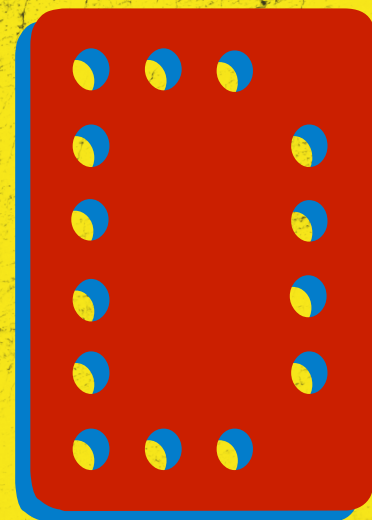
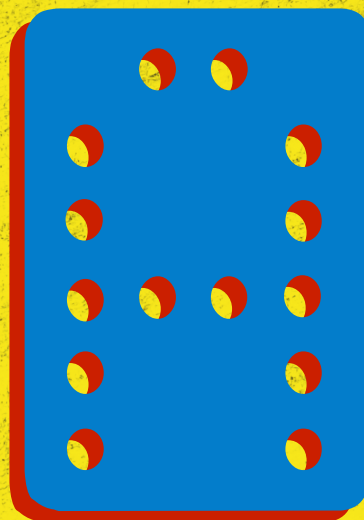
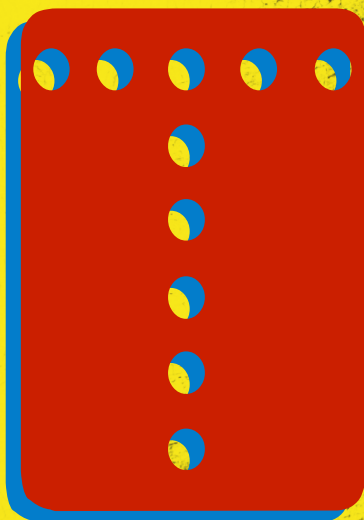
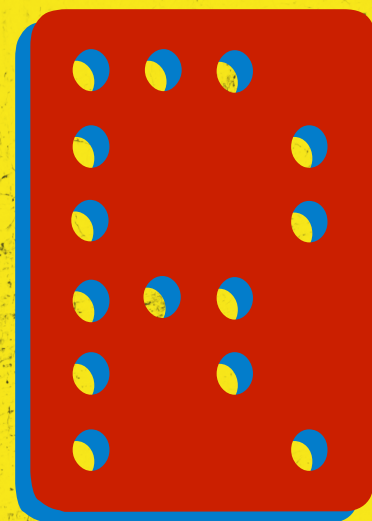
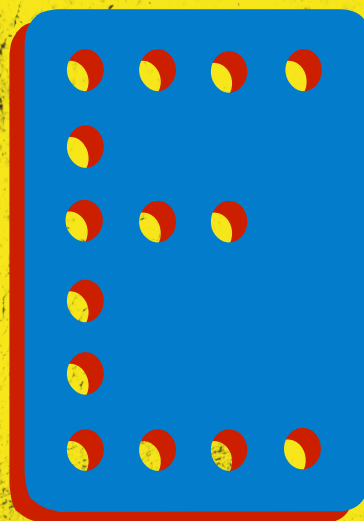
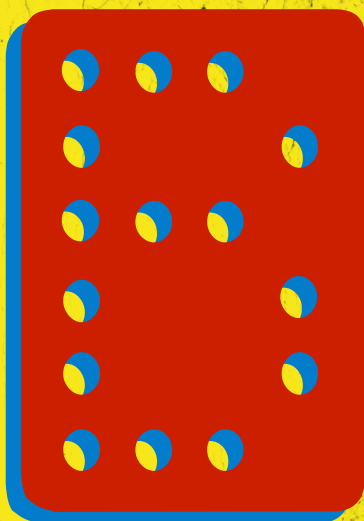
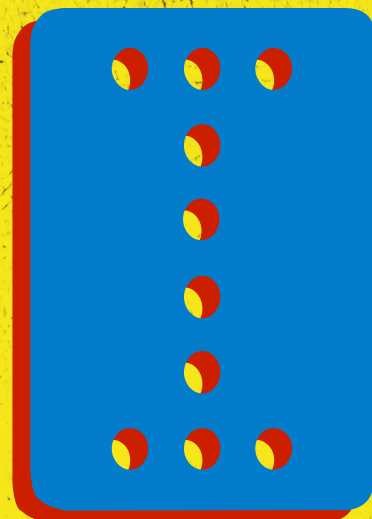
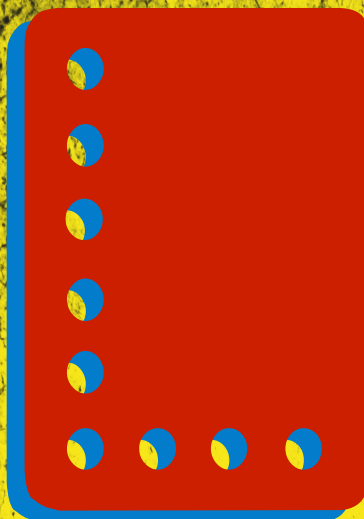


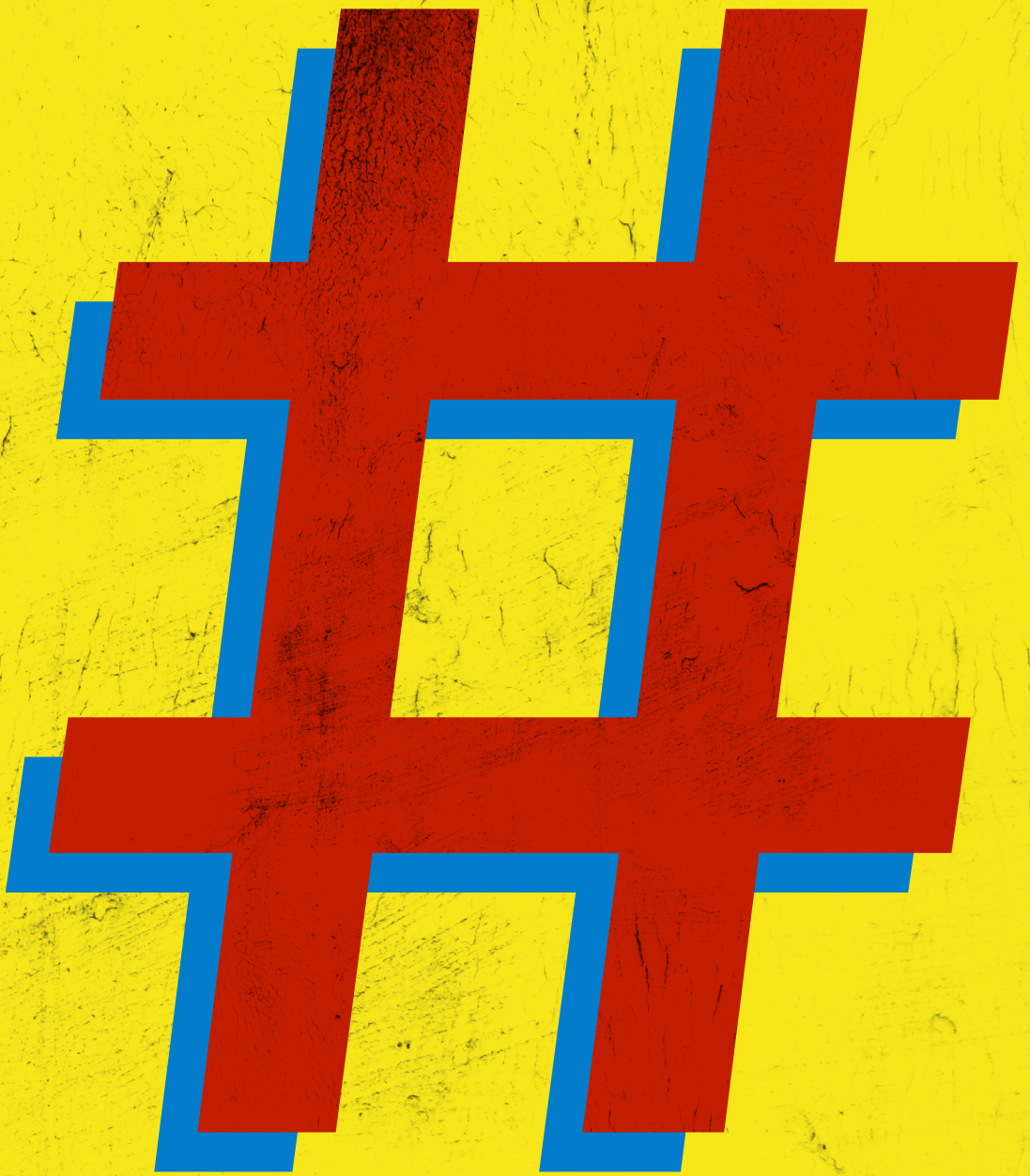
#



# # LIBERTAD

CUBA BETWEEN ITS PAST AND ITS FUTURE

*Eva Kubátová, Martin Palouš*



This project has been supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, within the Czech Republic Transformation Cooperation Program framework.

# TRANSITION

This book was created in cooperation with the following institutions and projects:

## memory of nations

●●● Post Bellum

**FIU** | Steven J. Green  
School of International  
& Public Affairs  
VÁCLAV HAVEL PROGRAM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIPLOMACY



Moreover, there are institutions that have collaborated with the project and have helped and supported it in different ways, and, therefore, a big thanks belongs to them.

