MEMOIRS of BERNARDO VEGA

A contribution to the history of the Puerto Rican community in New York

edited by César Andreu Iglesias
translated by Juan Flores

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something that I almost went so far as to say I had grown up playing with gunpowder!
That was my first job in the United States. The war in Europe was at its height. The Germans had just suffered a setback at Verdun. In the United States, war material was being produced in enormous quantities. The work in the munitions plant was very hard. Only those hardened by rigorous labor could stand it. It really was too much for the soft hands of tabaqueros like ourselves. They would work us for eight hours without a break. Even to do your private business you had to get permission from the lead man of the work crew, and he would only relieve you for a few short minutes. Never before had I experienced, or even witnessed, such brutal working conditions.

Pepe and I would be out of the house at five in the morning. It took us almost two hours to get there. The work day started at seven and we would spend the whole day surrounded by all kinds of grenades and explosives. Most of the workers were Italians of peasant stock, tough as the marble of their country. There were also a lot of Norwegian, Swedish, and Polish workers, most of them as strong as oxen... Pepe Lleras and I, though better built than the average Puerto Rican, were beaten to a pulp after two weeks.

On the way home we would collapse onto the seat of the train like two drunks, and when we got home we hardly even felt like eating. Our hands were all beaten and bloody and felt like they were burning. After massaging each other’s backs, we would throw ourselves into bed like tired beasts of burden. At the crack of dawn, feeling as though we had hardly slept more than a few minutes, we’d be up and off to another day’s labor.

One day—we hadn’t been there long—we met up with a stroke of hard luck. We used to get there a few minutes before work began to change into our work clothes. It so happened that one afternoon at the end of the day we couldn’t find our street clothes. We complained to the man in charge, but he only responded sneeringly, “What do you think this is, a bank or something? If your clothes are stolen, that’s your tough luck.”

It sure was our tough luck. The clothes that were stolen were the only good clothes we had, and for me the loss was greater still—for along with my suit jacket went my passage money back to Puerto Rico. It was as though my return ship had gone up in flames.

4. The customs and traditions of the tabaqueros and what it was like to work in a cigar factory in New York City

Since the day we had our street clothes stolen and had to come home from work in rags, Pepe and I started thinking of quitting work at the munitions plant. But we had no other job in mind, or time to look for one. One day I found Pepe gloomier than a rooster after a cockfight. I tried to console him, but he just broke down, crying his heart out. The job was even more unbearable for him than it was for me. He got sick and gave up.

I kept up that fierce daily battle for another few weeks. But one morning I caught sight of a bunch of rags on fire alongside a powder keg and, had I not grabbed an extinguisher and put out the fire just in time, right there and then I might have taken leave of the world of the living.

For fear of losing my skin, time had come to give notice. Payday was every two weeks, and I had worked only half that. I decided to leave that day no matter what, though I wanted to be sure of collecting what was due me. The only way I could see was to pick a fight with someone and force them to fire me. I chose as my victim the first co-worker who showed up. The foreman pulled us apart and took us to the office to fire us both. Once I got my pay, I assured the foreman that it was I who had started the trouble and that the other guy was innocent. The foreman shouted, “You son of a bitch!” That was the first time, though certainly not the last, that I was called by that name in the United States.

One day a few weeks later I picked up the morning newspaper and felt my heart skip a beat—that same plant had been blown to bits in an explosion!

With what savings I had I bought myself some clothes for winter. Having no notion yet what that season would demand, I made the sinful mistake of buying two loud colored suits and an equally flashy
overcoat. Friends who had already spent a few winters in New York made fun of my new purchases. So there I was, after all that hardship, in the same old straits—flat broke and without the clothes I needed for winter.

It took “El Salvaje,” as Ramón Quiñones—another fellow townsman from Cayey and a first-rate tabaquero—was called, to get me out of my predicament. Though gentle and good-hearted, he would resort to his fists at the slightest provocation, and was always quick to seize the limelight. He never carried firearms, but tried to solve all his problems with his bare hands. That’s how he got the nickname “Wild Man.”

