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**Ana M. Varela-Lago:** This is an interview with Mr. Raul Lavin. Mr. Lavin, I would like to start by talking a little bit about your family. How did your family first come to Tampa?

**Raul Lavin:** They first came to Tampa from Cuba. I would say it was in the early part of the 1900s, or the last part of the 1800s.

**AV:** Where did they come from? Do you know? Were they from Cuba, or from Spain before that—?

**RL:** My grandfather came with mother later on, and he had come from Spain. From Villaviciosa, which is the northern part of Spain.

**AV:** So they came from Cuba, then to Tampa. What did they do?

**RL:** My father was already in Tampa. He had come in the early part. I think he came in the late, late part of the 1800s. Because I remember that Martí, José Martí, had had coffees, many times, with my uncle in Key West when there was a big cigar factory known as Gato. And one of her prides and joy was to say that she still had the cup Martí had drunk coffee from. That was Yayo's aunt, Inés Paula. And at that time my father was down here already. In Key West, he was here, he went to Key West first and then moved to Tampa.

**AV:** Where in Tampa? Ybor, West Tampa?

**RL:** No, he came to Ybor City, directly to Ybor City.

AV: And what did he do here in Ybor City?

RL: And then we went back to Cuba—he left his future wife in Cuba. Then he went back to Cuba, got married, and they came over. And then, according to my mother's history and sisters', our house was the, what do you call, the boarding house for the rest of the family to come to and start off from our house. And about two brothers—three brothers—three brothers and two sisters came over.

AV: What did your family do in Tampa? Were they in the cigar industry?

RL: They were in the cigar industry; they were either *tabaqueros*, or in some other shape or form, they were in the cigar industry.

AV: What can you tell me—?

RL: I'll say that later on in years, my mother became a stripper—you know what a stripper is?

AV: Right. Yes, outside of Ybor City that's quite shocking.

RL: She went to the factory, after we were grown up a little, I guess. And she went to strip the stems off the [tobacco] leaves to make them into two leaves. So, when I say my mother was a stripper—(laughs)

AV: What do you remember of growing up in Ybor? Your childhood memories.

RL: I have some beautiful memories of a beautiful childhood and neighborhood, where everyone grew up to be like members of your own family. For instance, this picture that you have here, Saturnino and Maria and Aurora González. He was one of my father's personal friends for many years, when they were young. And his daughters and my sisters and her brothers are just like family. Her grandchildren—Maria's grandchildren—call me *tio* [uncle] today.

AV: It was a very close-knit community?

RL: Very close yeah, very close. And she was my nephew's godmother, Maria. Andres Morales, yes.

AV: Where did you go to school?

RL: In Tampa. I went to school at V[Vicente] M[Martínez] Ybor; what we used to call "el free school."

AV: El free school?

RL: Because, I think they got the idea because where they came from, I think, they either

had public schools or they had private schools. And the idea of a free school was very attractive. So they learned the word, "free," ["fri" pronounced with a long "e" like the Spanish "i"] and it wasn't "free," it was "fri." "Fri" school. So I went there, and then I went to Washington, George Washington. By that time, Depression has set in real hard.

AV: Tell me about that.

RL: In the early '30s. I wanted to keep on going, but my father got sick. So I had to quit school and try to help out with the rest of the family there. Jobs were hard to get. And people from Tampa would go up to New York or Chicago, Philadelphia. And the people from Georgia, the small towns, would come to Tampa, because Tampa was big. So it was an exchange of people all over the country. There's a beautiful moving picture called "The Grapes of Wrath," and it shows a very, very much duplication of what did happen in those '30s. Where people were promised jobs in some part of the state, or some part of the country, two or three states apart. And they just went up there thinking that it was all gonna be glory—nice, and honey, and sugar plums.

But it turned out to be that they were just almost slave employment. And that's the history of our country. But we got over that, thank God.

AV: So a lot of people left Tampa for New York?

RL: A lot of people left here, oh, yes. They left here, and—fortunately I was one of those that didn't have to leave. I had a job; I found a job, and I kept getting better and better at what I was doing and I kept growing with the company.

AV: How about the clubs? Did your family belong to any of the mutual aid societies? The Centro Asturiano, the Centro Español?

RL: I did. I belonged since, as a matter of fact, before I was born. Before I was born, I was made a member of the Cuban Club, Círculo Cubano. And the reason for it was, they had some kind of a gimmick whereby if a child, a forthcoming child, was a healthy child, he would be inscribed one month ahead of schedule. And they must have had a gimmick where you didn't have to pay dues or something for a week or two weeks or whatever it was. That way they would have another member. The Centro might have had something like that too, I'm not positive. But I know that the Cuban Club did. And I was born in April, but I was registered as a member in March.

