

MEMORIES OF PUERTO RICO AND NEW YORK

Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States not only had to leave their homes, families and friends behind. They said farewell to a way of life; one based on a strong sense of community, in which even the poorest people shared the little they had.

Minerva Torres Ríos, 87 years old, came to the United States from Puerto Rico in 1929. For many years she lived in New York City's East Harlem section, one of the oldest Puerto Rican settlements in New York. The people of East Harlem call it simply *El Barrio*, or "the neighborhood."

Ms. Ríos was a member of a popular education and literacy program in El Barrio, organized with the help of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños. She reflects in this essay on her childhood in Puerto Rico and subsequent experiences as a laundry worker in New York City.

To remember is to live. And how well I remember my childhood in the town of Guayanilla, where I was born June 5, 1905. Guayanilla is in the south of Puerto Rico. It's near Ponce, the second largest city in the country. Other towns nearby are Yauco, famous for its *caracolillo* coffee, and Peñuelas, known for its navel oranges and finger bananas. Peñuelas also has the famous Banana Tree Mountain, one of the five highest mountains in Puerto Rico.

One of my most pleasant memories is of my baptism at age seven. I felt so happy, especially when my godparents pinned a five-peso note to my dress. I knew it was money but I had no idea of its value. At that tender age, just like other Puerto Rican children at the time, I thought two or three cents was more than one dollar and that five *centavos* was a lot!

Life there was poor, but it was a happy life. You didn't have the violence you have today. We young girls used to go with the boys down to the river and go swimming together with our old clothes on.

The best times of my childhood were the holidays—the patron saints' days, Three Kings' Day and Carnival. For the patron saints' days we got to celebrate for nine days, winding up with a big party in the town square. We'd have games of chance, children's games and most of all, music. Three Kings' Day, January 6, was a holiday for children, something like the tradition of Santa Claus here in the United States. On that day we would go all around the neighborhood, showing off the presents that the Three Kings had left under our beds. The night before, we would have put a bit of grass under the bed for the kings' camels, who we knew would be tired and would eat the grass hungrily. That's what all Puerto Rican children believed, and I continued to believe in the Three Kings until I was twelve.

Carnival was another time of tremendous enjoyment, especially for children. I remember how we poor people celebrated carnival with water. We'd form groups and throw buckets of water on each other, and we'd put on masks and costumes and dance. We'd parade through the town chanting the famous carnival chant: *Vejigante a la bolla, pan y cebolla!*

In 1914 the First World War broke out. I was nine. That's when my suffering began, because my father had to go to war. How I cried to see my father leave me, my brothers and two sisters. Thank goodness, though, my father did not have to serve much time in the military since he was a school teacher and was soon called back to teach.

In 1918, when I was thirteen, I was in school one morning when the whole building began to shake. I had never felt anything like it, and ran screaming for home. I couldn't even stay standing up, I didn't know what to do; everyone was crying, "My God, it's an earthquake!"

The island was left in ruins by that quake. Every town suffered severe damage. There were deaths, and many people were left homeless: my humble house was damaged. They had to use the schools as temporary hospitals. That was the historic earthquake that destroyed much of Puerto Rico.

In school, we used a textbook called *Rudimentos de América*,

because in those days everything in Puerto Rico used to come from here, from the United States. The governor of the island was American, and the laws were made here.

I know the story of Abraham Lincoln, that they taught me in Puerto Rico; the story of George Washington; Benjamin Franklin with a kite . . . They taught some things about Puerto Rico, but there was no textbook on Puerto Rican history. They just taught it orally. They didn't teach us anything about the people of South America. I knew nothing about all that.

I graduated from the eighth grade, which is when you get your first diploma in Puerto Rico. Those who can, go on to study for another four years. But I couldn't continue in school, because there was no high school in my town and I would have had to go to another town and pay. My father and mother had separated by then, and I couldn't afford it.

My mother had to go work in people's houses as a maid, and I worked in a shop embroidering blouses and dresses. The pay was very little. In Puerto Rico at that time poverty was widespread, it was very hard to survive. I decided to come to New York to work in order to help out my mother and siblings. In 1929 I arrived in New York, where the rest of my story takes place.

I left Puerto Rico on a ship called the *Coamo*. There was at that time no other form of transportation between Puerto Rico and the United States. The crossing lasted five days. I spent most of the time up on the deck, in the fresh air to keep from getting seasick. It was quite a pleasant trip and the boat reminded me of a big hotel.

When we reached New York harbor, it was winter and the pier was hidden in fog. We had to wait for two more days outside the port for the weather to clear. Finally the ship sailed into the harbor, and we crossed in front of the Statue of Liberty and you can imagine what an impression that made on me. As the ship passed slowly in front of the statue, I wondered to myself why it was there in the water instead of in a park, where everyone could admire it.

The Statue of Liberty was the first marvel I experienced in the City of Skyscrapers. When we disembarked on the Brooklyn pier it was very cold, and I saw another wonder for the first time: snow. I knew what it was, of course, from studying the history of the United States, but I had never seen it personally and to see the ground all covered in white astonished me.

I moved in with my cousin. His wife soon got me a job in a factory where I worked for about six months. In 1930, a friend of mine got me a job working with her in a laundry on East 94th Street. I started out ironing collars and cuffs in the men's shirt department, using huge machines. We worked Monday through Saturday, from 8 a.m. to 7 at night. My salary was \$12 per week. The workers in the laundries weren't unionized and so the bosses could do whatever they liked.

On Mondays and Tuesdays we worked until 8 p.m. On holidays we had to work half-days. The summer was when I really suffered, between the work and the heat. When the temperature outside was 90 degrees, it was more than 100 inside the laundry. I sweated miserably between those two ironing machines but what could I do? Nothing but

keep on working in order to keep my job. The Depression was gripping the country and there were no jobs; anyone lucky enough to have one wanted to keep it, no matter how small the salary.

Working in a laundry has always been relatively secure employment, although it's one of the hardest jobs. In the days before the struggle to unionize the laundries, the U.S. president passed the National Recovery Act, prohibiting employers from paying less than \$14 per week. I'll always remember that great president, Roosevelt.

We began struggling for a union. It took tremendous effort before the bosses would agree to it. They threatened to take away our jobs, but we workers kept on fighting until we won.

We became unionized in 1936 and things began to go better. But

it still wasn't easy because the employers didn't want to give us paid vacations. But after a number of years everything improved. We no longer had to work on holidays or Saturdays, and if we did work those days, we received double pay.

I continued working hard from 1930 until 1970, when I retired. By that time, I earned more than \$200 a week with a month of paid vacation. □

Abridged from: Minerva Torres Ríos, "Remembranzas," in *Nuestras Vidas: Recordando, Luchando y Transformando*, produced by the El Barrio Popular Education Program, June 1987. Also includes material from an interview with Minerva Torres Ríos by Rina Benmayor of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College. Translated by C. Sunshine.