One day my friend “El Salvaje” took me down to Fuentes & Co., a cigar factory located on Pearl Street, near Fulton Street, in lower Manhattan. I started work immediately, but within a week they had marked down the price of my make of cigar, and I quit. * When “El Salvaje” found out, he went down to the shop in person and, as was his custom, had it out with the foreman with his bare fists. He had to pay a fine to stop them from locking him up.

As for me, I was actually lucky to leave that job. A few days later I found work at another cigar factory, “El Morito” (“The Little Moor”), on 86th Street off Third Avenue, a few steps from where I was living. At that wonderful place I struck up friendships with a lot of Cubans, Spaniards, and some fellow countrymen, all of whom awakened in me an eagerness to study. Among them, two Cubans who remain prominently in my mind. One of them, Juan Bonilla, had been a close friend of José Martí. He was a noted orator and one of the editors of Patria, the newspaper founded in New York by the Apostle of the Cuban Revolution himself. The other was T. de Castro Palomino, a man of vast erudition, who had also gained renown for his role in the liberation struggles of the Antilles.

Of the Spaniards I remember fondly Maximiliano Olay, still hardly more than a boy in those years, who had had to flee Spain to escape charges of complicity in an anarchist assassination of a leading political figure. He was a loyal friend of many Puerto Rican mi-

*Cigar prices varied according to the “make” or vitola—the quality of the tobacco and the cigarmakers’ reputation. The vitola was indicated by the cigar ring. Cigar factories ranged in size from the chimach (workshop), which might include no more than the master cigarmaker and two or three apprentices, to fábricas (factories), which employed from fifty to four hundred workers. Some fábricas engaged in all phases of cigar production; in others, called despensillas, most of the workers were women, who separated the tobacco leaves from the stems.

grants; more than once I heard him claim that destiny had made him a brother of the Puerto Ricans, for one of them had once saved his life.

Maximiliano was born in Colloita, a village in the Asturian mountains of Spain. Two of the Guardia Civil on duty in his town were from Puerto Rico. They were friends of his family, who had watched him grow up from early childhood. As a young man he got himself into serious trouble for political activities. He was arrested and the charges against him would have cost him his head. But one of the Guardia Civil hid him and arranged for his escape. He crossed the border into France and managed to get away to New York. “Now you see why all Puerto Ricans are my brothers,” Maximiliano would say.

Another good Spaniard and dear friend of Puerto Ricans was Rufino Alonso, whom they used to call “Primo Bruto” (“Dumb Cousin”). Another of the Puerto Ricans I got to know there and still remember was Juan Hernández, the director of the workers’ paper El Internacional. There was also the fine writer Enrique Rosario Ortiz, and J. Navas, Tomás Flores, Francisco Guevara, Ramón Rodríguez, Matías Nieves—known as “El Cojo Ravelo” (“Limping Ravelo”)—all of whom were active in the cigarworkers’ struggle and in the Hispanic community in general.

With workers of this caliber, “El Morito” seemed like a university. At the time the official “reader” was Fernando García. He would read to us for one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. He dedicated the morning session to current news and events of the day, which he received from the latest wireless information bulletins. The afternoon sessions were devoted to more substantial readings of a political and literary nature. A Committee on Reading suggested the books to be read, and their recommendations were voted on by all the workers in the shop. The readings alternated between works of philosophical, political, or scientific interest, and novels, chosen from the writings of Zola, Dumas, Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Jules Verne, Pierre Loti, Vargas Vila, Pérez Galdós, Palacio Valdés, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Gorky, or Tolstoy. All these authors were well known to the cigarworkers at the time.

It used to be that a factory reader would choose the texts himself, and they were mostly light reading, like the novels of Pérez Escrich, Luis Val, and the like. But as they developed politically, the workers had more and more to say in the selection. Their preference for
works of social theory won out. From then on the readings were
most often from books by Gustave LeBon, Ludwig Buchner, Dar-
win, Marx, Engels, Bakunin . . . And let me tell you, I never knew
a single tabaquero who fell asleep.

