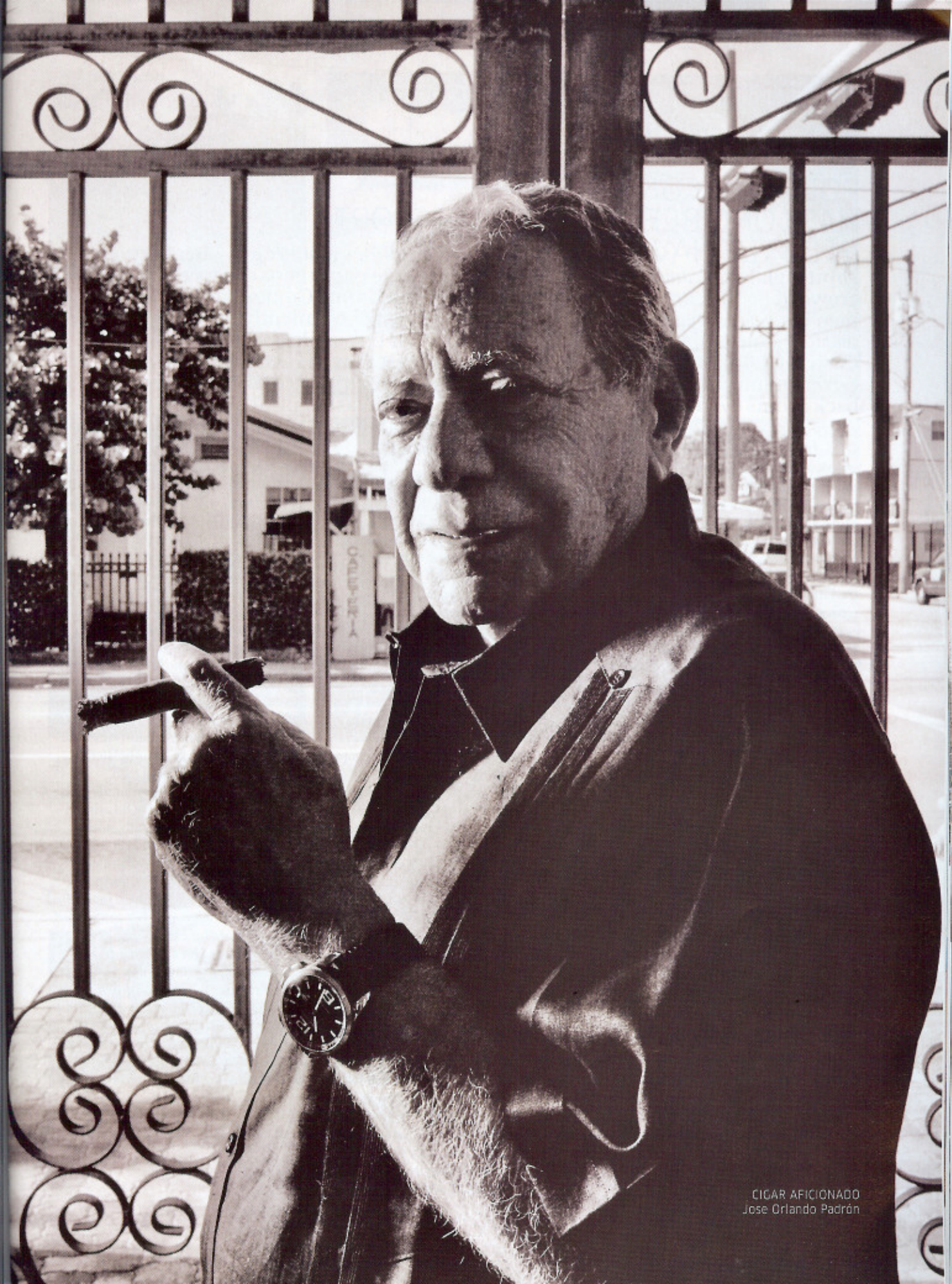


# EXILE ON 8TH STREET

FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE REVOLUTION, CHANGE MAY FINALLY BE COMING TO CUBA.  
BUT WHAT WILL THAT MEAN FOR THE EXILE COMMUNITY IN  
MIAMI'S LITTLE HAVANA?

