

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Hearing bongos beyond the walls, it's hard not to think about days feting with Cuban friends. They were always the best part of any celebration. Unfortunately, had I been a bit more perceptive or confronted them with the changes that occurred in the context of our friendships, I might have avoided my arrest. At least, the danger signals were there. As with Hebert, one of the most selfless and gregarious of Cuban Revolutionaries!

Hebert and I met for the first time the day I arrived from Mexico on my initial visit to Cuba the summer of 1970. It was hot, heat waves mixing with the fumes from the turbo-prop engines, then rising off the black asphalt into my face. But that didn't matter. I had finally arrived, crossing an invisible yet very real barrier separating dramatically different societies. Isolated and diplomatically cut off (at the time only Mexico and Canada had full diplomatic relations with Havana) Cuba was in the process of constructing a socialist system unique to the hemisphere. I was anxious to see whether an island nation of 8 million was all that much of a menace to, rather than a model for, the Caribbean and Latin America. "WELCOME TO CUBA" the sign said. "THE FIRST FREE TERRITORY IN AMERICA."

I walked toward customs, feeling a little uneasy--olive green uniforms holding sub-machine guns everywhere... not very encouraging to any hijacker. They were the first but best indication that Cubans take their security very seriously. Observing guards, I didn't notice Hebert approach and was startled when his bulky shape intercepted me at the door of customs to ask if I was the North American that was expected to lecture on Caribbean affairs. About thirty with a brush cut, he seemed eager to please. I said I was that

*Names and incidental circumstances have been altered in this series. The dialogues are reconstructed from notes taken after the conversations took place.



North American, happy to find a friendly face. Hebert Nunez then introduced himself as my guide, the word is "responsible" in Cuban terminology, and suggested that the air conditioned reception room would be more comfortable to talk in while customs and immigration took care of the rest. The cool air was as welcome as the cup of rich Cuban coffee, already sweetened, that someone handed us as we sat down to talk about the details of my stay.

We were both immediately at ease. Hebert told me that he was a professor at the University of Havana, an associate professor of history in the Faculty of Humanities and that his specialty was early Revolutionary history, that is, the years from 1953 to 1960.

I was delighted. In Hebert, I had found a very informed secondary source about the Movimiento 26 Julio (M-26). He also had to be highly trusted by the Revolution since a book about the M-26 entailed research into early political conflicts between Fidel and the old guard of the now-defunct Partido Socialista Popular. The P.S.P. originally opposed the M-26 and Castro when the Sierra campaign began; at the time Moscow was opting for cooperation rather than confrontation with Baptista. When the M-26 was victorious, however, Blas Roca, Anibel Escalante and the other leaders of the P.S.P. joined in support of the Revolution, and in the process alienated many of the middle class, anti-communists like Hubert Matos (now imprisoned in the Cabana) who had fought with Fidel against Baptista. Today, after a decade of ideological bucking and weaving the old P.S.P. and M-26 cadre have melded into the Partido Comunista de Cuba (P.C.C.).

Still very much controlled by Castro, the Central Committee of the P.C.C. is composed of 86 men and 4 women, most of whom were with Fidel in the Sierra. Of the nine men who comprise the Political Bureau, that is the men who direct the Revolution, three are former leaders in the P.S.P.; one was with the Directorio, a revolutionary student organization; and the other four men part of the M-26 with Fidel. As for the Ministries, these too are headed at the top by former M-26 leaders, although two key positions, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister without Portfolio (read economy) are filled by former leaders of the P.S.P.

"I'm happy you're interested in that," Hebert said, "I'm even writing a book about the July 26 movement. After all the men in the Sierra didn't have too much time to write

things down. Che is really our only Revolutionary author."

