

6-1-1996

The Goodbye Land

Jose Yglesias

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Yglesias, Jose (1996) "The Goodbye Land," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol18/iss1/4>

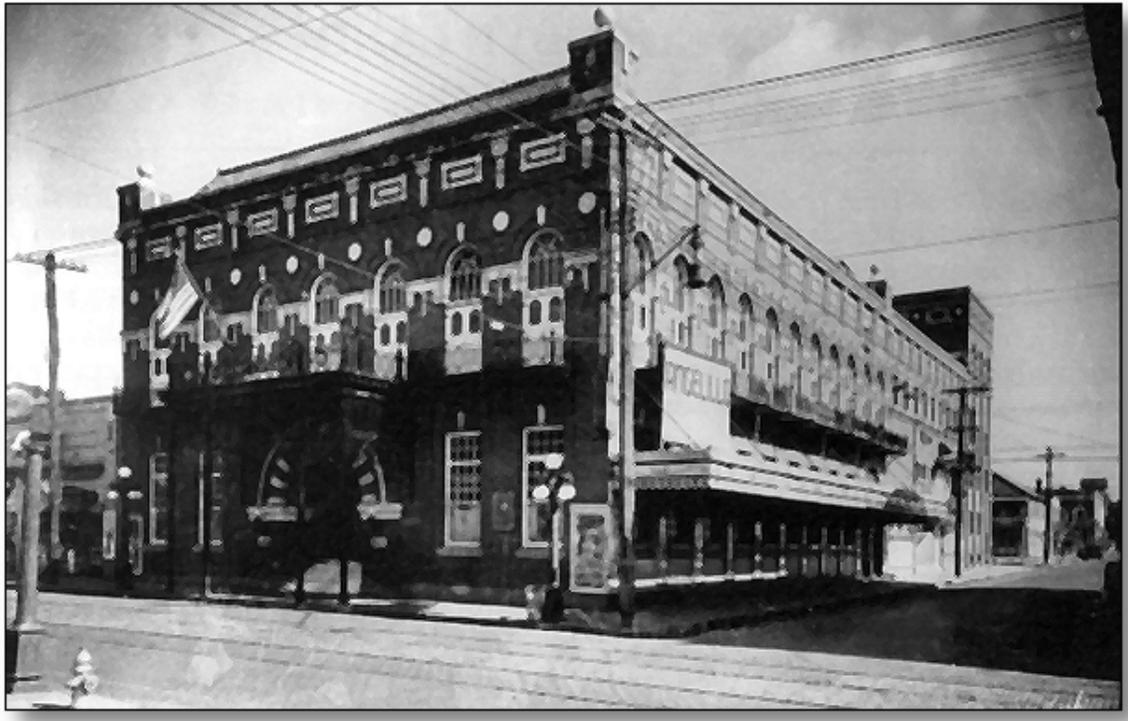
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

