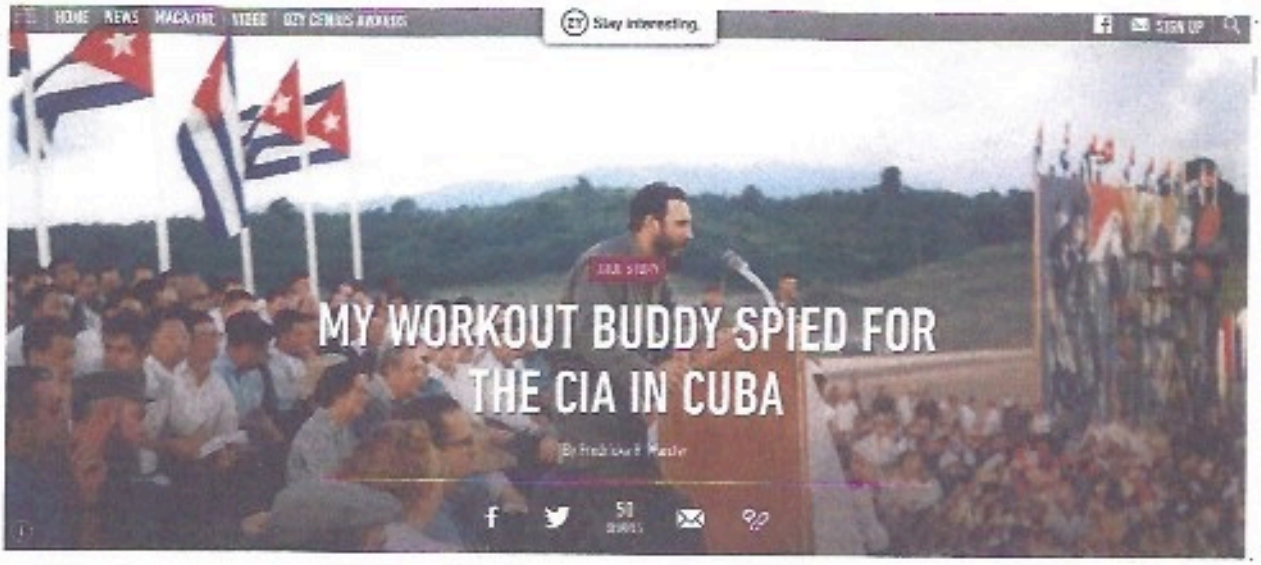

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because most 17-year-olds wouldn't risk their lives to photograph Russian nuclear missiles.

Fredricka R. Maister is a New York City-based writer whose work has appeared in a variety of print and online newspapers, magazines and anthologies.

Cary, an acquaintance from weights class, never discussed growing up in Castro's Cuba. We chatted about more mundane subjects, such as aging-body aches, job challenges, the hassles and perks of living in New York. But one day at Juliano's, the coffee shop where we'd meet after working out, we found ourselves talking about 9/11.

Cary said 9/11 had been especially stressful for her because it revived the trauma of living in Cuba 50 years earlier. In 1961, during the Bay of Pigs invasion, after her counterrevolutionary father fled to the mountains, young Cuban soldiers — neighbors she'd grown up with — would come to her house looking for him. With machine guns pointed at her, her mother and her sisters, they threatened to kill the family. She remembered the sound of

counterrevolutionaries being shot at a nearby prison in the middle of the night.

I told Cary that the fear and anxiety I felt in the aftermath of 9/11 brought me back to the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. A middle school student then, I sat in American history class questioning its relevance when it seemed we could be blown to smithereens in a nuclear World War III. I just wanted to go home and be with my family when the bomb dropped.

Surprised at my mention of the Cuban missile crisis, Cary opened up about a piece of her past she'd kept hidden for most of her adult life, assuming no one would believe her. "My sister and I took pictures of the missiles for the CIA," she said matter-of-factly as we sipped our coffee. Could she mean the Russian nuclear missiles that were based in Cuba and aimed at the United States? I listened as she went on to describe her role as an unwitting CIA operative in the summer of 1962.

> **"I DIDN'T REALIZE THAT IF WE'D BEEN CAUGHT THEY WOULD HAVE PUT US IN JAIL FOREVER, OR EVEN KILLED US."**

Cary grew up in the countryside near a military base where the Russians had installed missiles. "I lived 500 meters away from the missiles. They were practically in my backyard," she said. At first, no one knew it was a missile base, because the weapons arrived piecemeal on trucks and were kept under tarps. No Cuban soldiers were allowed inside the base, which was manned by the Russians.

Cary's older sister and a cousin were committed to the counterrevolutionary cause and maintained contact with a relative in the U.S. who worked for the CIA. The agency had aerial reconnaissance but no on-the-ground photographs of the missiles, so it recruited Cary's sister, who brought Cary, then 17 years old, along for "the mission." Was she aware of the danger had the mission gone awry? "We knew we were taking pictures for my cousin. I didn't realize that if we'd been caught they would have put us in jail forever, or even killed us," Cary said.

Late one afternoon, the sisters, "armed" with a camera, visited neighbors from whose patio the missiles were visible. Cary, her back to the base, pretended to photograph her sister standing against the house. Cary pretended she didn't know how to operate the camera, at which point her sister offered to help, stealthily turning the camera in the direction of the missiles and snapping a roll of film. As they took pictures, the girls even waved to some Cuban soldiers on patrol. When one soldier approached, the girls explained they were just playing with their new camera.

THE SOLDIERS TOOK THE CAMERA. IT WAS NEVER RETURNED.

That evening, when they told their mother what they'd done, she became very upset, and instructed her daughters to replace the film with another roll, take pictures of anything and keep clicking until the camera broke. When the Cuban soldiers came to investigate, Cary's mother said the girls had broken the camera and asked if they could fix it. The soldiers took the camera. It was never returned.

The sisters hid the first roll of film inside the waistband of Cary's slacks and traveled by taxi to give it to their cousin. He arranged for it to be delivered by speedboat to Florida. That October, the Cuban missile crisis burst into America's consciousness and the history books. And four years later, Cary and her family were finally allowed to travel outside the country to Mexico. From there they went to Miami to reunite with her father.

Fast-forward 50-plus years. Cary and I are once again at Juliano's, and I'm telling her about a recent trip to Cuba, regretful I didn't get a chance to see her home and the former missile site "in her backyard." I tell her: "I'd go back in a heartbeat." But Cary tells me that she won't go back, recalling an experience in 1989 when she and her husband visited Cuba. She described "the heartbreaking reality" of life under Castro: no running water, no toilets in the bathroom, grocery stores where only people with U.S. dollars could shop. To this day, Cary and her sisters send money to her aunt and cousins. "Otherwise," she explains, "they wouldn't eat." Despite the passage of time and the normalization of Cuban-American relations, Cary still has no desire to return. "None whatsoever!"

- Fredricka R. Maister, OZY Author Contact Fredricka R. Maister

7 Comments

Jody Millstone ·
American University
Well written Fredricka and such an interesting article. I look forward to reading other articles written by you in the future.
Like · Reply · 2 · Jan 26, 2017 3:41pm