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FJM-35: REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON V
Dialogue with Diaz

The day began in the cell block when it was still dark outside. The light above the door flashed on to start a five o'clock morning check and a guard, holding a mop, called me to the peephole. "The cell has to be washed down and then mopped with this (a long stick with rags affixed to it) . . . understand?"

I did, but instead of passing the handle through the peephole, the guards held a conference and decided that I didn't sufficiently understand. There must be a demonstration. So the warden was summoned to open the cell door and the guards clamored in with their disinfectant in hand. The white liquid was splashed over the tile floor and then the smaller guard began to mop it up with great enthusiasm. Rinsed and dried the floor didn't look a great deal better, but everyone nodded his approval. A proper job all right!

"Gracias."

"De nada."

"North American?"

"Yes."

"Hijacker?"

"No, the lieutenant thinks I'm a CIA agent. But I'm not really." (added hastily)

"Oh. . . ." Embarrassed silence. All eyes dropped and the guards made for the door.

Hijackers were also interrogated in the DSE detention center. For a time, I lived next to two of them, one named Russell and the other, Peter. I never spoke with them, although once the funnier one, Russell, knocked on my wall asking me what language I spoke. But my position was to keep my own council and break no rules. The last thing I wanted to do was antagonize my "Official," Diaz. I enjoyed their comments, however, as they complained about the delay in their processing (all hijackers go through a series of

interrogation sessions in order to verify their authenticity, background and reasons for wanting to live in Cuba). After three weeks, I sadly heard them go, laughing as they greeted each other on their way to a special house reserved for them.

Meanwhile the other prisoners nearby sloshed about their cells, mops swishing, water running as they worked in silence to clean their compartmentalized honeycombs of pain. Only one sound, from the other end of the cellblock disrupted the established order. In a whimper, barely audible at first, one of the prisoners began to cry for his little boy. "Nino, nino, I want to see my nino . . . ." Occasionally, the guards tried to comfort him suggesting that if he did what his Official wanted, he would not have so long to wait before he could be released. But it was without much effect as the whimper became a wail whenever the guards approached.

Touching as it did on my own self-pity, that whimpering was very depressing. The mornings were difficult enough to get through without listening to another prisoner's anguish. It grated on me and I resented him for it. I sensed too that the others in the cell-block resented it too. There was an accepted code in the prison, unarticulated but real: no shouting, no crying, no kicking of cell doors in a tantrum. Perhaps it was the Cuban idea of manliness, machismo, or acceptance of the notion that each man's pain had to remain his own affair.

There was certainly no reprisal for shouting at the guards or talking in the block as, on many occasions, prisoners did make public declarations of their innocence, shout out their names, explain why they were arrested, etc. One man, "Francés," used to make such a declaration every night, telling us when he was arrested, how long he had been held in solitary (85 days when I was there), and why it was a mistake for the Revolution to consider him a counter-revolutionary. "I'm no animal, I'm a Revolutionary. I fought with Che. I'm an internationalist. My name is Francés, Francés was my nom de guerre and it still is Francés." This availed him nothing however. The guards simply ignored him and after a few weeks he quieted down.

Generally, I discovered, the detained realized that there was nothing to be gained by emotional displays. There was nothing that could be done about our imprisonment, so it was accepted. Talking or complaining on the other hand

might well antagonize the Official handling the case; so the only time most men called a guard was to ask for a blanket, toothpaste or an extra bar of soap. Otherwise there was only the sound of running water, of a fist beating against the wall, and the ever-present jangling of keys as they hung from the warden's belt.

Two hours after morning check, as light began to create shadows in the cell, another guard opened the peep-hole. Breakfast time had come and two freshly-baked rolls were handed to each prisoner. (If asked, the guard would provide more if he had them.) I accepted mine and repaired to the bed-plank, there to carefully pull the rolls apart in sections so that what might have been dull and tasteless fare became a bit of a feast and even more of a past-time.

I always finished breakfast with a gulp of water from the spigot, then wrapped a sheet over me for warmth and began -- with shoulders hunched, head down, staring at the tiles -- to walk the five paces back and forth between the wall and door of the cell. So automatically was this done that I would soon lose consciousness of the cramped space, the walls and isolation of solitary in number eight. Instead I transported myself into the past, idealized perhaps, but revived more vividly than I ever thought imaginable. Every channel of love and hate, desire, success or failure was reopened and I flowed into them all: the last conversation with a girl about our troubled romance, the first honest exchange with a college roommate just prior to his wedding, the innocent yet insensitive betrayal of a brother's confidence.

Rummaging through the past this way, I found the regrets seemed to weigh heaviest of all. Blotting out the good times, the lost opportunities and failures converged with feelings of self-pity to create a psychic syndrome of depression and guilt. Then the realization that twenty or thirty years in prison meant that there would never be an opportunity to make up for that lost time, for all the mistakes, was psychically speaking, hell in the truest theological sense, that is, guilt without redemption. So while those emotional reruns got me through the long days of solitary, they left me hovering above the past like a ghost.