**Václav Havel**  
LIBRARY FOUNDATION

Observatorio Cubano  
de Derechos Humanos

Institute for the Study  
of Totalitarian Regimes



KNIHOVNA  
VÁCLAV  
HAVEL  
LIBRARY

archivo  
CUBA

AMERICAN  
MUSEUM OF  
the  
cuban  
DIASPORA

Knihovna Libri prohibiti  
Libri Prohibiti Library

DIRECTORIO

BAY OF PIGS  
BRIGADE 2555 MUSEUM  
bayofpigs2555.com

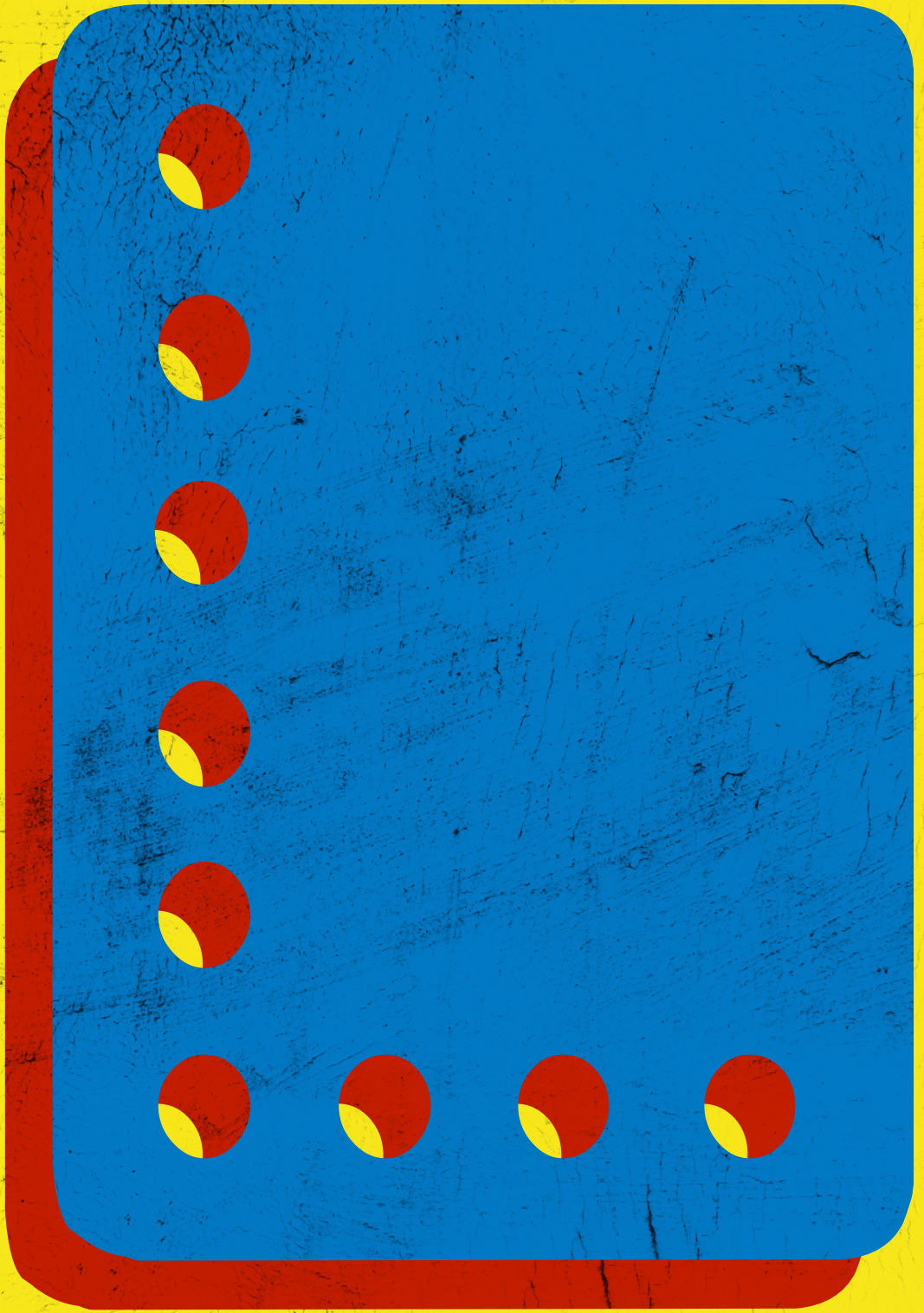


— IN  
CUBA  
DORA



It has not been possible to publish all the interviews conducted within the project Memory of the Cuban Nation framework. We invite you to learn more by clicking [here](#).







# The Play's the Thing

Martin Palouš

***The best resistance to totalitarianism is simply to drive it out of our own souls.***

**Václav Havel<sup>1</sup>**

## I

#LIBERTAD is an interim result of a project entitled The Memory of the Cuban Nation, implemented by the *International Platform for Human Rights in Cuba* (a non-for-profit organization based in Miami), the *Václav Havel Program for Human Rights and Diplomacy* at Florida International University and last, but definitely not least, the Czech non-profit organization *Post Bellum*, whose staff and cooperators have gathered all of the information which made the interviews with the Cubans possible. I also cannot forget to mention the greatest importance of the *Transition Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic*, as a vital financial supporter of the *Memory of the Cuban Nation* project since 2017.

The book #LIBERTAD is our contribution to the Cuban debate from the perspective of “engaged observers” - those who are well aware that they cannot and should not interfere into domestic Cuban matters, but can and should bring in their own outside perspectives, experience and the eventual knowledge that has come out of it.

Since 2017, we have been collecting, in cooperation with an entire network of our Cuban cooperators, oral testimonies of individuals who have been and are still exposed to the ruthless pressures of the totalitarian regime that seized power in Cuba in 1959, and who have tried and are still trying to resist it - each of them on his/her own terms. By the end of 2021, we have around two hundred cases in our collection, helping to bring around two hundred voices of freedom, articulating the experiences, views and hopes for the future of individuals belonging to all generations of free-minded Cubans *dentro y fuera de la isla* [inside and outside the island], from those in their eighties to those who are now in their twenties and thirties and everyone else in between.

On January 1, 2022 it will already be sixty-three years since *Commandante Maximo* Fidel Castro arrived in Havana and immediately started closing off Cuban society and transforming it according to his totalitarian designs. In light of this, and given the current reality of the deepening political and economic crisis in Cuba, we have decided to select sixty-three representative stories of resistance, one for each year of the brutal Castro's regime.

Who actually belongs to the intended target audience for the message of #LIBERTAD? Who are its primary ideal readers? First and foremost, it is Cubans at large, all the people of good will, on the island and in exile, sharing their joint *Cubanidad*, but capable at the same time of thinking for themselves, of articulating their own thoughts and speaking up. Our aim is to animate the discussion among all the committed and responsible members of this great Caribbean nation, of its Creole republic, politically non-existent in this moment, but still alive, with all its traditions, historical ups and downs, personal and collective memories and experiences; a nation finding itself at a historical crossroads today and trying to find a way forward from its current impasse; a nation in a searching for reunification and for the possibility of a new beginning after the decades of internal conflicts and divisions.

In our view, it is evident who is to be blamed for the current state of affairs in Cuba. It is certainly not those who speak up in this book: dissidents, human rights defenders, both domestic and exiled democratic critics of current Cuban realities. It is the totalitarian system that has been in place in Cuba for more than six decades, disrespecting the opinions of ordinary Cubans, manipulating them by force, disseminating hopelessness and fears, blocking any spontaneity among Cubans, any form of free thought and expression, with all the means available to its coercive apparatus. It is a broke, ineffective and utterly illegitimate form of government that has never given a chance to democracy, never allowed free and fair multiparty elections – a promise to the Cuban people made by Fidel Castro himself when he was seizing power. It is an outdated autocratic political regime, desperately trying to keep itself in power in the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, by combining the old worn-out revolutionary rhetoric of castro-communism with the declared attempts to introduce new economic policies – policies containing certain carefully calibrated reforms, allowing private entrepreneurs and foreign investors to step into the dysfunctional Cuban economy with their initiatives, but keeping the monopoly position of the Cuban totalitarian state untouched and ensuring that the group of selected “capitalists” operating today is allied in one way or another with the current holders of power.

The arrangement and the graphic design of #LIBERTAD is inspired by the game of Dominoes, the most popular pastime and form of entertainment for all Cubans. Dominoes form an indivisible part of every-day-life, as well as claims the popular saying *there is no Saturday without sun, and no Cuban fiesta without Dominoes*. The individual testimonies are offered here in the form of “double-nine” Domino tiles, a specific Cuban version of this game. The Domino tiles are a kind of historical narrator, indicating that a game can be played with them: a game for a *Cuba libre*. A game in which each reader is free to make his/her own decisions about where to start and how to proceed; how to get from the beginning of the book to its end.

What is even more important: as a Cuban reader is that he/she take into consideration that he/she will not be alone in this exercise. There are thousands of others, all around Cuba, from the inhabitants of Havana and other big cities to those who live in the smallest villages in the hilly countryside, passionate about the game of Dominoes, who will also read #LIBERTAD, thus turning the solitary





activity of reading into somewhat qualitatively different, i.e. an essentially pluralistic and public matter: into a play that is, as Shakespeare's Hamlet said to himself after he had welcomed the theater actors to the castle of Elsinore, "*the thing wherein I'll catch the consciousness of the king.*"<sup>2</sup>

In the other words: #LIBERTAD should be perceived as invitation for every Cuban, including those who still support the communist regime (!), to take a seat at the table in his/her neighborhood, with those who happen to be around, and set him/herself to the playing of the game.

First things first, the Dominos tiles need to be shuffled.

Then upon receiving his/her tiles to play with and to start thinking strategically; to make his turns, following attentively the sequence of play and, despite any possible temporary defeats, to keep playing as a member of a team; using prudently the tiles at his/her disposal; trying to read the minds of those who are on the other side; being aware of his/her past miscalculations, learning from his/her own missteps...

All of that is done with the hope that it will be his/her team defeating its opponent and thus having the opportunity to announce the victorious "Domino" at the very end.

So here are our bold questions: Wouldn't be possible that the good spirit of a game of Dominoes could also change the Cuban climate of political ideas and turn the life-or-death struggle between the two sides – the current government backed by the heavily armed police forces against the pro-democracy demonstrators having momentarily just their bare hands – into a kind of positive-sum game? Is imaginable that a truly new chapter in the history of Cuba could finally start in this changed atmosphere? So that those who speak up from the tiles of #LIBERTAD to the Dominoes players turned into readers, would be able to say to themselves: what we have been dreaming about in our stories, has come true, our mission has been accomplished.

### III

This book published in its electronic version in December of 2021, is also intended as our Christmas gift to all Cubans, as a message of good will and as an expression of hope that the upcoming Holiday Season 2021/2022, can be perceived as an inspiration, as a unique opportunity to make a new national beginning: to re-open the closed Cuban society, to help all its members to shake off their shackles, to overcome their fears and speak up loud and clear; to finally get rid of totalitarianism and bring back to life the lost spirit of their Creole republic. To convert the double-two tile, yet the year 2022, into the Cuban game-changer.

Obviously, not all Cubans are Christians, and it is a well-known reality that even among Christians there are differences, stemming from the different traditions of their denominations. Besides that, there is a strong living tradition of *Santería* in Cuba - a syncretic religion combining elements imported to the Caribbean region from Africa, home-grown spiritism and Roman Catholicism. There are also Jews, Muslims, atheists and believers in "something above us" - i.e. in





somewhat eclectic postmodern inter-religious or trans-religious spirituality - living on the island. And for sure, there are many Cubans with their minds firmly down-to-the earth, guided only by their intuitions, good will and common sense, neither having the time nor the capacity to think about the things “above the skies” and dealing just with their daily sorrows and troubles.

No matter what their worldview, social standing, level of education, profession, etc. is, all Cubans are Cubans first, human beings animated by their *Cubanidad*, and their love for their homeland. In that sense, we, who are non-Cubans ourselves, but just the “engaged observers” of the current struggles of Cubans for their true self and identity – one could say, for their collective soul - have strong reasons to believe that the examples of the individuals that #LIBERTAD is giving voice to, have the power to bring the biblical texts usually read during the Christmas season to life. For instance those from prophet Isaiah, where he speaks about “a child” that “has been born to us”, who “will bear the symbol of dominion on his shoulder” and whose “title will be: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Hero, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace”<sup>3</sup> or about the miracle of “light shining in the darkness”<sup>4</sup> and the coming of a moment when “swords will be beaten into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”<sup>5</sup> This year such stories could resonate and bring a very special appellative meaning for all Cubans of good will and open mind.

#### IV

Of course, there are not just Cubans, but a host of others who we hope will read this book. So, what is the message of #LIBERTAD to them and to the international general public?

Let’s look first at the overall project of Post Bellum’s *Memory of Nations*, of which our Cuban section is a tiny part. Here is how Marie Janoušková characterized this project in an edited volume *The Presence of the Past. Essays on Memory, Conflict and Reconciliation*, published in 2019, reflecting on our evolving cooperation. It is

*a collection of the memories of specific people, photographs, newspapers, and various archival documents from the totalitarian eras of the twentieth century. [...] The online collection includes the memories of veterans of World War II, Holocaust survivors, resistance fighters, political prisoners, dissidents, contemporary war veterans, ethnic minorities, but also of those who were on the repressive side of the totalitarian regimes—State Security, the KGB, and others. [...] We do not limit our testimonies to the lives of heroes and famous people. Hundreds of interviewed witnesses have dramatic and incredible stories of resistance and courage.*<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, it is important that within almost 7.000 published testimonies at *Memory of Nations*, the Cuban collection is a relatively small one – as I have already said, so far we have assembled two hundred testimonies and selected just sixty-three from them for this publication – that now belongs to the much larger whole of *Memory of Nations*. One has an opportunity to read the Cuban encounters with totalitarianism comparatively, aware that there are quite similar stories at his/her disposal, told by the witnesses from a different region



of the world. However, there is one essential thing that simply can never be stressed enough, because it makes a real difference here.

