City of Alexandria

Office of Historic Alexandria

Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future

Oral History Program

Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Myriam Lechuga*

Date of Interview: *June 13, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Ms. Lechuga's home in Falls Church, Virginia*

Interviewer: *John Reibling*

Transcriber: *Nellie Lawrence*

Abstract: Myriam Lechuga, whose father was a Cuban diplomat and whose mother was a journalist, immigrated to the United States in 1967 when she was twelve years old. Ms. Lechuga recalls growing up in Havana, Cuba, and her journey to the United States with her mother and maternal grandparents. A long-time resident of Alexandria, she speaks of the challenges her family faced in their new location, her experience in Alexandria Public Schools when they desegregated, her college education, and her subsequent career. She also discusses possible plans for returning to Cuba to reconnect with family members who are still there.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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Introductions	
John Reibling:	Today is June 13, 2015, and we are interviewing Miss Myriam Lechuga, a longtime resident of Northern Virginia. She is the Graduate Student Coordinator at Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs, Alexandria Center. This interview is being recorded at her home in Falls Church as part of the Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future oral history project. Miss Lechuga was born in Havana, Cuba, [in] 1955 and became a U.S. citizen about 1973. I am John Reibling, a volunteer with the City's Office of Historic Alexandria. Myriam, on behalf of the City of Alexandria, I thank you for agreeing to do this interview.
Myriam Lechuga:	Well, you're welcome. Thank you for including me in the project. I think it is a wonderful idea, and I am, I hope, looking forward to looking at and reading the other interviews from Immigrant Alexandria.
J.R.:	Great!
Childhood and Family	
J.R.	So to get started, tell us about Cuba and your early years. What was your home like and what can you remember? Who lived there? What was your neighborhood like and what were your parents doing for a living? Those kinds of things.
Myriam Lechuga:	Well, I lived in Cuba at different period times and because my father's job, which I can also talk about later, but I also lived outside of Cuba. But, I was born in Havana and my parents at the time when they met they were both journalists. So my father worked—a newspaper called *El Mundo*, which was like what the *Washington Post* would be here. And my mother was also a journalist and she worked freelance for a couple of publications, one of which was *El Mundo*, and that's how they met. So what I remember the most—we lived in an apartment in Havana when I was little—what I remember most [from] my early life is actually my grandparents' house, because—.
J.R.:	These are the same grandparents [inaudible]?
Myriam Lechuga:	The same grandparents that came here, then later with us to the U.S. They are my maternal grandparents and those are the ones I remember the most because I used to spend a lot of time there. My grandfather was retired. I don't remember him working, so he was already retired at this time. So, he would pick me up from school and then I would go back to their home and then my mother would pick me up from there.

	So we lived in a neighborhood in Havana. I know its 35th Street. They had what was called in the U.S. a rambler [style house.] There was one floor, though it had an attic room that was like my grandfather's office, and he used to tinker with things. When he retired, you know, he was kind of a tinkerer. He would, you know, repair clocks or whatever or my dolls or whatever he had. And they had a very nice garden in the back. So I remember, I had my own room because also for a time I lived with them. And I think they had three rooms and a porch and a very nice garden that I remember. And then, in Cuba at the time, it was a residential neighborhood, there was houses on either side. And they had a porch, and in Cuba at that time and now also, although I have been away, people would sit outside on the porch and they—the neighbors would come by or people would come by and say, "Hello." People would have a conversation and, you know, leave again and that was every night, that was what you did at night. So that was my memory of actually at my grandparents' home. We lived in an apartment earlier, my parents. And then—one reason I remember that because my parents' jobs—is that at one point my parents went outside of Cuba as part of his job and I was too little to go on this, so I lived with my maternal grandparents then for a while, while my parents were traveling. Then we lived elsewhere for a while and we came back to Cuba and at that time I remember the most, the last three years I was there. I came here when I was twelve. So I guess I was nine when we went back. We lived—my parents and I lived in a large house that was, and my father worked for the government so it was actually a house that we didn't own but it was a government house. He was sort of assigned to this house, let's say. It was big, it was pink, I remember that. It had two floors and it also had a nice garden. Lot of big houses, or houses in Havana or Cuba had gardens in the back, you know. It was tropical. It is an island. My mother was much into gardening. My mother and my grandmother were much into gardening, which is funny because I don't like plants at all and I kill them by sight. [laughs] I look at one of them, and it dies. But, they were both very good with plants. They loved plants and gardens. They had a garden. So the last three years I was there, we lived in a house that was two floors and it was just my parents and me in that house and I think it was Miramar. I think that was the neighborhood that we lived in at the time. Miramar at the end.
J.R.:	So, that was from age nine to twelve?

Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, that was age nine to twelve. Yeah, that was age nine to twelve when I lived in that house and that's my biggest memory of Cuba at that time we lived there. Those last years.
J.R.:	So tell me about your parents. Your father worked for the government after he was a journalist?
Father/Diplomat	
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, yes, what happened was that, as I said, my father was a journalist. But after the Cuban revolution in 1959, people might not remember or not, it was in 1959. What happened, obviously, is because a lot of diplomats that were on site in different countries. They were representing Cuba, or worked for a different government, or didn't want to return after the revolution. So a lot of career diplomats, same type of thing as diplomats here in the United States, you were assigned to a country. Many people that worked at the embassies in many cases didn't come back, stayed in whatever country they were in. So the Cuban government at the time, that was Fidel Castro [who] was looking for people to fill some of those positions. My father had always loved to travel. Actually, at one point when he was young, he ran away from home and joined the Merchant Marines for a year. And then his parents tracked him down. [laughs] I think that was what happened. He loved to travel so he became a diplomat at that time when the Cuban foreign service at that time, but before that had been a career journalist. And so when I lived with my grandparents for that period of time and what happened is Cuba needed, you know, Castro had this new government and so my parents, my father, was assigned to go to South America. On a tour of South America to talk about, to introduce the Castro government, I'd say, to governments in South America. And so in that time my parents left. And my mother used to have some funny, interesting, very interesting stories. She loved travel as well, interesting stories about that. This is the 1950s and there were a lot of propeller planes. It wasn't travel like it is now. In some ways, it was better, you know, some people dressed up to travel and all those kind of things, but so I stayed with my grandparents during the time that they were gone. I think, was about a year. Maybe more than a year. I don't know. I lived with my grandparents. My maternal grandparents who then came. So he then was a career diplomat his entire life, he didn't retire until his eighties actually, so, yes.
J.R.:	Well. Then he and your mom were journalists. How long did your mom work?

Mother	
Myriam Lechuga:	My mother worked until, well, my mother worked until she got married. But she continued, she always continued, well, actually until my father became a diplomat and, you know, she obviously had to travel, traveled with him so she was in it. And most people might not realize that the wife of a diplomat is also a diplomat even though they were not paid, she also had a job. So there were certain duties as his wife she had to do. And, but, even after she was married, she would write freelance for magazines or even the newspaper. She was an art critic and also she wrote about gardens and plants. That was her area and she wrote about different gardens and, you know, Cuba or Havana at the time, in fact maybe now also, but I think now things are sort of run down. You know, people had special gardens that, you know, maybe were not open to the public, so she wrote those kind of things. Especially one magazine called *Vanidades,* [it] is still published in South America and I think even here. But this was like the Cuban version of this magazine, *Vanidades*. So she wrote articles. So she even then, even after she got married. She was primarily a stay-at-home mom. She also wrote freelance articles, but then after we moved, you know, my father was assigned outside of Cuba, she didn't do as much at all at that time. And not at all when we came here, but that was a different story, yeah. [laughs]
Disenchantment with the Castro Government	
J.R.:	At what point did she become disenchanted with the Castro government?
Myriam Lechuga:	Oh, I don't know, you know, exactly what point she became disenchanted. I think that my mother, my mother at the time when she was young she was, and still even later, she was a great admirer of Gandhi, and she was a great admirer of the Scandinavian countries. I think here when people say "socialism" they think a different concept of it, maybe, but she was an admirer of what was going on in the Scandinavian countries, I would say. We would talk about that even later in life. I think once Fidel Castro declared initially for the people, you know, initially Fidel Castro didn't declare himself a Communist. That came later, but I think so many things that happened with the government. You know they confiscated people's property, people's businesses, and so she became disillusioned I think at that time. I don't think initially, I don't know if she was initially for the revolution. My father was a bit more, well, you know, there were