The institution of factory readings made the tabaqueros into the
most enlightened sector of the working class. The practice began in
the factories of Viñas & Co., in Bejucal, Cuba, around 1864. Of
course there were readings before then, but they weren't daily.
Emigrants to Key West and Tampa introduced the practice into the
United States around 1869—at least, I was told that in that year the
shop owned by Martínez Ibor in Key West had an official reader.

In Puerto Rico the practice spread with the development of cigar
production, and it was Cubans and Puerto Ricans who brought it
to New York. It is safe to say that there were no factories with
Hispanic cigarworkers without a reader. Things were different in
English-speaking shops where, as far as I know, no such readings
took place.

During the readings at "El Morito" and other factories, silence
reigned supreme—it was almost like being in church. Whenever we
got excited about a certain passage we showed our appreciation by
tapping our tobacco cutters on the work tables. Our applause re-
sounded from one end of the shop to the other. Especially when it
came to polemical matters no one wanted to miss a word. Whenever
someone on the other side of the room had trouble hearing, he
would let it be known and the reader would raise his voice and
repeat the whole passage in question.

At the end of each session there would be a discussion of what had
been read. Conversation went from one table to another without our
interrupting our work. Though nobody was formally leading the
discussion, everyone took turns speaking. When some controversy
remained unresolved and each side would stick to a point of view,
one of the more educated workers would act as arbiter. And should
dates or questions of fact provoke discussion, there was always some-
one who insisted on going to the mastaburos or "donkey-slayers"—
that's what we called reference books.

It was not uncommon for one of the workers to have an encyclope-
dia right there on his worktable. That's how it was at "El Morito,"
where Juan Hernández, Palomino, Bonilla, Rosario, and young
Olay stood out as the arbiters of discussion. And when a point of
contention escaped even their knowledge, the tabaqueros . . . / 23

The traditions of the tabaqueros . . .

I remember times when a tabaquero would get so worked up
defending his position that he didn't mind losing an hour's work—
it was piecework—trying to prove his point. He would quote from
the books at hand, and if there weren't any in the shop he'd come
back the next day with books from home, or from the public library.
The main issues in these discussions centered around different trends
in the socialist and anarchist movements.

In those years of World War I, a central topic was imperialism
and its relation to pacifism. In "El Morito" we had just been reading
Henri Barbusse's Le feu (Under Fire). The hair-raising depiction of
life in the trenches gave rise to an endless discussion among the
socialists, anarchists, and the handful of Germanophiles in the fac-
tory. Earlier we had read La Hyène enragée (The Trial of the Barba-
rians) by Pierre Loti, one of the writers often read to pass the time.
But this particular book did a great deal to disarm the pacifists. The
forceful description of the ruins of Rheims and Arras, the destructive
avalanche of the Kaiser's soldiers, so graphically depicted, stirred us
to thoughts of revenge and gained our deepest sympathy for the
Allies. Just like so many of our comrades in both France and Ger-
many, we fell prey to the call to "defend the fatherland," losing
sight of the proletarian internationalism on which socialism is
founded. Needless to say, Lenin and Bolshevism were still totally
unknown in New York at the time.

When the Catholic newspapers in France took up their campaign
against Marx and Marxism, we read the rigorous defense made by
the socialist Jean Longuet. His articles kindled lively debates among
the tabaqueros. For a while the sentiment in defense of France, in-
spired by Barbusse and Loti, began to lose support. The most mili-
tant pacifists among us struck back by arguing: "The French and the
Germans both represent imperialist capitalism. We workers should
not favor either one of them!" But this revolutionary position was
again undermined by the reading of the Manifesto of March 1916,
signed by the leaders of pacifist internationalism—Jean Grave, Carlo
Mala
to, Paul Reclus, and Peter Kropotkin. This declaration struck a
mortal blow to the worldwide anti-imperialist movement. "To talk
of peace," it read, "is to play into the hands of the German govern-
Teutonic aggression is a threat not only to our hopes for social emancipation but to human progress in general. For that reason we, who are antimilitarists, archenemies of war, and ardent partisans of peace and brotherhood among all nations, stand alongside of those who resist."