For Central and Eastern European witnesses, totalitarianism is – at least for the time being – a matter of the past. Their reflections on their experience with it can really be perceived as something that is made *post bellum*, i.e. after the war that happily ended in the *annus mirabilis*, the miraculous year of 1989.

For Cubans, however, this is not the case. The Cuban stories are different. They speak about the heroic efforts of Cubans to cope with this political phenomenon that is still present in Cuba today, in the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They don't demonstrate the evil features of the system of the past - that for sure decisively influenced the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are sending messages about its current metamorphoses and manifestations. Their narrators are not in a *post bellum* situation, but are still finding themselves, in 2021, *in bello* – in war, or in a continuous battle for freedom.

There are three points I want to make here.

The first one simply follows up on what I have just said about the enduring presence of the totalitarian form of government in Cuba.

It is not just a heavy burden still laying on the shoulders of the Cuban nation – a problem of “*a far-away country [...] of which we know nothing*”, to paraphrase the words of British Prime Minister Chamberlain from 1938, when his government agreed to the destruction of Czechoslovakia to appease Adolf Hitler in order to “*secure the peace of our time*”. Totalitarianism represents a danger that the whole of global mankind is still exposed and thus must resist!

The thing is that international solidarity with the democratic opposition of Cuba requires much more than a right answer to the question, whether we, who are the fortunate inhabitants of the free world, are ready to be focused not only on our material well-being, but to live in accordance with the declared fundamental values and principles of our civilization.

It is also a test whether we have enough of imagination to recognize in time the totalitarian tendencies in our own democratic countries and to find a timely cure for this deadly disease, before it starts taking away from us our free way of life. Before the initial mild symptoms turn into the elements of some new forms of autocracy, into something still unknown, but, thanks to its global outreach, even more dangerous political pandemics than German Nazism or Soviet communism – the two best known varieties of this species that emerged in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and plagued the mankind.

Second: As the current struggles of Cubans with the totalitarian legacies in their own country must be perceived in worldly terms, an adequate response from international community to the Cuban crisis is absolutely necessary. The democratization of Cuba, the re-opening of Cuban society, closed for decades by its autocratic government subscribing to the ideology of castro-communism, its healing from its persistent, chronic totalitarian disease, requires a concerted and effective action from the side of the world democracies - still believing, as,



for instance, the last conference of Forum 2000 clearly demonstrated,<sup>7</sup> in the realization of idea of American president Woodrow Wilson, pronounced during the First World War (1914-1918), that the postwar world can be “*made safe for democracy.*” There is, however, a clear conclusion here, if the Wilson’s vision is to be conceived as a realistic proposal based on the historical crossroads that the world finds itself now at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: cooperation between the key players in the sphere of international relations – the United States, The European Union, the democratic countries of Latin America – represents an essential step in this direction,

And third: What must be taken into consideration, carefully examined and reflected on with enough precision, if such a plan of action is to be proposed? These are the transformations of totalitarianism after decades of having dominance over a body politic, and also the history of seeking how to resist it. In the case of Cuba, this would start from the armed rebellions of the 1960 and the military interventions lead from abroad, to the concept of *la resistencia pacífica, no violenta*, thus peaceful and non-violent resistance, all of which are well illustrated in the stories of individuals presented in this book throughout the different generations naturally implied in the flow of the Cuban people’s lives.

I am going to leave this sufficiently deep, detailed and historically informed analysis of the variant of totalitarianism that still exists in Cuba - inspired not only by Marxism-Leninism, but having a distinct “magical realist” flavor once brought by Castroism and Che-Guevarism to the realm of global politics - to more qualified, preferably Cuban experts. Instead, I will close this introductory text to #LIBERTAD with some observations of Václav Havel, who in his text from 1986, thus three years before the already mentioned *annus mirabilis* of the revolutions of 1989, tried to understand what had happened in his country “at the heart of Europe” after more than four decades of the communist regime and its specific metamorphoses throughout the decades:

*Revolutionary ethos and terror have been replaced by dull inertia, pretext-ridden caution, bureaucratic anonymity and mindless, stereotypical behaviour, the sole point of which is to become, ever more fully, exactly what they are. The songs of the zealots and the cries of the tortured have fallen silent; lawlessness has donned kid gloves and moved from the torture chambers into the upholstered offices of faceless bureaucrats.*<sup>8</sup>

*The advanced totalitarian system depends on manipulatory devices so refined, complex and powerful that it no longer requires murderers and victims. Even less does it require fiery Utopia builders spreading discontent with their dreams of a better future. The epithet ‘Real Socialism’, which this era has coined to describe itself, points a finger at those for whom it has no room: the dreamers.*<sup>9</sup>

Maybe, the Cuban experience with totalitarianism is somewhat different and, in contrast to the Czechoslovak case, even the actual Cuban reality is a weird combination of both revolutionary terror and the application of manipulatory devices of an advanced totalitarian system. I understand this point, but as an engaged observer I have nothing else to add. I just want to wish to all those who

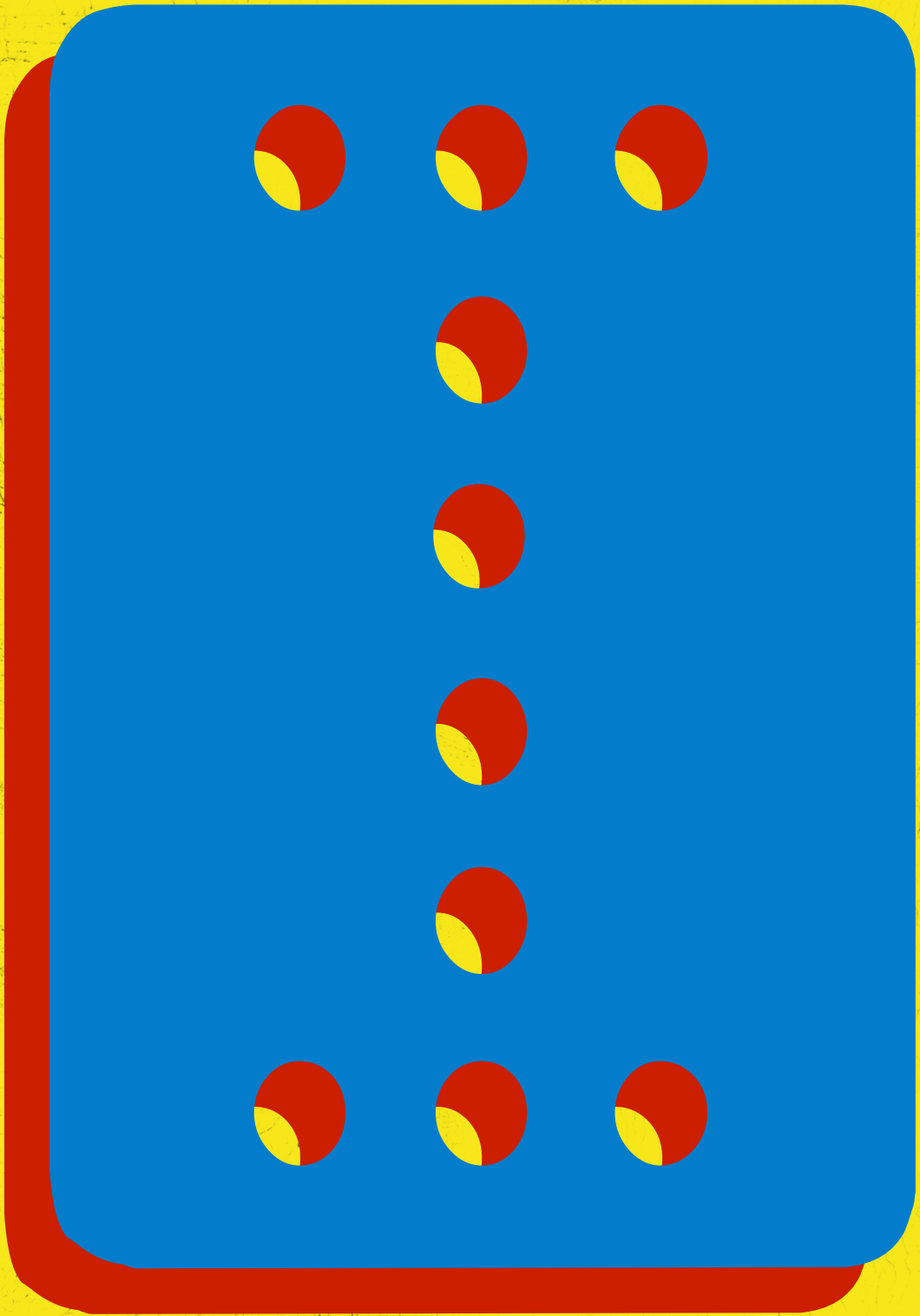


now have #LIBERTAD, sixty-three stories of Cuban dreamers, in their hands: may it be an inspirational read!

Anyway, maybe there is still something to say in conclusion: can you accept this introduction as another, additional tile you have in your hand and you can use when starting your game of Dominoes? If yes, use it, if not, just ignore it or even throw it away. No harm done, be smart, think strategically, and may good luck shine on you in the game!

- 1 Havel, V.: *Politics and Conscience*. In: *Open Letters. Selected Writings 1965-1990*. Edited and translated by Paul Wilson, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 268
- 2 Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2
- 3 Isaiah 9, 6
- 4 Isaiah 9, 2
- 5 Isaiah 2, 4
- 6 Janoušková, M.: *Remarks on Post Bellum and the Memory of Nations“ Project*. In: *The Presence of the Past. Essays on Memory, Conflict and Reconciliation*, Martin Palouš and Glenn Hughes, Editors, Academica Press Washington/ London, 2019, p. 9-10
- 7 [5 Big Ideas - What now? Building back democratically | Forum 2000](#)
- 8 Havel, V. : *Stories an Totalitarianism*. In: *Open Letters. Selected Writings 1965-1990*. Edited and translated by Paul Wilson, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, p. 330
- 9 Ibid., p. 332







## Editorial Note

**Eva Kubátová**

Subjectivity. Right to my own memory. Right to my own vision of the world. Such an essential pillar of democratic societies. And at the same time, one of the most important features of the testimonies presented in this book, published within the project *Memory of the Cuban Nation*.

It is not a historical account. It is not a detailed analysis of facts. It is not a guide on how Cuba should be understood. It is a book for those who believe that democracy should not be taken for granted. It is a collection of human stories of courage and pride, hope and despair, joy and sadness, and above all, it is a collection of hearts that beat as one for this Caribbean island.