In the months to come, and especially during my second stay, Hebert and I would spend hours discussing these biographic details, conversations that Diaz also shows great interest in. In this respect I learned a hard lesson, that there is more than one bureaucracy in Cuba and that permission or approval from say, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the university to hold an interview may not necessarily insure the blessings of the bureaucrats from State Security. By the same token, I didn't suspect that the innocent conversations I had with Hebert would jeopardize me or him. The notion that those discussions may compromise Hebert with the Revolution plagues me, however.

Besides his insights into the early years of the Revolution's political development, Hebert also shared with me his personal reminiscences of the Sierra campaign since, like so many young men of his generation, he fought in the mountains against Batista. In fact, a memento of those days hangs on the wall of his living room. It's a black and white photo showing him and five other men proudly posing for the photographer. Hebert, the biggest and obviously the proudest of the lot is smiling broadly, holding a rifle at port arms. There is someone else in the photo Hebert takes pride to point out. Standing just to Hebert's left is Camilo Cienfuegos with his mustache, cowboy hat and teathy smile that characterize all the pictures I've ever seen of this figure who, apart from Fidel, was the most beloved of the early guerrilla leaders.

"Those were wonderful times," Hebert wistfully said. "They were dangerous times too. I was only 18 then, and much thinner than I am now. Fay and I had just married. We didn't want to wait until the struggle was over. She was in the underground in Holguin and I joined Camilo's column in the Sierra. Then something went wrong. I think someone must have informed on us. Batista's police were alerted and came in search of us. My parents were very anxious about us and sent for me, insisting they wanted Fay and I to go into exile. After a week thinking about it I reluctantly agreed. She and I left separately, and made our way to Havana where each of us met and took asylum in the Venezuelan embassy. From there we went to Venezuela, eventually returning after the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959. It was a very hard decision to make." Hebert shook his head and looked at Fay who, after having raised two girls now of high school age, became head of a special school established for the education and training of Cuba's finest athletes. This was ESPA which was



A WORKER IN A TOBACCO FACTORY FASHIONS CIGARS.
THE PHOTO IS OF CAMILO CIENFUEGOS

located an hour's bus ride from Hebert's home on "O" Street in Vedado. In what used to be known as the Havana Biltmore Beach Club--one of the five most prestigious private clubs in Havana--ESPA began training baseball, volley ball and basketball players and boxers in 1964. Since then, most of the athletes who've consistently beaten U.S. teams in these sports have graduated from there.

I could see that Fay understood implicitly what Hebert was saying, that exile may have cost him a high place in the galaxy of Revolutionary leadership. For had he remained in the Sierra and survived, who knows, perhaps Hebert would now have a top post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead of being an associate professor of history in the Faculty of Humanities.

Not that Hebert was disgruntled about his work. On the contrary, just by the way he showed me around his library and explained to me his various historical projects, it was evident that Hebert loved history. He had collected every copy of Bohemia, Cuba Internacional, Penseamiento Critico, Alma Mater and various other periodicals or news clippings that had anything to do with the early years of the Revolution. Moreover, Hebert's enthusiasm for his work was contagious and anyone who visited his five room apartment invariably found himself standing around the back room, knee high in books, papers and files, talking Cuban history. And as sure as Hebert would keep one there all afternoon lecturing about some esoteric event that related in some way to Fidel's seizure of power, just as certain would be an invitation from Fay to remain for dinner.

At first I would refuse, believing that it was a gesture, especially given the fact that food was rationed. But I soon learned that the invitations were always genuine and that Cubans haven't allowed food rationing to curtail their entertaining.