"Those who resist," of course, were the French. As a result, a growing current of Francophilia spread among socialists. A great majority of tabaqueros saw France as the standardbearer of democracy and progress, if not of socialism.

The dominant trend among North American socialists, however, and perhaps among the people of the United States in general, was neutrality. The leading pacifist and anarchist among the Spanish-speaking workers in New York was Pedro Esteves, who put out the paper Cultura Proletaria. As I mentioned before, most of the tabaqueros believed that the Germans had to be defeated. Many of them enlisted in the French army. Outstanding among them were Juan Sanz and Mario César Miranda, two leaders of the workers' movement who left Puerto Rico and were killed in combat in the first battle of Verdun. Florencio Lomba, a Puerto Rican cigarworker in New York, also fell on the battlefields of France. Another tabaquero to take up arms was Justo Berra. Years later I was told that he had been seen, old and sickly, in Marseilles.

Many, in fact, are the Puerto Ricans who have fought in defense of other countries. Perhaps for that reason, they have found themselves so alone in their own land. It was right there in "El Morito" that I first heard of the role of the tabaqueros in the Cuban wars of independence. There, too, I began to learn of the distinguished contribution our countrymen made to the Cuban revolution. I heard many true stories from the lips of Juan Bonilla and Castro Palomino, who had experienced them first hand. From then on, I was determined to write an account of the participation of Puerto Ricans in the Cuban independence struggle, which after all was a struggle for the independence of Puerto Rico as well.

But life among the tabaqueros was not all serious and sober. There was a lot of fun too, especially on the part of the Cuban comrades. Many were the times that, after a stormy discussion, someone would take his turn by telling a hilarious joke. Right away tempers would cool down and the whole shop would burst out laughing.

None of the factories was without its happy-go-lucky fellow who would spend the whole time cracking jokes. In "El Morito" our man of good cheer was a Cuban named Angelito, who was known for how little work he did. He would get to the shop in the morning, take his place at his worktable, roll a cigar, light it, and then go change his clothes. When he returned to his table he would take the cigar from his mouth and tell his first joke. The co-workers nearest him would laugh, and after every cigar he'd tell another joke. He would announce when he had made enough cigars to cover that day's rent. Then he'd set out to roll enough to take care of his expenses. Once this goal was reached, he wouldn't make one more cigar, but would leave his workplace, wash up, get dressed, and head for the Broadway theaters.

A good-looking man, Angelito was tall and slender. He had a charming face and was an elegant dresser. He had arrived in the United States with a single, fixed idea in mind, which he admitted openly to anyone who would listen: he wanted to hook up with a rich woman. Pursuing his prey, he would walk up and down the streets, looking, as he himself would say, for his lottery prize. And the truth is that it didn't take him long to find it. A few months after I started at "El Morito" he landed a rich girl, who was beautiful and a violinist to boot. He married her and lived—in his own words—like a prince. But he never forgot us: time and again he would show up at the shop to tell us of his exploits and bless us with the latest addition to his vast repertoire of jokes.

Around that time news reached us at "El Morito" of a major strike in the sugar industry in Puerto Rico. A call went out for a rally in solidarity with the strikers. It took place on 85th Street near Lexington Avenue, and was attended by over a hundred tabaqueros, mostly Puerto Ricans. Santiago Rodriguez presided, and Juan Fonseca served as secretary. Many of those attending stood up to speak, including Ventura Mijón, Herminio Colón, Angel María Dieppa, Enrique Plaza, Pedro San Miguel, Miguel Rivera, Alfonso Dieppa, Rafael Correa, and Antonio Vega. The last mentioned immediately attracted my attention because of the way he spoke, and even more because of his appearance.

While I was listening to Antonio Vega I recalled how my father used to talk all the time about his lost brother, who had never been seen or heard from since he was very young. I'm not sure if it was the memory that did it, but I know I felt deeply moved by the man who
bore my last name. He was a tall fellow, with a broad forehead, a full head of gray hair, a big handle-bar mustache, green eyes, and an oval-shaped face . . . When I went up to him he jumped to his feet with the ease of an ex-soldier and responded very courteously when I congratulated him for his speech. We then struck up a conversation, at the end of which we hugged each other emotionally. He was none other than my father's long lost brother.

