

Voluntary Work

By Carlos E. Pelay

She tells me the story of how, every year, the staff of the Biblioteca Nacional departed for the tobacco fields – the *vegas* - west of Havana for a period of voluntary work.

My aunt and her fellow librarians traded their book stacks for rows and hectares of tall tobacco – with the most valuable plants sheltered from the harsh Cuban sun under canopies of gauzy tulle.

They bunked close together in vacant and primitive tobacco curing barns, hastily outfitted with cots and improvised showers. Much like going to summer camp – a child of exile - I can only imagine.

At night she saw: solitary palms, a full moon, one bright star in the clearest night sky.

In the mornings after the dew was gone and the tobacco leaves were dry, the librarians walked or were transported to the fields. As directed by the *campesino* in charge, on some days they pulled the *corona* (the highest leaves) of the tobacco plants. On other days the leaves from the middle, and on the hardest days knelt in the soil for hours to pinch off the lowest leaves.

On other trips to the *vegas*, the librarians worked in one of the large drying barns, un-stacking the still-green leaves and, four at a time, stitching the stems together with long needles and coarse string.

And so, bound together like folios, the green tobacco was draped and hung, two broad leaves each to a side, over the spine of a long pole which the men raised high into the rafters, to season and dry.

Over the years, my aunt saw other parts of the process from seed to cigar. At a later stage, the cured leaves, having been transported in the concave sheaths of the Royal Palm would, half-curved now, need to be *planchado* – flattened and smoothed by the women working at long tables, carefully pressing the palms of their hands against the brown, veiny leaves.

My aunt did voluntary work for the cigar rollers too. As a librarian, it seemed natural to her that she was called upon to read while they rolled and also smoked cigars. Perched on a wooden dais above the cigar rollers, the lector was a cherished tradition in the cigar factories of Cuba. Instead of clapping their approval, the rollers tapped their cutting knife – the *chaveta* – against their wood cutting boards.

What did you read to them, I want to know? *Oh, sometimes we chose poetry or something by Jose Marti. But mostly they preferred cheap stories, novels – some quite piquant!* – she says in her bookish Spanish. *These made us blush; some of us were very young!*

At the memory, she pulls her head back and raises both hands to cover her mouth and slanted teeth and laughs loudly for a long time.