"Really, we have plenty to go around," Hebert protested when I'd insist on leaving for the hotel. "You don't understand. Figure it out. Each month we get enough food to feed four of us every day. But actually, the girls go to school, and eat there. I eat at the University as you know by just looking at my belly. And Fay's meals of course are provided for her at E.S.P.A. So don't worry, we have more than enough.*

*Hebert and Fay's Ration list reads as follows:

Indeed, Hebert loved to eat! But he also worked very hard, harder I think than any of the other members of his department. He was continually running somewhere, always with that briefcase gripped underneath his arm, like the Mad Hatter always just a few minutes late. Still, he never missed a meal. As soon as the University cafeteria opened up at noon, he would line up with the other students and professors waiting his turn. Moving rapidly, we collected our aluminum trays and passed along in front of those dishing out the daily menu. There was never a selection. The only choice was either to accept or reject the meal proffered: fish, "Russian beef" (a joke for stringy meat), noodles or rice, a piece of bread and some dessert. All this was spooned out to us by perspiring workers who, looking like surgeons in an operating theater, were masked and dressed in white in accordance with the Ministry of Health's rigid standards of hygiene.

Then to the business of eating: there was little talk since lunch was the kind of meal we never lingered over. Besides others were coming along and there was an insufficient number of places for them to sit. So we finished as rapidly as possible, took a drink of water out of our aluminum cups, wiped the trays clean and then deposited them on a conveyor belt that ran directly into the washing machines. Not elegant but healthy and filling enough, the whole affair took no more than 15 minutes and all at a nominal cost of 35 centavos. Later in the afternoon, of course, there would be

PER CAPITA FOOD RATION

<u>Item</u>	<u>Period</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Rice	Monthly	3 lbs.
Meat	Weekly	0.75 lbs.
Grain	Monthly	1.50 lbs.
Fat	Monthly	2.00 lbs.
Eggs	Monthly	24 units
Milk	Daily	1 liter
Fish	Weekly	1.0 lbs.
Chicken	Monthly	2.0 lbs.*
Coffee	Monthly	12 ounces
Beans	Monthly	1.5 lbs.
Bread	Daily	50 grams
Vegetables	Weekly	3.5 lbs.**
Sugar	Monthly	6 lbs.***

* (None for residents in Havana in 1971-72)

** (When available usually during summer months)

*** (Somewhat less in 1972)



merienda, a break in the work schedule during which all students and faculty have a glass of yogurt. Hebert particularly loved soursop, a mixture of Caribbean fruit with yogurt and whether in class or in a discussion he would always be there. Then off he went chugging up the hill, puffing in the heat, late for another appointment.

I left Cuba that first trip after two months and Hebert was at the airport to say good-bye. "Write me, companero," he said; "and don't forget to send me that book you promised. You know the only thing I love more than a good meal is a book. So don't forget!"

I didn't. Hebert received his books and the first thing I did on my return to Havana a year later was to phone him and ask how he'd enjoyed them. "Wonderful," he said in English, "and as you can tell, I'm able to speak English too. I'm taking lessons now!"

Even though he wasn't my guide anymore, Hebert still used to call or come by the hotel as often as his work load permitted. He didn't have much time, however; since my departure he had been elected the official representative of the C.T.C. (Confederation of Cuban Workers) in the Faculty of Humanities. This meant that he was in charge of organizing the voluntary work schedules for everyone in the Faculty, assisted in evaluating work performance and consequently was involved in distributing consumer goods to those selected as meritorious workers. Knowing this, I gave Hebert a way out of a commitment, even though invariably he would never let me down. It was almost a standard routine. "Listen, Hebert, if you can't make it today, don't worry. I can get around on my own."

"Truthfully, Chico, I don't mind at all. I'll be there in an hour. Besides Fay says that all that walking is good for me, I'm losing some weight. But I tell her, the more walking I do, the more energy I'll need. And you know the more energy I use up, the more food I require. After all, food is energy!"

Despite his busy schedule, Hebert and I occasionally managed to find time to take trips into the countryside to visit rural development projects, visits that always sparked Hebert's pride and enthusiasm for the Revolution. "Living in Havana, you don't really see how much is happening. It's so depressing. The streets are breaking up, buildings are falling down and the water mains are bursting. So getting away into the countryside helps me to regenerate myself. I can see why

things are so bad here, because all of the resources are being directed away from the city to the countryside. I never realize the changes taking place for those who live on the land, what differences there are in the lives of people who live in Cieba, in Guanajay, San Andreas, or Vinales. Like Fidel says: 'A minimization of urbanisation. A maximization of ruralization.' Without understanding this, you haven't understood the Revolution."

