

## IT TAKES THREE TO TANGO: HOW A CUBAN BALLERINA INTERPRETED FOR CASTRO AND KHRUSHCHEV

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### Abstract



This text launches a series of articles under the image-based project *'With the Aid of an Unidentified Interpreter: Putting Names to Faces on Historical Photos'* dedicated to the history of high-level interpreting. Here, the quest is to identify the interpreter at the two encounters between Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro at Harlem's Hotel Theresa and at the Soviet Mission in New York on 20 and 23 September 1960 based on a photo from the personal archive of Khrushchev's assistant Vladimir Lebedev. This interpreter turned out to be Menia Martínez, a historic figure in Cuban ballet. Educated at the Vaganova School in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), she was proficient in Russian. The text looks at other professional and unprofessional interpreters who worked with the two leaders before, on, and after this trip to New York and whose work contributed to the development of Cuban-Soviet and East-West relations. The discussion draws on available visuals, memoirs, newspaper sources, and unclassified documents placing the discussion in the wider context of international relations at the time. The author is grateful to Menia Martínez, who, in a telephone conversation, has helped in clarifying some of the aspects of the matter under investigation.

**Keywords:** consecutive interpreting, history of conference interpreting, high-level meeting, translation studies, image-based research, autobiographical subjectivity

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<sup>2</sup>The author and publisher may have not traced properly the copyright holders for the photographs before publication and apologize for this apparent negligence. If notified, the publisher will be pleased to rectify any errors or omissions at the earliest opportunity.

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This text launches a series of articles under the image-based project '*With the Aid of an Unidentified Interpreter: Putting Names to Faces on Historical Photos*'. Browsing through archives with historical photos of high-level meetings, I noticed that captions often fail to identify interpreters by name. As a result, I set out to make a small contribution to putting names to the faces of unnamed interpreters in historical photos. The project grew out of my interest, as an interpreter trainer, in the history of interpreting as a whole and more specifically, the history of high-level interpreting. My own experience of working as a freelance interpreter for the Administration of the President of Bulgaria in the period 2009-2019 has also stimulated this interest. I also found inspiration for my project after reading a volume titled "*Framing the Interpreter. Towards a visual perspective*" (Fernandez-Ocampo & Wolf, 2014), an interesting example of image-based research in translation and interpreting studies.

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### **Castro, Khrushchev, and their interpreters in New York**

This article aims to identify the interpreter(s) (Spanish-Russian or English-Russian) at the two meetings between Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev in New York in September 1960, where they participated in the 15th session of the UN General Assembly. Among the highlights of the event were Khrushchev's shoe-banging incident on 12 October 1960, during the 902nd Plenary Meeting, and Castro's second longest timed speech in the UN history on 26 September (269 minutes)<sup>1</sup>, which he started with a promise to speak slowly and be brief, in order "to cooperate with the interpreters" (General Assembly, 15th session: 872nd plenary meeting, 1960). The meeting between the two leaders at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem was described as "a curtain raiser" to the 3 p.m. opening of a historic U.N. General Assembly on 20 September 1960 (Nikita Pays, 1960).

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<sup>1</sup> The record for the longest speech (8 hours) was set in 1957 by Krishna Menon while defending India's rights to the disputed territory of Kashmir before the U.N. Security Council.