5. An amorous experience and other incidents that lend substance to this truthful tale

As soon as I had assured myself of a job at the cigar factory, I enrolled in a public school on 86th Street off First Avenue. The other students were mostly Hungarians and Germans. The class was taught by a little teacher of Irish descent. One night she talked of the advantages of being a United States citizen and how to go about becoming one. "How can I become an American citizen?" I asked. She replied that you just have to follow the steps she had outlined. I responded by pointing out that, unlike our Hungarian and German classmates, Puerto Ricans do not really have any citizenship. Outside of Puerto Rico our natural citizenship is not recognized. Without any citizenship to give up, it would seem pretty hard for us to become Americans.

A bit flustered, the teacher could only restate what she had said before: that you just have to give up your own citizenship, follow the steps, and there you have it. And it was the same for everyone who was a resident of the United States!

"Yes, for everyone," I said, "except Puerto Ricans."

The teacher did not like my attitude. She must have thought that I was trying to make her look stupid in front of the whole class. She called the principal who, informed of the situation, felt it his duty to save the teacher from ridicule. After hemming and hawing, he concluded by saying that the problem was that so little is known about Puerto Rico here in the United States.

This incident wouldn't be worth mentioning if it weren't for what happened as a result: they transferred me to a school so far from where I was living that I had to give up my studies. I would have been better off if I hadn't said anything. Which is how I learned that keeping your mouth shut is the key to "success" in the United States.
7. New York: focal point of the Antillean revolution, and the role of the Cuban and Puerto Rican communities

The arrival of Ruiz Belvis and Betances in New York gave new life to the Sociedad Republicana de Cuba y Puerto Rico. It had been founded by a group of Cubans headed by Juan Manuel Macías and by the exiled Puerto Rican Dr. José Francisco Basora. Because of the reformist illusions encouraged by the Junta Informativa, which had been chosen in Cuba and Puerto Rico and had convened in Madrid, the society had become moribund. But no sooner were those illusions shattered and the promises of colonial reform abandoned than the revolution came back to life. So New York turned out to be just the place for the two new Puerto Rican exiles.

Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruiz Belvis were not unknown in the emigrant community. The former had already gained renown for medical services rendered when the bubonic plague hit Puerto Rico, and as an abolitionist. As for Ruiz Belvis, he was known for the outstanding role he had played in Madrid as a member of the Junta Informativa. The brilliant Memoria sobre la Esclavitud (Memoir of Slavery), which he wrote with José Julián Acosta, was often read in the cigar factories. His famous phrase—"We want abolition with or without indemnity"—was on the lips of every tabaquero.

Immediately after arriving in New York the two illustrious exiles met with Dr. Basora and formed the Comité Revolucionario. Together they signed a manifesto that ended with the following words: "Cubans and Puerto Ricans! Unite forces, work together, we are brothers, we suffer a common injustice. Let us be one also in the revolution and in calling for the independence of Cuba and Puerto Rico. And tomorrow we shall be able to form a confederation of all the Antilles!"

At this same time there appeared in the daily New York Herald a dispatch from Havana telling of the "disappearance" of Betances and Ruiz Belvis from Puerto Rico and implicating them in a mutiny of artillerists that had just taken place in San Juan. The two exiles answered immediately. In the same paper, on August 2, they published a statement declaring that they did not have "the least intention to vindicate themselves before the Spanish government now or hereafter." They went on to say: "The government of the Island, proceeding in its usual arbitrary manner, decreed, without any form of trial, the expulsion from the country of several individuals of good social standing, and among them the undersigned, requiring of them a pledge of honor to go to Madrid and report to the Minister of the Colonies. We decided not to pledge our word of honor for several reasons, which in due time we shall make known, and because we think it would be mere waste of time, money, and labor to trust the good faith of such a government."

According to Uncle Antonio, Betances, Ruiz Belvis, and Basora called a meeting of Cubans and Puerto Ricans in Salvador Gely's home on West 29th Street. Among those who attended were several cigarmakers, including Flor Baerga, Lisandro Rodríguez, my uncle, and the Sephardic Jew Jacobo Silvestre Bresman. The discussion centered on the possibility of initiating a revolution in the Antilles.