**BY PORTER FOX**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN LOOMIS



CIGAR AFICIONADO  
Jose Orlando Padrón

## POLITICAL CONVERSATION HAS LONG BEEN A FAVORITE SPORT

▶ **IN LITTLE HAVANA.** It flows from Versailles restaurant, where servers shuttle plates of *camarones al ajillo* and thimble-size paper cups of espresso to the crowded booths, and from the domino tables of Maximo Gomez Park, where old men in pressed *guayaberas* pass hot afternoons hunched intently over the tiles. For decades, much of that talk concerned Cuba, their erstwhile homeland, and Fidel Castro, who claimed their property and businesses for the people following the 1959 communist coup. Exiled counterrevolutionaries plotted in Little Havana's back rooms even after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in '61 and the Cuban

Missile Crisis in '62. When 125,000 newly arrived Cuban refugees flooded the streets during the 1980 Mariel boatlift, the murmurings of Little Havana grew into a national political bellwether. As recently as 2000, the volcanic anger of the exiles was felt around the world when a U.S. court ordered that a Cuban boy named Elian Gonzalez be forcibly removed from the Little Havana home of relatives and returned to his father in Cuba.

But the neighborhood is changing fast. Fidel, the loathed and loved revolutionary, has handed the reins to his evidently more conciliatory younger brother, Raul, who recently initiated the most significant shakeup in Cuban politics in 40 years when he replaced Fidel's cabinet.

These shifts, along with the stateside election of Barack Obama, have led to a growing sense of inevitability that America's 47-year embargo against the Republic of Cuba—the Cold War's last stand—will be lifted.

Now, as the U.S.-Cuba relationship begins to thaw, Little Havana has grown strangely quiet. The firebrand political bloc that supported the embargo for so many years seems to have little stake in Cuba's next step. It's an irony that looms over this sunny neighborhood: At the time when the hard-liners should be taking to the streets, everything feels like business as usual.

"The lack of outrage in the last few weeks has not been what I expected," says Elena Freyre, the 61-year-old

owner of Renee Gallery on Calle Ocho, little Havana's main drag; she sits on the board of the Foundation for Normalization of US/Cuba Relations. "It's like the exile community has been in the five stages of grief, and the final one is acceptance. It's been a very long time, but I think we're getting there."

Over at Little Havana's El Nuevo Siglo lunch counter, four older men dig into plates of steak and beans—intermittently nodding at the cook, who has been on a spatula-waving tirade about Castro "winning the war" for the last 15 minutes. A few years back, they'd likely have been shouting themselves hoarse, but today they just smile indulgently, seemingly more concerned with their meals. For them, Cuba's next revolution has become someone else's battle.

"There is a diminishing number of hard-core old-timers who are still opposed to lifting the embargo with Cuba," says historian Paul George, author of *Little Havana*, sipping strong coffee in front of El Nuevo Siglo. "The first wave really, truly thought they were part-time residents and they were going to go back. They've mostly aged or passed on. The folks who came next were more realistic. They didn't have the same hatred and resentment."

It's a common phenomenon, George adds, in exile communities. Anger is diluted as time passes.

"All Cubans from the first generation still think of themselves as exiles," observes Archie Nica, a grizzled 58-year-old muralist who has lived in Little Havana for 20 years. "But the second and third generations, they feel like American-Cubans. They're both."

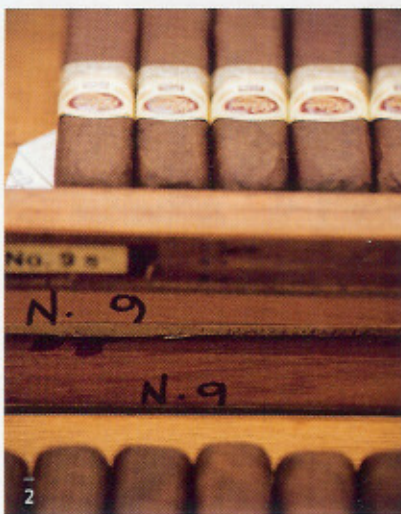
Ernesto Padilla, the 36-year-old

owner of the Padilla Cigar Company, is a card-carrying member of the second generation. Padilla views the future of Little Havana as having less to do with politics than with demographics. Like the Jewish population that once called the area home, most established Cuban families have now moved on to nicer neighborhoods in Coral Gables, Hialeah and Coconut Grove. In the last decade, immigrants from Nicaragua, Venezuela, Argentina and Colombia have taken their place. The cycle of reinvention, he says, is a familiar one in Little Havana.

