## Newly found letters offer glimpse into life of U.S. dancer married to Cuban spy chief

BY NORA GÁMEZ TORRES ngameztorres@elnuevoherald.com

She was a Connecticutborn American ballerina and the wife of the notorious chief of Cuba's intelligence and subversive operations — Manuel Piñeiro Losada, better known as Barbarroja, or "Red Beard."

And now a trove of Lorna Burdsall's recently discovered letters are on sale, offering a rare glimpse into the life of Cuba's ruling elites in the early days of the Castro revolution.

Piñeiro directed Cuba's intelligence, security and subversion apparatus for

nearly three decades, first from the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) and later from the Americas Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. His death, in a car accident in 1998, aroused suspicions at the time because he had just revealed that he was writing his memoirs.

A trusted aide to the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro since their days in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Piñeiro was best known as the architect of Castro's efforts to export his revolu- and earned the rank of tion by training and arming comandante when they guerrilla groups from vir-seized power on Jan. 1, tually every Latin American 1959.

country.

But in 1955, he was a student at Columbia University in New York who married Burdsall, a ballet dancer who was studying at the prestigious Juilliard School and was a member of the Communist Party of the United States of Amer-

Piñeiro was the son of a Bacardí rum representative in the Cuban province of Matanzas, so Burdsall probably had little idea of what would happen after he joined Castro's guerrillas

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Lorna Burdsall's letter described the events of May 1, 1965, in a letter sent to her mother in the United States.

A few days later, Burdsall, who was in the United States at the time, received booked to return via the two telegrams from Piñeiro telling her to return to Cuba. A third telegram sent

from Miami and signed "Fifo" told her that she was Key West-Havana ferry on

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Miami Herald, 12 Mar. 2017, p. 26. NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current, https://infoweb-newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\_id=infowab.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.access.library.miami.edu/apps/newsbank.com.acce 18AD4F9B85DBCDB4%25402457825-18AD4DDEF8AABB52%254025-18AD4DDEF8AABB52%2540. Accessed 20 June 2023



Lorna Burdsall, 70, poses with an old photo of herself with Cuban leader Fidel Castro at her home in Havana in this October 2001 photo.

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Jan. 6. One of Castro's nicknames was "Fifo" although it is not known if the telegram was sent on his behalf or was from someone else with the same nickname. What is known is that Castro was in Cuba at the time.

"You will receive money this day if you want to return," said the telegram, which included a contact address and telephone in Miami. The address on the telegram is the same as a three-story apartment building in Little Havana. All the telegrams were sent to Burdsall at the home of her sister, Nedda, known as Ned, in Lexington, Kentucky. Documents from Nedda

describe the hurried preparations and emotions surrounding Burdsall's return to Cuba, and ask about the dress she wore to the wedding of Castro's brother, Raul, to Vilma Espin. Photos of the wedding appeared in Time magazine.

Two years later, Burdsall's mother wrote to the State Department to report a rare glimpse into the that she did not know her daughter's whereabouts and asked that the U.S.

embassy in Havana make inquiries. The embassy replied that it had no information on Burdsall or her son Manuel Khalil Piñeiro, born in 1957. Both had been registered at the embassy as U.S. citizens.

"Her application states that she is married to Major Manuel Piñeiro and her address is the residence of Major Raúl Castro, Camp Liberty, Habana. Raúl Castro is the Chief of the Cuban Armed Forces. Major Piñeiro is a high official in the intelligence service of the Cuban Armed Forces. For the above reasons, Mrs. Piñeiro has had little contact with the Embassy and her present whereabouts are unknown," the embassy replied.

The telegrams and Burdsall's letters are part of a collection of 20 documents on sale by antiquarian Joy Shivar. Two boxes of Burdsail's correspondence were obtained by the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection after her death in 2010.

"This collection provides chaotic period of the Cuban Revolution through the eyes of an American wom-

