

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-48: REPORT FROM A CUBAN PRISON XVIII
ST. VALENTINE'S DAY

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According to my wall calendar, 52 days had passed since my arrest on Christmas Eve. I also noted that it was St. Valentine's Day; and I celebrated it by working out a five year reading program, preparing myself mentally for a long prison term. I was certain Diaz was going to prosecute.

Yet day after day, the announcement of my fate never came. For three weeks I had waited, musing about how I would spend the next twenty years in prison. But Diaz had disappeared, leaving me totally isolated without a hint about what was going on. Meanwhile I imagined every sort of possibility. Perhaps he was working on another case or doing a stint of volunteer labor in the cane fields. Maybe he's waiting for some detail to be checked out in the United States before coming to a final decision.

Then on St. Valentine's Day the bolt on the peephole door was pulled. But instead of hearing "Vamanos", the guard called me over to the door and handed me a small, blue-bound book, a biography of Jose Marti, the most famous of Cuba's 19th century patriots. Uncertain as to what it meant, I grabbed the volume to see if indeed my number (206473) was on the cover. It was, in the upper left hand corner, written in what I knew to be Diaz's own hand. Running over the possible meanings of having the book, only one seemed plausible. It had to be a good sign. Otherwise would Diaz ever give a book about the Father of the Cuban Revolution to an "agent of the CIA?" Unlikely.

There was little time to ponder this, for five minutes later, the peephole door swung open and this time the command did come: "Let's go!" And back in the interrogation room, in the straight back chair, I was before Diaz again.

With a wry smile, tilting backwards into his leather chair Diaz asked me how I liked the book. "Very much", I said. "I plan on reading it very slowly, no more than a chapter a day." Then leaning across the desk, his entire body a gesture of concern, Diaz asked me if there was anything else I would like to have. To me, the question seemed like a verbal embrace and I impetuously leapt at it. "Yes", I said. My freedom. I'd like to have my freedom".

"Besides your freedom. Other than that", Diaz said, waving my plea aside.

"Then yogurt", I said. (An afterthought, I remembered those happier days during merienda when, at four o'clock Cubans drink a jar of cold yogurt with pure cane sugar .) Diaz liked that.



His face beamed with that Cuban delight in pleasing a friend. "With or without sugar?" he asked with a laugh.

"With," I replied gratefully.

Then Diaz had another surprise: Would I like to be moved to another cell, to a more comfortable one, say to number 66 in the upper cell-block. "I've arranged it for you," he said. "You'll have more room. It's brighter, and equipped with a real bed, shower and even a light-switch. I think you'll find it preferable to number 8."

As he predicted, I did, discovering first of all the luxury of pacing fifteen across number 66 compared to the ten I had in number 8. This, the bed, shower, lights and especially the jug of yogurt and sugar (not once but twice daily) was as good as life can get in a Cuban prison. More important, however, was the symbolic value of these changes.

A new tone infused the interrogation, which really had become dialogues or conversations. Each time, still on the average of every other day, Diaz was more considerate. For the first time he spoke freely and easily, talking about himself, his personal values, his attitude toward the Revolution, home life, family and education. No longer abrasive or hostile, he was a different person.

"When I was 14, during the campaign in the Sierra, even then I wanted to join Fidel. But I was too young to carry a weapon, even though there were boys of fifteen who had them. Rifles were too scarce. A boy had to prove himself before the Comandante would issue one. So I proved myself as a messenger, carrying communiques back and forth between the army columns. . . .

After the triumph of the Revolution, I wanted to stay with the Rebel Army but my superiors told me that what the Revolution really wanted of me was to finish high school. It was hard to give up my ties to the Rebel Army; but I finished high school and then joined the Ministry of Interior when it was formed in 1961. I've been here ever since."

"So now you are only 26 and already an official investigator for the State Security!"

"Right! What's the matter? Do I look older?"

"No, but you act older. I'm 30, as you know, and I have always assumed you were older than I was."