AV: That's interesting.

RL: And I'm still a paying member.

AV: We were talking a little bit about the war before—the Spanish Civil War. What comes to mind when you think about that, the war in Spain? What is one of the first things that you remember?

RL: Well, I believe that the war in Spain really united and cemented all of the Latins in Tampa, and along with many Anglos too. But the Latin people really felt the pain, more than the Anglos did; became one community. And I remember many, many events that took place: dances, picnics, sales of churros everywhere and whatever it was. I remember the Cuban Club having one big dance where all the funds were given to the *comite de*, I can't remember what it was called, *comité de*—

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AV: Popular—?

RL: *Comite del Frente Popular*. That comes out back many years, sixty-one years ago. Yeah. All the funds would go to the *Comite del Frente Popular*. And everybody, don't matter whether you were Italian or Cuban or Spanish or what, everybody—the majority of the people—were in favor and contributed, did everything they could.

AV: Why do you think that was the case, that people in Tampa were so supportive of the Republic?

RL: What makes me think that the people in Tampa were for the Republic?

AV: Yes. Why do you think they were so supportive of the Republic?

RL: Well, for one thing, I sincerely believe that the people in Tampa realized, or they were informed, that all of the parties in Spain did get together to form one party and get elected. And I think particularly to do away with the monarchy, or something like that. They won't have to bring back monarchy to the place. I can't remember whether the monarchy was still in existence at the time of the—

AV: When the war started?

RL: —that the war started.

AV: No, no.

RL: It had already stopped then?

AV: Yes, in '31.

RL: The democratic government had taken over?

AV: Um-hm.

RL: That's something that I turn in my mind and I can't barely remember it much better. But however, I'm sure that the people in Tampa didn't want to see the monarchy returned to, become the parasite that it was. So when they heard about all the *partidos*, or parties, Republican parties or whatever. They were all together, and they made the general election, and they won, they thought that they deserved to be in power. Until the famous

Francisco, *Generalísimo* Franco decided it wasn't that way. And unfortunately it was supported by the biggest fascist in the world, which was Mussolini, and what's the other guy's name? Hitler. We later on, had we stopped them there, when they started—using Spain as a testing ground—we would have never had to go the second time to Europe. To whip them, and lose thousands and thousands of American lives and other lives too.

AV: Your family was very involved in supporting the Spanish Republic. I believe two of your relatives actually volunteered to fight in Spain? Could you tell me more about that?

RL: I had two cousins that went to Spain. They had moved up north; they had moved up to New York or Philadelphia—I think it was New York. And, like many people in the Latin communities of big cities, were all in favor of the Republic. They also found themselves in favor of the Republic. But I would say that we had war adventure soul in themselves so, or else they just loved the idea so blindly that they just decided to volunteer for the Lincoln Brigade, and became part of the Lincoln Brigade. And did a lot of fighting there, until one of them was killed, which was Aurelio. And then his brother, whose nickname is Yayo, returned after the war to Tampa. I think he made a trip during the war to Tampa.

AV: And then returned?

RL: And then returned. I'm pretty sure of that.

AV: Came back to Tampa, and then went back to Cuba, eventually?

RL: And then went back to Spain. He was, like I said the other day, he was a Don Quixote. Wherever there was a wrong, he wanted to right it, I think.

AV: Were you surprised when you learned that your cousins had decided to go to Spain? How did the family react to the news?

RL: From Yayo it didn't surprise me any at all. No. From Yayo—

AV: How old was Yayo at that time?

RL: Yayo must have been 20 or 21 when he went. But his older brother is the one that surprised us all, because he had a family and he was married.

AV: Aurelio?

RL: Aurelio. And to us and everyone it was just a big surprise. I just couldn't believe what conceived his thinking. Well—the story is, he got killed there, and it justified our worries. Yayo was single. So if he did die, it was a big loss, but I mean, not the whole family suffering. So, they had to put up with that.

AV: Was the family pretty much following what they were doing in Spain? How was the

communication?

RL: Yes. They kept communication as much as possible, whatever was available. I don't believe it was easy to communicate at the time.

AV: So, had they been politically involved during the '30s in any way, before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War?

RL: Really, not to my knowledge had they been. Everyone, every cigar maker in Tampa was involved in what we call *huelgas*, which is strikes. And in the cigar factories they had a lot of strikes. And one strike lasted ten months. And I think it was called *la huelga de la resistencia*, I think it was called. The resistance strike, or the strike of resistance. They were no different than any other family, like so many families. My father wouldn't cross a picket line either. His father won't, and the majority of the people didn't cross the picket line. But there were some who did.