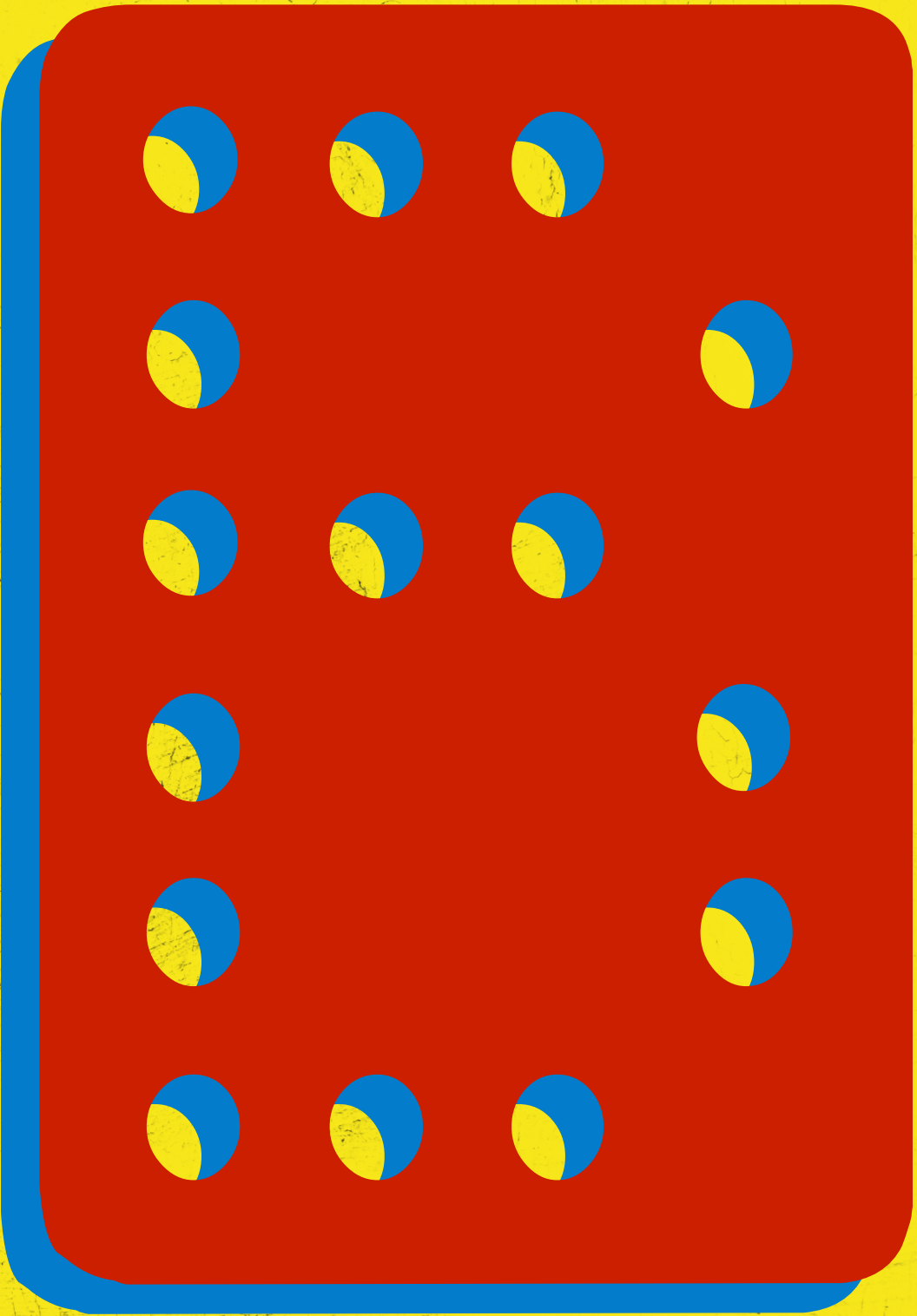
As human memory has so many layers and facets, the conclusions you will draw are entirely up to your imagination. I am very confident that the primary purpose of this book will be clear, and that is, not to forget the lives and struggles of the protagonists of this book.

I want to thank all who, over the years, have left their indelible mark on this project. Above all, to the witnesses who have dared to share their lives with us, but also to many others: interviewers, cameramen, editors, translators, proofreaders, consultants, including those who have collaborated on this book but wish to remain anonymous. Many of them have taken risks, but they have not given up. Each and every one of them has done their bit, and without them, the present book would not have been possible. I am very grateful to them from the bottom of my heart.

This book presents only a few dozen testimonies that we have gathered in the archive of [Memory of the Cuban Nation](#). We were very disappointed when we realized that we cannot include all of them in this edition. But we are only at the beginning. More books and more testimonies will be published, thus making them reach all that want to listen. To each one of you who could not be included in this edition, I ask your forgiveness, but at the same time, I swear that your testimony has not been lost and is available online.

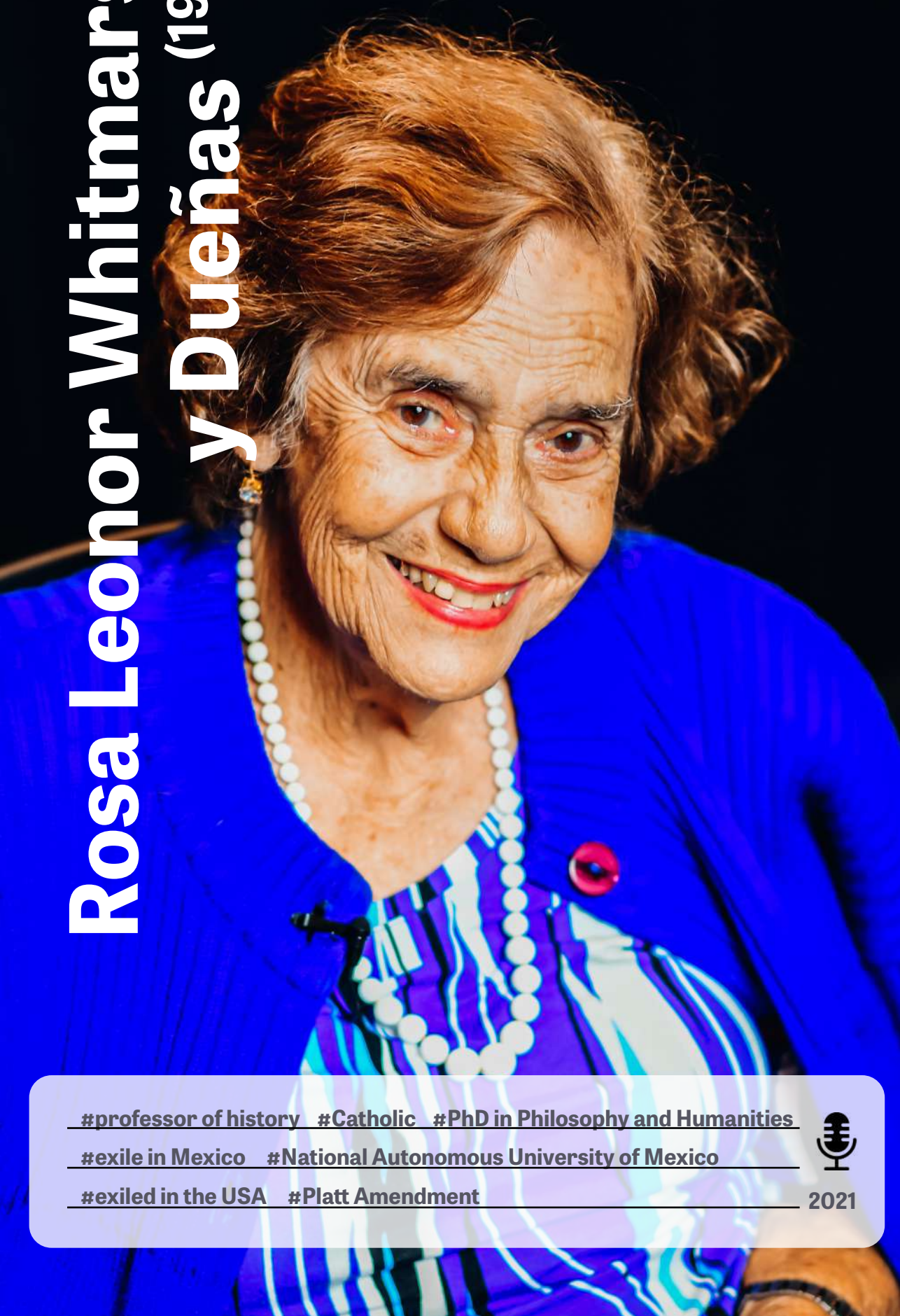
Everyone has the right to share their story from their subjective point of view. While editing, we have done our best to be as objective as possible, although, of course, we admit that some inadvertent errors might have happened. In the end, to make mistakes is human. If, despite our best effort, you find any imperfection or misunderstanding, I offer on my behalf and behalf of the entire editorial team a sincere apology.

To conclude, I hope that all these testimonies will contribute one day to reaching our common goal: Cuba achieving freedom, #LIBERTAD.





# Rosa Leonor Whitmarsh y Dueñas (1930)



#professor of history #Catholic #PhD in Philosophy and Humanities

#exile in Mexico #National Autonomous University of Mexico

#exiled in the USA #Platt Amendment



2021





*We cannot politicize the thinking of a nation by talking only about its political history. We have to look also at the ordinary developments that occur simultaneously.*

**With more than 60 years in exile, Dr. Rosa Leonor Whitmarsh y Dueñas dreams of returning to the homeland where she was born: Cuba. She keeps a suitcase, hidden under her bed, packed and ready in case this day comes. This topic tugs at her heartstrings during the interview, even after so many decades.**

Rosa Leonor was born in May 1930 in Havana's Vedado neighborhood during the period of Gerardo Machado's government and the Platt Amendment revolts. "On my father's side, I am the great-granddaughter of Major General and lieutenant Calixto García Iñiguez, and on my mother's side, of Dr. Joaquín L. Dueñas, considered by the National Medical Association of Cuba to be the first pediatrician on the island. My family had strong Catholic roots, like most of the families from that time on the island. I studied at the Ursuline School [the Order of Saint Ursula] where I received a very good education. I made good friends there, some of whom I still keep, others, unfortunately, have passed away," Rosa Leonor recounts. At the age of 10 she began to study piano under the tutelage of the teacher María Emma Botet. After graduating from the Vedado Institute, in the midst of strong student protests, Rosa Leonor studied Philosophy and Hu-



manities at the University of Havana. “My civic conscience began in 1940 during World War II,” Rosa says.

### **Cuba has only a little experience as a democratic republic**

In the 1940s, Cuba had good political climate, according to Rosa. “In 1944, Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín was elected by the Cuban Revolutionary Party and he was in power until 1948. During those four years in office good social laws were passed which represented progress and respect for common liberties and they had nothing to do with communism. From 1948 to 1952, Carlos Prío Socarrás was in power and he was also a modernizer. The National Bank of Cuba was founded during his tenure, and the education system improved. During these eight years, Cuba flourished economically, politically and socially. However, it was only a short-lived period of being a democratic republic. We cannot politicize the thinking of a nation by talking only about its political history. We have to also look at those with similar lives and what was taking place at the same time. Cuba was not born as a Cuban country. It was rather a product of a Cubanism that was determined by the fact that we were already Creoles, and we no longer had the same thinking as our Spanish fathers. During these years there was very significant progress made on all fronts, there were more jobs, an expansion of land ownership, better education, an Agrarian Reform,” explains Rosa, who was, between 1952 and 1959, a member of the board of directors of a cultural club for women, the Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club, in Havana.

