



## My Mother's Escape From Communism

What started out as a vacation turned into an adventure. The adventure turned into a tragedy. And out of the tragedy came one of the most amazing stories of courage, patriotism, and perseverance it has ever been my experience to witness. Here's what happened.

My father was "king of the hill" in the rural southern Indiana town where we lived in the mid-1950s.

He was president of the largest employer in the county, on the board of the only country club, president of United Way, and had been given just about every other honor and accolade it was possible to garner. As his wife, my mother was just as respected and just as involved in the social activities of the town.



It all came to a sudden end when my father died of a massive heart attack one Saturday afternoon. Years of abuse to his body and stress on the job had taken their fatal toll. After the funeral, my mother's brother insisted she come to Ft. Lauderdale for a week or two to rest and recover from the trauma she had just endured. While she was with him, Uncle Harry treated her to a long weekend in one of his favorite cities, Havana, Cuba.

Little did he know what he was unleashing. My mother fell head over heels in love with Cuba. She had never seen a place so exotic, a people so friendly, a climate so delightful or prices so reasonable. Her widow's mite would stretch a lot further there, she realized, than it would back home.

I was at boarding school in Michigan during what followed. I wish I had saved the string of telegrams, postcards and letters that began arriving in my mailbox. Most were as brief and cryptic as, "Staying at Hotel Miramar for a while; brothers are fine." When I got one that read, "Have taken a job and am buying an apartment," I went to my headmaster and said, "I think I should go down there and see what's going on. Don't you?"

So in late November 1957, I visited Havana, Cuba, for the first time. It was just as exotic as my mother had promised. Words can't express the excitement I felt the first time I walked into one of Cuba's legendary casinos and saw George Raft leaning against a wall, flipping a coin. (I learned later that he was hired to do this; the hotel provided him a complimentary gorgeous suite, all expenses, and, rumor had it, all the liquor and feminine companionship he wanted whenever he flew from Hollywood for a visit.)

I was quickly made a member of what was called the ABC Colony. This was a group of American, British and Canadian expats, most of whom worked for major U.S. companies and lived the good life in Cuba. And let me tell you, it was a very good life indeed, while it lasted. Maids, gardeners, cooks and



Written by [Wallis W. Wood](#) on May 8, 2011

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chauffeurs cost a few dollars a week. The social life was frenetic; during my first two weeks in Havana, there was something going on almost every day and certainly every night.

Within a few months it was as though my mother had lived there all her life. She became the society columnist for the *Havana Post*, the largest English-language newspaper on the island. (One of her most popular columns was a weekly collection of goings-on she called “Woodchips.”)

In the memoir she wrote about those days, she described “bouncing on a bridal bed with Maureen O’Hara.” And how she ended up “on the cutting room floor with Alex Guinness.” One of my favorite tales was when she went out to buy a used ironing board — and ended up owning one of Havana’s most popular antique shops.

I think my two brothers would agree that it was an idyllic life ... for a while. But it all changed on January 1, 1959, when Fidel Castro and a bunch of “bearded ones” marched into Havana.

What would this revolutionary new leader be like? The *New York Times* called him “the George Washington of Cuba.” But he turned out to be — as every American in Havana had been warned he was — nothing but a murderous communist tyrant.

You will not be surprised to learn that within a few months, my mother had lost everything she had worked so hard to build — the newspaper had been seized, her shop had been closed, goods were impossible to get and freedom had become just a memory.

When she was finally able to leave Cuba, eight months after the Castro takeover, she was allowed to carry two suitcases; her sons could each carry one. Everything else was left behind. She returned to the United States almost penniless to start life over.

And there my story would probably end, except for one thing: Someone invited a representative of something called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee to speak at her church in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. That was all it took to get her Irish up, as she would put it. She went to the meeting and denounced the speaker as a liar.

In no time at all she was being interviewed by the media and was being asked to address a handful, then dozens, then scores of community organizations. I don’t think she ever turned down an invitation. She and her white hats (she must have owned 30 of them) became famous — or some would say, infamous.

My mother became a heroine among the many refugee groups in the area. I still have a few of the decorations some grateful Hungarian freedom fighters bestowed on her.

Articles about Mom’s activities began appearing in the *Cleveland Press* and in other media. She was even asked to write a series of stories for the newspaper. And the hate mail and phone calls came pouring in.

These only made her more determined to fight. She started a group called the Organization to Fight Communism, which held regular meetings and sponsored a series of anti-Communist lectures in town. She debated Gus Hall, the head of the Communist Party USA, and organized people to picket his meetings. The more she was threatened, the more determined she became.

One of her favorite mementos of this time in her life is a letter she got from J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, congratulating her on her many contributions to our country. To say she was thrilled to pieces would be an understatement.



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As you can see, I come by my anti-communism honestly. For a while, in fact, I argued we should make the government bigger and stronger, precisely so it could do a better job fighting “the Red menace.” But the story of my own transition from the left edge of the spectrum to the right (some would say, the far-far-right) will wait for another day.

Many years after all of the excitement died down, Mom decided to write a book about her experiences. She called it *A Fool Walked In (To Cuba)*. And while I may be a little bit prejudiced (OK, I’ll admit it: On this topic I’m a *lot* prejudiced), I think it’s a thrilling, exciting story of one person’s courage, dedication, determination, and accomplishments.

That’s why I am delighted to announce that *Personal Liberty Digest* is making Mom’s book available — for free, with no strings attached — to anyone who wants to read it. [Just click here \(PDF, 7.11 MB\)](#) to enjoy the memories and accomplishments of the feistiest lady it has been my great privilege to know.

Mom ascended to her heavenly reward 21 years ago this summer. But part of me hopes she knows about today’s column and is smiling in appreciation.

To all of you reading this, please celebrate your own mother’s accomplishments this Sunday, as you wish her a happy Mother’s Day.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

**Chip Wood** was the first news editor of *The Review of the News* and also wrote for *American Opinion*, our two predecessor publications. He is now the geopolitical editor of *Personal Liberty Digest*, where his *Straight Talk* column appears weekly. This article first appeared in [PersonalLiberty.com](#) and has been reprinted with permission.



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