"Age isn't important, especially for us. The Revolution has given my generation great responsibility at a very early age. Ever since my 14th birthday, I've devoted my life to the Revolution--which is not just a pseudonym for something outside of myself. I feel it as a part of me. I am part of it. So I have been entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the Revolution from its enemies, and particularly Enemy Number One. You know what that is, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"The CIA, of course. That's our enemy Number One. You must understand why it is that the Revolution must defend itself. It's the duty of every Revolutionary to protect the gains made by the Revolution, a duty that not only falls upon my shoulders, as a member of the Department of State Security, but also upon the workers, the students, the young. This is why, for example, others like Padilla (Herberto Padilla, Cuban poet and critic of the Castro regime arrested in February 1971) have been brought here and questioned about their activities. Padilla and I discussed his activities just as you and I have done. Not, by the way, for what he wrote but for what he did, for making contact with foreigners linked with the CIA. Eventually, he re-evaluated his position and realized that the Revolution deserves a total commitment from a poet just as it does from the workers and students. For in our struggle with imperialism, it is the task of the writer to inspire the people, to ennoble the struggle. Here, like everyone else, a writer must define his position. We cannot make exceptions for intellectuals. Hear me well. Neutrality is not a revolutionary position."

I didn't say anything, content to let Diaz finish his thought. But then, in his characteristic offhand way, he asked me whether I thought myself a revolutionary. "What is your position?" he asked.

Not sure what to say, I balked. "My position? . . . Well, I think being a revolutionary is a very serious business. It's not what I'd call myself at all. When I think of a revolutionary, I think of Hebert and Delia, Lisa, Manuel and Andreas--even though you may not think they are. I consider them revolutionaries, the best the Cuban Revolution has produced. Me? I'm what you might call progressive, but certainly not a revolutionary.

"Would you like to be?" Diaz asked.

"I think that depends on how you define what a revolutionary is or does. To throw that word about is an easy thing to do. Anyone can say he or she is a revolutionary. Being a revolutionary is something else entirely. In our times, it can be a revolutionary act just to tell the truth. It's also revolutionary to see inequities and injustices and feel compelled to say something about them. How one goes about changing things is another question. That, I think, is up to each individual to decide for himself."

"Not entirely," said Diaz. "The individual must act, yes! But you must understand that in this world, in time and space, a gigantic struggle is taking place, a real struggle between the oppressed peoples of the world and their oppressors. For us, the oppressor is an economic and political system that exploits half the world, a system that controls sixty percent of the world's wealth and consumes a third of its available energy resources every year. U.S. imperialism. Now either you are a part of it or you are opposed to it. There is no middle ground. Remember, and I'm very serious about this, those who take to the middle are the ones who get bloodied the most. There is no protection for anyone in the middle."

Stopping there, Diaz looked down, apparently considering something. A few moments went by and then he brought the tips of his fingers up to his chin, folding them there as if he were going to pray. Looking back up at me, he blinked as though he was coming back to reality. "How would you like to wear olive green?"

"Olive green?" I asked.

"Yes! Olive green. Like this." Pulling on his uniform shirt sleeve, Diaz indicated that he was talking about his uniform. "How would you like to be my secretary? You could join the Ministry and work with us here."

"What? You've got to be kidding," I scoffed. "What would Piniero¹ say? Wouldn't he have any objections?"

¹Major Manuel Piniero, a member of the Central Committee and Chief of the Department of the State Security, was Diaz' superior. Piniero married an American from New York.

"He will do what I suggest. Whatever I say, what I recommend, is good enough for him." Diaz looked very serious. "Besides, you could translate for me. You're bright and you could serve the Revolution."

"Yes, but I'm no Revolutionary. I'm not even Cuban. Don't you have to be Cuban to wear olive green?" I was amazed. I wondered, is this a ploy to tie me to a life in Cuba, the "solution" Diaz had so often suggested he had for me? "Furthermore, what about my novia (fiancee)?" I asked, delving for reasons to reject the idea. "What if I wanted to marry someone who was North American?"

Diaz threw his head back and laughed. "Bring her here!" He raised his hand to imitate the motion of a plane in flight. "She could come here after a while, maybe in a few years you could even return to the United States. How does it sound?"

"But I'm an American!"

"So. . . . We have many North Americans working here as you know. We're not against North Americans living in Cuba. Those that are friends anyway. We even have them working in the Ministry of Interior."

"I don't think I'd fit in somehow," I said dismayed.

Looking exasperated, even a bit disappointed, Diaz rose. "It's not important. I'm only joking. That's enough for today. We can talk tomorrow."