Bresman questioned the likelihood of the participation of the large landholders, and underlined the need to win the support of the peasantry—the guajiros in Cuba and the jibaros of Puerto Rico. He reported that Spain had fourteen warships in Cuban waters and that many more could be expected to arrive in Havana. The Spanish army stationed in Cuba had grown from 12,000 to 40,000 regular troops. Any plans for revolution would have to take this situation into account.

At that and subsequent meetings they mapped out an elaborate plan of action. As part of that plan, Betances left for the Caribbean, charged with the task of recruiting a landing force. Ruiz Belvis went to Santiago, Chile, arriving on October 27, 1867, to work with Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna in gathering support for the upcoming

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*On June 7, 1867, the artillerists of San Juan met to protest their exclusion from benefits authorized by Spain. This mutiny served as a pretext for the governor of Puerto Rico to send Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruiz Belvis, along with a group of noted Puerto Rican liberals, into exile in Madrid. Betances and Ruiz Belvis broke the extradition order, fleeing first to Santo Domingo and St. Thomas, and ending in New York.*
insurrection. Dr. Basora stayed in New York to oversee recruitment for another armed force that was to leave from the United States. This was on the eve of the Grito de Lares in Puerto Rico and the Grito de Yara in Cuba.

To the detriment of the cause of Antillean independence, soon after his arrival in Chile Ruiz Belvis died of unknown causes in a hotel in Valparaíso. Word of his dear friend’s death upset Betances greatly, but did not distract him from his revolutionary task. He went on sending clandestine messages from St. Thomas to Puerto Rico and gathering together men and arms from different parts of the Caribbean. But neither men nor arms ever saw action. The Spanish authorities learned of the insurrection and succeeded in crushing it between September 23 and the first days of October 1868.

It is known that Betances had joined forces with a group of revolutionaries from the Dominican Republic who were conspiring against President Baez. The war material he had gathered for the expedition to Puerto Rico was lost in Santo Domingo, and Betances was strongly criticized in New York.

On October 10 what came to be known as the Ten Years’ War broke out in Yara. Carlos Manuel de Céspedes was proclaimed commander of the Cuban Liberation Army. This event aroused a great deal of enthusiasm among Cubans and Puerto Ricans in New York.

The revolution in Cuba seemed to have gotten off to a successful start, and the Sociedad Republicana de Cuba y Puerto Rico was renamed the Junta Revolucionaria de Cuba y Puerto Rico. J. Morales Lemus, who had been the Cuban delegate to the Junta Informativa in Madrid, was named president. Another outstanding Cuban, Francisco Javier Cisneros, joined the Junta Revolucionaria. Dr. Basora was named treasurer and Agustín Arango was appointed director of volunteer recruitment.

The first contingent of men and arms left from Jacksonville, Florida, on the steamship Henry Burden and the schooner Mary Lowell under the command of Cisneros. But the Burden proved too old to make the trip, and the troops had to transfer to the schooner on the high sea. They managed to land on Ragged Island, a British holding in the Bahamas. The revolutionaries wanted to go on to Cuba, but the ship’s crew refused to sail any further. They were forced to go: rid of the crew and recruit a new one, all of which took so long that a Spanish patrol boat had ample time to intercept them. As a result, the British authorities took the schooner into custody, and the first military mission to Cuba ended in failure.

Meanwhile, Morales Lemus had a meeting in Washington with President Grant, at which he beseeched Grant to intervene in the conflict with Spain. This Grant refused to do, but, according to Lisandro Rodríguez and Juan Arnao, he did promise to assist the armed revolution. This report was passed on to Céspedes, who was fighting in the Cuban country.

The idea that the United States might help the República de Cuba en Armas rekindled the enthusiasm of Cubans and Puerto Ricans in New York. In the cigar factories, boarding houses, and restaurants there was already talk of how by next Christmas “we’ll be eating our favorite stew back on our native soil.”