AV: And they were both cigar workers? Eladio and Aurelio?

RL: Eladio no. Eladio had never worked in a cigar factory.

AV: So what did he do?

RL: But his brother, Aurelio, I remember very well before he left for New York, he used to work on a laundry route. Picking up clothing for—what do you call, tablecloths and clothing for anything. And had it dry cleaned, or washed, whatever it is, and delivered it at home. And the laundry was named the Latin American.

AV: The Latin American Laundry.

RL: On Michigan Avenue, which is now known as Columbus Drive.

AV: That was Aurelio?

RL: That was Aurelio.

AV: And Yayo? What did he do? Do you remember?

RL: I'm trying to remember what Yayo did. I don't remember what Yayo did here. At that time, like I say, jobs were scarce, I guess, when they went up north. And Yayo left with his family. The whole family went up to New York. And one brother, the oldest one of the brothers, went to Philadelphia. He just passed away about two years ago. His name was Jose Manuel Paula Junior.

AV: Do you remember any of the other volunteers that were from Tampa? Names like Felipe Rojas—

RL: Really they can't come to my mind. I know there were a lot of volunteers from Tampa, but the only ones I can remember are probably the ones that were close to me.

AV: You mentioned before all the events that took place during the war. Do you remember for instance any of the speakers who would come from Republican Spain to speak at these events?

RL: Yeah. I remember one particular one. His name was Rivas? Rivero? Rivas. Francisco Rivas, I think it was.

AV: Francisco Rivas?

RL: I think he was the ambassador.

AV: Oh, de los Ríos? Fernando de los Ríos.

RL: De los Ríos, yeah.

AV: Fernando de los Ríos, I see.

RL: I remember a statement that he made that always stayed in my mind—why did he make it or what, because I didn't see the other end to it. But he made a statement that said something I guess, "*Ni Puerto Rico es tan rico; ni en Santo Domingo hay tal santo; ni en Veracruz hay tal cruz; ni la Habana vale tanto.*"

AV: Meaning?

RL: I don't know, he might have been thinking about the colonies that Spain lost, or—I still, to this day don't understand the psychology behind that. But I never forgot that, "*Ni en Santo Domingo hay tal santo; ni en Veracruz hay tal Cruz; ni Puerto Rico es tan rico, ni la Habana vale tanto.*"

AV: So when was that speech—?

RL: Have you heard that before?

AV: No, never. When was that speech delivered? Was that one of the events at the Centro?

RL: It might have been at the Centro Asturiano, or it might have been at the Labor Temple. I can't remember where it was. But those were strong words, and somehow or another they just made an impression on my mind.

AV: Do you remember any other speakers coming to Tampa and talking to the people?

RL: No. Not exactly. I remember Leopoldo González "Chicharito," who had composed

many, many beautiful songs, and my brother was the one who had interpreted them, here in Tampa. He interpreted all of his songs before he went up north. "Chicharito" went up north, too, during the depression. Leopoldo González. I think he was a reader—the other night they said that he was a cigar maker. He might have been a cigar maker, but I think he was a reader, *lector*. I'm not positive.

AV: And he was the author of [the song] "*¡No Pasarán!*"?

RL: I was looking forward to hear who had composed that story, or that song, because I knew it had to have been Leopoldo González. And when Willie Garcia said that, I said "Well, that's coming up, that's nice," I was glad to hear it.

AV: So your brother used to sing Leopoldo González's songs?

RL: My brother used to sing, yes. He used to sing. All the theaters, like Centro Asturiano, had a *Sección Infantil*, Círculo Cubano had one too. I don't know that the Italian Club had one. The Italian Club had a beautiful theater too. And I'm sure they must have had something going on in there. But I guess we were lazy, we didn't try to learn Italian. While some of the Italians were very, very active in the Cuban Club and Centro Asturiano. For instance, Tony Pizzo's father, who you probably heard of, was president of the theatrical committee. And they had this *Sección Infantil* and my brother was the leading tenor in the group. He had a beautiful voice, but he never followed up on it. Those that followed up on it, it's interesting enough, his name is Paul Díaz, better known, here in Tampa he's known as Pablo Galindo. And he was a big star in Cuba. Then he came to Miami and taught at the University of Miami.

Another person who became a very popular star in Cuba, or South America, was Velia Martínez. She became one of the leading characters in a play that was called "Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?" I don't know if you ever heard of that.

AV: No.

