the Swedish lighting company Electrolux, for which he worked, to buy a patent for a vacuum cleaner and to pay him a sales commission in company stock. By the early 1930s he owned Electrolux, which became a leader in vacuum cleaner and refrigerator technology. He later bought several banks and newspapers.

Wenner-Gren was not content being a millionaire several times over. He thought he could use his intelligence and vision in the business world to influence the course of international affairs. He was reputedly a friend of Hermann Goering, whose first wife was Swedish, and he sought to avert a second world war by acting as intermediary between the Nazis and the British and American governments. His efforts came to nothing, and he retired to his estate on Hog Island in the Bahamas. The 680-mile island was renamed Paradise Island when Huntington Hartford, the A&P heir, bought it from Wenner Gren around 1959 and turned it into a resort.

Wenner-Gren came to Cuba from the Bahamas, where he had also bought property on Andros Island. He, too, retained Guillermo Belt to look after his legal affairs. When Castro took over power from Batista in 1959, Wenner-Gren simply went back to doing business elsewhere. He was interested in rail systems and his company, ALWEG, built the Disneyland monorail in 1959 and the one at the Seattle Center in 1962.

Not all clients were as wealthy as Davis and Wenner-Gren. Guillermo's eldest son, who while studying law at the University drove his father to the office in the morning and had the privilege of watching him at work until it was time to drive

him back home for lunch (and after lunch going to class himself), many years later wrote a recollection of one in particular.

He had no money at all. He was tall and in good physical shape, very blond, with longer hair than was customary in Cuba, and an aristocratic air about him in his bearing and demeanor. He was Francisco José, Prince of Prussia, and a member of the ruling family of that vanished empire. I do not remember how he came to us, or what legal services he required. He soon became a shining star on the Havana social firmament. All the ladies with marriageable daughters were after him. We suspected that he was putting himself out there in search of the highest bidder. He was greatly amused by Cuban informality. Very soon his drinking and partying Cuban friends were calling him Paco. A very important corporate client was the Munich Reinsurance Company, which had opened an office in Cuba for its Latin American operations, through a corporation appropriately named Reaseguradora de las Américas, which my father organized for them. He was appointed president of the new corporation and did all its legal work. The man sent from Munich to run the operations was Boris Dreher, a very proper German.

The Prince of Prussia, in his incarnation as Paco, had informally dropped by our office one day to say hello, shortly before Mr. Dreher arrived for a scheduled appointment. I remember that the prince was dressed in a tan, safari-style shirt and light trousers.

The prince was seated on the sofa next to my father's desk. Mr. Dreher, who of course came in coat and tie, which my father and I always wore in the office, came in. My father introduced him to the prince, who thought about it a bit before extending his right hand, rather slowly, with a royal flourish and without rising from his seat. Mr. Dreher bowed deeply, clicked his heels, and murmured something very formally in German. He almost kissed the prince's hand. Dreher was evidently quite impressed by the presence of this personage, casually chatting with my father and me as if we were old friends.

The Republic of Cuba was forty-seven years old in 1949. Between Don Tomás Estrada Palma, its first president, who

had been served faithfully by Jorge Alfredo Belt, and Ramón Grau San Martín, served with equal faithfulness by Jorge Alfredo's third son, sixteen men had led the new nation (including Grau himself, as provisional president). The republic's 50th anniversary would not be celebrated by Carlos Prío, who was sworn in on 10 October 1948 and whose term would have ended under the Constitution on the same day in 1952. A former president, who was a candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections, decided not to wait for them and orchestrated a coup d'état with the practiced ease of someone who had done it before.

Fulgencio Batista, leader of the sergeants' revolt in 1933, had gone to live in Daytona Beach, Florida, when Grau was elected in 1944. From there he managed to get himself elected Senator in 1948 and then returned to Havana to run for president in the June, 1952 elections. By all accounts he was running a distant third, so on 10 March, heading a group of his former military cronies, he took over army headquarters at Camp Columbia, as well as the Cabaña fortress, without firing a shot. Prío did not (or in a friendly version could not) organize resistance to the coup. He took asylum in the Mexican embassy and eventually settled in Florida.

Batista's justification for his coup ranged from the ridiculous – he alleged that Prío was himself planning one because he thought his party would lose – to an apparently plausible excuse: he was trying to put an end to government corruption. There was corruption, to be sure, and there had also been corruption under Grau, but Cubans had to be naïve to believe that Batista, who had gone into exile with the loot obtained during his own presidency (1940-1944), would end a practice that with very few honorable exceptions had been a lamentable feature of political life in Cuba all the way back to colonial days.

Guillermo's sons would remember their father saying that March morning, "The clock has been set back twenty years." The republic, with all its faults, had gone through two successive constitutional changes of government. Batista had turned over the presidential chair to Grau when the former professor and physician defeated his candidate in a landslide in 1944.

Carlos Prío had taken over peacefully from his old mentor, keeping their Auténtico party in the driver's seat. It was likely that Roberto Agramonte, the candidate of the new Ortodoxo party, would succeed Prío, thus consolidating the peaceful transition of power that was becoming the norm.

On 26 July 1953, sixteen months into the illegal Batista regime, Fidel Castro and 82 followers attacked the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the capital of Oriente province. From a military point of view the attack was a complete failure. But politically it was a windfall for Castro, who together with his brother Raúl got away without a scratch, to be captured a few days later, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. During the trial Fidel Castro made a speech, which he later published (edited by a Cuban writer and respected intellectual) with the title "La historia me absolverá" (History will absolve me). He served less than two years, was amnestied by the Batista government, left for Mexico in 1955 and there organized the guerrilla group that would land in Cuba in December, 1956.

A central part of the total rewriting and falsification of Cuban history by the Castro regime is its glorified version of the Moncada attack. A true and documented account, which includes interviews with many participants, both attackers and defenders, can be found in *The Moncada Attack: Birth of the Cuban Revolution*, by the historian Antonio Rafael de la Cova, cited above in regard to the Bogotazo.

Guillermo Belt, the reader is reminded, was not a professional politician. Like his father, he was an attorney by choice and training. Following in his father's footsteps he retired from public service when he thought he had completed his mission, and went back to practicing law. In the midst of these developments, momentous as they were, he continued to look after his clients, domestic and foreign, giving them his best legal advice and his valuable political insight.

Capital loves stability, no question. The U.S. and European clients of Guillermo's law office were not particularly upset by the Batista coup, despite their lawyer's misgivings about it. They were not as wealthy as Davis and Wenner-Gren, but all the foreigners were entrepreneurs and therefore used to tak-

ing risks, within limits. They felt that Batista, who after being elected president in 1940 had shown his friendliness to the United States and to capital in general, would be a decisive factor for stability and order.

Business in Cuba went on pretty much as usual, until second thoughts, which usually follow events rather than anticipating them, intruded in the minds of many. Following is the eyewitness account of an attack even more spectacular than the one in Santiago de Cuba because it took place in Havana and at the very seat of Batista's power.