Usually on these trips, we would join a tour the university organized for foreign academics lecturing at the university during the summer. Most were French and Italian intellectuals eager to learn about the Revolution. In return for volunteering to teach in the Curso Verano during the summer vacation, the Revolution offered these people free transportation to and from Cuba, plus room and board. As one Frenchman said, "it's a nice way to spend the summer while doing something for the cause."

So along with thirty or more chattering French intellectuals, Hebert and I installed ourselves in the back of the bus and amused ourselves with this scene. "If these people represent the French Communist party, I'd hate to think what the French bourgeoisie are like," Hebert disparagingly joked. (This comment reflected not only on the French who, dressed in the latest form-fitted shirts and flared trousers, were forever critical of the least discomfort, but also on the Cubans who at the time expressed exasperation with the defection of the European Left over the Padilla affair.)

Once into the countryside, however, except for the occasional nudge of an elbow that directs my attention to the two French women seated across the aisle from us, Hebert became completely absorbed in whatever we saw. An artificial insemination project: "We have increased our national cattle herd by using new techniques on a national scale. Its really been Fidel who has pushed artificial insemination beginning back in 1965. We purchased Zebu and Holstein bulls, the Zebu for meat durability, the Holsteins' for milk and quality beef. Then we cross-bred them for the best beef given our conditions. Since then our national herd has increased from a 1964 level of 3.7 million head to more than 8 million today. When we have achieved 16 million, we'll be able to slaughter more, about 4 million head a year in order to maintain the herd. That will be enough meat to feed our population and export too.