	many Cubans in the middle-class who were against Batista. I think there is, you know, sometimes there are people think we were all for Batista [laugh] who came over here He took power in a *coup d'état* and so, it was a very corrupt government, even if on the right, but still many middle-class Cubans were not for Batista, except those people that worked for him. My father was one of those as a journalist, you know, that was not for that government. And my mother always had hoped that Cuba would have—Cuba had several attempts at an elected government. A more democratic elected government, but somehow, you know, always something like Batista happened. But she was not a supporter of the Communist government. When that exactly happened after Fidel Castro took over, I don't know because I was a kid. And even though we talked politics and we talked later on, I don't know when that happened. But I know that it was kind of interesting, in my household because my father was working for the government, the Castro government, and my mother was against it and openly against it. [laughs] Openly. Maybe it was unusual, but all her life, she was very strong in her beliefs and she wasn't going to change them just to go along with whatever was happening [laughs].
J.R.:	Must have been interesting at the dinner table.
Myriam Lechuga:	I was. Again, I was a child. You have different kinds of memories, but it was interesting, and I was an only child. I have half-sisters but that is another story. But, I was raised as an only child at that time, so I was always with adults at the table with my parents. I had meals with them, whatever, and they always discussed politics or whatever was going on, with me there. My aunt used to make fun of me because I would talk like an adult. As a small child I would, I was with my parents always, they never talked to me like a small child and I would meet other adults thinking that they were the same, then all of a sudden talk to them, try to join their conversation and people would laugh. People would think I was hilarious to be doing that.
J.R.:	[Laughs] Precocious.
Myriam Lechuga:	Precocious! I don't know what happened to me later but at that time I was kind-of precocious and subject of a lot of laughs. To this day my aunt mentions it every time she sees me. So, anyway.
Education in Cuba	
J.R.:	Did you actually go to school in Cuba?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, yes. I went to school obviously, before we lived in other countries and then, the one what I remember the most the last years we were there. Yes, I went to school there.

J.R.:	What was that like? Schools?
Myriam Lechuga:	Um, well, you know the schools were small. They were, I went to two different kinds of schools when I was there. I went to my neighborhood school and it was small, you know, small classrooms. We were all in one classroom in an old building. I remember that. And then for a while, for about a year I went to music school, a music conservatory school because my parents wanted me to play the piano. They were misguided in that I think. [laughs] They were. I didn't want to play the piano. So, that only lasted about a year. And so I rebelled or I, you know, I was not as successful as they had hoped I would be in that. But so then I went back to my regular school. Both schools were in old buildings. I remember. They were old buildings. They might have been in some cases, maybe the conservatory, might have even been a house, you know, at one point. A large house. And when, you know, we—what I do remember? By then Castro was fully in control in the [19]60s, the early [19]60s, and so we had a lot of lessons about what Castro was doing, these wonderful things he was doing, and the Vietnam War, which was going on at the time and so like, on the other side of that, so they used to talk to us about that. I still remember that. But on the opposite side of what the United States was on, of course. And so we did among our lessons. Among our math and grammar we would always have these lessons about all these wonderful things that Fidel Castro was doing at the moment. And so, I still remember that. And I still remember one of our lessons we were talking about actually one of the Vietnamese, of the Viet Cong, Nguyen Van. I don't remember anything about him. I think he was a pilot or whatever and so we sort of talked about him and, you know, as a hero of the Vietnam or the Viet Cong. So I got the other side when I was there. But then in my household I would get a different, would get all sorts of different, let's say, my grandparents were also against the revolution. So, you know, so I would be getting both sides of the political issues at the time in my own home. I didn't have to go anywhere. In my own home, yes, that's the thing, part of my family was against revolution. So, we, I also remember we wore these uniforms, not very attractive uniforms and they were gray. We had to have little skirts, and a gray top and it was a very stiff and scratchy material. So we all wore these little uniforms. [laughs]
J.R.:	Now earlier when your dad was assigned to Washington [D.C.], you were how old?
Myriam Lechuga:	You know, I wish I could remember how old I was when we were in Washington. It would have been obviously before 1967, which was

	when we came over, and before we came back to Cuba which was three years before. So somewhere in between there, in my memory, we lived in Washington, D.C. Yes, and I was small and actually I have a photo of me in Washington behind you. Maybe we will take a look at it.
J.R.:	Oh, good!
Myriam Lechuga:	And my family there.
Diplomatic Assignment to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN)	
J.R.:	Yes, I'll take a picture of it.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, you can take a picture of it. So you can see how old I was. I was little. I must have been either kindergarten or first grade. I am not sure what it was, but I was little. And, yes, my father was then assigned here in Washington. He was in the Organization of American States [OAS], representing Cuba for the Castro government. Yes, he was an ambassador. He was ambassador at that time. So we lived in Georgetown [neighborhood in Washington, D.C.], of all places. We had a home again, which was the house of the Cuban ambassador. I don't know. It's a consulate now? The building for the Cuban embassy, at the time, was then later the embassy for Czechoslovakia here in Washington. I might be wrong, but I think it was the embassy of Czechoslovakia after Cuba broke diplomatic relations. And when we first came, we lived in there on the top floor for a while. Very short while. Then, my father was in OAS, then Cuba broke with U.S., which they are now negotiating to bring back. [Formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba were reestablished on July 1, 2015.] So I went to private school in Washington. I don't remember even the name of the school or anything like that. I do remember that we lived in Georgetown. Part of that is because my mother when we came here initially, my mother used to visit, used to drive around and visit the places where she had been before, when we had been here before. So we used to drive around in the beginning, when we first came. So, yes, and then somewhere along there, my father was in Mexico City and then somewhere along there my father was in the UN [United Nations]. Now the UN I remember more, or I remember the—I don't remember the year, but I know more or less the year, because it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. So I kind of know the things that happen so I think that was [19]63? Yes.
J.R.:	Uh, I don't know. I think you're, I think it might have been [19]64.
Myriam Lechuga:	Or earlier.

J.R.:	Oh, I have to go check when that was. [laughs] [The Cuban Missile Crisis was in October 1962.]
Myriam Lechuga:	We'll have to check when that was. When that was. When the Cuban Missile Crisis was going on, whatever [19]60s that was, we were in New York [City] because by then my father was in the UN. He was ambassador to the UN. So somewhere in those years, I can't remember the exact years when we lived here in Washington, we lived in Mexico. I am thinking we went to Mexico first, then to New York. Or we might have gone to New York after Mexico. Unfortunately, I feel bad. I feel horrible that I don't remember the exact years because I was a child and—.
J.R.:	Right, you would not be expected.
Myriam Lechuga:	Okay, good. You know. I went along with whatever with my parents. We would pick up. We would go somewhere, and I went. [laughs]
J.R.:	Kind of like a military family.
Myriam Lechuga:	Kind of like a military family, that, yeah. It is somewhat like that. Go where you are assigned.
The Beach	
J.R.:	So when you were little, what kind of activities did you participate in Cuba, and then anything you remember about the United States early on?
Myriam Lechuga:	Early on here, I know we used to go—my parents. I was not a tomboy or anything like that. So I was very much, I played with my dolls and my Barbie dolls and all those things. Those things that I liked to do. And then we used to go a lot to parks. You know, amusement parks. And in Cuba I used to play a lot in the garden with my dolls. And again, I was not a tomboy in the sense, you know, or I didn't really participate in any sports when I was a kid. But in Cuba, what I did do? What I remember very much—Cuba is an island—was to go to the beach. We had a beach near where we lived. And I would go there after school or, yeah, my mother would drive there and we would go there after school and or on weekends or whatever, and go to the beach. We had a beach nearby where we lived. And again because it's an island, you were never that far from a beach. So then I used to take swimming lessons. When I was little, then in Cuba, I used to take swimming lessons. I remember that. So I was in swimming lessons with other little kids and we would all and, you know, in the actual ocean. We didn't have use of a pool, but we were actually out in the ocean, taking our