On 13 March 1957, a motley group of students and professional gunmen of various political persuasions, united in the common purpose of killing Batista and thus putting an end to his illegitimate regime, launched a brave but doomed attack on the Presidential Palace. The first shots were fired shortly after 3 p.m., and the first wave of 50 men of a total force just under 80 ran from several cars and a delivery truck towards the palace entrance.

Our office was in a building located across from the park that faced this entrance. My father and I were in the office, together with his clerk, Rolando Prieto, and a secretary. We of course heard the gunfire, mainly by machine guns, which came from both attackers and defenders. Our office was on a hallway that a short distance away from our door ended in a large plate glass window overlooking the park from the front of our building.

My father and I right away realized that we had to keep away from the hall window, as well as from all others, and stay where we were. Our secretary began to cry. In the midst of the firing I saw Rolando take a large pair of scissors from his desk and start towards the door. I asked him where in the world he was going. He then told me for the first time that he was a member of the 26th of July movement, created by Fidel Castro, who had landed in Cuba the previous December and was now in the Sierra Maestra mountains waging guerrilla war in Oriente province. He added that he wanted to go up to the roof of our building and try to kill any soldiers who might have gone up there. This would have been suicidal, and I told him so in very strong terms. He abandoned his plan.

The first office off our hallway was empty at the time. The following day we went in it and saw a large bullet hole in the wall, caused by a machine gun round that entered from the front and ricocheted off the interior walls. Our own offices were out of the line of fire and did not suffer any damage.

The battle continued for three hours or more. Tanks were brought up and we could hear the occasional distinctive sound of their main guns, firing at everything and anything. The assailants were able to surprise the guard at the entrance and had entered the palace. Some got as far as Batista's office, where as we later learned they killed two men standing by the dictator's desk.

Batista was by then on the top floor, accessible by an elevator, which right after the attack began had been called up and stopped there. The attackers could not find the staircase leading to the third floor and therefore never got past the second one. Batista directed the fire of his men from above onto the courtyard and the forecourt of the palace and after a time dominated these areas.

When the fight ended, 35 attackers and 5 members of the palace guard had been killed, with many more wounded. The palace by then had been entirely surrounded by soldiers and policemen. After the firing ceased completely, we decided to venture out and see if we could reach our car, parked in a garage about two blocks down Morro Street from our office.

My father and I gathered up our secretary, plus two others from a neighboring office, and with Rolando set out walking slowly and carefully, our hands plainly visible, the women crying in fear, towards the garage. Soldiers in helmets and battle dress, armed with rifles and submachine guns, index finger on the trigger and visibly nervous, lined the streets. I thought that if any more shots rang out we were likely to be shot ourselves by accident. We did make it to the car, dropped off the secretaries and Rolando, and went home, my father to his and I to mine.

The attack on the presidential palace was not carried out by Fidel Castro's movement and was therefore severely criticized by him from his hideout in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Had the attackers succeeded in killing Batista, his illegal regime would probably have collapsed, and Castro would have

instantly become a minor player in the wheeling and dealing to establish a new government. This task would have fallen to those who had succeeded in a feat of arms and courage, unlike Fidel Castro who had failed in 1953.

Cuba's economy was at the takeoff stage in the 1950s. In 1958 the national budget had 23% earmarked for education, the highest percentage in Latin America, followed by Costa Rica (20%) and Chile and Guatemala (16%), according to the OAS publication *América en cifras*. It ranked 33 among 112 countries in terms of daily readership, with 101 newspapers per 1,000 inhabitants. At the time Cuba had three universities financed by the government, with a total of 20,000 students, and 114 institutions of higher learning below the university level (polytechnic and professional schools). There were 900 private schools, including three universities, approved by the government, with a total student body of 100,000. The public education system had 25,000 teachers and the private system had 3,500.

With a population of 6,630,921 in 1958, it had 35,000 hospital beds, that is, one per 190 inhabitants, when 200 persons per bed was the goal for developed countries, and the U.S. had one bed for each 109 persons, all according to UN statistics.

According to the UN, in 1954 Cuba was ranked third in Latin America (after Argentina and Uruguay) in meat consumption per capita. It had the highest number of physicians per capita in Latin America (1 for each 957 inhabitants) and was second to Uruguay in the region in caloric consumption per capita.

And here are a few high points from its first thirty-five years of independence.

- 1906 Havana was the first city in the world to have direct telephone dialing (without an operator).
- 1915 The Cuban peso is issued, on a par with the US dollar. The Cuban peso kept parity with the dollar until 1959.
- 1937 Cuba passes laws on the 8-hour workday and the minimum wage, a first in Latin America.

- 1940 Cuba adopts a Constitution that for the first time in Latin America recognized the right of women to vote, equal rights for both genders and all races, and the right of women to work.

Cuba was a small but prosperous country, with a hard-working, professionally qualified middle class. The nation was on its way to bigger things. It was not a perfect system. There was poverty, as there is in more developed countries throughout the world. There was economic inequality, as found to this day even in a country as rich and powerful as the United States, and more could be done to level the playing field. But of all its shortcomings, which must be seen in the light of a country with about half a century of independence, the immaturity of its democratic institutions was the gravest.

Chapter XIX

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

De aquellos polvos vienen estos lodos.
Spanish saying

The Republic of Cuba was a little over fifty-six years old, and the life of its people in democracy even shorter, when Batista's presidency collapsed on 31 December 1958. It was the end of a long rule by the sergeant who, in the course of destroying the army's professional officer corps had promoted himself to colonel in the 1930s, then to general, went on to be elected president in fairly clean elections in 1940, and came back in 1952 from exile in Florida, purportedly to run again but actually to lead a coup d'état that put him back in the Presidential Palace without bothering to consult the opinion of the voters. There was no major battle to mark his overthrow. Batista simply said goodbye to a gathering of his closest followers at a New Year's Eve party he and his wife gave at Camp Columbia, got on a plane right there and flew away. He would never see Cuba again.

The first day of 1959 was one of hope for the many who believed that Batista's downfall would restore the Constitution

of 1940 – a promise publicly and repeatedly made by Fidel Castro from the Sierra Maestra. The return to the rule of law was shorthand for all good things: fair elections; freedom to speak, write, work, and travel; the right to enjoy the country's increasing prosperity in peace. Castro's July 26th Movement did not offer a complete transformation of the political and economic system, nor did it proclaim itself to be Communist. It would be a few months before the true nature of the revolution would be made known to supporters and opponents alike, and to the Cuban people.

January 1, 1959, was also a day of uncertainty. Batista's followers, with the exception of the few he took with him on the plane, were left high and dry. Some who had attended the New Year's Eve party went from Camp Columbia directly to an embassy and obtained political asylum, leaving Cuba shortly thereafter under diplomatic protection. Others decided to stay and see how things developed. This was not the first overthrow of an unpopular ruler in Cuba, and other supporters and even cronies of the former strongman had managed to survive, so why not them?