*Cuba was rich in the production of the arts: literature, music and dance. But in 1959 with the triumph of Fidel Castro’s Revolution, this richness started to disappear.*

### **1959**

Rosa had already studied and worked outside of Cuba before 1959. Concretely, during 1957 she had been staying in the city of Poughkeepsie, New York in the U.S., returning that same year to Cuba. By the time she was 22, she had devoted much of her time to the finishing of her piano studies. “At that time, Cuba was rich in the production of the arts: literature, music and dance. But in 1959 with the triumph of Fidel Castro’s Revolution, this richness started to disappear. As of 1st of January of 1959 intellectuals were persecuted on the of the island. Some of those who suffered were Jorge Vals, who was imprisoned for 20 years,



Ángel Cuadra, a high school classmate, who was imprisoned for 14 years, and Concha Arzola. However, there were also intellectuals who had no issues with censorship and became sympathizers of the regime, as in the case of Roberto Fernández Retamar. Many others went into exile because of the repression they faced,” Rosa recounts.

### **The decision to leave**

“In 1961 I had gotten a summer scholarship to Ecuador. In order to leave the island, I had to make an inventory of everything I was leaving in the house. This was common at that time. They did it to all the people who were leaving Cuba and supposedly I was only leaving to go study in Ecuador,” Rosa Leonor says. But she never returned to the island. “In 1961 when I left Cuba, I thought it would be just for some time. But in the end, I went to Ecuador and then to Mexico where I had spent 22 years. I had spent most of those years thinking about Cuba. I arrived in that country with only a transit visa. When I landed at the airport no one had come to meet me. I think the Cuban government boycotted my arrival,” she says. During those 22 years, Rosa held various jobs in Mexico. “I studied at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), for 16 years I taught oral and written expression in a private university,” she added. Moreover, since its foundation, Rosa was a member of the Union of Cuban Women in Exile [UMCE] and also of other groups founded by Cubans. “Mexico was on the path to communism at that time, because of the Echeverría government which was very close to the Castro regime, so I had to leave Mexico and in 1984 I moved to the U.S.,” she says.

### **Fidel was wrong**

Recapitulating everything she has lived through in Cuba, both during the democratic republican Cuba period before the revolution, which she deems “a positive experience”, and the time after the triumph of the Revolution, Rosa Leonor recalls a phrase of her friend Anita Arroyos, who said: “Fidel can’t make a mistake. But Fidel made a serious mistake. He plunged Cuba into total misery,” concludes Rosa.

***Fidel made a serious mistake.  
He plunged Cuba into total  
misery.***

# María Josefa Calafat Moya (1931)

[#Cuba before Fidel](#) [#Urban Reform Law](#)

[#confiscation of assets](#) [#Cuban Center of Spain](#)

[#exile in Spain](#)



2020





*“Before the triumph of the Revolution, Cuba was a wonderful place to live.”*

**“Fidel Castro has disgraced Cuba, and he has plunged it into misery. God will not forgive us for having allowed Cuba to be taken away from us,” says María Josefa Calafat Moya, born in Madrid, Spain, in June 1931.**

María Josefa moved with her parents to Cuba when she was very young: “In 1935 when my family moved to Cuba, I was only four years old. My father had a farm there, which I loved. My parents also had other businesses on the island. “The farm was located in the former Oriente province: “It was located between Bayamo and Manzanillo, in a town called La Julia. In 1936, when we lived in Cuba, the Civil War erupted in Spain, so it was much better to stay on the island.” María Josefa narrates the following about her education: “ For four years I studied in a boarding school run by nuns in Bayamo. When I was 14 years old, we moved to Havana, and I would spend less time on the farm”. When her father died in 1952, her mother decided to sell the farm and keep only the business in Havana: “We had an apartment building which we were renting, however, most of this business was confiscated in 1959, with the triumph of Fidel Castro’s Revolution, as a law was passed overnight called the Urban Reform Law,” she says.





## **Nobody imagined the truth**

When the Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959, “nobody thought that Fidel wanted Cuba to be communist, otherwise, I am sure that many people would not have supported him. There was even a Catholic mass celebrated in the Plaza de la Revolución. Then, sometime later, the same government ordered the priests and nuns to be persecuted and banished into exile.” María Josefa recalls: “Before the triumph of the Revolution, Cuba was a wonderful place to live. I lived with my husband in Tarará and my mother in Ampliación de Almendares. It is true that there was a mixture of millionaires, rich, poor, and also middle-class people in Cuba. The middle class lived well, and I believe that this is normal worldwide. Cuba was a good place to live, and Spain was backward compared to it. Now it is the opposite. There is too much misery on the island. With Batista, those who wanted to make the Revolution had problems. If you were quiet, you were never going to have problems. [Esteban] Ventura, who was a criminal of the Batista police, lived near to our house, and we never had problems with him,” she says.

## **Handing over the assets to the government**

In 1961 they started to arrange what was necessary to leave Cuba for good: “My mother died a few days before we left for Spain. When we were preparing the paperwork, we had some problems because we were missing passports and there was a lot of paperwork to do. Also, at that time, if you wanted to leave Cuba, you had to wait for government officials to come to your house to make an inventory of all the things you left behind as it was not allowed to take anything with you.” Her family was not allowed to take any belongings from the house. “There were six of us who left together, and we could only take five suitcases with clothes. We had to take old suitcases because they wouldn’t let us take the good ones. They broke my mother-in-law’s suitcase the day we left and threw everything on the floor singing the Internationale, the anthem of the socialist and communist movements. We also went to the bank because my mother had money in dollars in her safe, and they told us that the government had confiscated everything, so we were left with nothing,” she says. “If I’m honest, I was happy on the boat. We were all crammed into one cabin and we slept together. There was a lot of people and no ventilation, there was only a small window looking out to the bottom of the sea, as if we were in a submarine, but I was happy. We sailed on a ship called Satrústegui, which was the last transatlantic ship to leave Cuba at that time,” she adds.

## **The life-saving stamps**

“My husband was a philatelist, and when he saw what was happening in Cuba, he came up with the brilliant idea to start buying stamps and sending them on letters to Spain. We also took many with us on the boat. In October 1962, when we arrived in Barcelona, thank God we had those stamps. My husband was a lawyer, but when he arrived in Spain, he had to validate his degree and study the laws of the country for a year. We started selling the stamps in the square and thanks to this income we were able to pay for the hotel and buy food,” says



María Josefa. She adds that, although many people turned their backs on them, including the family, a couple they met on the ship helped them a lot on their arrival in Spain.

### **Cuban Center of Spain**

After the U.S., Spain is the second nation, with the greatest influx of Cuban emigrants. “Julio Lobo, together with other Cubans living in Madrid, founded the Cuban Center of Spain. It was a place where Cubans gathered to eat, listen to music and talk about the latest events. We received visits from Cuban cultural personalities such as Celia Cruz and Olga Guillot. I was president of the Center for a whole year,” says María Josefa, and reflects on Cuba: “Tell me what happened to sugar, in a country that was one of the world’s largest exporters of this product? Well, nothing, at one time, they simply dismantled many of the sugar mills.” María Josefa is aware that it is very difficult nowadays to live in Cuba because of the lack of freedom. “That’s why I only wish Cubans to have faith and hope,” she concludes.

***Tell me what happened to sugar, in a country that was one of the world’s largest exporters of this product?***

# Ángel Cuadra (1931)

#fight against Batista #National Revolutionary Unity

#Renuevo Literary Group #lawyer #fight against Castro

#political prisoner #PEN Club of Sweden #prisoner of conscience

#plantado #poet #exiled in the USA



2018



*"The best way to subdue an individual is to make him dependent on gifts."*

**"I could never stop worrying about what was happening in my country," says Ángel Cuadra - lawyer, poet, dissident, and prisoner of conscience exiled in Miami.**

Ángel was born in Havana in August 1931. His mother and father worked in the cigar industry, but despite his modest origins, he was able to study. He completed five years of high school at the Vedado Institute and practiced sports. Later, he studied law, philosophy and humanities at the University of Havana and attended the Seminar of Dramatic Arts at the University Theater of Havana. He earned law degree. "When I was at the University, students wanted to participate in public affairs. We had a government that was not democratic, but not tyrannical either." His mother was a member of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano Auténtico [Cuban Revolutionary Party – Authentic], and through her influence, Ángel began to sympathize with the party. He participated in peaceful student protests against the Batista government. In 1957, together with other students, he formed the Renuevo Literary Group and published his first poems. "I had dedicated quite an extensive part of my life to literature, within what was possible at that time," Ángel recounts.



## Dictatorial ambitions

At first, Ángel supported the Revolution, however when he saw what was happening after its triumph, and got involved in activities that would later lead to his imprisonment.” As the process was advancing, we realized that [Fidel Castro] had big ambitions to be a dictator and that he was an admirer of dictators. Castro made a written commitment in the Sierra Maestra Proclamation, where he promised the return of free elections and the institutionalization of the country. But things happened...,” Ángel reflects. He belonged to the political group Unidad Nacional Revolucionaria [National Revolutionary Unity] and directed a clandestine pamphlet called Cuba Democrática [Democratic Cuba]. “Four of our men were shot. I didn’t take part in the actions, but I was in charge of the ideological direction and dissemination of the pamphlet.” When he started to be persecuted, the Uruguayan Embassy offered him asylum. However, he was rejected and remained in Cuba.

*When I was at the University, students wanted to participate in public affairs. We had a government that was not democratic, but not tyrannical either.*

### Jan Palach

Ángel was finally arrested and put on trial. “One early morning, at about 4 a.m., police surrounded the whole block, and I was arrested.” They accused him of subversive activities and sentenced him to 15 years in prison. First, he was jailed in La Cabaña prison: “Many nights we would hear noises as they brought in detainees, and before they opened fire, we would hear them shout: ‘Viva Cuba libre’, ‘Viva Cristo Rey’. It was a horrible experience. Sometimes they brought in one of our companions,” Ángel recalls. Inside the prisons, he continued to write poetry and supported the artistic activities of other prisoners: “We used to meet in my cell, in Guanajay prison. And one day, I decided to write something about Jan Palach,” he says, recalling the Czech student who committed suicide by setting himself on fire as a form of political protest.





## **Jailed in La Cabaña**

Ángel was one of the prisoners held in La Cabaña. “I remember that they put me in a room that was almost completely dark with only a glimmer of light sneaking in. There was scribbling on the wall: ‘Those who have not suffered, what they know about life,’” he recalls. Ángel recounts how much the prisoners suffered in the prisons, including the female political prisoners, who were even beaten, he says.

## **Poet**

He managed to publish several poems aboard after having sent them out of Cuba in letters. He came into contact with the International PEN Club and was chosen as an honorary member of the Swedish PEN Club. As pressure from the Swedish government for his release grew, in March 1981, he was called the prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. “At the time, there was certain rejection by the international community of the prison practices employed by Castro’s communist regime,” says Ángel. According to him, the most difficult times were the first moments of imprisonment. Once released, he traveled to Germany and Sweden. He spent two months in Germany. Then he returned to Cuba. “When you go out on the street after being released from jail, it’s an almost inexplicable experience. You return to your country that does not seem to be your country. It is a new experience. I had troubles finding my way in my own city,” he recalls. For three years, the government did not allow him to leave the island. “I felt helpless. I felt like a leaf in the wind carried away by circumstances. I knew I had the international backing of certain writers and certain people. That’s why I refused to work for years, because I wanted to leave Cuba and be reunited with my parents, who were already very old, and you get older too,” Ángel recounts.

## **Anti-castro-communist attitude**

In 1985, he emigrated to the U.S., where he joined his family and earned a degree in Hispanic Studies at Florida International University, where he worked as an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Modern Languages for another nine years. Moreover, he taught drama courses at Miami Dade Community College and wrote a weekly column in the *Diario de Las Americas*. He even won several awards for his poems. In the U.S., together with other writers, he formed the PEN Club of Cuban Exiles and participated in several international congresses of this organization worldwide. “I felt that the struggle, in which I had invested the best years of my life, had to be confirmed. And so here in Miami, I managed to continue in it supporting the anti-castro-communist activities,” Ángel concludes.