	swimming lessons. So I did that. It was important too. Even though I haven't been swimming for I can't even tell how long. But being an island everyone would swim. Everyone was out in the beach at some point or to vacation to another beach. So I was always getting sunburned, horribly sunburned. I remember that. What other thing did I do? I liked to collect sea shells when I was in Cuba. I like to collect sea shells. I would go on the beach and I had a big sea shell collection at the time. But I was not a sports kind of person. I did read a lot. I have always been a reader, you can tell. I have always been a reader. And I was always going to museums and things like that with my mother. Also, my parents also always had me taking lessons in everything. Because they were those kind of people, they themselves did all these things, and knew about all these things. So I, in Cuba and even here, I took dancing lessons here too. I went to ballet class. Hard to believe looking at me today, I know that, [laughs] even when I was in junior high, I was taking dance lessons. I took dance lessons. Ballet, when I was really little. I mean I took ballet lessons. I took Flamenco dancing for a while when I was in Cuba. Yes, when I was little too. I even know how to do the castanets. You know, I took all sorts and as I said my parents were very much into the arts and all that. So I did all of that kids do, but I never did sports or any of those things. Here in the U.S. I did. Still take—took—dance lessons for a bit. I didn't go swimming here. You know it is hard to find a beach around here. But here I did mostly—I was mainly a reader. And when I came here older, that's what I liked to do and—.
J.R.:	You came here permanently when you were twelve?
Myriam Lechuga:	When I was twelve, right.
J.R.:	Well, tell me about your half-sisters. When did they come into your life? Or did they come into your life?
Myriam Lechuga:	They came into my life in two separate ways but, um, but my older siblings are still in Cuba. So I have two half-sisters, two older half-sisters. My father was married three times, so my oldest half-sisters were from his first marriage. My two sisters are still in Cuba, have always been in Cuba. And I have a younger half-sister who—my father then remarried. I have a younger half-sister who now lives in Spain with her family. So, yes, and I have an adopted half-sister who lives in Miami, who lives in Florida. I don't have a great deal of communication with them. With my sisters that were in Cuba, that never left, the older ones, who I knew when I was growing up. We weren't in touch for maybe thirty years. I wasn't really in touch, except for my father. I was never in

	touch with the rest of my family, maybe for thirty years. I would say, maybe, so we, sort of, maybe, fifteen years ago sort of, we reestablished contact, which they initiated. I have to say that I didn't, and so, that's where we are now. They—my older sister was a journalist, well, both of them were writers. Both my sisters were writers like my father had been. So they kind of took on that mantle of the family. And, my older sister, who has retired, been retired for a while, was a journalist also. That's what they did. They both have children. One has a son and one has a daughter, who are adults, of course. And, and so, that's my family there. My other sister, who is in Spain, she has two kids. A boy and a girl—yes, so they left Cuba. The other one, my father's third wife had a daughter, a small daughter so my father adopted her, so she—I met her, so she and I have met. But my other young sister in Spain I have never met. So, that's my family. Yeah, we are spread out.
J.R.:	Any plans to get together? With say your older siblings?
Myriam Lechuga:	I have talked about it recently now with the—I had talked about it a few years ago, when they always, they have always. Actually when my father was ill before he passed away, I remember, he, you know, we, they had wanted me to go. And then we talked about it since then. What I plan to do, what I am thinking now, is I am going to wait and see what happens now that they are talking about they are renewing diplomatic relations between the two countries. And I'll wait to see when that happens, how that happens. When that happens then I am thinking to go back at that time and visit my—renew my acquaintances with that side of my family which I haven't. So we'll see how it goes. [laughs]
J.R.:	It will be interesting.
Myriam Lechuga:	It will be interesting.
Leaving Cuba/Journey to the United States	
J.R.:	Now, let's talk about the time that, I guess, it was mom who decided not to go back to Cuba? At that time your—they got divorced? Is that right?
Myriam Lechuga:	No, we were in Cuba at the time.
J.R.:	Oh.
Myriam Lechuga:	We were in Cuba at the time. And then when they got divorced, my mother then decided to leave Cuba and come here.
J.R.:	On a Freedom Flight? [Freedom Flights were a program that allowed people to leave Cuba to come to the United States. They operated

	from 1965 to 1973. Cubans had to meet certain criteria to be on the flights.]
Myriam Lechuga:	No. At that time, the Freedom Flights had stopped.
J.R.:	Okay.
Myriam Lechuga:	This is 1967. I am not sure when the Freedom Flights stopped.
J.R.:	Okay.
Myriam Lechuga:	This was 1967, so there were no more Freedom Flights. My grandparents, my maternal grandparents, were also in Cuba and they also wanted to leave. So when my mother—my parents divorced—both my mother wanted to leave and my grandparents then wanted to leave as well. So at the time you could leave, you could arrange. You would have to be sponsored by a relative and the only way to leave was to go through a third country.
J.R.:	Okay.
Myriam Lechuga:	Most Cubans that left that way, that were claimed by a relative here [in the U.S.], went to Spain because Spain, you know, was Cuba's mother country and has always been involved. So Spain said, "Well, okay we do this. We will take the people." We actually have a relative who did that. And they had to stay there for a year in Madrid. But we left through Canada, but we didn't have to stay there for a year.
J.R.:	Oh, okay. And your uncle had left earlier? His name was?
Myriam Lechuga:	Oscar. He had left earlier. I think in 1962. He left on a Freedom Flight and he left with his family; my aunt, his wife, and my cousin, who was then a toddler. And so they came on a Freedom Flight. They came through the process in Miami. I am not sure what that process was like when they came through in Miami. I imagine that they were resettled somehow. I know they, I know they lived in an apartment. They were in an apartment there for a while. For quite a while, and then he decided to come here to Washington, Washington area, in part because we had lived here before, as I had said. My mother—my parents had lived here before. My uncle had visited and so. And Miami was not the way it is now in terms of what types of jobs were available, or et cetera so he left his family there in Miami, came here, and looked for a job here in the area, Washington area. Then when he found a job, then he had his family move with him and they lived in Arlington. He was an accountant. He was a lawyer in Cuba. He was also an accountant. He had studied accounting and that is what he did for his entire career then here in the U.S. was, you know, accounting. So I think his first job was at Woodies [Woodward and

	Lothrop department stores] if anybody would remember Woodward and Lothrop?
J.R.:	Right!
Myriam Lechuga:	Yeah, his first job was in Woodies here. Then he had his family come here. So that is how we ended up here when we came.
J.R.:	You were pretty close to your uncle?
Myriam Lechuga:	I was pretty close to my uncle, yes. I was pretty close to my mother's side of the family. You know, that was her only brother and my cousins. So, yes, I was pretty close to my mother's side of the family. That we were all here. We all came together.
J.R.:	While we are at it, we should identify the name of your maternal grandparents.
Myriam Lechuga:	Oh, my grandmother was Mercedes and my grandfather was Oscar. All the men are called Oscar. [laughs] So, yes, he was my uncle.
J.R.:	So, forward to 1967, when you and your mom and your grandparents and your dad—.
Myriam Lechuga:	No, my father stayed in Cuba. Yes, my father was still, lived his whole life. Well, he was also stationed outside of Cuba because he continued being a diplomat in the foreign service for the Cuban government. So he continued with the Cuban government. But, my parents divorced and so he stayed there. Yes.
J.R.:	Divorced, when you were twelve?
Myriam Lechuga:	Divorced when I was about eleven. It took that long to, to make all the arrangements. You know, I don't know if you are interested—when people left Cuba at the time, you know, now we didn't—my mother because my father was still involved. But, you have to leave all your things behind. So it was a long process if you were to leave permanently.
J.R.:	So they knew you were leaving permanently?
Myriam Lechuga:	They knew my grandparents were leaving permanently. I think they knew we were leaving permanently too even though we didn't talk about, you know, we didn't talk about it. We came on a cargo ship to Canada. And we didn't talk about it on the ship and didn't talk about it with the people on the ship with us but I am sure that people knew. I think most Cubans are always suspicious that one of the people anywhere are there watching the other people that are there. So I am sure there was someone on that ship that was