RL: "Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?" was a Cuban family that had moved from Cuba to Miami—

AV: Oh, yes, yes—

RL: —and she was the old lady in the group. And she always had some barbs she threw at somebody. And Velia came from that group, too. There were a lot of others. Centro Asturiano had Amelia Morán. And, I forgot her husband's name—Jose Morán? I should, he used to live, his mother lived across the street from me. Amelia was Al Lopez's sister. The ball player?

AV: I see, yes.

RL: Yes. *¿Cómo se llamaba el esposo de Amelia?* I know his name but I can't remember it.

AV: Antonio Morán?

RL: *No recuerdo*. I can't remember, I can't remember. I know Julie, and I know his daughters and so forth.

AV: How about the Catholic church in Ybor? Of course in Spain the Catholic Church was supporting Franco.

RL: I don't think they—The Catholic church was supporting Franco. So, if the Catholic Church supported Franco, Rome was sending the orders I guess to all of the Catholic churches. And they were completely in for the monarchy. As a matter of fact for a long while they ruled Spain along with the King Alfonso and the other kings. So they were hoping for the return of the monarchy. I guess.

AV: How was the Latin community relating to the Catholic Church in Ybor City? Were there conflicts because of the war?

RL: Well, there were a lot of people who were very molested over there—not molested, but very angry about the activities of the church not taking part in liberty. And I understand that a lot of children were removed from the Catholic Church because they couldn't believe that the church would do that. But they recovered, they lost a lot of members, but I guess in time they recovered their membership. Like right now they're very strong. But at the time that Mussolini went to fight Ethiopia with his wonderful weapons that he had, fighting against a tribe of black people that would shoot spears at him, or rocks or what have you—something that's always aggravated me was seeing the preachers at the porches blessing the troops going to Ethiopia. He should have been condemning them. But he wasn't. So the same thing happened in Spain. They were just against, I would say they were against democracy. Though in Ethiopia it was another king that they were ousting, Haile Selassie.

AV: How about the people here in Tampa who supported General Franco? There must have been some people who were supportive of Franco. What did they—?

RL: I think that the strong people, the strong followers that he had, were mostly the cigar manufacturers. Who were either being brainwashed or informed that it was a communistic government. Then the cigar manufacturers had a lot of employees that were in management positions, and some that were not in management positions, were in jobs that were well paying jobs compared to cigar makers, or *boncheros* as they called them, rollers of cigars that made finished tobacco, finished cigars. And I think that they had a lot of those people follow them for security purposes—not because perhaps their heart was in it. Because it didn't make any sense. I don't think Franco would have ever won that war if it hadn't been for Germany and Mussolini.

AV: You were telling me before about this shooting that took place in Ybor between a Franco supporter and a Republican supporter?

RL: That was one of the sad parts, or one of the sad things that did happen. My neighbor, Manuel, or Maño, Arango was shot by his neighbor on the other side. He lived between myself and a neighbor named José Alvarez, I believe. Better known as "El Rubio." "El Rubio" shot Manuel, and killed him. Then he went home and killed himself. That's the way I can remember, but I was old enough to remember—I remember the whole event. But I won't take bets that he killed himself at his house—he might have shot himself right outside of the place where they used to have, the coffee shop they called it. But it was a sad part because both men were family men. They were both good men. Manuel's uncle owned the factory, who was Pancho Arango, Francisco Arango. And "El Rubio," Alvarez, he was Loyalist. He was a Loyalist. So, what happened inside there, I think everybody who really knows what happened is dead now. You can speculate, but—

AV: Were those kinds of discussions common, do you think?

RL: Well, we can say that. When I was a kid I remember that, "They're ready," that they used to say that this group in there, who were just cronies of Manuel [Arango], when he went in there for some reason or another, they picked on him. They made some comments about it; he says, "I'll come back and fix this. I'll be back and fix this." He went home, got his gun, and came back, and—I don't know whether Manuel was the leader of the group or not. I really, you know, those that antagonized him. But it was a sad part. Two funerals in the same block.

AV: How did the community respond to that? Do you remember, what were the feelings?

RL: Well, like I said, it was a sad thing for the whole community. Because they had lost, everybody had lost somebody that we knew was for the Republic. And everybody else knew somebody was lost that belonged to the other party. They were both family men, both family men. "El Rubio" had one daughter and two boys. And Manolo had one daughter and an adopted daughter from a previous marriage by his wife. "Chiquitica" was his daughter, I remember her well.