# Cristina Cabezas (1932)



[#political prisoner](#) [#Guanajay Women's Prison](#)

[#farm América Libre](#) [#Free America prison](#)

[#victim of prison violence](#) [#exiled in the USA](#)



2018



*The rich are not necessarily bad for society, what is bad is the use they make of their wealth and power.*

**“Given my democratic upbringing, I never agreed with this man, who from the beginning exercised power in an absolute manner, without allowing people to disagree with him for the simple reason of having a different upbringing,” Cristina Cabezas says about Fidel Castro and his regime.**

Cristina was born in Havana in October 1932 into a large family of immigrants from Lebanon who came to the island in the early 20th century. “My childhood was similar to any other child of humble parents, who were honest workers, but did not have much money. She and her siblings received an extraordinary upbringing in an honest, decent family where different worldviews and ways of thinking were respected and everybody had the freedom to think for themselves,” Cristina emphasizes.



## **In charge of a flower shop**

She studied in a public school, and she graduated from the high school called the Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza del Vedado [the Vedado high school]. She also completed three years of Commercial Sciences at the University of Havana. Moreover, due to her interest in the field, she worked as a transfusion technician at the Vedado Hospital. After finishing her studies, she held several jobs, until she was hired in a flower shop, whose owners were forced to leave the country. Later on, Cristina became the manager of this flower shop.

## **The trial was all a charade**

In those times, Cristina started to meet people who were against the totalitarian tendency of the regime. "If I told you that I committed a serious offense, I would be lying to you. I believe that a rebellion or an attack would have been seen by them as something serious since they wanted to subjugate the people. But it wasn't like that," she says. However, after some time, the authorities went to look for Cristina at her house, where they did not find her since she was hiding in the house of some friends. But in the end, they found her and arrested her. "In my case, I did not spend much time in detention, because when they took me to State Security offices, they did not have to set up a trial against me, they just filled out some form, it was all a charade. You didn't have to be guilty to be sentenced," Cristina describes.

## **Prison as a concentration camp**

She was taken to the Guanajay Women's Prison, where she was jailed from 1965 to 1971. "This prison was like a concentration camp and women of all ages, from minors to 60 years old, were imprisoned there," she recounts. She witnessed a nun pass away because she did not receive proper medical care. "They didn't even allow her family to be with her when she was already on her death bed," she adds. Cristina says that the food was disgusting and that it was very difficult to coexist with the common prisoners. There were also strict limitations placed on visits. "Sometimes they would only give you a one hour visit every three months. They tortured the relatives this way, by not even allowing prisoners to share a few brief moments with their family," Cristina recalls. When she was in prison, one of her loved ones passed away. The experience of not being able to share the pain with the rest of her family was one of the worst things that ever happened to her. In prison, she suffered aggressions from the guards and witnessed acts of aggression between prisoners. When she showed solidarity with the hunger strike of political prisoners in La Cabaña, she was, along with other women, beaten. "It is very difficult to convey what it was like so that it can be understood," says Cristina, searching for the right words to explain everything she experienced in prison.

## **Free America**

According to Cristina, coexisting with the common prisoners was difficult, but not impossible. The authorities intended to make life difficult for the political prisoners by making them share space with the common prisoners, but it did not necessarily





result in conflict, as the common prisoners were often influenced by the political prisoners and identified with their cause. Later on, Cristina was transferred from the Guanajay prison to one of the farms confiscated from farmers. It was called América Libre [Free America] and the government confiscated these places to house political prisoners.

### **Rehabilitation Program**

Cristina refused to enter the rehabilitation program. “To tell you the truth, the fact that some of the prisoners joined the program did not make them our enemies, they were still our companions. And we maintained respect toward those who went through the program and those who did not. The differences in treatment and for those who did so were not a big deal. Since you would have to listen to people whom you considered as your enemy to give you a talk about the goodness of the regime and you had to put up with it. This experience was worse than the physical abuse,” she says. Cristina also mentions that there were people who had their reasons for entering the rehabilitation plan. “There were many people who were only children and had sick parents. Some of them had children of their own and they entered the program to be able to return to their families, which in the end is the most important thing,” Cristina summarizes.

### **Meeting her husband**

Her husband, Jorge Valls, served more than 20 years in Boniato prison. When Cristina was released from prison, she set a goal to raise awareness of the conditions of political prisoners internationally. She left Cuba in 1980 and subsequently worked together with important Cuban dissidents, denouncing the crimes of the regime in countries around the world, including Perú, Colombia, Germany, France, and the U.S. In 1984, her husband was released from prison thanks to international pressure and they reunited in Amsterdam, where he was being awarded a prize in literature: “He was a special person, a writer, a poet, and always a fighter for democracy,” Cristina describes her life partner, who died in Miami in 2015.

### **The rich are not necessarily bad**

According to Cristina, in any society, there will always be differences among people. “If someone works hard and studies hard to reach a high political, economic, cultural, and social status, they have earned it. If they have worked for it, they should be allowed to get it. However, those that don’t want to do this and are content with being poor, and we must also respect this. We should respect the fact they did not want to rise high, we should not mistreat them, or take away their rights. We should respect each other. The rich are not necessarily bad for society, what is bad is the use they make of their wealth and power,” concludes Cristina.

***This prison was like  
a concentration camp.***

# Jesús Ángel Carrasco González (1932)



**#Second National Front of the Escambray Mountains**

**#personal meeting with Fidel Castro #exile in Spain**

**#Cuban Center of Spain**



2020



*At the Cuban Center of Spain, we managed to send about 600 families to the U.S.; it was a tremendous achievement!*

**“I am as fond of everyone who has left Cuba as I am of the unfortunate people who have stayed there. But I am not fond of those who subjugate them in Cuba,” says Jesús Carrasco, who is 89 years and who recounts the hardship of exile and the support he provided to so many Cubans exiled in Spain.**

Jesús Carrasco González, born on April 6, 1932 in Havana, remembers his childhood and youth in the Cerro neighborhood with love. He saw his first movie at the Maravillas cinema and had what he defines as an excellent education at the Redención school. After high school graduation and studies in accounting, he began working in a tobacco shop at a very young age.



## Meeting Fidel Castro

In 1959 he started working a second job in a cafeteria-restaurant located in front of the Audiencia [now the Palace of Justice]. It was there that Jesús met Fidel Castro. According to Jesús, Fidel would often come to the Audiencia, and before entering, he would pass by the restaurant and say “what’s up, buddy.” He would ask him to keep his gun, a German Ruger pistol, in the storeroom. He says that people thought that Fidel Castro was a mafia member at that time, but Jesús cannot say for sure if this was true or not. He only knows that Fidel would often come to the Audiencia and always ask them to keep his gun in the restaurant.

*I will never forget the children’s eyes when they received a toy for the first time in their lives.*

## Coca-Cola vending machines

While he was still working at the restaurant, he was hired by the Coca-Cola company, which made him really happy. He specialized in the maintenance of vending machines with soft drinks. According to him, Coca-Cola had vending machines in many places, including the military centers of La Cabaña and El Morro. He had to repair vending machines more than once in the military centers, and he recalls that on more than one occasion, he heard the prisoners shouting: “Long Live Free Cuba”, “Long live Christ the King,” and then the bursts of gunfire. These sounds will remain in his memory forever.

## Leaving Cuba

Although Jesús claims that he was not interested in politics, he observed changes that came after the Revolution that he did not like. He did not hesitate to provide shelter to some members of the Second National Front of the Escambray [SFNE] which was an independent guerilla group that in the beginning fought against Batista. Still, later on, as the SFNE member were not included in Castro's government, they turned against him. When Jesús' friend told him that he was registered by the G2 [the Cuban Secret Service], Jesús decided to leave Cuba with his family. The administrative procedures to leave the island at that time were very complicated. They had to submit a letter to the authorities supposedly written by Jesús' mother in which she said she was in Asturias and needed their help, although in reality, she was in Havana. They thought the process of getting the exit permit would be very long, but one day in December 1961, they were told they could leave immediately. So they left Cuba overnight on the motorboat Covadonga. “A pianist started playing the Cuban national anthem on the 24th [of December]... All people started crying,” Jesús recalls.





## First years in Spain

Relatives received Jesús, his wife and two children in El Ferrol. Upon arrival, they encountered a harsh Spanish winter, different from those in Cuba. Jesús narrates with tears in his eyes that, seeing his children wearing only light summer shoes in the cold Galician winter, he understood how difficult it was going to be to get ahead in a foreign country. In a few months, they moved to Asturias to live with the family of Jesús' mother. Although they were warmly welcomed and, in Jesús' words, "they gave them everything they have," the first months were very hard. They worked in the fields and ate almost nothing but beans and potatoes. Moreover, the Cuban government did not allow his mother to travel to Spain until eight years later. She arrived with very advanced cancer and passed away 28 days after her arrival.

## You come too early

Jesús never stopped looking for work. He first looked for work at the Coca-Cola company, where the man who interviewed him told him: "you come too early," since in 1962 there were no vending machines with soft drinks in Spain. He worked for Pepsi-Cola and a few other companies, and it was with the energy company ENHOL that he moved to Madrid, where he still lives today.

