

Russian women stranded in Cuba since USSR fall

By Anthony Boadle Wed Sep 5, 8:50 AM ET

They came from Russia with love to a tropical socialist utopia when the going was good.

They were young women romantically drawn to Fidel Castro's revolution, a breath of fresh air on a distant Caribbean island for those who were disillusioned with Soviet communism.

But when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, hundreds of Russian women who married Cubans and moved to Cuba were cut off from home and stranded in poverty as the Cuban economy plunged into deep crisis.

For those who had lived through the hardships of World War II in Russia as children, the long blackouts and the lack of food, medicine and fuel for transport were a cruel flashback.

"We were young and Cuba was beautiful when we got here," said film historian Zoia Barash, who arrived in 1963. Cuban leaders were so young compared to the Soviet gerontocracy and abstract art was not seen as incompatible with communism.

Her hopes of finding "true socialism" were dashed, though, as Cuba copied the Soviet model, with sweltering heat added.

"Today our situation is difficult, as it is for the whole country," said Barash, 72, who cannot make ends meet on her 260 peso (\$10) monthly pension after 30 years working for the Cuban film industry.

About 1,300 women from Russia and former Soviet republics Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan still live in Cuba, scraping a living as best they can.

In an old mansion belonging to the Russian Embassy, two women run a store selling anything from vodka and pickled gherkins to imported toothpaste, Pringles and Viagra pills.

The harshest aspect is not being able to travel home. Cuba used to grant them subsidized tickets every five years, paid for in pesos. But Cuba's airline stopped flying to Moscow and tickets must now be paid for in hard cash few can afford.

"My father died in 1994 and I could not go to his funeral," said Zita Kelderari, a Ukrainian gypsy, in tears.

The Flamenco singer fell for a Cuban helicopter pilot in Kiev in 1985 and sailed to Cuba on a Soviet freighter loaded with Yugoslavian butter. When he defected to the United States a few years ago, she was left penniless in Cuba.

Only the women lucky enough to receive money from their relatives get to travel these days. On a Cuban pension alone, it would take 10 years to gather the cost of a flight home.

For most it is too late to go back and start a new life. Many are grandmothers with families to look after.

The blackouts are gone and food supplies have improved since the dark days of Cuba's post-Soviet crisis. But housing remains dilapidated and overcrowded, few have cars and access to the Internet is expensive.

NO BOOKS, NO NEWS

Havana's Russian bookstore closed when "perestroika" reforms took hold in Moscow under Mikhail Gorbachev. Newspaper and magazine subscriptions were stopped, cutting off information from Russia.

Despite the problems, some women have pressed ahead.

"I don't know what nostalgia is. There is no point sitting around crying," said Natalia Balashova, who set about uniting the women in a cultural club for Russian speakers.

Balashova's father was a Bolshevik and she was drawn to Cuba in 1969 as much by love of the Cuban military officer she met in Moscow as by Castro's "bold" transformation of Cuba.

"I knew what to expect. Cuba was building socialism and had its difficulties. We came willingly, out of love," she said. Still, she felt "shipwrecked" when her country disappeared.

Balashova said she tapped her inner reserves and wartime improvisations she learned from her mother to cope with the crisis, such as using crushed egg-shells for cleaning powder.

After a 14-year hiatus, she returned to Moscow last year, invited to attend a world conference of Russians living abroad, and got to meet President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin.

DEPORTED FROM CUBA

Elena Verselova, who was struggling to get ahead after two Cuban divorces, took her activism in a different direction. She became a dissident on Cuba's depressed Isle of Youth.

Verselova was deported by the Cuban government on July 26, according to her daughter Diana Aguilar, who arrived from Russia when she was a nine-month baby in her mother's arms.

Verselova was harassed and threatened by Cuban police, and eventually arrested, her daughter said. The family had to sell hard-won electrical appliances to pay for her ticket to Moscow, where she arrived with \$170 in her pocket to start a new life.

"They didn't let us say good-bye to her," said Aguilar, 22, a University of Havana student. She said the Russian consulate in Cuba refused to help her mother even locate family members in Vladimir, 115 miles east of Moscow.

"I hope to leave Cuba to join my mother. I want to return to my roots in Europe," said the blond student.

A Cuban documentary "Todas iban a ser reinas" (They were all going to be queens) made last year captured the isolation of women from seven former Soviet republics living in Cuba.

"It was a migration of love, a part of our shattered utopia," said director Gustavo Cruz. "They worked in our country for many years. It would be ungrateful to forget them."

Women from other former Soviet bloc countries were also stranded in Cuba and forgotten by post-communist governments.

Stasia Strach, 65, is one of 49 native Poles living in Cuba -- only three of whom are men. The view from her small apartment overlooking Havana's Malecon, or sea-wall, is spectacular. But the elevator packed up years ago and the 130 steps are a daily effort. Going home is out of the question.

"What would I do in Poland, beg at the door of a church?" she said. "I have no pension and nowhere to go."