THE GOODBYE LAND*

by Jose Yglesias

When I was five, the cigarmakers in the Latin section of Tampa, Florida, held a collection on payday to send my mother, my sister and me to Havana to see my father. Four years earlier, he had become ill with encephalitis – the Sleeping Sickness, they called it then – and when he got over the first attack, he began to wander away from home for the second time in his life. When he was thirteen, he had left the province of Galicia in northern Spain, accompanied by a cousin the same age and from the same tiny *aldea* in the mountains. First, he went to Havana, where he spent four years as an apprentice in a cigar factory, like a young Dickens hero. From there, already the owner of a dark suit with thin gray stripes, high starched collars and a straw hat, he went to Tampa to work in the cigar factories; and at a Wednesday night social of the West Tampa Methodist Church, run by missionaries who quite rightly considered they were bringing the gospel to virgin territory, he met my mother when she was not quite sixteen. They got married and, of course, never went back to church. My grandfather's pleasure of having the youngest and last to marry of his five daughters safely given away was soon dampened by my father's sociable and gay habits: having come of age in Havana, my father liked to stop at the cafe on his way home for his espresso and to return after dinner to talk and play dominoes. Not at all like Grandfather's other Galician son-in-law, a sober-minded man, not given to leaving the house after work, which was what you were to expect of Galicians. Father first got sick on the eve of what was to be the ten-months strike of 1920 – a watershed in the Latin community of Tampa, from which a generation now dying out dates most events in their lives – and the crippling fever did not make him as anxious as did his knowledge that he could not be at the factory the next day. He had been chosen by the strike committee for all the factories to get up from his worktable at the secretly appointed hour, and call down the block-long floor of rows of closely packed tables, in a voice that hundreds could hear, "Outside, comrades, outside!" He had already received the folded piece of paper and read the date and the hour he was to do this; he kept it in the back pocket of his brown pants, the one with the button-down flap. Months later, when the strike was over and he could not go back to work because his right hand without warning would open spasmodically, he still kept the piece of paper with him when he left for Havana. He was a member of the Centro Español, a mutual aid society of cigarmakers for which there was a counterpart in Havana, and although the cigarmakers in Tampa had months to go yet before they could pay the grocer's bills accumulated during the strike, they held a collection, as they did for us later, to pay for Father's trip to Cuba: surely the doctors of the Centro in Havana would know how to cure his creeping paralysis. It affected not only his hand but his right leg, which he dragged behind him, and his throat, which would suddenly cause him to stutter or be unable to swallow. The doctors did not cure him, of course, and Father began to believe that if he could once more breathe the air of Galicia and eat the food they grew in their tiny farms along the mountainside, and if he could do that for a few months, he would surely get well. There was still some money left from the collection, to which he could add the fifteen dollars a month the Centro in Tampa gave Mother and which she passed on to him, so he went back to Galicia to visit his mother and sister in the aldea. His sister had just been widowed, and for a while he helped them work the land, and he answered, *Do not worry*, to Mother's letters reminding him that since he was a resident alien in the States he must return before the year was out. It turned

* Reprinted from *The Goodbye Land* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 3-11.



Ybor City's Centro Español, as it looked in 1941.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

out that Mother was right to worry, for Father contracted typhoid in Spain and did not make it back in time. Weak but desperate, he arranged to be smuggled back to Cuba on the regular liner which left from Vigo, and, like hundreds of others, would have gotten into Cuba illegally had not a recurrence of the typhoid on board ship made him very ill: the ship's officers would not take the risk and turned him over to the Cuban authorities when they came on board on their routine visit. He was transferred to a hospital for infectious diseases in Havana, and that was when Mother (who was twenty-eight and had never been out of Tampa) and my sister and I went to Havana in the hope that we would, somehow, bring him back with us. I remember vividly the slum street where we stayed with Father's uncle; but I did not know that Mother, besides seeing Father at the hospital every day (she took him a bottle of milk because the diet there was bad), spent her time seeing the Cuban authorities, the Spanish embassy, and the American embassy. She took me to the hospital only once, and when I saw my sister run ahead to one of the long rows of beds, I went after her, looked at the man she kissed, and asked if he was my father. He smiled and I jumped on the bed and kissed him too, not to be outdone by my sister who saw him almost every day. He had not shaved in several days and his beard was scratchy; that is all I remember of him, but the story of how I instinctively knew who he was and how eagerly I kissed him has been retold often by my Tampa aunts, always to my glory. Mother failed; neither Cuba nor the United States would have him, and the Cuban authorities were only waiting for him to get over the attack of typhoid or the Sleeping Sickness – they were not sure what he had – to put him on a ship back to Galicia. The Spanish ambassador, who could afford to be candid, told