Guillermo Belt was not among the believers. He had not supported Castro in any way; furthermore, he had serious doubts about a man he had met briefly and whose reputation – charges of murder and attempted murder of rival activists in his Havana University days, as well as his very presence and actions during the *Bogotazo* – outweighed the propaganda lavished on him by, for example, the New York Times, which called him the Robin Hood of Latin America.

Neither was he among those who feared retribution. In fact, not long after Castro arrived in Havana his mother, Lina Ruz, in an interview published in a Cuban newspaper thanked Guillermo Belt for having facilitated her son's return to Cuba from Colombia after participating in the events of 1948. A friend of the young Belts telephoned to tell them, "*Están hechos*" (you've got it made) in referring excitedly to the newspaper item. Guillermo did not share this optimistic forecast.

For the Belts, like for most people, life went on pretty much as usual, at first. Guillermo had his clients to look after, so on January 27 he flew to Miami to meet with Mr. Arthur V. Davis.

There were documents to be signed for the purchase of land in the Isle of Pines, a deal agreed upon months before Castro took power. After talking with Davis, Guillermo flew back to Havana, and on February 3 returned to Miami for the signing. He recorded these trips in his even handwriting in a red agenda book for 1959, one of several that he would keep through most of what turned out to be an endless exile from the land of his birth.

Another client, the Munich Reinsurance Company, had asked Guillermo Belt to attend the meeting of its board of directors in Munich in mid-March, all expenses paid. Guillermo decided to combine the Miami trip with one to New York City, where he had other clients, and then go on to Germany. He wanted to give Cuquita a break from the hectic and worrisome mood in Havana, so he asked his wife and their teenage son Juan to join him on a European trip.

Guillermo spent one month in New York. On March 8, Cuquita and Juan joined him there, and two days later they took the 10 p.m. Pan American Airways flight to Paris, where they stayed at the Hotel Vendome. On the 17th they flew to Munich, and while Guillermo attended his meeting his wife and youngest son toured the city. Their German hosts were very gracious, providing them with a car – Juan remembered it was a BMW limousine – and entertaining them. The details were not recorded by Guillermo but remained in Juan's memory for many years.

Guillo had remained in Havana in charge of his father's law office. In those first months of 1959 the nature of the Castro revolution started to become clear and the breakdown of the rule of law increasingly evident. One client, an American, had been swept up in a group of people, detained without a warrant, and jailed at the sports palace in the capital. Word got to Guillo and he went to the complex to see what he could do, without much hope.

By sheer luck, at the main entrance, in the uniform of a *comandante* (the highest rank in the rebel army, which then had no colonels or generals) stood a son of Pelayo Cuervo, the well-known political figure who had been murdered by the Batista police the night of the assault on the Presidential Pal-

ace two years before. Guillo knew him, so he asked if he could see his client. Cuervo gave an order and after a while the client was brought to the entrance. Then Cuervo said, "Take him, he's all yours". With that, the American was set free. He left the country shortly thereafter.

Other incidents showed there was no rule of law in Cuba. Firing squad executions after a summary trial without any legal representation for the victim were gruesomely portrayed on live television. There was nothing to be done by practitioners of the law when everything from executions to confiscation of property was carried out on the pretext of revolutionary justice.

Guillermo, Cuquita and Juan flew back to New York from Paris on April 28, and two weeks later Guillermo accompanied his wife and son to Miami. Cuquita and Juan flew to Havana on May 18; she had many things to do at home and also for her mother, alone in her house next door. Guillermo stayed a couple of days in Miami and on May 20, Cuban Independence day, he was back in New York.

Chapter XX

Exile is a desperate longing, an unending regret. Political exile, that is, and for Cubans opposed to the seemingly endless tyranny in their country, “el exilio” is just that. Economic exile, self-imposed and inspired by the legitimate desire for a better life in material terms, is something else, something that political exiles can comprehend but do not share. Exiles in the true sense understand each other. A Cuban who left his country as a matter of principle in the twentieth century or the twenty-first can compare experiences and feelings with political exiles from any other part of the world. The same empathy with more fortunate persons is generally impossible, particularly in the United States, because this nation of immigrants tends to look at those who keep coming in as mere adventurers seeking to share in the magical state of wellbeing called the American Dream.

El viaje, a comienzos de 1959, duraría tres meses. En aquel entonces uno podía salir del país sin mayores inconvenientes ni restricciones. Los que mandaban no se habían quitado la careta todavía.

—¿Cuándo vuelven, caballero, por si acaso alguien llama?, preguntó la manejadora, quien ya no tenía niños pequeños que cuidar, dos de ellos mayores de edad y el tercero, el benjamín de la familia, adolescente, iba con sus padres en el viaje. La niñera (para entendernos, nadie usaba la palabra en ese país) había devenido ama de llaves, otra expresión que nadie usaba,

qué ama de llaves ni ocho cuartos, pero llámela usted como quiera, era la persona que manejaba la casa, y por eso manejadora le cuadraba mejor que nunca. _ En la segunda semana de abril, contestó él, y le daré la fecha exacta con tiempo de sobra, no se preocupe.

Los acontecimientos no pintaban bien, él lo sabía mejor que nadie, pero tampoco era cuestión de marcharse para siempre. En primer lugar, el viaje lo hacía por razones de trabajo, y le pareció buena idea aprovechar la invitación a Europa, con todos los gastos pagados por el cliente, para invitar por su cuenta a su mujer e hijo menor a darse una vuelta por el Viejo Continente. Buena falta le hacía a su mujer este descanso, y el niño no iban a dejarlo atrás.

Muchas cosas sucedieron en esos tres meses, entre ellas la más perjudicial para el ejercicio de la profesión del viajero: desapareció lo que los entendidos llaman el imperio de la ley, de un golpe, con un discurso, una más de aquellas interminables peroratas del máximo líder en las que abordaba todos los temas habidos y por haber. Pero como dicen que la esperanza nunca muere, se aplazó el viaje de regreso por unos días, o unas semanas, o unos meses, y finalmente sine die, como dicen esos mismos entendidos.

Así las cosas, la manejadora dispuso varias medidas preventivas por sí y ante sí (siguen los entendidos), para algo ella sabía mandar en ausencia del caballero. Primero, tirar la ametralladora Thompson al fondo del pozo en la casa de al lado, la de los abuelos de los niños, como todavía se refería a los que ya no lo eran salvo en su cariño. La ametralladora era un recuerdo de tiempos revolucionarios, aquellos vividos veinte y pico de años atrás, ella los recordaba como si fuera hoy. La tarea se la encomendó a Pepe, recién llegado a la casa, es decir, para ella que había cumplido 26 años allí y él sólo unos 15 o 16, pero de toda confianza a la hora de obedecer sus instrucciones, y de contra veterano de la guerra civil en España, así que entendía de estas cosas.

Acto seguido, ayudada por Pepe, enterró en un lugar apartado de los amplios jardines de la casa los cubiertos de plata, las fuentes de servir la comida y varios objetos de similar valor, todo a su leal saber y entender (y dale con los leguleyos, estas

expresiones se te pegan de tanto oírlos) y sin que nadie se lo hubiera encargado. Esto, desde luego, al igual que la ametralladora, de noche, sin hacer ruido, porque nunca se sabe quién puede andar curioseando por ahí.