The suggestion about olive green never arose again. But the next time Diaz had something else, a statement for me to sign. "It's a summary of our conversations to date," he said. "That's all, I wrote it simply to detail the facts of your case. It's for the record."

I looked uncertain and so he reassured me. "Don't worry! It says nothing about you being an agent, nothing about espionage. There are no hidden tricks and it's not going to be used for the Tribunal. What's the matter? Don't you trust me? Don't you trust the Revolution? I'm your friend." I looked up at him in amazement. "Do you really mean that?" I said. "Yes! Now take a look at the document, read it carefully, change it if you want, and then sign it."

I looked it over. At the top of the page in caps was a single word: "Declaration." Then followed a text, written in legalese, with a "whereas" introducing each new paragraph. It sounded very official, but the language was straightforward,

even blunt, very much like Diaz himself. No mention was made of the CIA except for a reference to my uncle. In sum, the Declaration stated I was a writer invited to Cuba who had gathered "sensitive information" for a book. In pursuing this material, what Diaz called "socio-economic" information, I violated a "freeze" currently imposed on all such activity. The fact that I had an uncle in the CIA or that I had once considered joining the agency was a complicating though not relevant factor in my case. Nevertheless, because I had gathered sensitive information about the Revolution, I had incurred a "moral debt to the International Revolutionary Movement in general and to the Cuban Revolution in particular, a debt that could only be expiated by accepting whatever task the Revolution commended to me."

"What is this Moral Debt?" I asked. "And what is the task I'm supposed to perform?"

"First, I must explain to you what we mean by moral. Our Revolutionary Morality is opposed to what we call Bourgeois Morality. We see man as a social being whose life cannot be considered outside the society in which he lives. Society entrusts him with a series of imperatives or standards which condition his behavior. In this way society imposes morality on the individual. In your society, Bourgeois Society, it is immoral to violate the sacred right of Private Property. Your morality punishes those who steal because they are hungry, imprisons those who rebel against the unjust order, while at the same time it blesses the large corporations, the large landowners, the monopolies that control the power in your society. Isn't there a standard joke that if, in North America, you steal a loaf of bread, they'll throw you in jail; but if you steal a railroad or an election, they'll make you a senator or a president? In our society, on the other hand, private property and economic exploitation are things of the past, as you have seen for yourself. Here, anyone who appropriates the property of society, or who uses unjustly the labor of others, is punished. The Revolution says that 'He who doesn't work shall not eat.' Thus, we punish the loafer and exclude the social parasite while we exalt the ones who create through their own efforts goods for society as a whole. That is why we view labor as the highest form of activity. No one is more esteemed than the worker. To the bourgeois, on the contrary, all means that maintain their system of exploitation are moral. Anything is justified so long as it is in the defense of that system: colonialism, racism, economic exploitation of the Third World, imperialistic war, genocide and blackmail. The economic blockade your country has imposed on us is only a minor example. We Communists repudiate that morality and those methods. For us, morality is just the opposite. Everything that contributes to the freeing of man, to social emancipation, is moral. Building

the Revolution, therefore, is moral. And you, personally, can attest to this by demonstrating your willingness to integrate into that process. Not only must you avoid damaging the Revolutionary process, you must do something positive for the Revolutionary process itself. You must assist the progressive forces of the world."

As Diaz grew more intense and increasingly theoretical, I began to feel uncomfortable. I wondered how I was supposed to fit into his scheme of things. As for the theory itself--his definition of Revolutionary Morality--I could have questioned its application in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe where one witnesses so many contradictions to what Diaz was saying. Nevertheless, there was no reason to debate with him. I would have the rest of my life to do that. I was more concerned about finding out what "Task" I was supposed to accept in order to expiate my moral debt.

"I understand what you are saying," I said. "But don't you think writing the truth is a revolutionary act? Just telling the truth. That's revolutionary?"

"Perhaps. Still, we think the best way for you to prove to us what you say is true--that you are not an agent for the CIA--is to accept the task that we commend to you. For us, subjective honesty, that is, doing what you would normally do, is not enough! Writing is what you normally do. We must ask something above that, something that objectively demonstrates which side you're really on. Only when a man acts to objectively make the Revolution, after all, is he demonstrating that he is worthy to be called a Revolutionary."

Frank M. Donald

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