Thus, the isolation of solitary, past associations, the sense of guilt and the thought that I would never be able to expiate it created the kind of mentality that Diaz used to complement his interrogation process. First, the

isolation of solitary, eliminating as it did all ties to the outside world, caused only one relationship to count, the one I had with Diaz. He became everything to me. Like the guard said, nothing could be done without him. Not even a tube of toothpaste or a bar of soap got through that peephole without his consent. And as my only lifeline to the world outside, he took on a dimension close to the source of life for me.

Second, my own personal depression about the past brought on in solitary, aided Diaz in his effort to break down the street personality, the self-conception I had as a free individual interacting with others. All the regret about how I'd wasted the past, how time had been so poorly appreciated worked in conjunction with Diaz's insistance that I was guilty, deserved to be punished and be cut off from others.

I could feel my self-confidence being eroded as all the old supports, plans and people that once sustained me were pulled away. The distinction between who was right and who wrong began to blur within a very short time. If I didn't constantly affirm my innocence -- I began to wonder how long I could -- the whole question of guilt or innocence wouldn't matter anymore.

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One hour, two, then three hours passed this way and it was mid-afternoon on the second day when, turning from the back wall to pace once more toward the front, I saw the white helmet in the peephole. Just as before, the same guard asked for my number -- "73?" -- then said "Vamanos." I knew Diaz wanted me again.

We repeated, as we did every time, our standard opener:

Diaz: "Como andas?"

Number 73: "Terrible. The same as yesterday."

Diaz looked tired, his eyes lined red with what he explained was the result of a night's work on my case. He explained that he had found my diary, the one in which I'd faithfully recorded each day's impressions, and had it translated so that he could read it. "It was very helpful to me," he said. "Have you thought some more then?"

"Nothing but . . . that's all I have to do. The truth is that I'm not a spy. I'm not associated in any way with the CIA. You know about my uncle. But I didn't work for him, although I once thought about it . . . even had an interview, but never went further than that."

"Tell me about that. Do you find your uncle's work interesting?"

What followed was a brief discussion of my uncle, then a request that I detail in writing my past association with him for Diaz. The request was a frightening one (anything in writing could be used in evidence before a tribunal) but I agreed, figuring that honesty about everything was in my best interest. If Diaz was harboring any evidence of my guilt based on association I thought best to deal with them directly and truthfully. Even the most innocuous lie,the least resistance to total truth could lead Diaz to think that I was lying about other, more important things.

"Why is it you think I'm a spy? Is it the Institute?"

"Ah, the Institute! . . . Yes, I know all about that. I told you I had been investigating you for months. All those foundations are connected with the government, however much they hide it. They all are. But I'm not interested in that. If you are not an agent, why is it you spent so much time looking for problems here? Asking about Padilla, seeking information about the army and other sensitive matters? Why didn't you look for the good things in the Revolution?"

"I realized the Revolution had good points. I've seen that and as you know, I've tried honestly to record those efforts, but so are there problems. And to be honest, I don't agree or else don't understand sufficiently certain policies of the Revolution, particularly with regard to culture, to the judicial system, or the press. Another thing, why the recent attacks on homosexuals? These are things that I wanted answers to, and so I asked about them. You know that I tried to arrange interviews with the officials responsible for those policies, like the National Council of Culture. Frankly, I was disappointed. I think if the Revolution has a line it should be able to explain why.

"No, that is not why you asked those questions. That's all a facade. You are not being honest with me. You're just another Golendorf, and like him you'll go before a Tribunal and get 20 years. I know, because I handled that case. Like him that is where you will go . . . the carcel." With his hand over his wrist Diaz made a gesture that symbolized the manacles of imprisonment. It was a favorite mannerism. "Continue to lie like this and you will be in trouble. Tell us the truth and the Revolution will help you."

Charged as a CIA agent was, I thought, bad enough, but the realization that another foreigner, Pierre Golendorf, was in prison after Diaz had interrogated him was like a well timed blow that produced real fear.

A French citizen, Golendorf had been living in Cuba for two years when he was arrested in February 1971 as he was about to leave the country. Held incommunicado for three months, he was officially charged with espionage (for working with the CIA which he denied) and held for trial. In September 1971, he was taken before a Revolutionary Tribunal, judged guilty and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Today he labors on a prison farm where his Cuban wife is occasionally permitted to visit him.

At this point, Diaz decided to end our discussion. I didn't have an opportunity to answer him because his hand was in the air as I started to object again. Instead, he stood and moved toward the door, motioning me brusquely to get up and start back to my cell. "We shall see," Diaz added in the doorway.

No more discussion. There was only the two minute walk back to the cell block and then a short delay while the warden opened my cell. The door shut, and I started once again to pace.

Frank Mc Donald

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