The Cuban delegation arrived on 18 September by plane; Khrushchev and his entourage sailed into New York on 19 September. The two leaders first met at 12.14 p.m. on 20 September at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem (Pérez, 2010; Vstrecha N.S. Hrushheva, 1960), in Castro's room No. 929 (Núñez Jiménez, 1998), where the Cuban delegation had relocated after being moved out of the Shelburne Hotel, despite an offer of free accommodation at the nearby Commodore Hotel (Castro Quarrels, 1960; Andrews, 2015). One newspaper source mentions a visit of Cuba's Foreign Minister Raúl Roa García to the Soviet Mission in the morning of 20 September 1960 (Nikita Pays, 1960), after which Khrushchev "suddenly," according to his memoir (Khrushchev, N, 2016), decided to visit Castro in Harlem (Soviet Premier Visits, 1960). However, unclassified documents from Russian archives unambiguously demonstrate that this meeting was carefully planned (Hershberg, 2019). These documents include, for instance, records of conversations between Sergey Kudryavtsev, Soviet Ambassador to Cuba, with Foreign Minister Raúl Roa García (14 September 1960) and with Fidel Castro himself (15 September 1960), in the run-up to the General Assembly. Khrushchev went to the Hotel Theresa without Viktor Sukhodrev, his official English-Russian interpreter, and, in fact, without any interpreter, because he knew that Castro had included in his delegation a person who spoke Russian. I could not find any photos of Raúl Roa and his entourage at arrival or departure, and no mention of this meeting can be found in the available eyewitness accounts. It is impossible to say at this stage whether communication was via an English-Russian or a Spanish-Russian interpreter. On 23 September, another meeting between Castro and Khrushchev took place (Pravda, No. 269, 25 September 1960), this time for dinner at the Soviet Mission to the UN in New York, on Park Avenue and 680 Street. Both leaders also met at least once at the UN headquarters.

There is a wealth of literature on the two meetings, especially the first one. However, an initial investigation as to the identity of the interpreter yielded no results. Google searches in English, Spanish and Russian with keywords "Fidel Castro", "Nikita Khrushchev", "interpreter", "translator", "Hotel Theresa", "Harlem", "United Nations", "1960" in various combinations yielded results including Carmen Zamora, Juana Vera García (Juanita Vera), Nikolay Leonov, Ovsep Manasarian, Galina Utekhina, Viktor Sukhodrev, Oleg Troyanovsky, Yuri Vinogradov, Oleg Darusenkov, etc. These and other professional and unprofessional interpreters worked with the two leaders before, on,

and after this trip to New York and contributed to the development of Cuban-Soviet and East-West relations. However, there was no information about a Soviet or Cuban interpreter at Khrushchev's meeting with Castro at the Hotel Theresa in September 1960. The problem is that you only get results when you know the name of the interpreter and search in Spanish for "Name + traductora" or "Name + interprete". But at this initial stage, the name of the interpreter was still unknown.

Khrushchev travelled to New York with Viktor Sukhodrev, a prominent interpreter and diplomat at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Sukhodrev also had a degree in French from Moscow State Linguistic University; however, there is no evidence that he spoke or ever studied Spanish. Viktor Sukhodrev accompanied the Soviet delegation a year earlier, in 1959, when Khrushchev became the first Soviet leader to visit the United States; Oleg Troyanovsky, a future Soviet ambassador to Japan and China, was the second interpreter. Both interpreters can be seen in action during the 1959 visit in "Khrushchev Does America," a documentary by Tim Toidze (2013). In September 1960, Troyanovsky and Sukhodrev were again among the members of the Soviet delegation. In a photo at the ABC archive, Sukhodrev (in the middle) can be seen interpreting for Khrushchev and Castro at the UN on 20 September 1960 (Torremocha [Photograph], 1960).

In their memoirs, Sukhodrev (2008) and Troyanovsky (2017) provide no details with respect to the meetings at the Hotel Theresa or the Soviet Mission (Sukhodrev devotes several pages to the shoe-banging incident). Neither does Nikolay Leonov, Khrushchev's trusted Spanish-Russian interpreter. General-Major Nilolay Zakharov, assuring Khrushchev's security during the visit, does not mention interpreters at the Hotel Theresa in his memoir (Zakharov, 2016). My conclusion is that interpretation during these two meetings was predominantly Spanish-Russian, and that the interpreter most probably was a member of the Cuban delegation.

