Bernardo Benes, Cuban Exile Who Negotiated With Castro, Dies at 84

Bernardo Benes met with the Cuban leader Fidel Castro in Havana just before the release of a group of political prisoners and their families in 1978. Mr. Benes was harshly criticized by Cuban exiles for negotiating with Mr. Castro for the release. UPI

By Richard Sandomir

Jan. 23, 2019

Bernardo Benes, a Cuban exile who helped persuade Fidel Castro to free 3,600 political prisoners in the 1970s but became an outcast in Miami's anti-Castro community for negotiating with him, died on Jan. 14 in Miami. He was 84.

His son Edgar confirmed the death but did not give a cause.

Mr. Benes was a prominent businessman and activist in Miami when he first met with Mr. Castro in early 1978. He had risen to a major job at a savings and loan and later co-founded a bank in the Little Havana section of the city. He had helped raised money to build a monument to the soldiers who died in the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and worked on various causes to help Cuban refugees.

"Until 1977, 1978, I was The Cuban in Miami," Mr. Benes told the writer Joan Didion in an interview for her book "Miami" (1987). "There was nothing important happening in Miami that I wasn't involved with. I was the guerrilla in the establishment."

His business and civic activities shifted into a higher gear in 1977 when two high-level Cuban government officials approached him in Panama while he was on vacation with his family. Cuba at the time was apparently interested in improving relations with the United States and believed Mr. Benes, who been the Florida director of Hispanic affairs during Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign, might be helpful.

With the approval of the Carter administration, Mr. Benes and a group of exiles began months of secret talks with Mr. Castro and his aides. In face-to-face conversations in Havana, Mr. Benes recalled in interviews, he rebuked Mr. Castro for confiscating his father's underwear manufacturing business in Havana after he took power, challenged him to establish better ties with the United States, and chastised him for his brutal treatment of political prisoners.

In an interview with The Miami Herald in 1994, Mr. Benes recalled that he told Mr. Castro he could not forgive him for "the way you lined people up against a wall and shot them," and that Mr. Castro responded by saying: "I was very sorry to have to do that, but we had to set examples. It is the only way to consolidate strength in a revolution."

Mr. Benes and the negotiating team believed they had persuaded Mr. Castro to make concessions that would please their fellow exiles in Miami. Mr. Castro

agreed not only to release the 3,600 prisoners but also to let Cuban exiles return to visit their families.

Mr. Benes in 2006. His son said that he never recovered from being ostracized.
Eliza Gutierrez/Palm Beach Post/ZUMA Press, via Alamy

"If I know that a Cuban in Miami was able to put a flower on the tomb of his mother" in Cuba, "that is enough," Mr. Benes said in 2001 when he discussed a book about his diplomacy published that year, "Secret Missions to Cuba," by Robert Levine, in an appearance at the Miami Book Fair International.

But he swiftly faced condemnation for his actions, which stunned him. When he escorted 46 prisoners from Cuba to Miami in late October 1978, exiles in Miami castigated him for starting a dialogue with the reviled Mr. Castro and pursuing warmer relations with Cuba. A photograph of him smoking a cigar with the dictator inflamed the opposition.

And that censure proved unrelenting: His main business, the Continental National Bank of Miami, was picketed. He was assailed on the radio and on the street, labeled a Communist, a Castro agent and a fool.

He received protection from bodyguards and the local police. He wore a bulletproof vest for a few years.

The vilification did not dampen his enthusiasm — at least not for a while. After the prisoner release, Mr. Benes told The New York Times in an interview, "I forgive those Cubans who have started an unbelievable defamation campaign against me." He added: "You might say I was a Lonely Ranger or a Don Quixote. I think this is the biggest contribution to human rights and morality in a long time."

He continued to try to improve relations between the United States and Cuba after Ronald Reagan became president. But in 1983, his bank building in the Little Havana section of Miami was bombed, injuring two police officers. Omega 7, a militant anti-Castro group, claimed responsibility.

In response, he shrank from public view and sold his share of the bank to his partner and childhood friend, Carlos Dascal, who had been part of the negotiations with the Cubans.

Yet even after the bombing, he said he continued to travel to Cuba to talk to Mr. Castro. In May 1985, he believed he had reached a major immigration agreement — one that would have lifted the United States embargo of Cuba, Mr. Levine reported — but it abruptly collapsed when the Reagan administration started broadcasting anti-Castro messages through Radio Marti.

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Bernardo Benes Baikovitz was born on Dec. 27, 1934, in Matanzas, Cuba, and raised there and later in Havana. His father, Boris, was born in Belarus, immigrated to Cuba in 1923 and built textile factories in Havana. His mother, Dora (Baikovitz) Benes, an immigrant from Lithuania, was a homemaker. The Beneses were one of about 15 Jewish families in Matanzas.

At the University of Havana, where he earned law and accounting degrees, Mr. Benes joined a student group trying to topple Fulgencio Batista, the Cuban dictator. After graduation — and with Mr. Castro in control — Mr. Benes worked as a lawyer (his clients included the Havana Sugar Kings baseball team and, reportedly, the Cuban government) but left the country on a flight to Miami in November 1960, with $215 sewn into the shoulder pad of a jacket.

He was quickly hired by the Washington Federal Savings and Loan Association in Miami Beach as an auditor. Within a year he was promoted to vice president.

Mr. Benes remained at Washington Federal until the mid-1970s when he and Mr. Dascal started Continental National.

More than a decade earlier, Mr. Benes had been one of the founders of Temple Beth Shmuel, also known as the Cuban Hebrew Congregation of Miami. One of the other fruits of his diplomacy in Cuba was receiving approval from Mr. Castro to bring back three worn Torahs from a synagogue in Havana. He restored them and donated one to Temple Beth Shmuel and another to a synagogue in Miami Beach. He kept the third at home; his grandson Brett read from it during his bar mitzvah.

In addition to his son Edgar, Mr. Benes is survived by his wife, Raquel (Gurinsky) Benes; his daughter, Lishka Wittels; another son, Joel; eight grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; and a sister, Ana Benes Anders.

Edgar Benes said that his father never recovered from being ostracized. He worked at other banks after selling his shares in Continental National and lamented that being exiled from his adopted community limited the philanthropic work he could do.

“He came out of it thinking he was not a hero,” Edgar Benes said in a telephone interview. “His bank opened up avenues for many people in Little Havana who otherwise wouldn’t have gotten loans. Continental was the bank of Cubans, and the Cubans turned on him.”