

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-33: Report From a Cuban Prison III      535 Fifth Avenue  
Cell Number 8                                      New York, New York  
December 27, 1972

Gradually my eyes adjust to the gray light of the cell, such a gloomy contrast to the hotel room I'd left just an hour before. This is No. 8: ten feet long from its iron door to a back wall; 8 feet from side to side. (The longer side, front to back, can be stepped off in five pinched paces, a distance I cover on an average of 6000 times, or 12 miles every day.) In the corner nearest the doorway, a hole in the tile flooring serves as a toilet as well as a drain for the cold water shower that flows from a spigot attached to the wall 7 feet above. It's an economical use of space, a shower, drinking water and flush toilet all in one.

Along the sidewalls, partitioned off from the corner is the bed-board, a wooden plank set into an iron frame that is suspended from the wall by two, iron-link chains. This plank also doubles as a table, standing chest-high as I am before it. Meals that I take in the months to come will be more comfortably eaten here, standing, as I have no chair in the cell. I notice that in the center of the board, one enterprising prisoner has carved an 8" chessboard, a task carefully done, although it never is of much use to me, for though I eventually fashion 32 chess figures from bits of string and cloth taken from my bedding, I find that playing against myself is as great a bore as not playing at all. The enjoyment is in the making, not the moving of the pieces.

Along the back wall there is a 3 foot slit that is supposed to be a window. Due, however, to a large cement overhang I am prevented from seeing anything at all outside. The overhang has obviously been so designed: an air duct that allows fresh air into the cell but prevents the prisoner from viewing what seems to be an enclosed courtyard below, perhaps the courtyard into which I had been driven two hours before. Moreover, because of the positioning of the overhang, only a bit of refracted light penetrates the darkness within the cell, and then only in the late afternoon when the sun sets low on the horizon. Otherwise, one lives in shadow except for meal-times when a small light bulb, sealed off in a grate above the door, is switched on by the guards outside. I soon crave the light as much as the meals that come with it.

Around me, the stuccoed walls are painted in fresh-colored paint that time has left faded and scarred from markings of prisoners that have been here before me. Each wall is a testimony from them--dates, a plea for love, for

pity, or most often, a short prayer for freedom. Each has also selected a spot to chisel out a calendar, usually a series of slants and crosses that measure each prisoner's most cherished possession: his time.

Walking the walls of my cell, I accept these gouged lines to be messages from friends, men with whom I now identify. It becomes depressing, therefore, to move about No. 8 counting the days, weeks, and months some were confined here. The shortest calendar I can find contains 40 chiselled slashes while the longest is a series of 265 lines, each line a very long day.

One of my predecessors I see immediately was a gifted artist. His name, at least the one he has signed on the work he has done on the walls, was Orlando. Orlando left three portraits for me--two he'd done together, somehow fusing them into a composite portrait of agony. The other, a religious study I think, could have been and probably was the face of Christ.

Often during a long day I sit on the bed-board and study these portraits, watching the contours of each appear and disappear depending upon the angle of light that enters and leaves the cell. As the day moves on, the portrait nearest the outside wall, in this case, the one of agony, slowly comes into focus. But then as the day ends, that face disappears and is covered in shadow, leaving only the tranquil face, the one nearest the iron door, visible. Then it, too, disappears.

Examining these portraits, I estimate that Orlando must have been in No. 8 a very long time to produce them, limited as he was, without the usual implements of the painter, brushes or paints. The process he used was painfully slow. First, he outlined his figures using a sharp-edged instrument, probably the pewter spoon each prisoner was allowed during the few minutes that meals were passed through the door of the cell. Hurrying his meal, he moved to the wall to give shape to his figures with the spoon; then using a rag or perhaps a bit of cloth torn from his sheeting, he carefully washed the wall's surface. In this way, he would lift several layers of dirt, paint and plaster that in the end produced a face, one that actually emerged from the wall itself.

Looking again about the cell, I wonder how long I am expected to remain here. (In the end, any of the estimates I make always proved to be too optimistic.) I move the wooden

plank down on to its iron frame, position the mattress and begin making my bed, catching myself trying to tighten the frayed sheets with hospital corners, a habit retained from boys camp and later the Marine Corps. This tightening of the sheets has little effect really, since the mattress can't hold them--gaps in the stuffing are so large and the mattress so thin that there is really only a piece of cloth between me and the board as I finally lay down. Nevertheless, I'm happy for the chance to rest after what seems the passage of an entire day. Yet it's only 6:00 A.M. Christmas morning; and I'm cold. So I wrap myself into the top sheet and try to escape into a dream.

Sleep nor dreams come easily, however, as I lay trying to absorb the isolation of imprisonment. From No. 8, the professor seemed smug indeed, a non-being now, vanished, obliterated. Had they always planned it this way? Has there been no mistake?

Suddenly the sound of the lead pin slipping from its catch in the cell door's peep-hole alerts me to a pair of brown eyes peering at me from the small slit through the cell door. Through the slit I can see part of a white helmet too, a helmet which has an insignia that has a large "DSE" painted in green on it. Then a number I can't quite make out but think must be mine is called out. I check the little white card I've been given that morning, my tarjeta, and hold it obligingly up to the eyes in the slit. The eyes and the helmet nod and disappear together as the peep-hole closes up again.

Then some keys jangle, the lock snaps, the bolt slides and to my delight the cell door starts to open. Turning on rusted hinges it squeaks (each door in the cell block has its own sound that identifies which of us is being "conducted out"). Light from the corridor floods into the cell and I feel good that, at least, something is happening, that maybe they've realized it's all been a mistake.

The faces of the three unsmiling guards awaiting me do not lend much support to this notion, however, especially the guard wearing the white helmet. He also wears a white shoulder strap and holster attached to his waist, the first evidence I've seen of a weapon in the prison. About the size of a Big-Ten tackle, he's just the right man for the job.

The warden with the keys closes the door to number eight behind me and the helmeted guard points me toward the right and says, "Vamanos," We go. Then he whistles a

high-pitched whistle that is a warning to other guards that a prisoner is being conducted from the cell-block. So long as I am out of my cell, security will prevent other prisoners from moving through the corridors at the same time.

The cell-block, completely air conditioned, makes the air colder outside my cell than in it. It even smells differently, a peculiar odor, sweet and pungent, that reminds me of an undertaker's parlor.

As we move along, my cellblock becomes a corridor that leads to a glass-encased guard-post, that becomes another corridor to the left that becomes a series of doorways, that finally becomes one door, a wooden, sound-proofed one with the number 102 stencilled on it.

My guard then points toward the left of the door, indicating where I'm to stand as he moves and exactly as one learned in the military, front knuckles forward--raps on 102 three times.

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Received in New York on February 6, 1973.