But very different events were to transpire. Rumors of a possible United States intervention in Cuba alarmed Spanish diplomats in Washington, who denounced the Junta Revolucionaria de Cuba y Puerto Rico. Morales Lemus was summoned to the capital and reprimanded by United States authorities.

At the same time, Morales Lemus’ frequent visits to Washington began to cause fears and division among the exiles. The president of the Junta was charged with “annexationism,” and the revolutionary struggle against Spain went in two directions: one that had consistently demanded independence, and one that more or less openly advocated annexation to the United States.

It was around this time that women began to join the Antillean emancipation struggle. On the initiative of Emilia Casanova de Villaverde, the Hijas de Cuba, a patriotic society, was founded on February 6, 1869, at the St. Julien Hotel, located near Washington Square in New York. Fourteen women were seated around the president’s table. At that meeting Sénora Casanova de Villaverde accused the Junta Revolucionaria de Cuba y Puerto Rico of “annexationist maneuvers and betrayal of the independence movement.”

For all its failings, the Junta Revolucionaria did manage to dispatch a second expedition to Cuba in May 1869, and a third by the
end of the year. Both, however, were intercepted by Spanish patrol boats and only escaped by throwing part of their war material overboard. Later expeditions met a similar fate.

The insurgent army began to run short of supplies, which forced them to limit their campaigns. This critical situation generated heated discussion in the Junta. Charges were made against Cisneros, the head of the expeditions, who submitted his resignation. He was later absolved, when it was learned that the ships had been taken by surprise because of indiscretions on the part of those responsible for planning the expeditions. It became clear that Spanish agents had been able to learn dates and points of departure and had transmitted the information to their naval patrols.

At the beginning of 1869 Dr. J. J. Henna, a victim of the repression that had followed the Grito de Lares, arrived in New York. Henna immediately joined the Comité Republicano Puertorriqueño, now directed by Betances and Basora.

On October 31 of the same year Eugenio María de Hostos landed in New York. He came from Europe "sparking with rage," his soul burning with "holy fanaticism" for the independence of his country. Not long before that he had broken all this with the Spanish "progressives" in the Atenéum of Madrid. His years of compromise and discussion with Spain were over. He had come to the conclusion that the colonies would have to win their freedom "in cold blood, in the field of combat."

At Basora's suggestion, Hostos joined the editorial staff of La Revolución, the organ of the Comité Republicano Puertorriqueño in New York. His work for this publication was to become the subject of fiery polemics—according to Baeró, Hostos "put together and directed" the newspaper, but was never regarded as the "editor."

Hostos was aware of the bitter division between those who had consistently demanded Antillean independence and those seeking annexation of the islands to the United States. He hoped to win the confidence of Morales Lemus and the other Cuban leaders. He wanted to become the undisputed leader of the independence struggle, and worked toward that end by editing the newspaper. The mood among Puerto Rican and Cuban exiles and emigrants in New York worried Hostos. But, with his goal firmly in mind, he took up the challenge with a positive outlook. He drew up a manifesto calling on his fellow Puerto Ricans to join the revolution, and secured the adherence of several members of the Junta Revolucionaria Cubana.

In this same period a resolution was presented to the United States Congress proposing that an offer be made to Spain for the purchase of the island of Cuba. The proposal was endorsed by one of the major daily newspapers in New York. The Comité Republicano Puertorriqueño assigned Enrique Piñeiro, editor in chief of La Revolución, to print a response. He did so, but Hostos considered the answer "very ambivalent." The article did not make it clear that the goal of Antillean revolution was independence and instead left the reader believing that the idea was simply to throw the Spanish out of Cuba, no matter what happened after. This position led to a serious argument between Hostos and Piñeiro, and Betances and Basora had to step in to prevent Hostos from resigning. But his staying on at the paper only left a very difficult situation.

As the representative of the revolutionary government in Cuba, the Junta Revolucionaria Cubana was charged with a variety of diplomatic functions, and these tended to restrict its activities in other areas. What was needed was a forum for public discussion, a center for raising funds and recruiting volunteers, and similar purposes. It was with these ends in mind that the Club de Artesanos was created. And Hostos made use of this group to expound his ideas and to speak out against annexation.