The problem is that back in early 1960s, Russian was not a popular language to learn in Cuba, and very few people, if any at all, could speak it, let alone act as reliable interpreters. Dmitry Yazov (1924-2020), Marshal of the Soviet Union, commander of the Soviet ground forces in Cuba's Oriente Province during the Cuban Missile Crisis, working directly with Cuban Defense Minister Raúl Castro, says in his memoir that

“nobody knew Russian in Cuba at all at that time” (Jazov, 2015). Faced with a complete lack of military Spanish-Russian interpreters, the Soviet instructors relied on the language skills of 35 Moldovan soldiers (out of the contingent of 2,500 Soviet troops).

To improve the situation, a group of Soviet fourth-year students of Spanish translation and interpreting from Moscow were sent on a one-year internship to Cuba in 1961. Later, in 1964-65, one of these former students, Ovsep Manasarian, was among the interpreters for a group of high-ranking Cuban army officers sent for training to the Academy of the General Staff (Manasarian, 2016). Back to Cuba, he interpreted for Soviet military advisors and worked in close contact with Raul Castro and Che Guevara. Alongside English, Russian was introduced as an obligatory subject in the preuniversity Camilo Cienfuegos Military Vocational Schools (EVMCC) established in September 1966 (Handbook on the Cuban Armed Forces, 1979). But in 1960, finding a Cuban person proficient in Russian was a difficult task. Luckily for Fidel Castro, such a person had returned to Cuba from a five-year stay in the Soviet Union just in time for the trip to New York.

### **A photo from a personal archive**

Searching for photos of Khrushchev and Castro in New York in September–October 1960, I came across two images in Rutov (2013). The article discusses Castro’s 40-day visit to the USSR in 1963 and displays photos taken from another article (Samye jarkie momenty, n.d.), which actually does not feature **Figures 1 & 2**. In Rutov (2013), they are accompanied by a caption stating “*Hrushhev i Kastro v neformal'noj obstanovke*”, i.e., ‘Khrushchev and Castro in an informal setting’, without specifying any date or location.

The scene in **Figure 1** looks like an informal meeting between the two leaders. **Figure 2** seems to be taken before or after the meeting; available documentaries such as “Fidel en Nueva York” (1960) confirm that it was taken after the meeting, outside the Hotel Theresa in Harlem (**Figure 3**). One of the other two persons present in the room in **Figure 1** had to be an interpreter because Khrushchev simply did not speak any foreign language.

**Figure 1**

*The first meeting between Castro and Khrushchev at the Hotel Theresa on 20 September 1960*



*Note.* [Photograph], by Vladimir Lebedev, 1960

**Figure 2**

*Castro and Khrushchev outside the Hotel Theresa after the meeting on 20 September 1960*



*Note.* [Photograph], by Vladimir Lebedev, 1960

The young woman in **Figure 1** can be seen next to Fidel Castro and Khrushchev exiting the Hotel Theresa in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3**

*Castro, Khrushchev, and a lady interpreter outside the Hotel Theresa, 20 September 1960*



*Note.* From *Fidel Castro in the US, 1960* [Screenshot].

It is difficult to conclude from a silent video footage whether the person standing between Castro and Khrushchev in **Figure 4** is interpreting or just saying something to Castro. I think this person is Honorio Múñoz Garcia (1910-1977), a famous Cuban journalist (Hernández Serrano, 2016), founder of the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC), director of the school of journalism in Havana. And I am also not sure whether he is the same person with the one sitting first from left in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 4**

*Castro, Khrushchev, and Honorio Múñoz (center) outside the Hotel Theresa after their first meeting on 20 Sept. 1960*



*Note.* Castro, Khrushchev, and Múñoz outside the Hotel Theresa [Screenshot]. From *Fidel en Nueva York en 1960*.

The source of **Figure 2** by Lebedev is a short article dated 28 January 2009 on the Russia Today website. The article announces that it unveils the first public display of “exclusive photos of Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro made by the Soviet leader’s personal assistant Vladimir Lebedev in 1960 in New York and in 1963 during Fidel’s trip to the Soviet Union” (Khrushchev and Castro: insider photographs, 2009). However, the article features only **Figure 2**, not **Figure 1**. In reply to the query about the other “exclusive photos”, the RT’s Copyright Clearance and Permissions Office replied that they had been unable to find other photos in their archives. They also added that **Figure 2** had been used in their article without permission. On the other hand, they assumed that Vladimir Lebedev had taken the photos as part of his official duties and therefore the images may well be in the public domain.