	watching the rest of the people there that were going to Canada, including the crew. And maybe one of the crew. You were always suspect that there is someone there watching everybody else and reporting on what you are doing. I think all those people knew we were leaving. Yes, and I think because my father, my mother went to my father and told him they wanted to leave. So my father sort of arranged the leaving part of it. Of getting on the ship. We didn't. The difference I would say was that my grandparents had to leave everything behind. And I just say that this is one of the things that I always remember still in my mind. That when you leave, they initially come through and inventory everything that you own. So they inventoried everything my grandparents owned in the house. They could only take certain things.
J.R.:	This is in Cuba?
Myriam Lechuga:	In Cuba. When you left permanently, they would inventory everything that you had, then they would come back when you were about to leave, because they would seal the house and everything and they would inventory again. You couldn't have lost or given away anything, because you had to have the same things they had inventoried, had to be in that house or you couldn't leave.
J.R.:	Because it was government property?
Myriam Lechuga:	Because now it becomes government property. So everything that you have in your house, and your house, becomes part of the government. And so my grandparents, you know, so that is what happened with them. I remember because I was in the house with them. And they were inventoried and then they came back and they sealed the house, kind of like a crime-scene type of thing. You know, they'd finish and you would see they had sealed the house. We were lucky, I think, because before you would go to the other country, they actually, they were put in a camp for a while. We were lucky, I think, because of my father, that we didn't have to go to a camp or my grandparents, at least, didn't have to go to any sort of camp in between before they left. People that did—I think that they sealed their belongings, took their belongings and their house, then you had to go to a camp and there was a transition period before you could leave for Spain, let's say. My grandparents luckily didn't have to.
J.R.:	So what was it like for you going to Canada? I mean, what do you remember about that experience?
Myriam Lechuga:	What I remember about it was the ship. We were in a small ship. And

	we were, I think, for a week in the ship. I think I was the only kid. Only kid on the ship. And there were other people, not just the crew. There were other people going to Canada, Cubans that were going to Canada. Not everybody could go. This was not—Cubans could not travel freely. At the time you had to have special permission to be even in this little cargo ship. So my grandparents and I had a cabin. My grandparents and I shared a cabin for a week. My grandfather slept in a chair. The cabin had like a bunk and a chair and like a tiny, I wouldn't even call it a closet. It was like a locker. And my grandfather slept in the chair and my grandmother and I slept in the bed, which was a single bed. Then, my mother slept in a sleeping bag or whatever in the dining room with the other passengers. So not everyone had a cabin. I don't know why, why we, maybe we ended up with a cabin because there was me when they gave us a little cabin.
J.R.:	You were just twelve?
Myriam Lechuga:	I was just twelve, yeah. I remember when we got to Canada. I remember the ship. We went down the Saint Lawrence River, I think it was Montreal we went in. The Saint Lawrence River, which is huge. The Saint Lawrence River is humongous. When you come into it, you can't believe it is a river when you come into it. It is huge. When we got to the dock, I remember this because I am a bad sailor, let me say. I had motion sickness. It was a horrible week for me. The mast, the dock was all the way to the top. The mast of our boat, of our ship, was like hitting where the dock was. So you had to go all the way to the top of the ship, where that look out thing is, on a plank to get out, to get on the deck. Incredible. [laughs]
J.R.:	[Laughs]
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, I still remember that because it was the scariest thing for me. When you look down, you have the water. That I remember. Then we stayed like in a bed and breakfast thing. My uncle and his family had come to Canada to meet us. So he and my mother went to the American Embassy there. My uncle was claiming us. And that's how we ended up here. I don't know what happened again. I was a child. They went to the American Embassy. Then I guess had to ask for asylum or whatever for my mother. Then a week later, we were given passage, our green cards actually. Which was the ugliest photo I have ever had taken. Yes, we had to go in and have our pictures taken. And that was it. Then, we came a week later to Arlington [Virginia], where my uncle lived. But what I remember the most when we got to Canada, aside from that, was using real shampoo, and also seeing all this food, let's say

	that I hadn't for a while. Going to a grocery store or store and seeing all these things, that I had not seen in the three years that I was in Cuba, let's say. And that's a shock when you come and you're shopping for the first time and you are seeing all these things, all these choices of things. And Cuba at the time I was there the last three years Cubans have ration cards, year rations. We can talk about that if you want to. I remember going to the first grocery store and having a ham sandwich. Ham was one thing that was not easily available in Cuba. I don't know why. So having a ham sandwich and having real shampoo because the shampoo we could get in Cuba, I don't know why, but it was horrible. Where it came from, but horrible in comparison. At least we had shampoo. I think now people are having trouble getting soap and shampoo. But, still in the [19]60s you could. I remember that having something, you know, that shampoo that smelled, that had perfume. I still remember eating that first meal, that ham sandwich. So those are the strange things that seem kind of materialistic, but those are the things you sort of remember, you know.
J.R.:	Did you know English when you arrived?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes.
J.R.:	You knew it because of your earlier experience in Washington?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, I knew it because of my earlier experience in Washington. I learned English here when I was very little as I said. I am probably considered bilingual, which is why I don't have an accent. Yes, so, I learned English here, knew English. Then when I went back to Cuba or wherever we were even in Mexico, when we lived in Mexico, my parents were always very big on education. So, I went to school after in Cuba, after I went to my regular school, then my grandfather would pick me up and take me to a language school where I continued my English, because my parents didn't want me to forget my English.
J.R.:	Your parents were extraordinary!
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, my parents were extraordinary. Unfortunately you don't appreciate. Let me just say to people out there in the world: You don't really appreciate those things about your parents until after you are an adult. You know at the time when you are a child, you are like, "Why do I have to go?" [Laughs] That's true. You know, you want to go home after school. You don't want to have to go to another school and have language lessons. But my parents were both that way so I am very grateful to my parents. But I would say at the time I didn't appreciate what they were doing as much as I appreciated it later. I

	appreciated it when I came here because I knew English. I still kept my English. Yes. It was important to them that I not lose that. And I'll just tell a little story about that. The school was a little language school in Havana run by two old French ladies. Maybe they weren't that old but to me at the time they were very old and I have a feeling that the school, I mean, I think, they owned the school before in Havana and when Fidel Castro came it became part of the state. But I think originally it had been their private school. It was two French women who had this language school. They taught French and English and other languages to children. What happened to them, I don't know.
Arlington and Alexandria	
J.R.	So, you arrived in Arlington.
Myriam Lechuga:	We arrived in Arlington, yes.
J.R.:	Did you live with your uncle for a while?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, we lived with my uncle for a while. I think he was in a two-bedroom apartment. So we were all in the two-bedroom apartment. Then my mother—well, my uncle worked for the National Educational Association [NEA], that's how my mother ended up working there. He worked accounting there. And so my mother looked for a job when she came, so then she got a job in the typing pool. In those days they had like typing pools. She had a job there at the NEA, which my uncle shortly afterward moved to a different job. So he left and she stayed there. So I went to school in Arlington initially for a very short time, maybe about a month and then.
J.R.:	Your impressions?
Myriam Lechuga:	My impressions? I think my impressions of that school and when we came here to Alexandria, to Polk School, was how big it was. Yes, how big the school was, it was huge for me. And I was always a shy person. So it was difficult for me because I had been in a small school with a small group of kids. And all of a sudden I was in this huge school, where we changed classrooms at some point. You know we had our homeroom teacher and we had other things. And we had to take sports or gym or whatever. Which I don't remember doing in Cuba, taking any, you know, those kind of classes. I had to go to gym lessons. How big the school was, I think was the biggest shock to me, so when we came here to Alexandria, to Polk, the school to me was huge. I think I felt a bit lost there, initially. Luckily, I spoke English, which I think would have been worse if I did not. There were some kids actually who didn't speak English in the school. I remember