Hostos' presence was an invaluable stimulus to the club. Cigar-makers, artisans, and laborers, both Cuban and Puerto Rican, began to fill their halls. Lectures and discussions led by Hostos were one of the main attractions. He came to be recognized as the leader of the separatist workers.

In the cigar factories the belief in the future independence of the Antilles came to life again. But the activities of the club pointed up further divisions within the emigrant community. The conservative, bourgeois, and professional elements in the Junta Revolucionaria Cubana began to encounter opposition to their plans. The animosity against Hostos intensified.

In that year, 1869, another famous Puerto Rican arrived in New York: Juan Rius Rivera. He was barely twenty years old. He joined the Comité Republicano Puertorriqueño and offered his services to Cuba. He didn't stay in New York very long: on January 19, 1870, he landed in Las Tunas, Cuba, as part of an expedition led by Melchor Agüero.

Seeking to sway United States public opinion in their favor, the Junta Revolucionaria Cubana decided to organize sympathizers in the United States. Toward this end Manuel Macias founded a group
that came to be known as La Liga. Unfortunately, the new body deviated from its central aim by filling its ranks with North Americans motivated less by a desire for independence than by the hope that Cuba would be annexed to the United States. This attitude led to hostility from the Club de Artesanos, especially the tabaqueros. To them, the bourgeois leaders of the exiles were what they called the “aristocracy.”

On February 23, 1870, La Liga sponsored a function at Cooper Union. Hostos was invited to speak and in his talk he came out against the formation of the new group. This increased the enmity of the annexationists even further. The plot thickened when Hostos presented a resolution in the Club de Artesanos urging the Junta Revolucionaria Cubana to lend financial support to the revolutionary struggle in Puerto Rico.

The positions that Hostos took separated him from Basora and even Betances. But his ideas were warmly received among artisans, as was proven by a dinner held in his honor on March 12, 1870. The feast took place at Flor Baerga’s home at 227 East 17th Street. It was attended by Martín Castro, Juan de Dios Núñez, Jesús Rodríguez, Isidro Ferrer, Jesús Picón, Lisandro Rodríguez, Flor Baerga, and of course Hostos. The only one who wasn’t Puerto Rican was the Jew I talked about earlier, Jacobo Silvestre Bresman.

This get-together is recalled both in Hostos’ Diario and Flor Baerga’s Memorias. They discussed the situation among the emigrants and the possibility of carrying the war over to Puerto Rico. They agreed to come together again, and in the course of those later meetings they debated the need to define the immediate tasks of the revolution.

At no point did Hostos tone down his campaign against the annexationists. But finally, on October 3, 1870, disgusted with himself and sick with impatience, he left New York. With Hostos gone and Betances away, and with bad news coming from the battlefields of Cuba, the newly born Puerto Rican community, divided and discouraged, lost interest in the fate of the Antilles.

8. The vicissitudes of the revolution; the war ends in Cuba, but the bright light of José Martí shines forth in New York

The reestablishment of the Republic upon the fall of the Spanish throne breathed new life into the revolutionary aspirations of Puerto Rican and Cuban exiles in New York.* But any hope that Madrid would now recognize the rights of the Antillean peoples was soon dashed, and nothing contributed more to the end of that illusion than the tragedy of the Virginius in October 1873.

This had to do with what was probably the largest and best-armed of the expeditions—150 men, most of them soldiers of fortune with long military experience. The ship was seized by a Spanish cruiser and escorted to Santiago de Cuba. Just about every man on the mission was summarily shot by the Spanish authorities. Even crew members were gunned down. It was such a bloody massacre that the commander of a British warship stationed in Cuban waters heard of it and asked for clemency. When the Spaniards ignored his plea, the British commander pointed the cannons of his vessel toward the city, threatening to blow it up if the mass murders were not stopped. It is said that this act saved the lives of the few remaining prisoners.

That example of inhuman repression occurred under the Republic of Castelar.

On April 22, 1874, Eugenio Maria de Hostos returned to New York. Betances was based in Paris and totally involved in raising...