Known for his passion for photography, Lebedev would take photos alongside professional photographers at official events and, more importantly, at informal events where official photographers were not always admitted. For instance, Sergei Khrushchev (1991, p. 135) describes how Lebedev took pictures with his camera during the telephone conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and three Soviet cosmonauts on a Voskhod program flight on 12 October 1964.

Coming back to the caption in Rutov (2013), it did not take me long to realize that **Figures 1 & 2** had nothing to do with Castro's 1963 visit to the USSR, where his official interpreter was Nikolay Leonov (1928-2022), a senior KGB officer and Latin America expert. Leonov, who met Raul Castro in 1953 and Fidel Castro in 1956 (Fraguas, 2022), later penned their biographies (Leonov, 2015; Leonov & Borodaev, 1998). He was the official interpreter of the Soviet delegation to Cuba in February 1960 headed by Anastas Mikoyan, First Deputy of the Council of Minister of the USSR, then the number two man in the Soviet hierarchy (Leonov, 2006; Samye jarkie momenty, n.d.). However, Leonov was not a member of the Soviet delegation to the Fifteenth session of the UN General Assembly in 1960.

According to the unclassified Record of Conversation between N.S. Khrushchev and Prime Minister of Cuba Fidel Castro (1960) in the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, V.S. Lebedev was present at the meeting at the Hotel Theresa; no female name is mentioned:

The conversation lasted 40 minutes. Present at the conversation were: F. Castro's adviser [Antonio] Núñez Jimenez, V.S. Lebedev, A.I. Adzhubei, P.A. Satyukov. Recorded by: [Signature] (V. Vinogradov).

Such Records or Memorandums of Conversation are usually prepared by the interpreter(s) working at the event. According to Viktor Sukhodrev (1999; my translation),

It was the interpreter's duty to keep the record of the conversation - almost like a transcript. The negotiator can talk for five or ten minutes, and you sit there with a notepad and take it all down. And then you interpret. The record becomes a major reference document. Now in the archives, I am convinced, there are kilometers and



kilometers of sheets that say, "Recorded by V. Sukhodrev." After the meeting with Kennedy, I dictated 120 typewritten pages...

In this case, the record was prepared by a V. Vinogradov. Below is the list of the USSR representatives and alternatives accredited to the Fifteenth session of General Assembly (General Assembly, 15<sup>th</sup> session: Appendices, 1960, p. 754; bolded by me, hereinafter BBM):

USSR. Representatives. N. S. Khrushchev, A. A. Gromyko, V. A. Zorin, A. A. Sobolev, S. G. Lapin, **S. A. Vinogradov**, A. A. Soldatov, Mrs. Z. V. Mironova. Alternates: M. I. Kuchava, P. D. Morozov, A. A. Roshchin, N. I. Molyakov, P. M. Chernyshev, K. G. Fedoseev, L. I. Mendelevich, A. E. Nesterenko.

Sergei Ivanovich Vinogradov (1907-1970) was a Soviet diplomat, Ambassador of the USSR to France (1953-1965). Boris Pjadyshev (1932-2018), a Soviet and Russian diplomat and political analyst, then a young graduate of the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), was a member of the Soviet delegation to the Fifteenth session of General Assembly. After the departure by plane of the official delegation headed by Khrushchev on 13 October, he and two other colleagues stayed on (the first part of the fifteenth Assembly met from September 20 to December 20, 1960) and then sailed back to Europe on *Liberté*, a French liner. His colleagues were Vladimir Krylov, V.A. Zorin's assistant, and Yuri Vinogradov, whom he describes as "the master of English translation" (Pjadyshev, 2008). In Paris, they were invited to stay for 10 days in the French capital by Ambassador Sergei Vinogradov who was eager to learn how things had developed at the UN after his departure with the official delegation.

