

# Broward woman remembers Cuba as haven from Holocaust

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HAPPY DAYS: This 1955 Weinbach family photo shows a younger Claire Weinbach and her daughter Graciela, then 6 months old. Graciela died a few years later and is buried in a Havana cemetery.

Claire Weinbach remembers a Cuba where families spent weekends enjoying the crystal blue ocean, children played in the lush parks and loved ones gathered for extravagant Sunday dinners.

Weinbach, 76, a Jew born in Belgium, said some of her best memories are from her nine years living in pre-Castro Cuba, a place she called "paradise."

"I came to Havana and fell in love with it," said Weinbach, who now lives in Hollywood. "Everybody there loved life."

Weinbach began her married life in Cuba, gave birth to three children there and was able to put behind her childhood of horror as a prisoner in French concentration camps.

But Weinbach also experienced sad times on the island, where her 4-year-old daughter, Graciela, died from renal cancer. She was buried in a Havana cemetery.

In 1960, soon after Castro's rise to power, Weinbach and her husband, Abraham, decided to leave the communist nation with their two surviving children, expecting to return in a few months.

That never happened. And Weinbach has spent the past 46 years waiting for the day she could return to her daughter's grave.

"It's been very painful," she said, fingering through decades of photographs, neatly stacked in a tattered black shoe box. "Here we are 90 miles away from Cuba and we cannot make it there."

Weinbach's son, Bernard, hopes to one day visit his older sister's resting place.

"If it ever becomes democratic, I would consider it," said Bernard, an Aventura physician.

When celebration over Castro's illness erupted on the streets of Miami and Hialeah last week, Weinbach couldn't help but join Cubans in hoping that change is near.

"I only hope their wish comes true," said Weinbach, a grandmother of seven who speaks with a thick French accent. "I'm sure there's going to come a day when democracy is going to come again."

Because of her experiences during the Holocaust, Weinbach said she can sympathize with Cubans still living on the island.

At the start of World War II, Weinbach, her parents and three brothers fled their home in Belgium to a small village in France.

But the family was captured and taken to a French concentration camp, where Weinbach, 10 at the time, remembers sleeping on the ground, having nothing to eat but hot water "with terrible things inside" and the screeching cries of young children.

"People were dying like flies," she said. "It was terrible."

### **'SLAVE' WORK**

Weinbach was rescued and sent to live with a peasant woman on a farm, where she worked "like a slave" planting and picking vegetables in exchange for a safe place to live.

She stayed there for a few years -- pretending to be a Catholic -- until being reunited with her mother and brothers in 1947. Her father was killed in a concentration camp.

The family returned to their home town in Belgium, until the start of the Korean War. Fearing another Holocaust experience, they planned to move to Canada.

But before she left, Weinbach met her future husband, Abraham, a Jew from Poland who had been living in Cuba. Within two months, the couple married and moved to the island.

Abraham owned a successful diamond business, and Weinbach explored the city, learned Spanish -- she speaks five languages -- and raised their children.

### **NOT FORGOTTEN**

Though more than 50 years since the death of her daughter, Weinbach has never forgotten her. Photographs of the toddler, wearing frilly dresses and big smiles, are scattered throughout Weinbach's home.

She hopes to visit Graciela -- and her former island home -- again soon.

"I would love to go back to see my daughter's grave," she said. "But only after the communists are gone."