Unos años después, primero Pepe, luego ella, lograron salir del país y viajar a Washington, ciudad que Ana, como la llamó desde muy pequeño el primero de sus niños al no poder decir Ernestina, conocía bien de la época en la embajada, cuando ella cuidaba al benjamín de esta familia que había pasado a ser la suya. Y cuando le contó al caballero lo de la ametralladora y la plata, él pensó en el pariente que trescientos años antes, en Inglaterra, había confiado a uno de sus sirvientes, hombre de confianza, la tarea de enterrar en el foso de su casa solariega las monedas de oro y plata que le quedaban después de haber donado muchas más a la causa, antes de partir a combatir por su rey durante la guerra civil. Pensó en aquel antepasado que tuvo la fortuna de morir sin enterarse de la traición del servidor, quien una vez perdida la guerra se robó todas las monedas que logró desenterrar.

*

Unlike Humphrey Belt, his ancestor who came to the U.S. from England in 1635 to start a new life in a land open to opportunity, Guillermo Belt did not leave Cuba for economic reasons. Nor did he follow the example of John Benjamin Belt, who traveled from his native Washington to Havana in the 1840s to explore a nearby, intriguing country, not yet independent, carrying an excellent letter of introduction that opened many doors, and had ended up marrying a Cuban lady from an aristocratic Spanish family.

Guillermo had solid reasons to believe that Cuba was in for a very difficult time. He knew that there was nothing he could do inside the country to influence events towards a favorable outcome. The rule of law had been discarded, as well as the political process that however imperfectly had existed in democratically elected governments since 1940. For the time being there was no place for him in the land of his birth, as a lawyer, diplomat, or political figure.

How long could the Castro revolution last? No one knew for sure. Guillermo Belt had to start all over once again. He had reopened his law practice in Havana and now there was no law to practice in Cuba anymore. So he settled temporarily in New York and from there, full of energy and optimism as usual, he set about looking for work.

Cuquita had rejoined her husband in July. One day, on returning to their apartment from grocery shopping, she found Guillermo seated at the dinner table in front of a rented typewriter, his eyes blindfolded with a handkerchief, slowly pecking away at the keys. Many years later she would tell her children: "I thought, poor Gui, he's gone mad, the stress of starting life all over again has driven him out of his mind." Far from it: Guillermo Belt was teaching himself to type.

On that typewriter he was in due course able to write a good number of letters to friends and acquaintances from his Washington days. One went to a top executive at the J.H. Pomeroy Company, which had been a primary contractor for the Golden Gate Bridge, among other large engineering projects. He had met the man at an international conference on Latin America and they had spoken of Pomeroy's interest in doing business in Mexico.

Guillermo followed up on that conversation. On October 5 he flew to San Francisco. His diary entry says he stayed at the Saint Francis hotel, and in parenthesis appears the word Pomeroy. Three days later Guillermo flies to Mexico City, where he meets with several persons. He notes all the meetings, indicating which were at lunch or dinner, and where. Clearly, he is keeping a detailed record for expense account purposes.

Ten days later he is again in New York. On October 19 he testifies as an expert on Cuban law in Federal court, in a civil suit brought against the Cuban Venezuelan Trust. Three days later he attends the Maria Moors Cabot awards at Columbia University as a guest of an old friend and colleague, Ambassador José Antonio Mora, of Uruguay, who by then is Secretary General of the OAS. He notes that at the dinner he saw another old friend, Galo Plaza, former ambassador and later President of Ecuador. Guillermo Belt is back in town.

He is also back in rhythm. November 2 finds him in San Francisco, and on the 3rd he flies to Mexico to resume his work for Pomeroy. Later the same month he is in New York for meetings with his Munich clients, and on the 22nd he flies back to Mexico. He and Cuquita are joined, in mid-December, by Marilys, her husband and their three children, who have left Cuba, and by Juan. The hectic pace takes a toll on his body. At 8 o'clock on the last night of 1959, the first year in exile, a hernia appears, and Guillermo, with Cuquita ever at his side, must face this new challenge in Mexico City.

Chapter XXI

Memories of Marjorie Merriweather Post during Our Exile

The main reason I am most grateful to Marjorie is that many years after our golden Washington era she, if anything, increased her many attentions, her kindnesses, and the number of her invitations to us. Every summer we were her guests at Top Ridge, her Upper Saint Regis Lake property and at Mar-a-Lago, her Palm Beach palace.

Marjorie showed us great love and affection that had nothing to do with Guillermo's prominence; instead, her feelings for us were sincere and heartfelt, something that she proved once and again throughout this long exile and up until the day she died in Palm Beach.

From *Notes and Scribbles*

On January 1, 1960, Guillermo Belt undergoes surgery at the British Cowdray Hospital in the Mexican capital. The operation is successful. Twelve days later, as noted in his diary, he is inspecting lands near the capital, and on the 16th flies to Guatemala on Pomeroy business. In the midst of all these activities he stays in touch with his law office in Havana. He also keeps track of his weight, carefully noting exact results on a regular basis, no doubt as an indicator of his recovery from surgery.

The three areas of maximum concern throughout his life are present in exile: his family, his work, and Cuba. Guillermo and Cuquita have established themselves in a rented house in

Mexico City, large enough to accommodate Marilys and her growing family. Work has taken Guillermo there, but Cuba will always be a top priority.

In May he and Cuquita fly to New York and then travel to Washington, where Guillermo begins a flurry of meetings related to Cuba. On May 18, one day after arriving in Washington, he visits the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter American Affairs in the State Department, and that same afternoon meets with Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA. That evening, he and Cuquita have dinner with their old and very good friends, Ambassador and Mrs. Mora. On May 20, Cuban Independence Day, he has a meeting with Admiral Arleigh Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, with whom he will forge a friendship based on their shared view of the situation in Cuba. Dates and times are duly recorded, but the subject of his conversations is omitted. Guillermo Belt is working on behalf of his homeland, with no official representation, as a Cuban exile opposed to the Castro regime, relying on his reputation and personal contacts to open doors that would otherwise be firmly shut. Discretion is essential.

Early June finds him and Cuquita in Miami. There are no diary entries until October, when they both travel by automobile back to Mexico, Guillermo driving all the way, as Cuquita never learned to drive. Many years later she would recall this trip as one of their great adventures.

A weekly account of Guillermo Belt's activities – he kept an almost daily record in his diaries – would show the same feverish pace that these few examples reveal. His work discipline never faltered; eventually, however, the trips to Latin America on Pomeroy business came to an end. He and Cuquita then decided to settle in Washington, the city that held memories of their shared success in the diplomatic world.