As for Yuri Vinogradov, he was a high-level interpreter at the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later an Ambassador to Sri Lanka (1991-1993). The photos of 29 November 1962 from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (e.g., Rowe, 1962). do not mention Vinogradov by name. However, two Memorandums of Conversation between President Kennedy and Anastas Mikoyan of 29 November 1962 (Keefer et al., 1996a and 1996b), and a Memorandum of Conversation between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Anastas Mikoyan of 30 November 1962 (Sampson, 1994) list Yuri Vinogradov as the interpreter on the Soviet side. I have no access to the original of the Record of Conversation between N.S. Khrushchev and Prime Minister of Cuba Fidel Castro (1960) to check whether "V.Vinogradov" is written in clear print or there is room for

interpreting a handwritten Cyrillic “B” (В) as “Ю” (Yu). Otherwise, we will have to search for a third “Vinogradov” in the Soviet delegation.

There are also photos by Alberto Korda (Alberto Díaz Gutiérrez, 1928–2001), Castro’s long-time official photographer working for *The Cuban Revolution* newspaper, and the author of the iconic image *Guerrillero Heroico* of Che Guevara. Unfortunately, the photograph from Castro’s room at the Hotel Theresa captures the two leaders in a friendly hug with no interpreter in sight (Korda, 1960a).

Fidel Castro himself spoke enough English to successfully communicate with journalists and even deliver a lecture to an audience of several thousand people during his visit to Cambridge and Harvard Law School Dillon Field House (Harvard Law School, 1959). Ralph D. Matthews, one of the journalists present at the meeting between Fidel Castro and Malcom X, a prominent African American Muslim leader, at the Hotel Theresa on 18 September 1960, testifies that Malcolm came with an English-Spanish interpreter, who “would translate longer sentences from Malcolm X into Spanish and Castro would listen alertly and smile courteously,” also communicating “in his curious brand of broken English” (Matthews, 1960). At the meeting with Nehru (Korda, 1960b), “Fidel addresses Nehru in English, with difficulty, and relies on the translation by the young Raúl Roa Kourí” (Núñez Jiménez, 1998 in Báez, 2009, p. 318; my translation). When Ahmed Sékou Touré, the first president of Guinea (1958–1984), visited Cuba on October 13, immediately after addressing the General Assembly, Raúl Roa Kourí acted as an interpreter during his meetings with Castro and Dorticós (Cuba’s president from 1959 to 1976), and also during his TV appearance (Kourí, 2018). Raúl Roa Kourí also testifies that Che Guevara spoke good French (Kourí, 2018).

### **The book that resurfaced forty years later**

By some strange twist of life, the book (or, at least, the first volume of it) that helped me identify the name of the interpreter in this quest first came into my hands back in 1983, when I was in my final year of school. At that time, we lived in a neighborhood close to the Cuban Embassy in Sofia, Bulgaria. Three or four families of Cuban diplomats lived in our building, including the Ambassador himself. That’s how I was introduced to Cuban Spanish. One day, my Cuban friends took me to the Embassy

where they had afternoon classes in Spanish. To further improve my Spanish, I was given a copy of the recently published *"En marcha con Fidel-1959"* by Antonio Núñez Jiménez (Núñez Jiménez, 1982). I do not actually remember reading the book, but it surely spent several months on my desk and the image of its front cover had been floating in the back of my memory ever since until it resurfaced forty years later.

I remembered about the book when I learnt that Antonio Núñez Jiménez was present at the meeting at the Hotel Theresa (Record of Conversation between N.S. Khrushchev, 1960). In fact, I tried to get hold of the memoirs, if any, by all participants in the two meetings. I searched for the book on the Internet, and I found out that there were in fact four volumes of it (1959, 1960, 1961, 1962). And I also learnt that Antonio Núñez Jiménez was a famous Cuban geographer, speleologist, archaeologist, scientist and revolutionary, which had escaped my attention when I was fifteen years old.