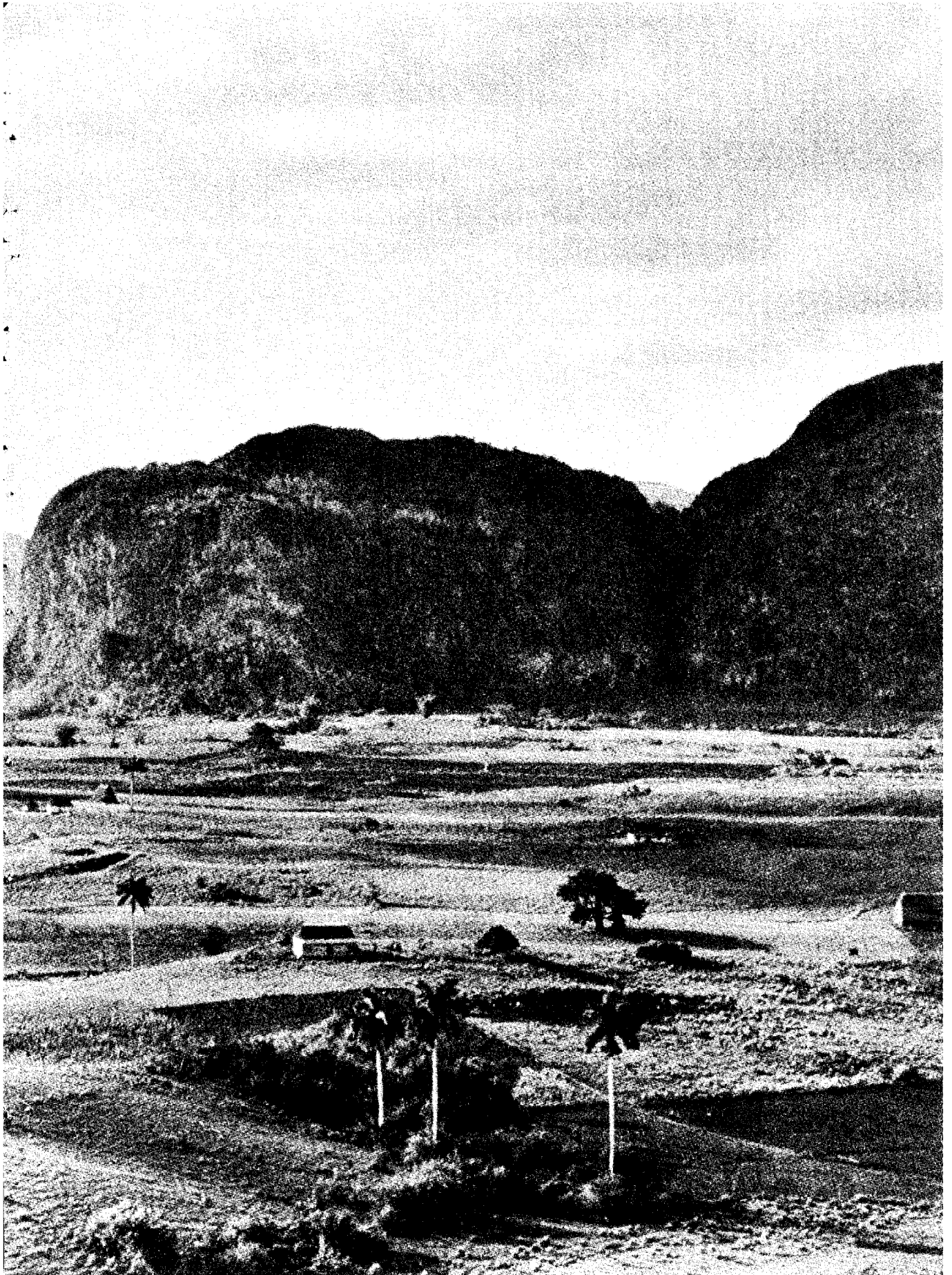
A tobacco farm: "Ah, Pinar del Rio. This is tobacco country, 100,000 acres of nothing but. Seventy per cent of our crop comes from here. And how we love those cigars. There never will be enough production. Right now we export about 7 million cigars each year, mostly to West European countries. So what's left has to be divided up for us, about one cigar or a pack of cigarettes a week right now."

A sugar mill: "That's one of 153 sugar mills or centrales as we call them. During harvest time they operate twenty four hours, day and night. But right now it's dead season and most of the work devoted to repairing and refitting the grinders and extractors. We don't expect a very big harvest this year (1972) due to the drought, maybe 6 million tons at most, like last year.* This is really tragic for us because we depend so heavily on sugar for foreign exchange to purchase the industrial machines we so desperately need to develop. At least 80 per cent of our total export is sugar or sugar by-products. Our problem this year is the same one we've had for several years: manpower. The drought only makes it worse. As with any sugar producing country, our objective is to cut and grind the maximum amount of cane in the shortest possible time. That ideally should take four months, from January through April. But we don't have the mechanization, the cane harvesters to do the job; and so we have to depend on our arms alone. This means mobilizing hundreds of thousands of workers. Knowing that, and then calculating that for every three Cubans who work there are seven who are either too young or too old, in school or some other way unproductive. Consequently, we face a manpower shortage which, coupled with the need to maintain high production in other sectors of the economy, has forced us into an eight month harvesting schedule. Twice as long as we should have and twice as uneconomical as well. Meanwhile, as we try and mechanize, a difficult thing to do given the complexities of matching the machine to the terrain, we'll just have to rely on the technique of mass mobilization of volunteers from schools and other sectors of the economy.