It was a logical choice, but not an easy one. As old Washingtonians know, once you come to the end of your diplomatic posting there you disappear from view. A former ambassador's name does not appear in the prized "A list" used in government, diplomatic, and society circles as a basis for invitations to receptions, dinners, and many other functions. The former representative of his country and the current one might not

even be on speaking terms, and even if they were it would be awkward to have them both at the same table, with other guests mentally comparing notes on their present and past performances.

But Guillermo and Cuquita had made good friends in Washington, forging the relationships that are essential for a successful diplomatic tour of duty. Such good friends, in fact, that their situation as political exiles was graciously overlooked many times, and fairly soon the couple was seen around town again.

Exile ends when the person who left the country of birth or nationality returns to it. A person exiled for economic reasons can return to the homeland any time, and do so permanently if in exile he or she achieved financial success. The political exile cannot return unless and until the political situation back home changes for the better. For Cuban exiles, political and otherwise, whether they left in 1959, before that year or after, return is only possible if the Castro dictatorship allows it.

Guillermo Belt was known to Fidel Castro and many of his followers. His name, long associated with politics and diplomacy, had often appeared in the Cuban press, sometimes unfavorably because of his U.S. ancestry. The Cuban Communist Party, legalized long before Castro took power, had criticized him for being too "pro American". This charge, as his critics well knew, could be easily disproved by his actions at the United Nations and as Cuban ambassador in Washington, most of which had found space in the Cuban press at the time. But in a revolution, truth, along with the rule of law, is quickly thrown overboard. Nothing mattered, other than being for the revolution, and if you were not openly for it, then you were an enemy. Guillermo Belt was definitely an enemy.

There were many sympathizers of the so-called Cuban revolution in the United States, right from the start. State Department officials, even CIA agents, had sympathized with the Castro brothers, and not many of them had become disillusioned in the early years. Cuban agents of influence were soon walking the corridors of power in Washington, the halls of academia, and the print and TV newsrooms.

Guillermo Belt made his opposition to the Cuban regime well known in Washington. That was the reason he had come back to the city; his purpose in life was to open the eyes of those who could not see, or did not want to see what the Castros were up to. It was not a popular position because the Castro propaganda machine, oiled by the likes of Herbert Mathews of the *New York Times*, was willingly echoed by many reputable media. So, from the beginning of his Washington exile, Guillermo Belt was once again the man who refused to march to the prevailing drumbeat. There he goes again, more than one State Department hand would say, recalling Belt's opposition to the veto at the UN, or his proposal on economic aggression at the OAS, a decade before. There goes this maverick Cuban who dared defy the U.S. position at international conferences, standing pretty much alone among his Latin American colleagues.

But Guillermo had good contacts with a few members of the press in Washington and New York. Some still remembered him as Cuban ambassador. For example, on December 8, 1961, *The Washington Post* carried an item quoting his presentation at the Washington Club denouncing the Cuban regime as a tool of the Soviet Union, and recalling his tenure as ambassador in Washington, permanent delegate to the UN and vice president of its General Assembly. A few weeks later, on February 15, in *Town Topics*, her regular column in *The Washington Post*, Marie McNair cited Guillermo's name among the guests at a dinner given by Mrs. John Foster Dulles, the wife of the late Secretary of State.

On March 7, 1963, Guillermo Belt was cited in a question put by a journalist to President John F. Kennedy during a wide-ranging news conference: "Mr. President. Ambassador, or former Ambassador Guillermo Belt, the Ambassador from Cuba to the United States in the old days, said in a lecture at Georgetown Visitation Convent last Sunday that Castro would not be able to survive two weeks if he was denied Soviet oil. I wonder if there isn't something that you can do about this, or maybe bring greater pressure on some of our allies who are shipping Soviet oil in their ships to Cuba?" President Kennedy

replied that “to deny the oil would require, of course, a blockade, and a blockade is an act of war...”

In his campaign to motivate the U.S. to act on Cuba Guillermo had gone to Cuquita’s old high school. He would speak about Cuba in public and in private whenever the occasion arose, or whenever he could make it happen. The above example, from *The Washington Post*, shows that his point on Soviet oil was not only mentioned publicly to the President of the United States, but shared by the journalist posing the question.

One month later, on May 8, *The Washington Post* published an item by Marie Smith titled “Democrat Tells Republicans U.S. Should Impose Blockade of Cuba.” Rep. O. Clark Fisher (D-Texas) told the D.C. League of Republican Women that President Kennedy ought to impose an economic blockade on Cuba by prohibiting any country or shipping company that does business with Cuba from sending ships into U.S. ports. Fisher contradicted his president by declaring that such a move “could not be called an act of war...” Guillermo Belt was a panelist, along with several other members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and syndicated columnist and author Edgar Mowrer. A bipartisan group of lawmakers had taken up the former Cuban ambassador’s suggestion.

Two days later, the topic of Cuba came up again, this time at a dinner given by Ambassador Gonzalo Facio, of Costa Rica, for his departing colleague from Guatemala. After listing other guests, ambassadors save for the President of the Inter-American Development Bank, Marie McNair wrote: “Two former Ambassadors, Rafael Oreamuno of Costa Rica and Guillermo Belt of Cuba, were there with their wives. During the evening there was much conversation about Cuba with various theories being offered on what should be done. SOMETHING should be done seemed the consensus.”

Chapter XXII

Cuquita had lived in only two family houses, her parents' and her own, and now she had to find a new one and make it into a home where all her family would be welcome. She found a house at 5224 Elliot Road, in Bethesda, Maryland, just over the demarcation line with the District of Columbia. It was a great buy, in terms of price and location, but Cuquita's main consideration, as she would say many years later, was that it had enough bedrooms to accommodate her and Guillermo, together with Juan, Marilys, her husband and their four children.

In fairly short order the remaining sons would also come to the United States. Although they have all made cameo appearances in this account, this story is not about the Belt siblings. It is enough to say that, even as adults, their parents continued looking after them, and at one point all except Sonny, the last one to leave Cuba and who eventually settled in Madrid, were living in or near the new Belt family home, where they would generally meet on Sundays.

The house at Elliott Road soon became a favorite meeting place of the couple's Cuban friends, who were regular visitors on holidays, and also on June 25, the day when Cuquita celebrated Guillermo's saint's day. It was the custom in Cuba for women and men to celebrate the feast day of the Catholic saint after whom they had been named.

Fellow Cuban exiles, not necessarily personal friends of the Belts, would also come to the house often. Guillermo had befriended a generous man who for several years held a high position in the Immigration Service, and many of these exiles, previously unknown, were helped by Guillermo in immigra-

tion matters. Other exiles came to talk about Cuba, discussing what could be done to recover the freedoms abolished by the Castro regime. They, too, found in Guillermo Belt sympathy and whatever support he was able to give to a cause in which he never faltered.

In their efforts to reassemble their family, children (who could no longer be so called) and grandchildren included, Cuquita eventually had very valuable help. Ana had stayed in La Coronela, in the Belt family house, to which Mamalie had been moved from her own beautiful house next door, taking care of Mrs. José Agustín Martínez, for whom she had never worked before. Rosa María had moved away some years earlier, but José Iglesias, a “recent” addition to the Belt household in Cuba – he had been there only 16 years – was also in Villa Marisol.