AV: How about the other groups, the Italians and the Cubans, were they—? I mean, the Italians, some of them, probably supported—

RL: The Italians were very sympathetic towards the revolution, as far as I can remember. I know that the Cubans were. I know that the Cubans were because I was very young, and I remember at the Cuban Club that they had a big, big event that they, as I said before, they just passed all the profits to the Frente Popular.

AV: Do you remember the demonstrations and parades—?

RL: I never participated in any of them, for some reason or another, I don't know how. I was 20, 21 or something, and I was working. But I know that there were demonstrations. Quite frequently very strong, very strong. And I believe—I believe—that at that time, the Communist Party of the United States was very active in anything that agitated labor, or

that labor was part of it. And I think when people go on strikes and things like that, they agitate themselves, they get excited. They want to see rights corrected, or wrongs corrected. Whatever it is, they want to see things happen. At that time the Communist Party was active in New York—very, very active—and they sent delegations down here to blend and mix in with the *Republicanos*. And I would say that the cigar industry was not radical, but they were always willing to hear somebody try to make improvements on their plight. It's not a plight, it was a way of life, that job that they had. And readers were always accused of exciting and inciting people to strikes and to what not. Perhaps not to strikes, but the literature that they read, or whatever they picked up from newspapers, they always had something to do with conditions all over the world.

And I believe that most of the cigar makers always had a willingness to better themselves. And they thought one way to strike back was to go on strike. They had no other power; they had no representation. The government was corrupted, the city government was corrupted. We had people that really were worrying about lining their pockets instead of worrying about making a better city. Things like that. Some people call those the good days, I think they were the worst days in the history of Tampa. We had a chance to get Pan-American as a company down here, but they wanted so much money for them to set up. And Miami almost paid them to come in. And they made a city out of Miami. So, no, I have memories, sad memories of Tampa sometimes. However, we came through it.

AV: How about the feeling in Tampa when Franco was winning the war, and the Republic wasn't really—?

RL: Everybody thought that—Nobody thought that Franco would win, really. I don't think they did. And everybody was for the Republic. Not everybody, but the majority, the majority of the people were for the Republic. You know? They used to give as much as you could, whether canned goods or whatever. Whatever you could give, you'd give to the Republic. And they picked up a lot of money, in New York, too. In New York and Philadelphia there were many people going out and collecting whatever they could collect.

AV: So when Franco won, what was the response of the people in Tampa?

RL: Well, it's a black day, I guess, in the history of Tampa because it wasn't only Aurelio Paula who died in that brigade or anything like that, but it touched a lot of homes here in Tampa. Plus all the families that had died in Spain. Plus the fact that one brother was fighting against another brother made it a very sad situation. And those who lost were sure to receive some reprisals of that. So, it was a sad day.

AV: Did people here in Tampa follow what was going on in Spain, once the war ended?

RL: Yes. Yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. They followed it for a long time. During, before, and after.

AV: Were they still sending things: money, or food or other kinds of things over there?

RL: No, I think that stopped. Amazingly. Because Franco won, and I guess they figured that spoils belong to the victor, you know?

AV: Now, Mr. Lavin, would you say that the war in Spain shaped your life in any way? Had some effect?

RL: It made me think. You know? It made me think. I was a young fellow. Made me think. As I get old and got older, why didn't we, the United States raise the embargo, help out the situation? How badly, or poorly informed was the State Department! To know that the shipments that were going in there had to go through another, to Mexico or something like that, because we couldn't ship anything to Spain. It's a shame that they didn't have enough foresight or hindsight to—something that they could really have discovered what was taking place, to avoid what we had to go through. Because we went through a good bloodshed to eliminate fascism. But recollections of—no, I can't say that I really—you know, we lost a cousin and we never did understand why a married man with young kids and so forth would leave his family, but he was an idealist I think. And that's about it.

AV: Is there anything else, before we conclude, that you would like to add to the interview? Anything that I didn't ask you about, that you feel you would like to have recorded?

RL: No, I don't believe that. I think history has almost proven itself that Franco was no good. And history has proven us that he has brought us back into a parasite type of government. Though they claim it's a democracy, as long as there is monarchy, there are no sincere free elections of a president, with an assembly of two, three, or four parties that can govern the country. Even if it's just a puppet government, the monarchy is, it's a bleeding event for the whole country. It costs a fortune to keep them up. So. I just wish it would go ahead and have another election, the way they had them before. And now that we know what we paid for, they would honor a good democratic government. And let the monarchs live out their life, and then they will eventually pass away into history. That's about it.

AV: This concludes the interview with Mr. Raul Lavin. And I want to thank you, Mr. Lavin, very much, for participating in this project.

*End of interview*