Openly enthusiastic and very eager, Hebert was obviously sincere in his love of the Revolution. He wasn't putting me on or being chauvinistic; nor was he trying to

*The Record 1970 harvest of 8.5 million tons has been followed by two dismal years: 5.9 million tons in 1971 and 4.6 million tons in 1972.





imitate the rhetoric of the official guides from ICAP who were so discreet and cautious. Hebert was honest and committed to the Revolution, identifying with its idealism completely. Admittedly at times this was fatiguing, especially when there were many things one could criticize about the Revolution. But that wasn't his way. Hebert was committed to achievement within the Revolution not so much out of self-interest as self-respect. Above all else, he wanted to be recognized as worthy of the trust of the Revolution. One particular conversation I had with him helps to demonstrate this much more clearly. We had just seen a film version of Joseph Conrad's "Lord Jim," and Hebert was moved by it. "You know, I think, how Lord Jim felt about wanting a second chance to prove himself. I mean how he roamed the world trying to regain his honor. All of us make a mistake: Lord Jim's leaving the ship when it was sinking, a dishonorable thing to have done. Well, exile was something like that for me. Though I know I shouldn't feel guilty about it, I do. And I realize that I've been trying to make up for it ever since."

In the last months before my arrest, we had fewer conversations like this and less contact in general. Hebert began to avoid me and offer excuses, in order to beg out of a dinner commitment or a Sunday afternoon walk with Fay and the girls. Above all, he fended off any political questions that inadvertently arose. Something or someone had clearly intervened, though I wasn't sure of it until the last time we spoke. Hebert that day was unusually nervous and made a point of insisting on talking to me in my hotel room, which at the time I was quite certain was bugged. It all seemed so contrived. To my surprise the conversation focussed on what I was going to do with the "information" I had gathered about the Revolution, particularly the background Hebert had given me about its political leadership.

I was on the bed, facing him while he sat in one of the chairs in front of the windows overlooking the sea and the Malecon below. Dressed in his blue militia uniform--in preparation for a parade that was to be held later that afternoon--Hebert nervously fingered his green cap. "How do I know that you aren't going to use that material to harm the Revolution?" The question coming from a friend both hurt and shocked me. It also made me mad.

"But, Hebert," replied, "What harm can it do? Answer me this! How can someone write about the political developments of the Revolution and not refer to the kind of men that have

formed the backbone of its party. It's important to know where these men have come from, how they earned their political credentials and what qualities they possess as leaders. Many who write about Cuba charge that there is a New Class developing at the top. And you yourself know that even in Cuba that joke about how socialism has become 'sociolismo' or crony-ism."

Hebert did not look convinced. "Yes, I understand that. But we have been discredited so often by journalists who come here and gather facts, only to distort them when they leave. We have to be cautious. I hope you understand. I'm just asking."

"Look, don't worry about it. I haven't gotten secret information that can harm the Revolution in any way. I asked you for no information that couldn't be read in numerous books written about the Revolution. You're getting upset over nothing. Besides, I've been granted a visa and accreditation by MINREX to write about the Revolution. And if I can't inquire about who and for what reasons the members of the Central Committee, the Political Bureau and the top Ministry posts have been selected, it demonstrates I think an insecurity on the part of the Revolution itself."

Hebert appeared to be more relaxed, perhaps only because he had finished what he had been asked to do. Saying I had gathered biographic material about the leaders of the Revolution may be self-incriminating under the circumstances in which I find myself now. Diaz seems to think so anyway.

That conversation in my room was the last Hebert and I ever had, though two days before my arrest I saw him once more. We were at a large outdoor dance sponsored by the Department of History for the entire faculty teaching in Humanities, and Hebert, as chief spokesman for the department, was in great form. There was plenty of rum and even a full course dinner of fried pork, beans and yellow rice. As usual he was harried, moving from the kitchens to the band to the ticket table at the front of the entrance. All the time in a great rush. I was with other friends and so we only passed each other once, just opposite the band shell. "Como va?" he yelled, shouting over the noise of the blaring trumpets. I smiled at him and clapped my hands in his direction, a gesture of congratulation for having done so much to organize the evening. Smiling, he waved back to me, and then moved away into the crowd. We never really had a chance to say goodbye.

Frank M. Donald

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