Mother, “Madam, if you or your family were wealthy, you would have no problem with your country’s immigration laws.” Mother waited until she was sure there was nothing else to be done to tell Father, and then only when the sailing date of his ship was near. “I do not want to go back,” he said. “If they put me on that ship, I shall jump overboard when it is in the middle of the ocean. I do not want to live.” “Man, what are you saying! You must not be in your right mind,” Mother argued. “You know I am going back to Tampa and that our whole family will work to bring you back. We shall write to Washington, you shall see.” It was a coincidence that the ship for Spain left on the same day as ours for Tampa. I was sorry that the voyage to Tampa lasted only a day, for we had a cunning little cabin with two berths and I liked the idea of sleeping with Mother in the lower one. When we went to bed, Mother called up to my sister and told us for the first time that Father was on his way to Spain and that she wanted us to pray with her for his safe trip. Then she began to pray, and I was so astonished to hear her speak English that I could not respond. “Our Father who art in Heaven,” said Mother, remembering those Wednesday night meetings at the West Tampa Methodist Church, and my sister, who was nine years old and knew English, echoed from the upper berth, “Our Father who art in Heaven.” At first I did not like it, and I interrupted Mother to tell her I did not know English, and she said, “That is all right, you listen and wish your father well.” Lying on my side, absorbing my mother’s warmth and watching the moonlight coming in the porthole, I felt good, and went off to sleep, as on Christmas Eve, certain that when morning came some aunt or uncle or sister or cousin – not Santa Claus – would have made my good wishes come true. Forty years later, in the spring of 1965, I went to Galicia to see the country where my father was born and died, feeling excited at the prospect, emotions which were but a slight resurgence of my childhood feelings, for intellectually I was cool now: I had long ago assimilated the knowledge that the goodbyes of the poor are forever, their ten-months strikes are never won, and the letters they write to Washington are not read but weighed.



Jose Yglesias at the age of five in Havana to visit his ailing father.

My father went back to Miamán, the little aldea on the mountainside, writing seldom and then not at all when the paralysis got worse; after a year, he was good only to take care of the cows, getting up before dawn to lead them up to the forest where, if the flies bit, they could not run into fields under cultivation. When he could not do that, he lay at home, and when the women could no longer take care of him, they took him to the hospital at Santiago de Compostela; the hospital kept him a few weeks only, until they realized that he was incurable and could only be given nursing care, so they arranged to transfer him to a charity home; there he spent the last three

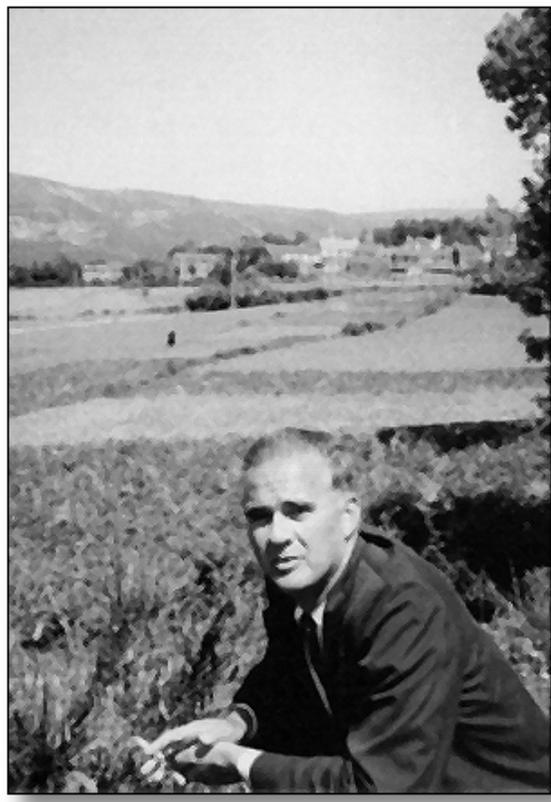
years of his life. Just before I left for Europe in the summer of 1964, I asked Mother what she had heard about his stay there and what was the name of the place. “Well, you can imagine, his mother could not see him often. They were poor and the city was far away. I remember that she said – or the man who used to write the letters for her – anyway, she wrote that he did not talk to her. She did not know whether it was the paralysis or whether he just did not wish to talk.” Mother rubbed the lobe of her right ear between two fingers, a habit with her when pensive, and said, “Your father was a very sociable man.”

Mother came to New York to see me and my wife and our eleven-year-old son off to Europe, and she brought a copy of Father’s baptismal papers for me; also, the last letter she received from Miamán, two years after Father died, announcing the death of his widowed sister. After that the old woman, which is how we always referred to Father’s mother, never had another letter written to her daughter-in-law in America; that last letter was written in 1933, so I knew I had no more relatives in Galicia, for the old woman had never mentioned any. I planned to spend a year in Spain, however, and I promised my mother and sister to go to Galicia, look up Miamán, find Father’s grave, and talk to people in the aldea who might remember Father or the old woman; I had a camera and I planned to take pictures to send back to them in Tampa and thus lay to rest this ghost which haunted all three of us.