	talking to some of them who spoke Spanish in Arlington. But I don't remember much about them. I didn't really stay in Arlington long enough to make any friends.
J.R.:	So Polk was different?
Myriam Lechuga:	So Polk was the school that I remember. That was my elementary school. So then we moved to Alexandria. What happened then was obviously we couldn't stay with all of us living in that small apartment. So the idea was my cousins were very small. My uncle had two children. Has two, they are still around. [laughs] They were very small. My oldest cousin was four. So the idea was we could find a place where we could move, where we could all be close to one another but we would have our own apartment. So that is how we ended up in Alexandria because, they worked in D.C. so they didn't want to be too far. At the time there was no Metro [D.C. subway system], so people took the bus to downtown D.C. That's what they did. So we were looking for a place to live and ended up in Alexandria. So my grandparents, both of them alive at the time, moved in with my uncle and his family, because the kids were small and so the idea was that they would take care of the kids when the adults worked.
J.R.:	Did they speak English also?
Myriam Lechuga:	No. My mother did. Maybe I should say that my mother did speak English also. So that was why she was able to get a job where she did. Now, it's very difficult even if you speak a language it is very difficult to work in a language that is not your own, I have to say. Even though she spoke English, she wasn't bilingual. It was difficult for her at the beginning. My uncle also and my family is unique in some ways. My uncle also when he came over on the Freedom Flights, he spoke English also. That was a bit easier transition then what some people had. Then we had to move to an apartment. That is how we ended up in Alexandria, and we liked Alexandria a lot.
J.R.:	Do you remember that address?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, it is Seminary Towers.
J.R.:	Yes, you entered it in your pre-interview form.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, I was there for about a thousand years. But at the time my mother and I moved to a one bedroom apartment in one of the buildings, and my uncle, his family, and my grandparents moved to the building next door. We lived in two separate buildings. They found a larger three-bedroom and we lived in a one-bedroom. Not to be materialistic again, but one of the biggest shocks for me when we came is that I had had

	my own bedroom most of my life up to that point. I had had my own bedroom. No siblings that lived with me. But when we came, my mother could only afford a one-bedroom so my mother and I shared a room. And so I think that was another—sure was an adjustment for my mother as well, had to be to share a room with me. [laughs] But that was the one thing, "Why do I have to share?"
J.R.:	Well, you were becoming a young lady at that time, weren't you?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yeah, I was twelve or thirteen at the time. Having to share a room, which I did for many, many years now, it seems to me was a challenge. And I am sure it was a challenge for her as well. But at the time I was concerned with myself and thought, "Why do I have to do this?" But of course she could only afford, we could only afford a one-bedroom. We stayed there for a while.
J.R.:	So what were your first impressions of Alexandria?
Myriam Lechuga:	I love Alexandria. I always loved it. To me, even though I don't live in Alexandria now, Alexandria is still home. If someone asks me what is my hometown really, I think in many ways and I have lived here so many years, it is Alexandria. So once we were settled there and I was in school, in Polk Elementary School. I then started to make some friends. And I made some friends there in school, which makes a difference. There were other kids who went to school and lived in the neighborhood so we would get together and be outside playing or whatever. Or as we became teenagers we would go to each other's rooms and listen to records, if anyone remember those records and that kind of thing. And we had our crushes on different singers, that kind of thing. So that became the life. I was more adjusted when we came to Alexandria. Maybe that's why I have better memories of that than Arlington. I don't have particularly good memories—sorry, Arlington. But then Alexandria, I had friends. Maybe there were more Cubans or just because I knew more Cubans then, but there were—I had two Cuban friends. So I had a friend in school also Cuban refugees, immigrants at the time.
J.R.:	Did you identify yourself as a refugee or an exile?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, I think I identified myself, we identified ourselves as exiles and refugees and I still identify myself as Cuban-American, which bothers some people. I will have to say, yes. I have friends who say, "Why do you always identify yourself as Cuban-American rather than American?" You know, I am an American now.
J.R.:	Because you are Cuban.

Myriam Lechuga:	Because I am. That's what I say to them, "I am Cuban-American." Why do you still? You have been here all your life or a large portion. But I am a Cuban-American. I am a combination of those things. Yes, so I identify myself, especially at the beginning. I would say at the beginning we really, I and my family really identified as exiles because at the beginning, in the beginning my grandparents, I don't know if my mother necessarily, but my grandparents really thought we would not stay here [in the U.S.] their entire, rest of their livers or our lives. At the beginning they thought at some point the Castro government will fall in the near future and we would go back. Initially in terms of the exile experience or refugee experience, I think very much within my household the idea was that we would return. And of course, then after a decade went by or more, was not happening, then things changed. You know, at a certain point the realization comes that you are not going back probably in your lifetime. Yes, initially my grandparents were convinced that in a few years, we would be going back. They would be going back home. So the identification initially is of being in exile. We were going to return and this was just temporary. And so, I did identify that way.
High School Years/Desegregation	
J.R.:	Tell me about your high school years. What was that like?
Myriam Lechuga:	Well, you know, high school is not ever an easy time, I would have to say. Well, some people do really well in high school. Some people love high school, but high school is a challenge for most people. And I have kind of mixed memories. I had a conversation with a high school friend—we are still friends—the other day and she said, "I don't remember anything about high school." And I found that surprising but maybe sometimes you block some things in your mind. [laughs] The high school—what I remember the high school the most that I started out—this would be an interesting thing about this history of Alexandria, I think. When I started out, I started out in Hammond [High School]. Actually, I kind of looked for the yearbook here. When I started out in Hammond, which is now a middle school, I think, it was a four-year high school. The year I started in high school was the year that Alexandria desegregated the schools. And so I started out—that's what I remember—that whole period of transition. And so I started out in Hammond as a four-year school, but that year the Alexandria plan for desegregation was, I think, that Hammond became a ninth and tenth grade at the time. I think George Washington [High] School [now Middle School] was also ninth and tenth. And then we would all

	feed into T.C. Williams High School. So all the kids in Alexandria would end the eleventh and twelfth grades at T.C. Williams and you would do ninth and tenth grade somewhere else. So what I remember initially, what I remember is that when that happened, Hammond was a primarily white school at the time and I think George Washington was primarily black, African-American, at the time. And then there were other ethnic groups, myself included, within the two schools, but we were a small group of students. I mean, I had friends from Venezuela and things like that at the time I was there. What I remember is that some of my friends moved out. Some of their parents decided they weren't—was not what they wanted and so they moved out to other parts of Northern Virginia. Few of my good friends, couple of my friends moved out. And some then went to private school. One of my Cuban friends who lived—she was a bit younger than me—lived in my building, she went to private school. My mother was a great believer in public school, public education, always a believer. One of those things she believed in, she believed in a good public education itself so I stayed there. That's my memory. I started out in a four-year school in Hammond and then we became a ninth and tenth and other kids came in. Then we all fed into T.C. [Williams]. It was huge. I think we were almost 900 in my graduating class. It was 890 some people in my graduating class. So that is what I remember the most. I visited my—I wouldn't even say what year of my reunion—I think was thirty-five years out of high school, we visited. They took us on a tour of the new school. Of course, the new building. It was kind of sad to see the old building torn down. What I remember the most is that time period and we actually had, and at Hammond especially, some kids did not react, you know. I think they were more innocent times. You hear now kids bringing guns and other things to school. At the time I think we never feared that. But there were occasions when kids were attacking each other, right, for lack of something. Yes, so different groups as they fed into this school were not happy that these other kids were coming in. So we would be locked into the gym. I know people who were walking the halls and hit over the head by other kids who didn't like them. Really, because you were different or you were coming in from the other school. So initially there were problems like that. They would make announcements and we would all be locked into the gym and then we would be sent home.
J.R.:	Were these folks who were prejudiced? And—?
Myriam Lechuga:	I think there was prejudice, yes. I think there were groups. I think