The second volume that I needed was published in 1998. I could not find it online; fortunately, large excerpts from it (as well as from the other three volumes) have been published in a collection of texts titled *'Así es Fidel'*, edited by Luis Báez Hernández (1936-2015), a famous Cuban journalist and author of several books about Fidel Castro (Báez, 2009). And *'Así es Fidel'* is available online.

To my knowledge, *"En marcha con Fidel-1960"* by Núñez Jiménez (1998) is the earliest primary source mentioning the name of the interpreter at the meeting between Castro and Khrushchev at the Hotel Theresa (Núñez Jiménez, 1998 in Báez, 2009, pp. 314-315; my translation, BBM):

Four cars arrive and Khrushchev gets out of the first one, forced to pass through a cordon of journalists and security agents. After a cordial embrace, we enter the hotel. Fidel is waiting in his room No. 929, where he will have his first meeting with the Soviet leader, in which we, Foreign Minister Raúl Roa and the author, participate. **Comrade Menia Martínez, Cuban ballerina, serves as a translator.**

The second primary source (El día que Fidel, 2003; my translation, BBM) lists no author and provides a link to a non-existing site titled 'Terra Colombia' (<http://salud.terra.com.co>):

Five days after our stay in New York, Fidel asked us what places we had visited in the city. Carlos Franqui replied: We haven't even left the hotel, because we don't even have a dollar to pay for a cab. Fidel said to Celia: Well, let's give some per diems to these poor ambassadors, US\$25 each. And with these minimal per diems, I bought a pair of Florsheim shoes in a store on the first floor of Theresa and **I had a few dollars left to invite translator Menia Martinez to a restaurant in the Italian quarter for lunch.**

**Figure 5**

*Original caption: In the Assembly Hall shortly before the meeting got under way, Premier N.S. Khrushchev (right), Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, and Premier Fidel Castro, of Cuba, are seen greeting each other.*



*Note. Castro and Khrushchev at the UN Assembly Hall [Photograph], UN Photo, 20 September 1960*

The description of the meeting between Castro and Khrushchev in the UN Assembly Hall on 20 September 1960 (El día que Fidel, 2003; my translation, BBM) is supported by **Figure 5** and the UN video 864th Plenary Meeting of General Assembly (1960):

As I crossed into the space occupied by the Soviet delegation, I saw Nikita Khrushchev signaling me to come closer. “Are you from the Cuban delegation,” he asked me. “Yes,” I answered. “Please take me to greet Fidel Castro,” he asked. Accompanied by Khrushchev, I went down the same staircase I had previously used with Fidel, to the first row, where we were welcomed by a surprised Castro.

**The Russian and the Cuban exchanged cordial phrases with the help of a translator**, agreeing to meet that same evening at the residence of the Soviet delegation on Park Avenue.

The “translator” was Viktor Sukhodrev. The person wearing dark glasses and a white suit is José Pardo Llada, a famous Cuban journalist and radio commentator, who in 1961 defected to Colombia. The passages above must have been taken from one of the books he wrote in exile (e.g. Pardo Llada, 1988, 1993).

Pardo Llada is also the author of a booklet published in 1960, in which he describes the meetings of Fidel Castro with Khrushchev, Nasser, Nehru, and Tito. Unfortunately, there are no scans of pages 18-19 with the description of the meeting with Khrushchev at the Hotel Theresa on Ebay.com, so at this stage it is impossible to say whether he mentions the name of the interpreter.

The third primary source is an article by Raúl Roa Kourí (2018), a diplomat and writer, son of Foreign Minister Raúl Roa García, ascertaining the fact that Menia Martínez also interpreted at the second meeting (Kourí, 2018; my translation, BBM):

The Soviet delegation invited our delegation to a "friendly and fraternal dinner" at the headquarters of its Mission to the UN, then located at 67th Street and Park Avenue... **Menia Martínez, Cuba's first ballerina, who had studied in Leningrad, served as interpreter for Fidel**, who occupied a small sofa next to Khrushchev. The rest of us crowded, standing or sitting, around the two leaders.