José Iglesias, “Pepe” to one and all, disliked the Castro regime and made no bones about it. One evening, after a few drinks in the nearby town of La Lisa, he got into a fierce argument with one of the many supporters of the revolution, which led to Pepe knocking the man down and ending up in jail. Released a few days later, he decided there was nothing more for him to do in Cuba. Claiming his Spanish citizenship, he had himself repatriated to Orense, in his native Galicia. Soon, however, he found that he was a stranger in his own country, so with the new Belt address in Bethesda on an envelope containing a letter from Cuquita to Ana he went to the local schoolteacher, asked her to write a letter for him, dictated the contents, and made it known to “la señora”, the only person for whom he had worked in Cuba, that he was more than willing to go to the United States and resume his employment with the Belt family. And so he did.

After Mamalie died, if not in her own house at least in the one she and her husband had built for their only daughter, Ana knew that her work for the family in Cuba had come to an end. There was no one left for her to take care of, after more than a quarter century. Therefore, she applied for permission to leave the island, and after a detour to Madrid, came to rejoin her other family, the adopted one. Now, at last, for Guillermo and Cuquita, and for their grownup children, Elliott Road was on track to become the new “Villa Marisol”.

Epilogue

*O death, where is thy sting?
O grave, where is thy victory?*

1 Corinthians 15:55
King James Version

April 17, 1961, was a fateful day for Cuba. A U.S.-backed force of about 1,400 Cuban exiles landed at Playa Girón, an isolated beach on the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) on the island's southern coast. Many books have been written on the failed invasion and its aftermath.

Guillermo Belt's agenda for this year shows his feverish activity in the weeks leading up to that day and in the months that followed. His conversations in Washington and Miami with Cuban exile leaders and with U.S. officials, many of them at the highest levels, are recorded by date and place. The subject is obvious, and no details are set down in writing, as with most of his diary entries. Two things stand out when reading these names and places: the former Cuban ambassador resorted to all his friends and contacts in making the case for the liberation of his country from the Castro dictatorship, and he did not succeed.

It is yet another indication of his temperament that he never gave up on Cuba. He continued giving talks, presentations, and press interviews, as noted in the newspaper accounts cited before, about the dangers posed to the United States and Latin America by the Castro regime. He always spoke his mind, and on more than one occasion had a sharp exchange of opinions with high government officials of the Kennedy administration. His public statements eventually drew a reaction from

the State Department. Through a message delivered verbally to his eldest son by a third party at the OAS he was reminded that his immigration status could be revoked by the Secretary of State. Undeterred, Guillermo Belt continued his criticism in public and private of the U.S. government's actions – or rather, lack of action – about the situation in Cuba.

Guillermo had accomplished much in the first years of his life. By age 21 he had graduated with honors from the University of Havana with a doctorate in Law and immediately begun to practice his profession; a few years later, shortly after marrying Cuquita, he had taken part in the overthrow of a president who had unconstitutionally extended his mandate; and before turning 30 he had been appointed mayor of Havana, the youngest person to hold that office, second in importance to the presidency; had become the father of their first two boys, and planted a royal palm in the garden of Villa Marisol that turned into five palms, one for each of the five children they would have.

Before his 40th birthday he and Cuquita had their other three children, and at 39 he was appointed Cuba's ambassador to the United States, representing a freely elected president who had defeated the government candidate in a landslide at the polls. He enjoyed President Grau's full confidence throughout his mission, and also at the United Nations and the Organization of American States, where he left his mark on Cuba's foreign policy.

In the last ten years of life back home, Guillermo rebuilt and enlarged his law practice. Cuquita saw her family grow; the first grandchildren made their welcome entrance. Life was back to normal, until 1959, when Guillermo, just shy of his 54th birthday, left Havana on a business trip to Munich. He had not planned a one-way trip; it turned out to be a trip with no return.

And it was also a very, very long exile. The year 1967, a busy one, began well. The entry for January 1st says that Guillermo and Cuquita celebrated New Year's Eve at the Embassy of Venezuela. Three years before they had welcomed the New Year at the Spanish Embassy. They were still in the diplomatic

circuit, in an honorary capacity, and this was quite a feat, as pointed out before.

All was not wine and roses. On Sunday, April 2, their wedding anniversary, Guillermo wrote: “Ingresé en el Providence Hospital” (I was admitted to Providence Hospital.) And, on the following day, he records having had surgery by Dr. Louis J. Gofredi. No further details were recorded. On April 8 he was released from the hospital, and ten days later he was on a plane to Miami. And then, more medical problems:

- 14 JUNE Cuca (his name for Cuquita, all his life) entered the hospital.
- 15 JUNE *Cuca fue operada.* (Cuca underwent surgery.)
- 19 JUNE Cuca was readmitted to the hospital.
- 20 JUNE *Cuca fue operada.*
- 21 JUNE I was admitted to the hospital.
- 28 JUNE *Salimos del hospital.*

The last, cryptic entry (we left the hospital) does not do justice to the events of that day. Guillermo decided he had had enough of Georgetown University Hospital after his one-week stay. No doctor gave him permission to leave. He simply got out of bed, dressed, and when the astonished nurses tried to stop him in the hallway he told them he was going home, and he did just that, in a taxi he had called from his room. Guillo, who was there and also powerless to stop his father, picked up the pieces – in a manner of speaking – arranged for his mother’s more conventional release, and Guillermo and Cuquita were reunited back at Elliott Road.

In a telephone directory dated 1968 Guillermo had written down his brother Jorge Alfredo’s address in Cuba: 31A #2007 entre 20 y 22, Marianao, no phone number. And in his agenda for 1968, on Thursday, 28 March, he wrote this sad entry: *Murió mi pobre hermano Jorge Alfredo. Tenía al morir 64 años, 10 meses y dos días de edad.* (My poor brother Jorge Alfredo died. He was 64 years, 10 months and 2 days old.)

Tucked in this page, a clipping from *Diario Las Américas*, dated 7 April 1968. The headline: *Víctima de un Ataque Cardíaco Murió Jorge Alfredo Belt en la Ciudad de La Habana.*

The obituary, giving March 28 as the date of death, names his parents; his widow, Alicia de Cárdenas de Belt; his children, Alicia Belt de R. de Arellano and Manuel R. de Arellano, and Jorge Alfredo Belt y de Cárdenas; his grandchildren, all of them living in Summit, NJ; his brother Alberto Belt and wife Julia Alonso de Belt, “ambos presos en Cuba” (both imprisoned in Cuba); his brother Guillermo and wife Cuca Martínez-Viademonte de Belt, and his nephews, Guillermo and Cuquita’s five offspring.

Much later, Cuquita recorded in her memoirs the circumstances of Jorge Alfredo’s death. He had gone to visit elderly relatives in Havana, had taken a seat on the porch while waiting to be announced – a true gentleman to the end – and when they came for him he was dead, still sitting in the rocking chair.