	there was prejudice and I think it was the two groups coming together. White, you know, the primarily white kids and then some of the African-American kids and other groups of kids who came in from other schools. Some of it was prejudice of the different. "Here comes somebody different, here comes somebody I don't want in my school" and the others felt, well, "I am angry at you cause you don't want me in your school. Here I am. I have been sent here." So those two groups clashed initially. Later on I think two things happened: things died down. At that time, then, a few of my friends their parents moved out from Alexandria; things then died down. But initially in Hammond, this was happening and then we would be sent home because these things were happening. You could see the kids hitting each other, fighting each other. As I said, it was more innocent times because at the time we never thought, I don't think any of these kids had a gun or knife or anything like that it was just, you know fighting. But two things happened: they then put guards or monitors in the buildings. And so they didn't have that when I first. The doors were locked, and there were monitors, adults, guards, out on the hallways. Every hallway and every door. So then it stopped once they came in and put this in. Initially, I think maybe they didn't think this would happen, obviously. So once things settled down and the monitors came in, we didn't have that problem anymore. I remember that initially, yes. I remember being sent home because kids were being attacked. I knew some kids were hit over their head. You know, even though they were at Hammond that was primarily white and some African-Americans kids and some Latin kids like me. We were the minority within that group, a very small minority, of both groups. So I think that there was a certain comfort in that, you know, they didn't feel threatened. Maybe neither group felt particularly threatened but when more kids came in, yes. Once we got to T.C. Williams, I will have to say, but then again they had implemented certain security measures at that point. You couldn't just—I think there was more freedom even then there is now. I think the kids are locked down more from what I understand. We could go outside, maybe we weren't supposed to, but you could go outside for lunch and come back. Once I got to T.C. Williams I don't remember anything ever happening, don't remember anything, ever happening then. So.
J.R.:	So, you graduated from T.C. Williams?
Myriam Lechuga:	[Nods her head yes.]

College Years	
J.R.:	And, did you go on to college?
Myriam Lechuga:	[Nods her head yes.]
J.R.:	Uh, right away?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes. I went on to college right away. I went to GW—George Washington University [in Washington, D.C.]. So yes, I was an urban commuter to GW and—.
J.R.:	How were you finding your education?
Myriam Lechuga:	I think GW then, as it is now, was an excellent school. I enjoyed my time at GW. I studied International Affairs then. Thinking again, you know, because it's a family thing. I am interested in international politics. I thought at the time, which isn't how my life ended up. I thought at the time, I knew Spanish and I actually speak French also. I thought I could use that. Might be something interesting as a career. So that's what I studied there. But I had a wonderful—I really enjoyed my time at GW. I think even then an excellent university. Yes, I was there for the four years. I was a full-time student.
J.R.:	How did you fund it?
Myriam Lechuga:	How did I fund it? Well, I funded it in two ways. There again I applied for financial aid. So about half of my tuition was covered by loans, financial aid, and some scholarships. Most financial aid offices now as well as then, every semester I had a different mix of loans. If I could get some scholarships, also. So some years I had more scholarships and that's money you don't have to pay back, which the financial aid office takes care of doing that. And, then, most was loans, government loans. The other half was paid by my mother. God bless my mother! But she found she could get a loan from the credit union, I remember that. She would pay half of the tuition. I should say that my mother during all the—until I graduated from college—worked two jobs. That's how you fund, how to fund some of these things. Yes, my mother who had, previously I said was a journalist. When she married my father, she was a full-time wife and mother who hadn't worked in that sort of way for all her life. She was forty, I think, she was. She worked two jobs. So my mother during the whole time I was in college until I graduated from college. She worked her full time job in the NEA. And then she worked a part-time job initially at Sears [department store] at night. Yeah, you do what you have to do. I always say to people who sometimes say to me, "Oh I would only do this in a job or I would only have to do that." I say to them, "If you

	have to live, you will do anything. You'll do whatever you have to do". So yes, she worked full-time and then at night, she worked at Sears, in the offices at Sears. I think she did maybe they had mail order. Maybe it was the mail order. I know she had to type labels and things of that nature at night. So she would come home late at night. I would when I was in school. Here's an aside. I would come in from school, I would go to my uncle's apartment where my grandparents were. My grandfather died only a year or so after we came here. My grandmother, I would sort of check in with her that I was back from school. And then, when I was about thirteen, thirteen, fourteen, around there, then I didn't have to stay there with her. I could come back to the apartment and my mother would come home like at nine o'clock at night. Something like that, my mother would come home like around nine o'clock. At night.
J.R.:	She didn't have a personal life? She didn't date or anything?
Myriam Lechuga:	No. I remember my mother maybe dating, maybe twice during the time that we were here. No, she didn't have much time for her personal life. But I do remember her dating twice. Neither of them I think went very well. One of them she was set up by a friend of hers who was also a single mom at the time and who lived across at Seminary Hills Apartments. And she was American. She also was single parent with three kids. So she and my mother became friends and she set up my mother with this, I remember, with this date. And then, my mother dated another man, I think she met who was also working at Sears for a while. But, she didn't remarry. None of them, you know, she didn't have much time in her life. Monday through Friday she was working morning and night and then she came home. And she always said to me, you know, she would say to me two things: that she would remarry if she fell in love or, you know, we were romantic, we Cubans are romantic. We think there is someone who is out there somewhere. [laughs] Either she fell in love again or if she would marry and be financially well off enough that we both would be taken care of. But she always said that she didn't want to remarry unless she was in love to have to still work two jobs and then have that and take care of a man, let's say. She would say, "I did that" under different circumstances. Unless you fall in love. So that never happened. She never did remarry.
First Job and Graduate Degree	
J.R.:	Let me ask you this about graduate school and then I want to ask you about Cuban traditions you kept up here. Graduate school, did that come much later?

Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, that came a bit later.
J.R.:	After your undergraduate degree?
Myriam Lechuga:	After I got my undergraduate degree then I went to work. I should also say I also worked after I turned sixteen. I worked after school as well. So I always worked after school and every summer because, obviously, you know, my mother couldn't afford everything. And so after sixteen, I went to work. I bought my own clothes and if I wanted to do anything, I paid for it myself. I mean, there were things my mother did, but if I did things with my friends or went to a concert or anything of that nature, I paid for it myself. I worked and I worked every summer. And then, I started work full-time. After college I looked for a full-time job, which was not easy. I graduated in a recession and anybody who graduated during that recession can know what I am talking about. It was very difficult to get a job.
J.R.:	What year was this?
Myriam Lechuga:	Oh, God, I graduated in 1978. So in 1978 we are in a recession. I am pounding the pavement, not finding a job, not finding a job, and so, I actually went back to the community college to take typing lessons. This is true. Because I couldn't pass a typing test. I would have never thought that that's what I wanted to do, but the reality of the situation was I wasn't finding a job. So that's how I got into education, because my first job ended up being with the University of Southern California off-campus program here. But I was working full-time. I decided to go to graduate school. And part of it was that I working for a university. Even though I had to pay my own tuition, but still they would give me the time off, because I worked in a university they gave me the time off, to go to class. I remember when I was working on my master's dissertation they gave me the time off to go work on that. It afforded me the time to do it. They were also pro-education and wanted people to. Unfortunately the programs here for USC [University of Southern California] was, we only had two master's programs that I wasn't really interested in.
J.R.:	The University of Southern California?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, USC. Yep. I think they are still here on campus near Ford's Theater [in Washington, D.C.], but at the time we were in Arlington. So that's how I got into working with education. It was not what I planned at all, but it was my first job. And I shared a job with a woman who was my boss for many years and has been my good friend all these years as well. Became a good friend. We shared a job initially. I started out as a part-time person.