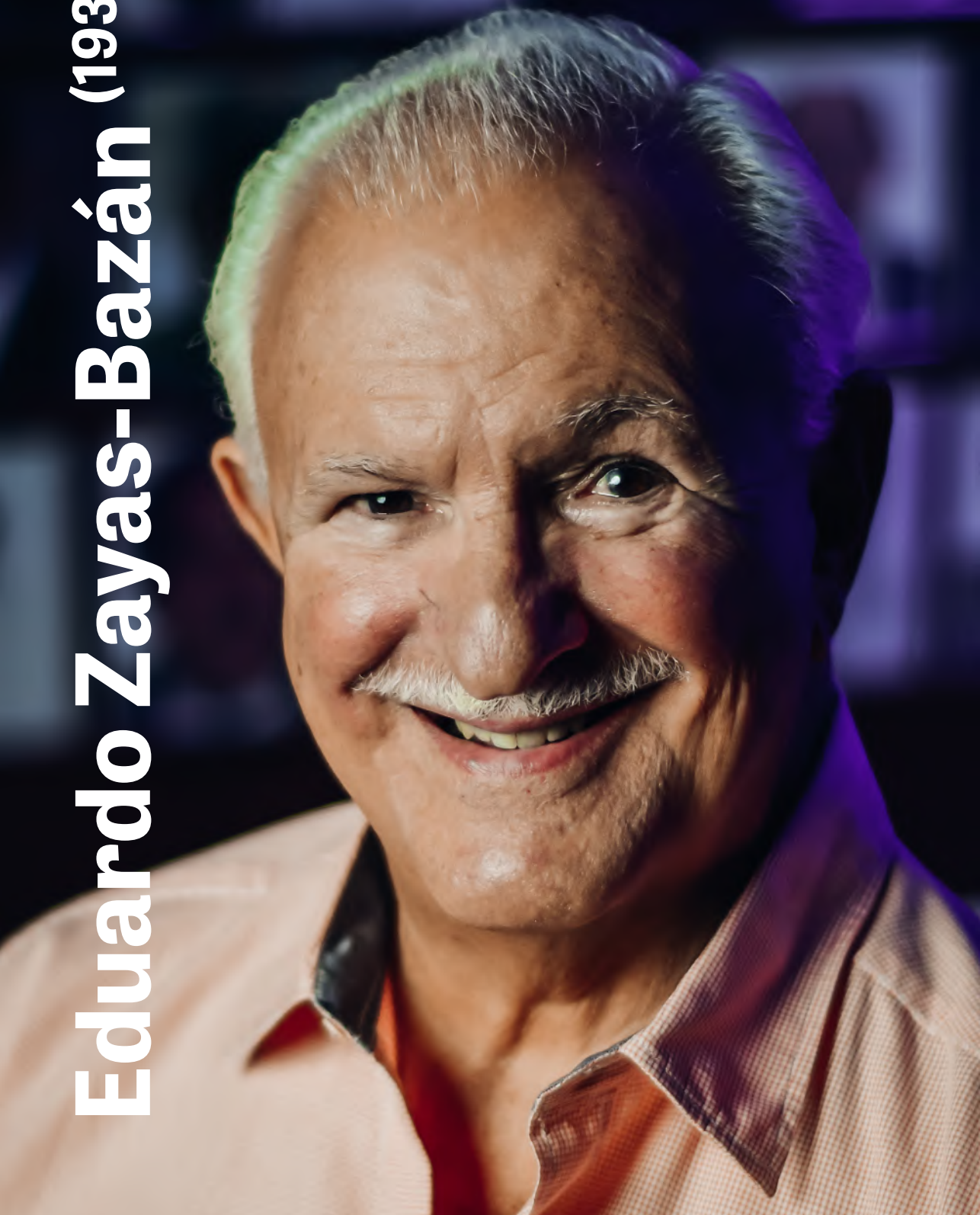
## Support for Cuban exiles

As soon as he arrived in Madrid, Jesús started helping other Cubans arriving in Spain. He says that he would go with his wife to Barajas airport many Mondays to see if there was anyone he knew or anyone he could help among people arriving in Spain on flights from Cuba. However, he soon channeled this help through the Cuban Center of Spain, founded in 1966 in Madrid. Jesús was always a very active member and even served as its president for four years. He recalls some critical achievements of the Center, such as negotiating visas for many Cubans living in Spain to move to the U.S., since it was very difficult to find work in Spain at that time. Another success was the approval of a grant of eight million pesetas by the Madrid City Council. "One of the Center's achievements, among many others, was that when I was president of the Center, we managed to arrange with the American Embassy the departure of about 600 families from Spain to the U.S. It was a tremendous achievement," he said.

## Fond memories

He has fond memories of celebrations of *Día de los Reyes Magos* [the Three Kings' Day that takes place on January 6 and is considered to be Christmas day in Spain] at the Cuban Center when children would receive gifts. He says he will never forget the children's eyes "when they received a toy for the first time in their lives." Later on, Jesús left the presidency of the Cuban Center because, as he says, he did not like the direction it took. He does not want to give details about it, but he disassociated himself from the Center, which now, he says, is inactive. However, he will always remember the vital work they did during those years for many Cubans who came to exile in Spain.

# Eduardo Zayas-Bazán (1935)



[#Military Academy](#) [#Revolutionary Recovery Movement](#)

[#Frogman](#) [#Bay of Pigs](#) [#El Príncipe prison](#)

[#Kennedy-Castro swap](#) [#professor emeritus](#)



2021



## *I have achieved the American dream.*

**“I am very proud to have ancestors that were able to see freedom in Cuba,” says Eduardo Zayas-Bazán, whose full surname is Zayas-Bazán Loret de Mola, and who was born in November 1935 in Camagüey. His great-grandfather was the member of the first Senate of the Republic of Cuba in 1902, his grandfather was also a successful politician and senator. Since then, Eduardo’s relatives held important functions in Cuban public institutions. “My father, at the age of 23, was elected to the Cuban House of Representatives and we moved to Havana so he could begin his career as a member of the Cuban Congress,” he says.**

Eduardo’s father was a MP and as of 1948 a sitting senator for the Liberal Party, which was one of the most important political parties from the beginning of the 20th century up to the Cuban Revolution in Cuba. Due to his father’s political work in Havana, Eduardo’s youth was divided between Camagüey, an important city located in the central part of Cuba, and the capital. It was in Havana where he, together with his brother Rogelio, started going to the Colegio de Belen, where the future revolutionary leader Fidel Castro was also studying at the same time. “I remember that there were large athletic fields where all kinds of sports were played. Fidel Castro had the reputation of being a great athlete, and indeed he was,” he recalls.



## A lively boy

“My brother and I were a bit disobedient,” explains Eduardo, so their father decided to send them to Baldor College, which was supposed to be much stricter. However, they both had behavioral problems even there, so they eventually ended up at a military academy in Georgia, in the U.S. In 1953 he graduated, became a successful swimmer and received a scholarship to study at the University. “But I didn’t want to study in the U.S., I wanted to go back to Cuba and study law. Since my ancestors had always been involved in Cuba’s public life, I wanted to follow a similar path,” Eduardo explains. With his return to Cuba his lifestyle changed abruptly. At the Military Academy the regime was quite strict, but in Cuba, the 18-year-old Eduardo, enjoyed his life in the social clubs of the capital and all that came with it. “My grades, which had never been too good, were not good enough in two disciplines: economics and religion,” says Eduardo. That is why in 1953, around the same time when the attack on the Moncada Barracks failed, he decided to leave the University of Villa Nueva (Universidad Católica de Santo Tomás de Villa Nueva) and enroll at the University of Havana. “At the beginning of my studies at the University of Havana, everything was relatively calm, but student demonstrations against the Batista dictatorship were taking place. Little by little the situation deteriorated,” Eduardo explains about the university environment. Since his father was a member of House of Representatives and later a senator, as well as the fact that his grandfather was also a senator, politics directly influenced Eduardo’s family life in those years. “My grandfather was a personal friend of Batista, but my father was not. Although my father was the governor of Camagüey, he never got an audience with Batista,” he says.

## They arrested my father

“On January 1, 1959, my father decided to spend some time at the house of some friends whose last name was Arango to see what was happening during the first days after the revolution. The situation was chaotic. They began to shoot many politicians in the Oriente [a former Cuban province]. Within a week, my father decided to turn himself in to the authorities in Camagüey on the condition that if in three days there were no accusations against him he would be released, and so it happened,” says Eduardo who was at the time in Havana with his girlfriend studying for the state law exam. “The chief of police, who was also the commander of the rebel army, inspected our house to see if we had some weapons. But he did not find anything, so my father returned to the house in Camagüey. However, 24 hours later Commander Huber Matos, who was carrying a machine gun, knocked on the door and detained my dad once again. There was also the chief of police in the same car with my dad. He was detained for having released dad without asking Huber Matos’ permission,” recalls Eduardo. Eduardo’s father was in jail for a month and half. Then his farm was confiscated. Eduardo says that between 1956 and 1959, he was left without the possibility of practicing law because university degrees had been invalidated. “I didn’t know what to do about my future,” he explains. “First, I went to the University of Havana to see how I could finish my degree, but the professors started to leave because they didn’t want to bow down before Fidel Castro and because the new





regime started to eliminate everyone. I decided I wanted nothing to do with this and never went back to the University of Havana,” he explains.

### **Ambivalent feelings**

“When Fidel Castro triumphed, I had ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, I was worried about what would happen to my grandfather who had been a friend of Batista and what would happen to my father who, although he was not really a friend of Batista, was part of the coalition that had supported Batista. On the other hand, however, I sympathized with the Revolution. I thought that Cuba needed important changes to end corruption, establish a democracy and to have decent politicians who would work for the welfare of the country,” Eduardo says. However, he changed his opinion quickly and turned against Fidel Castro. The extrajudicial executions that took place in his own region of Camagüey played an important role in his decision. In the end, Eduardo’s father and grandfather had no serious problems with the revolutionary authorities, but the elimination of all political parties that opposed Castro’s government was another problematic aspect for Eduardo and he could no longer defend the Revolution. “In March 1959 my sympathies with this Revolution ended,” he says. Eduardo worked for a few months as a swimming instructor, got married and in September 1960 left Cuba. Before leaving, he joined a group of people who were beginning to conspire against the Government. He became a member of the Movement to Recover the Revolution, in which he printed and distributed pamphlets. These activities sparked the attention of the secret police. “I was aware that some kind of opposition landing was being plotted. The first thing I did when I arrived in Miami was to go to the office of the Democratic Revolutionary Front to register for the invasion,” he says.

*I heard they were looking for frogmen. Since I had been a swimmer, I said this is what I wanted to do.*

### **The training**

Eduardo’s role in the invasion was pretty clear because of his successes as a swimmer. “I heard they were looking for frogmen. Since I had been a swimmer, I said this is what I wanted to do,” he explains. In October 1960 his wife also arrived in Miami and in November their first son was born. During this time, he worked as an assistant in an apartment complex, where he cleaned cars. In January 1961, the frogmen left for the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, where they were trained. Later they continued their training on a naval base near New Orleans and later on, they moved to Nicaragua, which was the starting point for the invasion of Cuba.



## The Americans had never lost a war

“For us the fact that the U.S. was supporting us was a total guarantee that this project was going to succeed. The Americans until then had never lost a war. We thought they were supermen and that the FBI and the CIA were organizations of super-capable men,” says Eduardo. And they believed all of this, despite the fact that most of the men who joined the invasion troops had no military experience. “We were college students or people from countryside or from humble backgrounds,” he says of this.

### Landing

Upon arrival in Nicaragua they had the first meeting where they were informed about the plan for the invasion. However, the original plan to disembark near the city of Trinidad, a few kilometers from the zone controlled by the anti-Castro guerrillas, had changed and the invasion was going to take place in the Bay of Pigs. But these changes that were made at the last moment were, according to Eduardo, one of the big mistakes that caused the failure of the operation. “The chief of the frogmen who knew that part of the island said: ‘But I see something that looks like coral reefs’. And they said: ‘No, no, no, no, the experts in Washington have said that those are shadows from clouds and that there shouldn’t be any problem to disembark.’ This was a big mistake. We hit the reefs. That was one of the many mistakes,” he says. According to Eduardo, the biggest problem was that President Kennedy decided to cancel the air strikes. “At that time the invasion should have been called off. Castro’s planes quickly bombed and managed to sink two of our ships, one of which had ammunition and gasoline for the planes. The other ships were ordered to go 30 miles away and never returned. After 70 hours our ammunition ran out. We were surrounded by tens of thousands of Castro’s militiamen who defeated us,” said Eduardo.

### We decided to surrender

Eduardo was wounded in his knees and on the third day he was arrested by Castro’s troops. “We decided to surrender,” he says. Once arrested, he spent time in several hospitals. In one of them he met an old acquaintance. “He was interviewing the wounded. Do you think he had the common courtesy to greet me, to say something to me? Nothing. He didn’t approach me. And that was typical of the Revolution. In the times before the Revolution even your political enemy would help you, if he could. After the Revolution, everything changed,” he explains. Eduardo ended up in El Príncipe prison, where many of the members of the defeated Brigade 2506 were imprisoned. “We were there for about eight months until we found out that we had been put on trial. Fidel Castro appeared at 2 AM and said to us: ‘How are you guys? How do you feel? Are they giving you enough food?’ As if he was one of our best friends... He spent more than two hours talking to us. He told us he had good news: ‘We’re not going to shoot anybody, but we’re going to sentence you to 32 years in prison or the U.S. Government is going to have to pay a ransom for you of \$62 million dollars. And the ransom will be computed as follows: for the three leaders of the insurrection,



they [the U.S.] are going to have to pay \$500,000 for each of you; \$100,000 for the richest of you; and for the rest of you \$50,000 or \$25,000 each.' When we heard that, we thought that this was never going to happen," he confesses. Fidel Castro first released about 60 wounded men who were supposed to help get the money. That is how Eduardo managed to leave Cuba for the U.S. on April 24, 1962. After another eight months, the rest of the prisoners were also released, as the full ransom had been collected.

