

Coming out—Cuban style

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I AM SITTING at a glass-topped, wrought-iron table near the hotel swimming pool. Two hundred and fifty guests, distributed at 50 other tables near the pool, are sipping daiquiris and soft drinks. An orchestra is playing and waiters are beginning to distribute plates with rich assortments of coldcuts. It's 11 p.m.

Suddenly there is a drum roll and the band sounds a fanfare. The lights go out. A spotlight creeps along the pool's edge and seeks out a stairway. The orchestra strikes up a Cuban number and the crowd watches as a

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middle-aged man dressed in a formal suit walks down the steps arm in arm with a young woman dressed in an evening gown with her hair done up elegantly. She holds her evening gown up just enough so that the light glitters off her silver shoes.

The guests applaud as the older man, the father and the young woman, his daughter begin dancing under the spotlight and around the pool. A young man suddenly appears and the father steps off stage as the two youngsters dance.

It has all the glamor and pomp of a debutantes ball. If it had really been happening at the Havana Hilton it would have seemed so natural. But it was happening at the Havana Libre, the former Hilton, just a few weeks ago.

It was the traditional "fifteen" party for the girl who glided down the steps with her father. It's the Cuban equivalent of "sweet sixteen". Usually it's a house party with soda pop, ice-cream, cake, relatives and schoolmates. Occasionally the "fifteen" is celebrated in a hired hall. The one I witnessed at the poolside of the Havana Libre was the most lavish and costly I had ever heard about. It cost the parents about \$4,800.

Here it was, socialist Cuba, and the pretentiousness of it all seemed an anomaly. The party lasted until three in the morning. Several orchestras played, known Cuban entertainers performed and three hired photographers kept their electric flashes popping. The rum flowed, food was abundant and during the evening Mom and Pop visited each of the 50 tables and chatted with their friends. The schoolmates of the 15-year-old daughter spent most of the evening dancing around the poolside to a Cuban version of rock while the older people sat quietly watching.

Were these party goers, perhaps, the remnants of the old ruling class that were having their last tango in Havana. They weren't, in fact. The mother is an eye doctor and an outspoken supporter of the Cuban revolution



and Fidel Castro. The father, an engineer, is a proud revolutionary. The daughter is a member of the Cuban Young Communist League. None of them see any contradiction in the lavish coming-out party and their radical outlook.

Some of the guests, like the ones at my table, were mildly critical of the conspicuous consumption. "When my daughter is 15," the man told me, "we will all go out to a restaurant and then to a movie."

One asks logically, where did the parents get the money for such an expensive evening. For one thing, both parents get excellent salaries as professionals? The average salary is about \$162 a month and the average professional salary is about \$320 a month. These parents probably earned something in the vicinity of twice the average professional salary each. That salary would be what they were paid immediately following the revolution in 1959. Under current policy, professional salaries are lower now in an attempt to equalize income but Cuba has generally maintained what have been called historic salaries at their earlier, and higher, level.

Inasmuch as rent is minimal (10 per cent of income) and other necessities (health and dental care, education) free of charge, they have been able to accumulate money over the years.

But, in this case, it is probable that they also had money—tens of thousands of dollars, hundreds of thousands or even a million dollars—in the bank. Yes, there are some millionaires in Cuba because the Government never touched the money of Cubans who stayed in Cuba, left their money in the bank and could prove that it was earned legitimately.

Despite their money, the family of the 15-year-old have the same basic food ration as any other Cuban family — three-quarters of a pound of beef a week, four pounds of rice a month and so on. They like others can buy all the fish and eggs they want at minimal prices. Both parents, the doctor and engineer, work long hours, often doing overtime as a social duty and without extra pay.

Like other Cuban workers and professionals, they are entitled to one month of paid vacation each year. But their accumulated savings does give them an advantage over the Cuban without any. They can eat out often at any of Havana's very good and somewhat expensive restaurants. Yet, when I asked the father of the 15-year-old about the seeming contradiction between the society-type ball and Cuba's socialist morality he replied: "Even if the Government took all the money I had in the bank, I would still support the Revolution."