J.R.:	What was her name, your boss?
Myriam Lechuga:	Iva.
J.R.:	Iva?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes. We worked together later at GW as well. So off campus education used to be at the time, and probably still is, kind of a small world. Once you worked in one university, then people would know each other. There is all sorts of off-campus education here in Washington, and we worked with the military. So here in Washington any student could come, but I worked for an office that had classes at different military bases in the eastern U.S. So that's what we did there. We had classes there, but we also had classes here. So my job with education was sort of accidental in that, but I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to get a master's degree and so I did. Then, I went to American University because I was interested in the arts. And I actually, as you can tell. I was always interested in the arts. I had gone to a lecture, I still remember this, from the National Education Association. One of the people there was talking about, they were talking about careers or something related to that because I was looking for something. They had just started a program, not too long before at American University for arts management. I think the program had only started a few years before. They just had an anniversary not too long ago, I think. I know they had an anniversary not too long ago but kind of a new program and it sort of sounded interesting to me. I thought this was interesting. It's a new program. So I talked to the person who was in the panel who was from the program and she, you know, she encouraged me to look into it. And so I did. But then, I went to class at night so I can relate to my students now because I did the same thing. I worked during the day and went to class at night at American U [University] and I paid for it myself. So it took me a long time [laughs] not only I, I think I was out of school maybe about [pause] took me about five years to get my master's. I was out of school, I was working full-time about five years then I started on my master's and then it took about five years.
J.R.:	Your mother must have been very proud of your selection for the major.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes. I think she was, I think she was surprised. But one thing about my mother was that she never—sometimes I would say to her, "Why don't you tell me what to do?" But my mother was of the belief that it was my life, so she never, you know, I heard either time I went to GW or AU [American University]. She never interfered with that.

	Whatever I wanted was okay with her.
J.R.:	She was quite remarkable.
Myriam Lechuga:	You know, yeah, she was, she was, you know. So sometimes I would say to her, "Tell me what I should be doing now." [laughs] She thought it was my choice and so I think she was surprised that I took arts management. Was interested in museums.
Communication with Cuban Friends and Relatives	
J.R.:	Tell me about how you maintained contact. Did you maintain contact with Cuba, with relatives there?
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes.
J.R.:	How was that?
Myriam Lechuga:	I didn't maintain contact with my father's family. I would say I didn't. And they didn't with me. But, yes, my mother's side of the family—they kept very much contact through letters. It was very difficult to make phone calls to Cuba. I think it is a lot easier now. Then it was very difficult. You had to call and then wait to be called back. By that time there was no direct connection. No direct phone connection so you kind of had to call somehow and then your party over there would know you were calling and then you would have to wait for a call back. So it was mainly through letters. It was mainly through letters that everybody communicated. But both my mother and grandmother—I am not sure my uncle what he did to, or [just] them—both of them wrote a great deal to family there, but [also] to friends and to neighbors. I think they maintained correspondence with all their former neighbors. My grandparents, who had been neighbors of some of these people for decades. Some of them had come over then—came over to the United States or had come over to the United States. So they were actually, at the time I have a picture in my mind, which might be wrong, more Cubans here in the D.C. area then because maybe I was with my family and they were in contact with the Cuban community here at the time. Which I am not, if there is one here now. But at the time they were very much connected to the Cuban community here in Washington, the other exiles. And so, yes, you know, they maintained communication with all their neighbors. And we had—my grandmother had brothers, sisters in Cuba. They were there, she never saw them again so she maintained correspondence with all of them. Her mother, my great-grandmother was still alive when we left. She would die while we were here. Then I

	had—the saddest for me was leaving my great-aunt. I was very close to my great-aunt, who we called *Mi Niña.* Her name was Antonia but we called her my name for her, my name for her *Mi Niña,* which is like "my child," "my girl." [Laughs]
J.R.:	What was her complete name?
Myriam Lechuga:	I don't remember her last name, isn't that terrible. Her name was Antonia, I believe. And she was from my grandmother's side of the family. I don't remember her full name but I called her *Mi Niña.* When I was a kid. I gave names to everybody. So when we left, we left her there. And she didn't have any children or anyone. Her husband had passed away. She was my great-aunt. She was my grandmother's aunt. So that was sad. That was sad for me. It is still sad for me today, that we left her. But she didn't want to come. She was elderly. She was older than my grandmother at the time. But I spent a lot of time with her as a kid. She took care of me, too. She would come to my grandmother's home every day. She lived somewhere else but every morning she would be at my grandmother's home and wouldn't leave. She had her meals there and everything. So she was my constant companion when I was a kid. She was an elderly lady but she was about this tall [gestures with hands]. She was this tall, maybe only a little bit taller, maybe about a foot or so taller than me. We left her behind. So my grandmother was very much in contact with her until she passed away. And everybody—as I said, they didn't think initially we wouldn't come back. My grandmother, my mother had cousins who I don't know what happened to them. There were cousins. My grandfather's brother was still there. They have all passed away. Initially, when they were still around, they kept a lot of contact with them. And they had a lot of contact here with the other members of the Cuban community here.
Cuban Community in the United States	
J.R.:	Talk about that, Cuban community. Were there organizations that supported you and your mom?
Myriam Lechuga:	Um.
J.R.:	Or your grandparents?
Myriam Lechuga:	Well, so I was a kid. I mean I sort of hung around people or went to these places. But they—what is it? The Hispanic Committee. *Comité Hispano.* I think that was here in Northern Virginia and was here nearby in Arlington. And I remember going with my mother there and I remember going there when I was looking for a job. One of the times I was looking for a summer job, I did go there. And they helped, you

	know, the Hispanic, the Latino immigrant community here with education, with jobs. So I visited several times with my mother. My mother knew the people there but I don't remember their names, I am sad to say. I don't remember their names. Then there was a Cuban community here. Some of them I believe that my mother and my uncle had known in Cuba. So they were here now and so my uncle became very active and I don't think it is even still here in the D.C. area, but for a while the D.C. area had like a Cuban cultural center called *Casa Cuba.* And my uncle became very active in that. They had different social events; that's what I remember. They had like musical events and dances.
J.R.:	The flamenco?
Myriam Lechuga:	Not that much. [laughs] But they had what you would call salsa dancing, salsa dancing. Because you know, Cuba created, you know, rumba, conga, you know, all those dances. Rumba, conga, all those dances are Cuban dances. Cuban ballroom dances, ballroom dancing. I guess it would be salsa dancing as they say. So *Casa Cuba* would sponsor, you know, social events with music and so I would go there as a teenager and my cousins. We would all go there and my uncle was very active in *Casa Cuba*. What happened to *Casa Cuba* I don't know, because I grew up in a different way. Once I was older and had my own, you know. I still had to go to things at *Casa Cuba* [laughs] once in a while. But I had my own friends and my own things to do, and so I sort of became more separated from what they were all doing. Initially, as a young teenager, that was part of it. And I know my mother's—their doctors were also Cuban. It was very much within, which I think is, it is with many exiles, immigrant communities. So very much all my mother's—my mother's dentist, my mother's doctor, my grandmother's, you know, were from Cuba. My grandmother's doctor was from Puerto Rico. So everybody that they interacted with doctors, or if you needed a lawyer, you needed someone, you know, a mechanic, whatever, they were all within the Cuban community or maybe the Latin community. You know, so initially that was my life, I would say, too. Once I left school, came into my apartment, I was pretty much in Cuba, I would say. Maybe that is one thing that happens to people like me, who are in both cultures. So when I was in school most of my friends—I had a couple of Cuban friends who were like me, but most of my friends were American, you know.
J.R.:	Uh huh.
Myriam Lechuga:	But then, when I came into the door to my house, I was in Cuba.