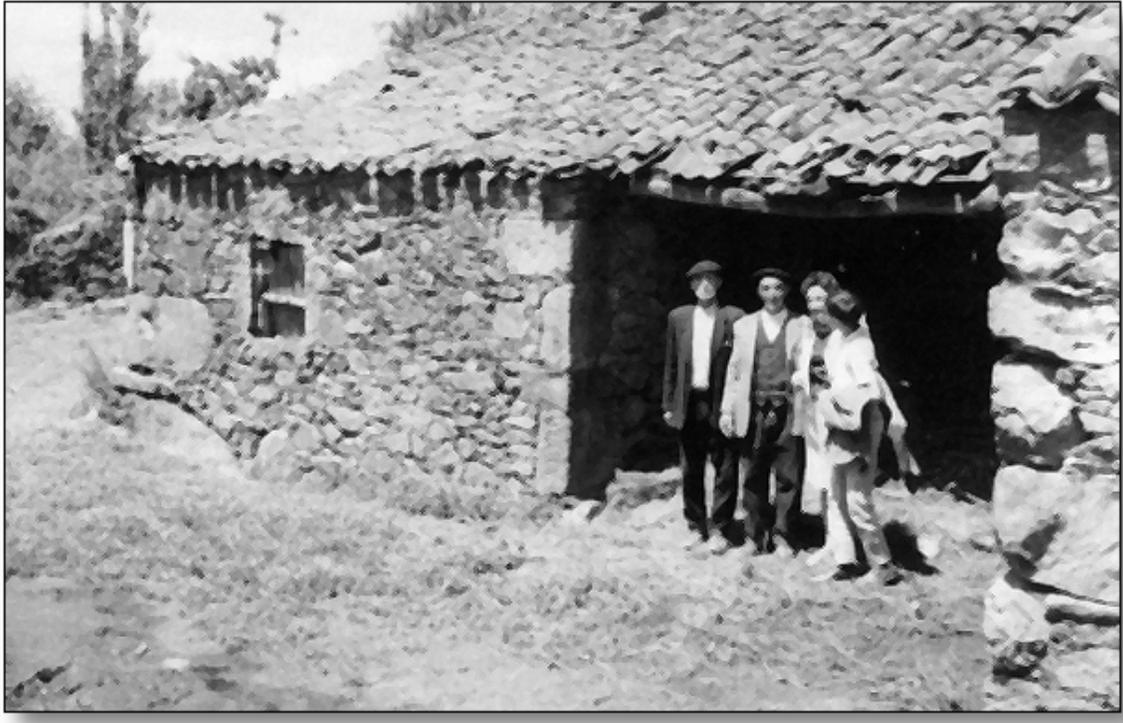
“And so,” I said to Mother, “you did not write again after the old woman didn’t answer your last letter?”

Mother sighed, as if the memory of those years were a hard rock so imbedded in the past that it was too much to drag it up now. “Oh no, I wrote several times. Though not too often, for I liked to send ten dollars or at least five with each letter and – and, you know.”

There it was, the old uncrushable rock of guilt: the old woman had had an invalid son dumped on her and what had we done to help? My sister and I had gone over the situation many times in the past: the old woman had been widowed before Father left Galicia at the age of thirteen, so was her daughter by the time Father returned, life in Galicia was hard, and in her old age the old woman had without warning to take care of an invalid son and a sick daughter. And it had been her terrible task to turn him over to hospitals and charity homes. Charity homes! We knew what they were in our country and could imagine how much worse in Spain. Even after the war, when my sister and I had married and had less pity for ourselves (for anyone could see that we had



Jose Yglesias in front of the Galician village where his father was born.