"It's an inexpensive neighborhood, and it's easy for immigrants to come in and start again," Padilla says. "This has kind of become the capital of Latin America."

Padilla reclines in an upholstered leather chair in his Calle Ocho storefront as a Colombian parade rolls by during Carnival Miami, a Latin American festival. He recalls stories from his childhood under house arrest in Havana. His father, dissident poet Heberto Padilla, was imprisoned by Castro, fled with his family to the United States with Ernesto in 1980 and started making cigars for exiles.

Today, Little Havana is less a destination for agitators than an intersection of business, culture, politics and kitsch. Calle Ocho is lined with restaurants, art galleries and a plethora of tourist shops. One souvenir hawker wearing a MOST WANTED sandwich board picturing Fidel Castro sells baby



**SCENES FROM CALLE OCHO:** 1. Versailles restaurant // 2. The Padrón No. 9 // 3. Walk of Fame // 4. Jose Orlando Padrón // 5. The Tower Theater // 6. Maximo Gomez Park // 7. Bay of Pigs Invasion Memorial // 8. Archie Nica's street mural of Cuban heroes



1. **CUBA LIBRE** // Calle Ocho, the main thoroughfare of Little Havana, was called SW 8th Street until the postrevolutionary Cuban influx in 1959. While cigar vendors and cafés still hawk their goods, Castro-kitsch souvenir shops are becoming more common.
2. **MAXIMO GOMEZ PARK ENTRANCE** // The unofficial gate to Little Havana

T-shirts printed with the slogan, **MADE IN THE U.S.A. WITH CUBAN PARTS.**

For his part, Padilla is content with the notion that relations with Cuba will

them. Standing in front of her gallery, which is showing an exhibit of Middle Eastern photos, she points to the counterrevolutionary monuments

**“THERE IS A DIMINISHING NUMBER OF HARD-CORE OLD-TIMERS WHO ARE STILL OPPOSED TO LIFTING THE EMBARGO,” HISTORIAN PAUL GEORGE SAYS. “THE FOLKS WHO CAME NEXT WERE MORE REALISTIC.”**

be normalized. “It’s good for business to move on,” he says. Jose Orlando Padrón, a Little Havana fixture and owner of Padrón Cigars, would also like to move on. In 1978, he negotiated with Castro for the release of political prisoners. To this day, he worries about his factory being blown up.

There are still some hard-liners left. Freyre, who is also the daughter of Cuba’s prerevolutionary ambassador to Argentina and Chile, is one of

lining Cuban Memorial Boulevard and insists that no matter what happens, the neighborhood will always be a symbol for the exiles.

“This is Miami’s counterpart to the ‘streets belong to the revolution,’” she says, referring to Castro’s famous battle cry: “Little Havana belongs to the Cubans.”

The message from Washington and Havana is that change is coming, she says. Still, it’s unlikely that the dream of going home will be realized by many of Miami’s 800,000 Cubans—or that Little Havana will suddenly disappear.

“Some people have this idealized, frozen 1959 picture of Cuba,” she says. “It’s not real. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Strolling along Calle Ocho on a

Saturday afternoon, it’s hard to imagine Little Havana ever changing. Rows of pastel-colored *guayaba* pastries glisten in a display case at the Karmen Bakery II. Inside the terra cotta-roofed McDonald’s flanking Maximo Gomez Park, photographs of old Havana’s Malecon and Plaza de San Francisco hang on the walls. Old ladies in pearls chat with little girls in sundresses outside the Exquisito Restaurant, and next to the Bay of Pigs monument, three men with notebooks and *robusto* cigars discuss politics under a massive ceiba tree. They seem as permanent as the trees themselves.

“Unless you have a crystal ball it’s hard to figure out what’s going to happen,” muses historian George.

“I think people will pack their bags when Cuba opens up,” Freyre predicts, “and I think the same people are going to be packing their bags again 24 hours later.” ■

**PORTER FOX** writes and teaches fiction and nonfiction in Brooklyn, New York. He’s on a diet after overindulging in Cuban food.



**MAXIMO GOMEZ PARK** // Named after the general who fought to liberate Cuba from the Spanish, this Calle Ocho nexus (also known as Domino Park) is crowded with graying Cuban exiles and has been a clearinghouse of neighborhood gossip, trash-talk, politics and highly competitive dominoes since the '60s.