	There was no doubt. [J.R. laughs.] My house or my uncle's house, you know, I was in Cuba.
Cuban Traditions	
J.R.:	So, talk about the traditions you have maintained from Cuba. Any?
Myriam Lechuga:	Myself, now? Or—?
J.R.:	Right.
Myriam Lechuga:	I think now because I am on my own. Like I have said, most of my friends are Americans. Except for my family I don't have any Cuban friends of my generation here now at all. But when I still, when my mother was still alive, and some of my relatives were still alive, yes, we would celebrate Christmas, especially, in the Cuban tradition. And my aunt, and she still does, she still makes—we celebrate it on the twenty-fourth of December, *Nochebuena.* We don't celebrate Christmas day. We have our certain dishes that we make. My aunt, as I said, she still makes black beans from scratch.
J.R.:	This is your mother's sister?
Myriam Lechuga:	This is my mother's sister-in-law. Oscar's mother. Very active. She is in her eighties but she is very active.
J.R.:	Oscar's?
Myriam Lechuga:	Oscar's mother, my cousin's mother.
J.R.:	Oh, okay.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, I have two cousins. Oscar.
J.R.:	Oh, Oscar, the son of your uncle.
Myriam Lechuga:	Oscar, the son. The wife of the other Oscar.
J.R.:	Okay. Got it. [laughs]
Myriam Lechuga:	I have three Oscars: my cousin Oscar, my uncle Oscar, and my grandfather is Oscar. All the men in the family were Oscar. But when I was growing up, we called them, you know. We had diminutives in Spanish. So my grandfather was *Oscar* [with Spanish pronunciation]; my uncle, *Oscarito*, and my cousin when he was growing up was *Oscaritin*. They were all named Oscar, but in Spanish, you know, we have diminutives, like little nicknames. So it was like Big Oscar, Middle Oscar, and then Little Oscar. We don't call my cousin *Oscaritin* anymore. [J.R. laughs.] But he was when he was a little boy. That's what people called him. So yes, we celebrated, we were still, you know, we were Catholic. We still went to Easter Mass and we

	still, which I don't sadly don't do now, and we have the tradition of midnight mass. So you would have dinner on the twenty-fourth and then you would go to midnight mass. But I still cook. I would say that's the traditions that I keep now, that I still once in a while I cook Cuban food. Maybe a few times a month. There is one dish that I make, but I don't go all out. Cuban cooking is very labor intensive. But, all the years I was growing up here I think until my, you know, when my mother was still alive, I would still make the Cuban dinner for Christmas Eve.
J.R.:	What would that consist of?
Myriam Lechuga:	Well, we would have black beans and rice. We have yucca, which is a vegetable. You can now buy it at the—anywhere—the Safeway or wherever. When we first got here, we had to go to special markets to buy it. But it was like a tuber, like potato-ish kind of thing. And you boil it and then when it is soft, what you do, you heat up olive oil and garlic in a pan and then you pour it over the boiled yucca. That's great!
J.R.:	Now I'm getting hungry.
Myriam Lechuga:	I know it sounds strange, but it is great. There is that, and then we eat—we don't eat turkey. What we would eat, we would eat—would be, when I was growing up, we would eat, when I was little, we would eat an entire small pig, *lechon asado,* roasted pig. So you would go and order your pig and you would get a whole small pig, roasted. But here we would make, still pork, we would eat like a pork roast for Christmas. And then we would get, because Spain, you know Cuba was the last Spanish colony, we would buy *turrones,* which were from Spain. That is what we would eat for dessert. Which are like nougats that come in different flavors and you have only at Christmas. We would have that only at Christmas. And then, cider, Spanish cider, cider also which is an alcoholic beverage. Those you can't buy everywhere, the Spanish *sidra*. And then my grandmother would make something called, *buñuelos,* a dessert that is made from yucca. You kind of fry it, a pastry thing that you make and you fry. Then you eat it with syrup. But I don't go all out. It's only me. I hate to say that even though the rest of my family and my aunt does make black beans from scratch, I buy a can. [laughs] That's my American side. I buy a can of already made black beans and I doctor it. I put the stuff in it but I don't make it from scratch. [laughs] So there you go. That's my hybrid self.

Visiting Cuba	
J.R.:	So have you been back to Cuba?
Myriam Lechuga:	No. I haven't.
J.R.:	Do you think you will go back someday?
Myriam Lechuga:	I think I will go back. I think I am thinking now when diplomatic relations if they reopen between Cuba and the United States then I think I will go back. To reconnect with my family there, you know. I think it has been fifty-four years and I always thought, I always thought that I wouldn't go back until Fidel Castro died. But apparently he and Raul are eternal. [laughs] And so, yes I don't know what it is, I think they have a cadre of doctors looking at them all the time, so, yeah. Originally, my plan—I thought since I'm younger, so they must pass away at some point. But they haven't and it's been fifty some years. So I think that I will. I think diplomatic relations are reopened. And maybe I don't know how long it would take, maybe about a year I don't know or if they keep running into things, then I will. Then, I think I will.
J.R.:	What do you look forward to seeing besides your relatives?
Myriam Lechuga:	I think I look forward to seeing what I remember of—[pause] where my grandparents lived, where I lived the last three years or so that I was there, I lived there. I really remember my grandparents' house, which was there throughout my life. I don't remember where my schools are, any of those things that would be tough to find because I don't have a great deal of information. And my memory, you know, from when I was a child. I would like to go back to see the cathedral in Havana because I did go there a lot as a child, and the plaza in front of the cathedral and I remember that very much. I would like to go to the Malecon because I remember driving up and down. I remember being in a car, in a car, driving up that road by the Malecon, which faces the ocean. And the Morro, which is like a fortress which is there in the harbor, there at the beginning of Havana. And I remember driving there and seeing the water come up over the wall. If it was bad, if it was raining or if it was bad, a storm, you know, you would be driving along this water comes over the wall. And I always—.
J.R.:	It must have been scary as a kid.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, a kid was like, "Oh, my God, this is happening!" So I would like go back and walk the streets and see what I remember of my old neighborhood there. Though people say to me—other relatives maybe or friends of relatives that have been—they say, you know, it's not as

	it was, whatever you remember, it won't be that way. Things are falling down. So some people say oh, you know, it's not good to go back, but because of your memories. So, yes, that is what I would like to. Oh, the beach, yes, definitely. I will tell you I would like to go to Varadero, which is a beach in Cuba. Because, and of course, I know that has totally changed, I am sure, not the beach itself but, you know, there're new hotels and all that now tourism has reopened. We used to spend every year a week on vacation at Varadero.
J.R.:	How do you spell that?
Myriam Lechuga:	V-A-R-A-D-E-R-O, Varadero. And to me it is still the most, to me, I have seen it, to me it is the most beautiful beach ever. You know, that I have ever seen and had good memories as a kid of being there on vacations. So I would like to see it now. I am sure it is totally different but we'll see. We'll see what happens.
J.R.:	We have talked about an awful lot of stuff.
Myriam Lechuga:	I know, I know. Don't know how long it has taken.
Final Thoughts	
J.R.:	Anything else that you think is important that you should mention about your family or your journey here to the United States?
Myriam Lechuga:	I think about my family, my uncle, you know, everybody included. It's difficult. It was difficult for them to leave, obviously, to leave everything they had worked for behind. But I would say that it was worth it. Even though my mother had to work two jobs and all the things that happened, it was worth it because we had our freedom here. We were able to, my mother and I, and my uncle and his family, we were able to travel freely. We have traveled outside of the U.S. At other times, moved where we wanted to, live where we wanted to, study what we wanted to. You know, lived the life we wanted, my cousins and I and their kids. So whatever the hardships were I think that even they would agree it was worth it. I am grateful to them for having done that. You know, not having stayed. I think people take, obviously, here in the United States, people tend to think that every place in the world is like it is here. But it's not. That's the thing I always say to people or remind people to go and vote. I would say that is important to have a government you can change in a certain period of time. If you don't like that government you can vote them out. All those things that people fought for, like the people that came. All the refugees—that's what they came here looking for is freedom. So I would say, that was my family. There were hardships. I'm getting emotional. Even with all

	the hardships that was worth it to me. I am very grateful to be here and not be over there.
J.R.:	Thank you for letting me listen to your story.
Myriam Lechuga:	Thank you.
J.R.:	It has been very—.
Myriam Lechuga:	Hope it has been interesting.
J.R.:	Very interesting, indeed. So thank you. So this is a good place to stop.
Myriam Lechuga:	Yes, good. I know I have been going on too long.
J.R.:	Thank you. Thank you.
Myriam Lechuga:	Thank you for your great interview. I appreciate it.
J.R.:	It has been fun.