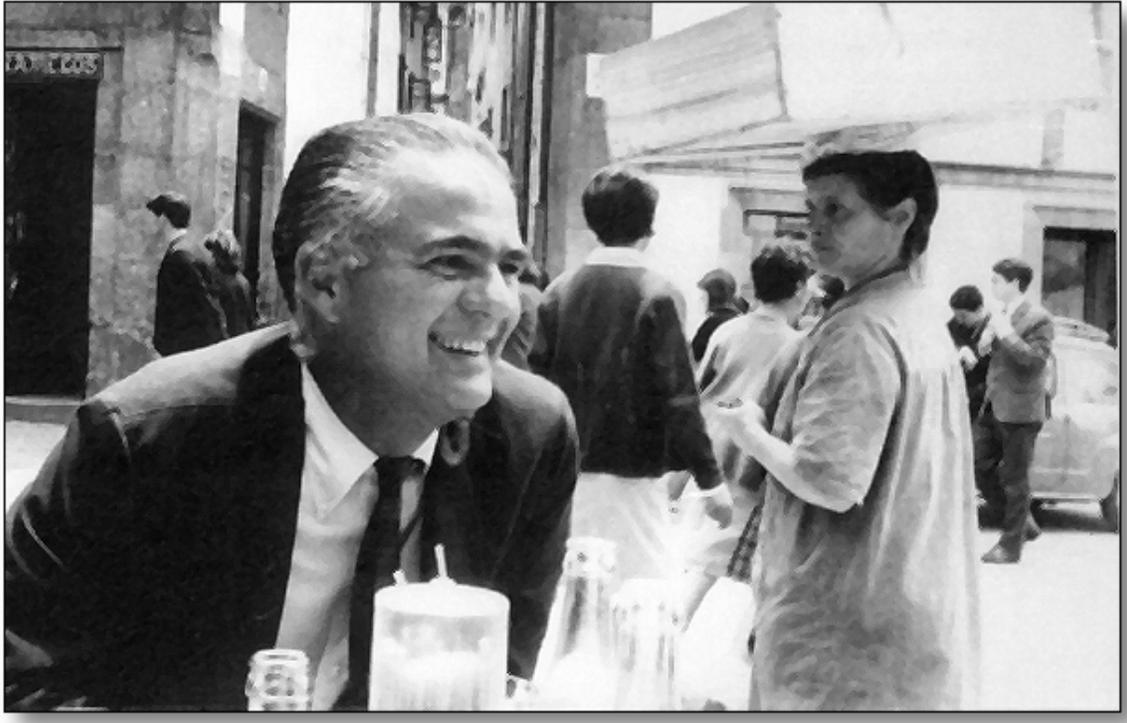


Helen and Rafael (right) Yglesias posed in 1965 with two distant cousins in the entrance of the Galician farm building where the father of Jose Yglesias was born.

survived the terrible blow to ourselves) we would often sit out on the porch, after the others had gone to bed, and talk about what must have happened after Father's ship reached Vigo with him still – thank God! – on board. By the time we recounted the last visit the old woman paid him, walking many miles to Santiago only to sit before a mute man who simply stared ahead, we would decide it was foolish to lacerate ourselves that way: we were kids, after all, when it happened, and Mother did send what little money she could find.

One of the reasons we still thought about the old woman after the war was that Mother regularly mailed packages of clothes to a Spanish family in Toulouse. They were one of thousands who crossed into France when the north of Spain fell to Franco's army, and the cigarmakers in Tampa, supporters of the Republic, passed around to each other the names of families in exile now suffering at the hands of the French. Galicia had immediately fallen when the civil war broke out, and often my sister would say, "What a problem! What if Father had lived or the old woman? We would have been sending things to the fascist side!" And when I decided to go to Spain, my sister said on the long-distance phone, "You know – isn't it funny? you may be able to find records of the old woman and Father because they say nothing was destroyed during the war. It wasn't like Asturias where people who go back can't find records at the churches or city halls."

We left in October and entered Spain at Hendaye, for we had a week before we were due in Barcelona and there was time to take a quick look at the north before settling down for the



Jose Yglesias during his 1965 visit to Spain.

winter. I had a year in Spain ahead of me: no need to hurry to do anything. But I did want to see the north first because my family in the main came from there. Besides my father and my Galician uncle, there were uncles who came from Asturias; my brother-in-law had spent several years in a country village in Asturias, and he gave me letters to people there. The Spain that most drew me was not the one everyone had heard about: not Madrid, Barcelona, Andalusia, but Asturias and Galicia. Asturias because it is rebellious, Galicia because it is my father's province.