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Cuban immigrants share precious family heirlooms to show history of Cuban exiles

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Julia Adán Pelegrín, 71, opened a black suitcase full of faded elegant shirts.

Those shirts, she explained, belonged to her father, Emilio Adán Silva, when he was a Supreme Court justice in Cuba, and they represented his life before he and 12 other justices signed a letter denouncing Fidel Castro's government.

Eight years later, his family moved to Miami.

Those shirts, Pelegrín says, represent the sacrifice her father made for his family and express the pride she feels.

"These are not only memories but items of everyday use when Cuba existed as a nation," Adán said. "[These shirts] were on the streets of Havana. They lived there."

Such feelings of pride and nostalgia prevailed Saturday in the lobby of the Freedom Tower, when dozens of Cubans gathered to donate or lend objects of historic interest that document their exile experience.

More than 300 items — passports, documents, photos, clothes — will be part of an exhibit that will open at the tower in September.

The inauguration of the exhibit is a key step in the preservation of Cuban history, said Alina Interián, host of the event and executive director of Miami Dade College cultural affairs.

"We want to pay tribute to the people to whom this tower means so much," said Interián, who also was processed at the Freedom Tower when she arrived from Cuba.

Between 1962 and 1974, Cuban refugees were processed at the tower, known as "The Refuge." It was added to the United States National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and designated a National Historic Landmark in 2008.

The exhibit, titled "The Exile Experience: Journey to Freedom," is a collaboration between Miami Dade College and the Miami Herald Media Company. Its objective is to document, preserve and share the history of the difficulties the exiled Cuban community went through since Fidel Castro's rise to power.

The facility has deserved a project like this for some time, said Luisa Meruelo, 93, who worked for the tower's immigration service for nine years.

"I was always wondering why no one had done something about the refugees here," Meruelo said. "This is a long story, a beautiful story."

The exhibit is a way to thank the nation that gave them refuge during that turbulent time, she said.

"We have to thank the people of the United States for being so generous to us at a very difficult time," she said.

Now, the museum can show items like the first coins earned in this country, the tie that an immigrant was wearing when he arrived, a wedding gown and the tiny dress of a 3-year-old. To the people who wore them, these items are intimately associated with the difficult experience of having to abandon their native country.

One of those people was Mercy Advocat, who arrived in 1962 with her brother in the Pedro Pan Operation. That exodus took place between 1960 and 1962 and brought more than 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children to the United States.

"The last thing our parents told us before leaving was that my brother and I should never be separated," Advocat said.

"We then boarded the plane and, when we landed, the first thing they did was separate us — the girls from the boys."

Advocat and her brother eventually were sent to the same foster home in Albuquerque, N.M., and they ended doing what their parents had told them. After two years, they were reunited with their mother in New York.

The black-and-white photos Advocat brought to the tower show her mother's tears when she reunited with her children. She is lending those photos and a doll brought from Cuba — some of her most precious keepsakes — to the museum. She is not ready to part with them yet.

"I'm not so old to have to donate them," she said.