Guillermo’s father had died at 64. Now his brother, the eldest of the three sons of Jorge Alfredo Belt Muñoz, had died at that same age.

Good news ushered in the New Year in 1971. On January 11 Ana cabled that she would arrive in Madrid on the 25th, a necessary but out of the way stop on her way to Washington. Just in time, too, because Guillermo and Cuquita were going through sad and trying times with some of their grandchildren. So much so that on March 4, Guillermo, recording “another snowstorm” that day, added: *Primavera o invierno, el frío lo llevo en el corazón.* (Spring or winter, the cold is in my heart.)

A time to weep, and a time to laugh.

More than their failing health, the sadness caused by family problems begins to take a toll. His brother Alberto and his wife, Julia (Beba) Alonso de Belt, are in prison in Cuba, accused of counterrevolutionary activities by the Castro regime. They have been sentenced to very long terms; at their age it is very likely they will die in prison. Guillermo does everything he can to obtain their release, including writing a letter to the Pope. He calls on all his influential friends, on anyone who might have an entrée to Castro. He sends a cable to Fidel Castro, quoted earlier, all to no avail.

On 14 July 1971, his birthday, Guillermo writes that he had always hoped to die suddenly, like his brother Jorge Alfredo, but that he believes his wishes will not be fulfilled. Two years

later, for the first time he writes on the page for October 27: On this day, 41 years ago, my wonderful father died. And in 1977, again on his birthday: *Nunca pensé ni deseé llegar a los 72. La vejez es peor que la muerte. La gran compensación que tiene es poder hacer algo por nuestros descendientes.* (I never thought that I would reach 72, nor did I wish to. Old age is worse than death. The good thing about it is that I can do something for our offspring.)

A time to plant.

The most painful blow was still to come. On 14 June 1983, José Agustín Cristián Belt y Martínez-Viademonte, known and loved by all as Sonny, died in Madrid. He was only 49. There is no greater pain for a parent than to have a child die, and this pain stayed with Guillermo and Cuquita until the last.

A time to mourn.

For Guillermo death would not come suddenly. On 2 July 1989, two days short of his 84th birthday, he fought his last battle. He never lost his love of God, for his family, and for Cuba, and he never surrendered. Guillermo would have to wait 20 years to be reunited with Cuquita. She died at home, in the house on Elliott Road, as she wished, sleeping, her rosary in her hands, in the early morning of Sunday, August 2, 2009, mother to the last day to her four surviving children, and leaving memories to 11 grandchildren, 20 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild.

Nothing written here can truly do them justice. But there is a time to keep silence, and now it is time to speak.

ICoNograFía



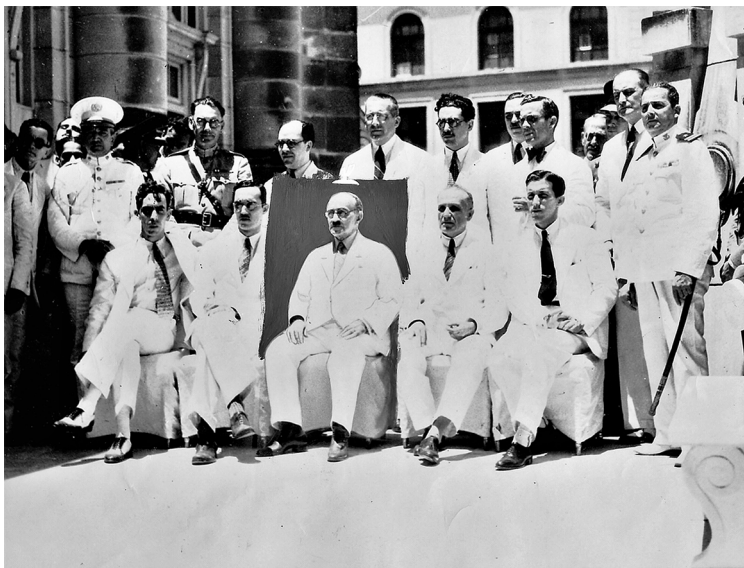
Elisa Martínez Silverio, de niña/*Elisa Martínez Silverio, as a child*



Guillermo Belt Ramírez, Doctor en Derecho, Universidad de La Habana, 1926/*Guillermo Belt Ramírez, Law School graduate, University of Havana, 1926*



Dr. Jorge Alfredo Belt Muñoz, Secretario de la Presidencia, 1902/*Jorge Alfredo Belt Muñoz, chief of staff to the President, 1902*



Guillermo Belt, Secretario de Instrucción Pública y Bellas Artes, gabinete del Presidente Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, 1933/ *Guillermo Belt, Secretary of Education with President Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, 1933*



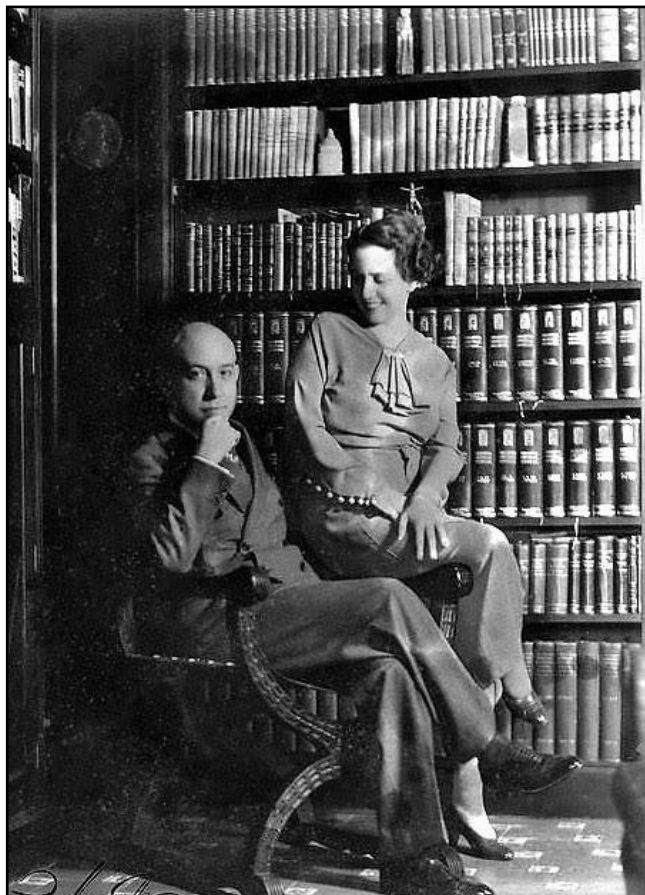
Alcalde de La Habana Guillermo Belt con la Legión de Honor de Francia, 1935/*Havana Mayor Guillermo Belt receiving France's Legion of Honor, 1935*



Elisa M. de Belt, Villa Marisol, La Coronela, c. 1950/*Mrs. Belt, at home, Villa Marisol, La Coronela, c. 1950*



Dr. José Agustín Martínez Viademonte, de joven/
Dr. José Agustín Martínez Viademonte, as a young man