This second informal meeting between Castro and Khrushchev took place on 23 September (Pravda, No. 269, 25 September 1960), this time for dinner at the Soviet Mission to the UN in New York, on Park Avenue and 680 Street, with exchanges of Russian cigarettes and Cuban cigars, and “countless toasts with vodka” (Núñez Jiménez, 1998 in Báez, 2009, p. 315-16; my translation). Viktor Sukhodrev, Khrushchev’s official interpreter during this visit, confirms that Castro’s gifts to the Soviet delegation included several boxes of Cuban cigars (Sukhodrev, 2008).

According to Pardo Llada, the first toast was raised with “Caucasian white wine”, after which Fidel took the floor for an hour and a half with detailed stories about the attack on the Moncada Barracks, the imprisonment on the Isla de Pinos, the travel to Mexico and the arrival at the Sierra Maestra (El día que Fidel, 2003). The meeting was cut short by Khrushchev’s remark that “what you are telling us is very interesting but remember that tomorrow is a very busy day, and we should leave that story for another occasion” (El día que Fidel, 2003) (my translation).

Unfortunately, the only photo of the meeting at the Soviet Mission on 23 September 1960 which I have been able to find (Figure 6) does not show the interpreter.

**Figure 6**

*Nikita Khrushchev, Fidel Castro, and Raúl Roa at the Soviet Mission to the UN in New York, 23 September 1960*



*Note.* Nikita Khrushchev visits USA [Photograph], TASS Photo by Vasily Yegorov, 23 September 1960

**Menia Martínez: *a pas de trois* in Harlem**

The fourth primary source is the account of the meeting by Menia Martínez herself. On 25 November 2019, Cubans residing in Belgium and staff members of the Cuban Embassy to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union, gathered at the Cuban Embassy in Brussels to pay tribute to Fidel Castro (Fidel por Siempre, 2019).

The article goes on to say that the audience was deeply moved by the presentation by Menia Martínez, president of CUBABEL, the Association of Cubans Residing in Belgium, as she told the story of her high-level interpreting stint in New York on 20 September 1960. There is also a video recording of her presentation on YouTube (Martinez, 2019) in Spanish with French subtitles. In the caption to the video, no information is provided about the time and date of the event. I first found the video and then the article (Fidel por Siempre, 2009), which provided the missing data.

Menia Martínez (b. 1938) went to the Soviet Union in 1955 and stayed there till 1960. In an interview (Martínez, 2010), she says that when she left Cuba on a trip to Europe as a teenager (her parents wanted her to see Paris, and she planned to go to Warsaw for a Youth Festival<sup>2</sup>), she had no plans of going to Russia. However, the Bolshoi Theater company happened to be in Paris at that time, and she went for an audition. After a long wait, she finally got a telegram from the Ministry of Culture of the USSR (at that time, she needed a translator to read it, and she received the confirmation in Bucharest) informing she had been awarded a scholarship to study at the Vaganova school. After she arrived and settled in the boarding school, she was introduced to “a Russian teacher who did not know any Spanish, so the classes were based on pantomime” (Martínez, 2010; my translation):

At the beginning I cried a lot, I missed my family, I dreamed of the palm trees and the sea... For me it was a big change, new customs, new food, everything was different. But thanks to the students who were very affectionate, everything was easier, they told me that with the Russian teacher I would not learn anything, that I should hang out with them in the street, go to the cinema, which helped me a lot.

It was five years before I returned to Cuba, but it was not only a matter of weather, in fact I remember the first day I saw snow, I was in a Russian class, I left my books and went downstairs, the whole school looked out the window to see the Cuban eating the snow, and of course I got a sore throat.