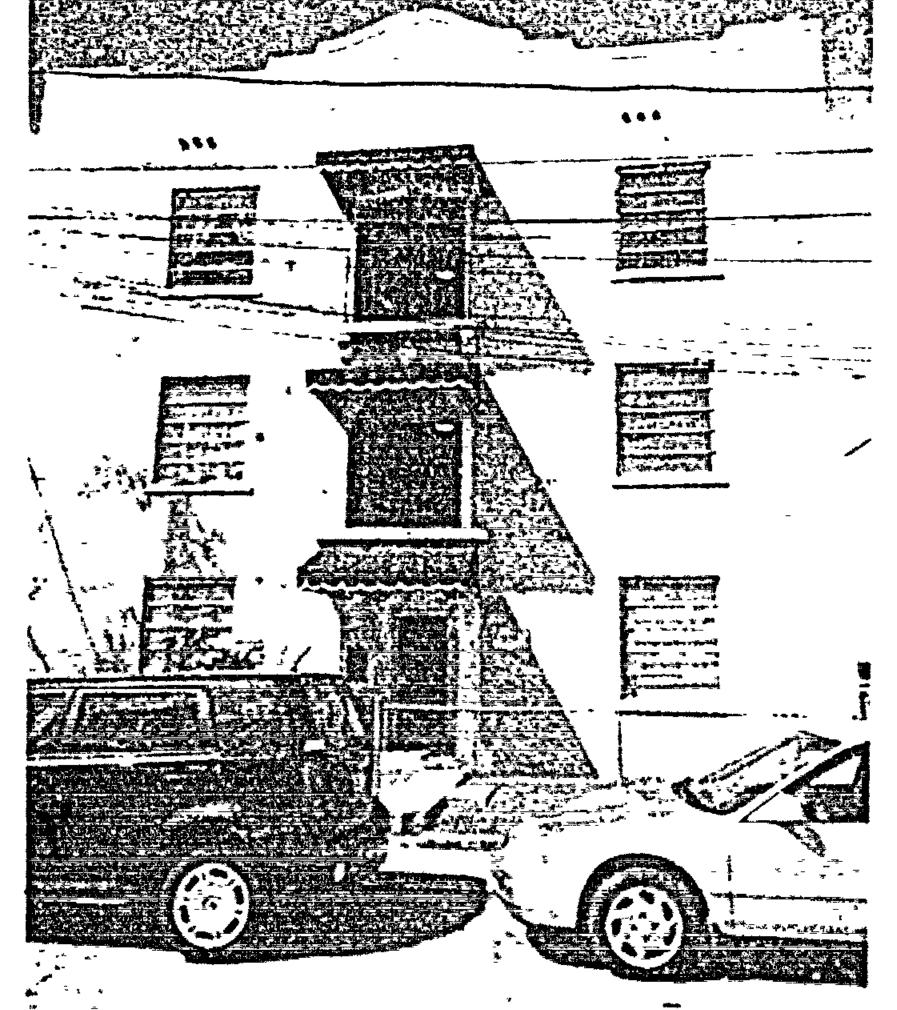


Manuel Piñeiro Losada led a key part of the Cuban intelligence and state security apparatus.

an who was deeply involved and dedicated to the cause," said Shivar. "Ostracized by her father and possibly other family members (as exemplified by her personal letters), her critical commitment to Cuba and her husband, Manolo, often placed her in dangerous situations."

Shivar discovered the documents in the hands of another collector who had bought them at an auction held by the Burdsall family in Lexington. Family members who were contacted showed no interest in buying back the documents, she said.

The documents offer few details about the secret



A telegram addressed to Lorna Burdsall and signed by 'Fifo' was sent to this Little Havana building in January 1959.

work of Piñeiro in Latin America, but they do provide examples of the privileged life the ballerina and her husband led as members of Cuba's ruling elite.

A rally on July 26, 1964, in Santiago de Cuba the attack on the Moncada Barracks, considered the

birth of the Castro revolution — was preceded by a swim in a pool and later a lunch of roast pork. One Piñeiro birthday was celebrated in Havana's famous Tropicana cabaret. In the 1970s, years marked by marking the anniversary of shortages and austerity, Burdsall wrote about her husband's preference for a

War Horact staff

fancy sweet made with cottage cheese.

The documents also make occasional mention of Fidel Castro, his government, and policies and Cubans in general.

"Yesterday was the big day, 4 and a half hourparade, then Fidel for 2 and a half hours — Cubans have more stamina than most people it seems. Cuban coffee is very stimulating," she wrote about the May 1 celebrations in 1965. "This year's May 1st was a very great success — everybody was happy that we cut more cane (59,000 tons more) than the 5,100,000 quota."

The letters between Burdsall and her family showed that members of the revolutionary elite were not greatly affected by the end of direct mail services between Cuba and the United States in 1963. It's not clear from the stamps on the envelopes whether the letters went through third countries, but they reached their destination in two to three weeks.

Burdsall and her U.S. relatives also managed to exchange food shipments and gifts, including some cigars "of the same kind that Fidel smokes." In one letter to her mother, the ballerina reported that she was gathering goods for a shipment, some bought by her and others "gifts from Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Korea, etc."

Dance filled many of her letters, as she helped to found the National School of Dance and created the **Contemporary Dance** group, as well as the experimental Asi Somos group — "That's How We Are." She became an adviser on modern dance to the Ministry of Culture in 1977.

Burdsall appears to have been no fan of Cuba's prima ballerina Alicia Alonso, who gave the National Ballet of Cuba great prestige abroad but blocked efforts to modernize its style and repertoire.

"Now that she's not dancing, she's turned into a choreographer," Burdsall wrote in 1974. "The ballet will have its big night on Wednesday with a new version of 'The Sleeping Beauty' — poor Petipa," she added, referring to the classic's original choreographer, Marius Petipa.

Piñeiro ultimately divorced Burdsall and married Marta Harnecker, a Marxist Chilean sociologist. Burdsall remained in Cuba, although she traveled to the United States obcasionally. A granddaughter, Gabriela Burdsall, lives in Havana and is a ballerina in the same dance company founded by Burdsall.

Follow Nora Gámez Torres on Twitter: @ngameztorres