Los padres de Elisa Martínez de Belt, en su casa, Cuba, c. 1930/
Mrs. Belt's parents, at home in Cuba, c. 1930



Embajador Guillermo Belt, ex Primer Ministro Winston Churchill,
Embajador Willy de Blanck, Londres, 1946/*Ambassador Guillermo Belt,
former Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Ambassador Willy de Blanck,
London, 1946*



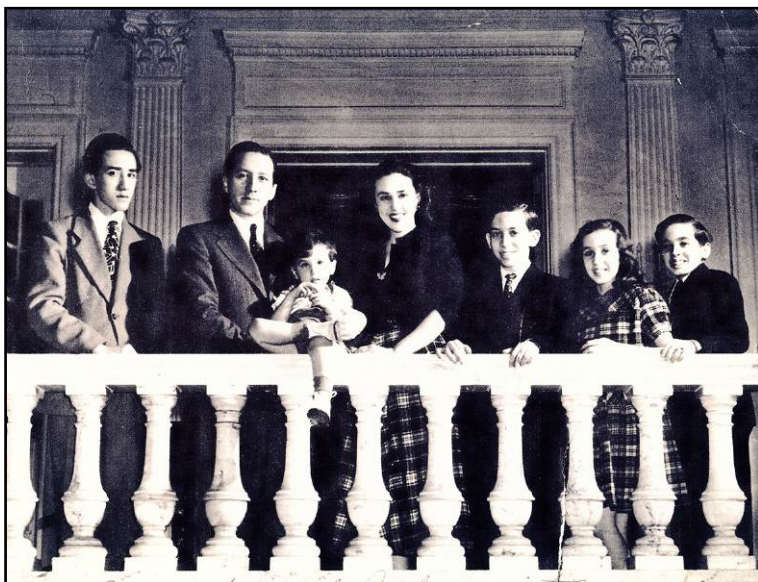
Detalle. Guillermo Belt, jefe de la Delegación de Cuba, firma la Carta de la ONU, San Francisco, 1945/ *Detail. Guillermo Belt, head of Cuban delegation, signs UN Charter, San Francisco, 1945*



El Embajador Belt y señora, recepción en Washington, c. 1946/
Ambassador and Mrs. Belt at a Washington reception, c. 1946



Sra. de Belt, derecha, con Sra. de Truman, Presidente Carlos Prío y Presidente Harry Truman, embajada de Cuba, Washington, 1948/
Mrs. Belt, right, with Mrs. Truman, President Carlos Prío and President Harry Truman, Cuban Embassy, Washington, 1948



El Embajador Belt y señora con sus hijos, embajada de Cuba en Washington, c. 1947/*Ambassador and Mrs. Belt and their children, Cuban Embassy, Washington, c. 1947*



Nelson Rockefeller (EE. UU.), Guillermo Belt (Cuba), Galo Plaza (Ecuador) y John Cabot (EE. UU.), Conferencia de la ONU, San Francisco, 1945/*Nelson Rockefeller (U.S.), Guillermo Belt (Cuba), Galo Plaza (Ecuador) and John Cabot (U.S.), UN Conference, San Francisco, 1945*



Embajador Belt saluda al Presidente Truman, Presidente Prío,
embajada de Cuba, Washington, 1948/*Ambassador Belt greeting
President Truman, with President Prío, Cuban Embassy,
Washington, 1948*



Guillermo Belt, jefe de la Delegación de Cuba, firma la Carta de la ONU,
San Francisco, 1945/*Guillermo Belt, head of Cuban delegation,
signs UN Charter, San Francisco, 1945*



Embajador Belt y señora, cena diplomática, embajada de Cuba,
Washington, 1945/*Ambassador and Mrs. Belt diplomatic dinner,
Cuban Embassy, Washington, 1945*



Guillermo Belt, Washington, década de 1960/*Guillermo Belt,
Washington, 1960s*



Presidente Truman y señora, Embajador Belt y señora, Presidente Prío, embajada de Cuba, Washington, 1948/*President and Mrs. Truman, Ambassador and Mrs. Belt, President Prío, Cuban Embassy, Washington, 1948*



Embajador Belt y señora, almuerzo en honor de Pedro de Alba,
Hotel Mayflower, Washington, 1947/*Ambassador and Mrs. Belt, lunch
in honor of Pedro de Alba, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, 1947*

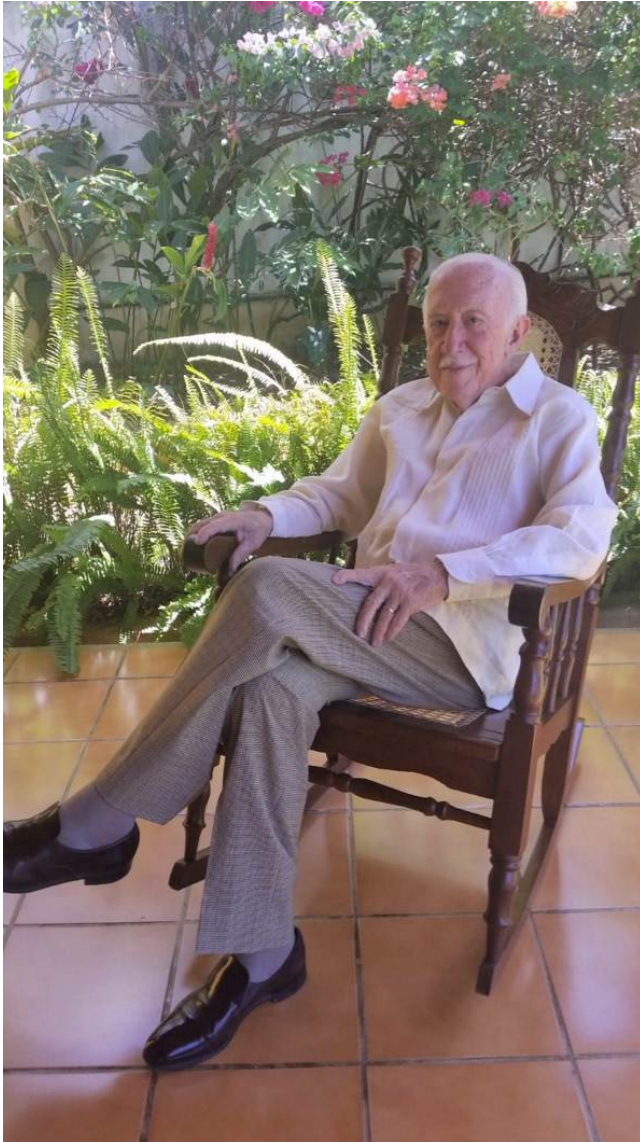


Elisa M. de Belt, recepción en Washington, c. 1946/
Mrs. Belt at a reception in Washington, c. 1946



Dr. Guillermo Belt, c. 1940/*Dr. Guillermo Belt, c. 1940*

sEmblaNza



Guillermo A. Belt
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guillermo a. belt

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*

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