It is difficult to imagine an untrained person going for a spontaneous audition at the Bolshoi Theater company on tour in Paris. In fact, Menia started her dancing career at an early age. At the age of 13, she was more interested in “becoming a musical

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<sup>2</sup> The 5th World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS) was held from 31 July to 15 August 1955 in Warsaw, capital city of the then Polish People's Republic.

performer, since I liked to sing, or perhaps a dancer in musical theater, which didn't exist in Cuba in those days." (Martínez, 2012(b); my translation). She was the first student to be offered a scholarship at the newly created Alicia Alonso School, and she soon started dancing in the Dance Company of the Cuban Ballet. So, she was well prepared for the Bolshoi Theater audition. In an interview, she says that it was Nicolás Guillén (Nicolás Cristóbal Guillén Batista, 1902–1989), Cuba's national poet, who encouraged her to enroll at the Vaganova School (Martínez, 2012(a)).

She studied dancing together with the 17-year-old Rudolf Nureyev and they are believed to have had a relationship (Kavanagh, 2007). She also gained popularity as a singer, recording several vinyl discs with Cuban songs, and giving live performances. In another interview, she recalls that this was a very important stage in her life (Martínez, 2023). When Juan Marinello (Juan Marinello Vidaurreta, 1898–1977), Cuban Communist intellectual, writer, poet essayist, lawyer and politician, came to Moscow, Menia performed Cuban songs for him, "I still have a photo of myself and Marínello, together with the great musician Achataríanas, and the director of the place handing me flowers." (Martínez, M. (2012b). It took me some time to figure out that "Achataríanas" is in fact Aram Khachaturian, a prominent Soviet Armenian composer and conductor. The photo of Khachaturian talking to Menia Martinez after her performance at the Central Actor's House in Moscow, with the timestamp of 17 April 1959, is in the RIA Novosti archive (Aram Khachaturian and Menia Martinez [Photograph], 1959).

Menia returned to Cuba in 1960, after the victorious Cuban Revolution, to become a star of the Cuban National Ballet and would later dance with Maurice Béjart. In 2013, she went to St Petersburg to participate in the quinquennial festival dedicated to the memory of Rudolf Nureyev. Currently, Menia Martínez works as a classical dance teacher and artistic director at the *Conservatoire de la danse de Bruxelles*, and as a teacher, rehearsal director, and assistant choreographer at the *Víctor Ullate Ballet – Comunidad de Madrid*. She is also honorary president of the *Académie de danse & musique Yantra*.

In the video, Menia says that Fidel Castro asked her to join the delegation because she knew Russian (she also spoke English), with no additional explanation. She was told to stick to Núñez Jiménez, whom she had known from her childhood years. One morning, she was told to get ready because Nikita Khrushchev was coming to see Castro and she



was supposed to interpret at the meeting. When Khrushchev arrived, Castro introduced her as a Cuban interpreter. And Khrushchev corrected him by saying ‘a Spanish interpreter’. ‘No, she is Cuban’, said Castro.

She also tells two other anecdotes about her stay in New York with the delegation. The first story took place when the delegation was leaving the Shelburne Hotel for the Hotel Theresa (Menia mistakenly refers to them as the Sheraton Hotel and the Victoria Hotel respectively). She was walking next to Castro with a small suitcase. When journalists asked her what was inside, Castro told her, ‘Tell them there’s a bomb inside’. The second story happened at the Hotel Theresa. One night she and Alberto Korda, the official photographer of the Cuban delegation, whom she met on the plane to New York, went out to a nearby jazz club. The following day, after listening to her account, Castro said they would all go to the club in the evening.

### **Conclusion**

The interpreting stints performed by the young Cuban ballerina Menia Martínez on 20 and 23 September 1960 is an interesting example of a successful unprofessional interpreter involved in informal, but nonetheless high-level and high-stakes talks that defined Cuban-Soviet relations for decades to come. Luckily, the camera of Vladimir Lebedev, Khrushchev’s personal advisor, captured Menia Martínez interpreting at the first meeting between Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev at the Hotel Theresa on 20 September 1960. And it has been an honor and privilege to talk on the telephone with Menia Martínez and be able to ask questions to the only remaining witness of the historic meeting at Harlem’s Hotel Theresa.

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