### **The American dream**

"I never expected to see my family again," says Eduardo, who was eventually reunited with his family. He began working in various Cuban exile organizations and later got a scholarship to become a Spanish teacher. He taught at a high school in Nebraska and finished his master's degree. He continued studying and became the Head of the Language Department at East Tennessee University. "I've been very fortunate to be able to write Spanish textbooks. I retired in 1999 and after 22 years my books are still being sold. God has been very good to me," he says. Today he lives in Miami, has grandchildren and great-grandchildren. "I have achieved the American dream," he concludes.

***We're not going to shoot anybody, but we're going to sentence you to 32 years in prison or the U.S. Government is going to have to pay a ransom for you of \$62 million dollars.***



# Julio González Rebull (1936)

[#Association of Young Revolutionary Cubans](#) [#journalist](#)

[#Radio Swan](#) [#CIA training](#) [#Bay of Pigs](#)

[#exiled in the USA](#)



2018





*Fighting for a free Cuba is the duty of every good Cuban.*

**“I think Cuban youth experienced a big disillusion. We thought that to have a peaceful life we didn’t necessarily have to belong to a political party but to complete our studies and to help our homeland to move forward,” says Julio González Rebull.**

Julio was born in 1936 in Havana. His father was the owner of the Cuban newspaper Crisol and a radio station. He studied at a Catholic school. Later on, while studying journalism, he worked at his father’s newspaper. “I always believed that a change was needed in Cuba after President Batista staged the coup d’état,” he recalls. He joined the Association of Young Revolutionary Cubans, which was along with the 26th of July Movement, one of the two most important groups that were fighting against the government of Fulgencio Batista. “We very quickly started to doubt that the dictator of Cuba, Fidel Castro, would step down, and we realized that the promises they had made were not kept. They had promised elections in Cuba, they had promised freedom where you could disagree [with the government] without the risk of being shot or going to jail for 30 years,” he says.



## Arrival in Miami

The editorial policy of the newspaper where he worked began to clash with the Castro regime. In May 1960 Julio left for the U.S. with the intention of joining what later turned out to be the Bay of Pigs invasion. "I arrived in Miami with my press card as a journalist, where we were supposedly coming to report on an event that Fulgencio Batista had started and that Fidel Castro was continuing in New York at that time." After arriving in the U.S. he immediately applied for asylum and got involved in activities aimed at defeating the Cuban regime. He joined Radio Swan, which was broadcasting to Cuba.

## The duty of any good Cuban

After learning about the existence of training camps for military intervention in Cuba, he decided to participate. "It was tough. My mother had arrived from Cuba in October. During the previous months, we were separated, I couldn't even talk to her. When I called from Miami to Cuba, they wouldn't let the calls go through. When I wrote to my mother a letter and the Cuban Post Office confirmed that these were my letters, they would not let her receive the letters. So, for two to three months, I did not have any information about my mother except through third parties. Finally, they told me that I had to leave for the camps. I had no idea where we were going, I had never been in the military. On December 16 they came to pick me up at my house. My mother had arrived a month ago," Julio recounts. He was supposed to broadcast from the camps to Cuba on Radio Swan. There were also plans to have my friend and I parachute into the Escambray Mountains, to join the units fighting Fidel Castro's regime. "Honestly, I had never been in the military and I trembled when I heard what the plans were, but it was the duty of any good Cuban to participate," Julio says.

## Air Missions

Julio received documents with a false name, a military uniform, and he was transported through the Miami airport, along with the other young Cubans, to training camps in Central America. Only when they landed did they learn that they were in Retalhuleu, Guatemala. After spending a month or so in the training camps, he traveled with his friend to the TRAX base in Guatemala, where he was briefed on his tasks, which consisted of air missions to Cuba to drop anti-communist propaganda. Later their radio equipment arrived, and they began transmitting to Cuba from Guatemala.

## Fidel had hundreds of thousands of men

Air missions continued until the final stage of training. "Honestly, we were a little surprised, because we were only about 1300 men and we knew that Fidel had hundreds of thousands of men in arms," recalls Julio. Our training continued in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua. Later, some soldiers went to Cuba by boat, and others were sent by plane. There was a counter-offensive by Castro's planes and Julio had to return to Nicaragua. This happened twice, and then the pilots



learned of the difficult situation on the ships. “When the pilot told me that we had to return to Nicaragua, I asked permission to let me parachute on my own, but they did not allow me to do it, so I had to return,” he recalls. On April 15, another offensive was made against the Castro planes which resulted in deaths. “One of the instructors told me: ‘Julio, you were such a good friend of Martin’s, pick up his things because they have killed him’. It was simply a horrible moment,” he recalls. The fighting continued, but the decisive factor was the end of U.S. military assistance. The landing mission in Cuba was not successful. “It was a very hard experience. One hundred or more young men died. We felt betrayed,” Julio confesses.

### **Missions to supply aid to rebels**

Julio continued to participate in missions to supply aid to the rebels in Cuba, which was transported using boats from the islands of the Florida Keys. He also remained a member of the Inter American Press Association (IAPA). They were also attempting to help people who were trying to rise up against the Castro regime. It was a matter of supplying them with weapons or getting them out of Cuba, as they were in danger of repression. Julio was part of these support and rescue missions three times. However, the struggle gradually diminished.

### **I can give advice**

During the interview, Julio showed disappointment with the attitude of young Cubans. “Think about those of us who are as old as I am... I can no longer fly, nor can I sail on a boat for four days without food, nor can I give money. But what I can give is advice,” he said. Julio passed away in January 2019, after having spent 60 years of struggle against the Castro regime.

*One of the instructors told me:  
‘Julio, you were such a good friend  
of Martin’s, pick up his things  
because they have killed him.’*

# Humberto López Saldaña (1936)

[#soldier](#) [#training camps](#) [#CIA training](#)

[#Bay of Pigs](#) [#Brigade 2506](#) [#Kennedy-Castro swap](#)

[#exiled in the USA](#)



2021





*I always thought my purpose was to get to Cuba with my rifle in my hand!*

**“I have always wanted to have a military career,” Humberto López Saldaña emphasized several times during the interview. It is not surprising, therefore, that he decided to join the little more than a thousand men who embarked on the dangerous adventure that would go down in history as the Bay of Pigs invasion.**

Humberto Saldaña was born in September 1936 in the city of Cárdenas, Matanzas province, about 150 kilometers from Havana on the northern coast of Cuba. His father was in the military and, so he grew up in a military environment, which perhaps influenced his later decision to become a soldier. Since his father served in different locations, the family had to occasionally move. “Once, we lived in San José de los Ramos. That’s where I first went to school. Then we lived in Varadero for two years and later in Cárdenas,” he says. In Cárdenas he went to a school run by Spanish priests, and some of them had fought in the Spanish Civil War. “That school was very strict,” he recalls.



## Fidel Castro has just landed in the East

In 1956 Humberto finished the science track at Cárdenas High School. “I remember that I wanted to study in the U.S. but my father didn’t want me to,” he says. So, he chose a career in Civil Engineering at the University of Havana. However, he was unable to finish it. “In the morning in December 1957, we had a chemistry class. Suddenly, a civil servant who was also one of my friends appeared and said: ‘The class is suspended, because Fidel Castro has just landed in the East’. This was the last day of my University studies. When it was reopened in 1959, I didn’t go anymore,” he says.

*Many people say that in 1959 there was an explosion of joy. I don’t see it that way. There was an atmosphere of threat.*

### This goes wrong

Humberto recalls that tensions between supporters of different ideas and ideologies had not always been as acute as it was after Fidel Castro came to power. “I grew up in the environment of a military man of the Republic. But I had friends who were different and we respected each other. I used to go to Echeverría’s house. I knew José Antonio Echeverría [a student leader killed in combat in 1957]. I remember there was a palm tree in front of his house and we used to have conversation there,” he recalls. Humberto got married in 1958 and when Fidel Castro victoriously entered Havana, he was living in Varadero. “We turned on the TV and watched everything that was happening,” he recalls. The social climate changed abruptly. His father, a former military officer in the Batista regime, had to go into hiding and died soon after [in 1959], the same year of the Revolution. “My group of friends had never been Castro sympathizers. We began to organize as a group. We talked very discreetly and carefully about carrying out acts of sabotage. We were conspiring. It was extremely dangerous at that time to do these activities in Cuba,” says Humberto. “We started a fire with white phosphorus in a store which caused quite a bit of damage. It was a time of terror. Many people say that in 1959 there was an explosion of joy. I don’t see it that way. There was an atmosphere of threat. You already couldn’t go to the movies in 1958. They threatened that they were going to plant bombs there,” he says.



## Just the fact of leaving Cuba made you disaffected with the regime

In a short time, the family's bank account was confiscated, as well as the house they rented, and in April 1960 Humberto decided to leave for the U.S. "Just the fact of leaving Cuba meant that you were disaffected with the Castro regime," he explains. He went to the American embassy where his aunt worked and got a tourist visa. He arrived in Miami, where his brother had already been living. He passed through several houses of relatives and friends from his youth who also went to the US. He decided to enter the training camps that were preparing volunteers to invade Cuba. "I was working for a few months until the time when I signed up. Soon after, I left for the camps. My group left in February 1961," he says.

## Training in Guatemala

The first part of the training took place at a U.S. base in Louisiana and lasted about a month. Then they moved to Guatemala. Humberto and his group formed the 5th Infantry Battalion. The boot camp in Louisiana, he says, was like the ones you see in the movies, but the one in Guatemala was very different. "People dressed differently, they were more emaciated, some were not shaved. But soon we were like them," he recalls. Once training was over, the group went to Puerto Cabezas in Nicaragua, where the ship Houston was ready, and Humberto and his companions set sail for Cuba. "It took us almost three days of sailing to reach the coast of Cuba on the morning of April 17<sup>th</sup>. The invasion took place in April because in May the Russian MIG aircraft were supposed to have arrived. In the morning we arrived at the Bay of Pigs, as was the plan for Battalions 2 and 5. The landing was done on aluminum boats with 40 horsepower engines and it was very slow," he describes.

*My group of friends had never been Castro sympathizers.*

## Kennedy's attitude

According to Humberto, one of the main reasons for the defeat of the Bay of Pigs invasion was the attitude of the then president of the U.S., John F. Kennedy. "He wasn't the right person for this historic moment," he says of the president's decision to suspend airstrikes against Castro's aircraft. "Our planes were leaving Nicaragua and could not stay over Cuba for more than 30 minutes," he says. Therefore, the plan to take the beach and establish a government there could not prove successful even though Humberto's battalion had made some advances at the beginning of the operation. The ship Houston was burned.



## The trucks

Humberto and his group fought until his arrest on the fifth or sixth day when they were captured by Fidel Castro's forces. "They then put us in one of the *rastras* [truck-like vehicle] to take us to Havana. The militiamen were shouting at me, 'Give me the pants, give me the boots.' Then they brought another *rastra* and told us to get off and get on the other one. I said, 'I'm not getting off here, they're taking my pants and boots as souvenirs,'" recalls Humberto. For some of Humberto's companions, the *rastras* proved fatal. "They packed the other *rastra* with some of his companions and hermetically sealed it. Nine of them died. On the way they shouted at us: 'Shoot them in the head, mercenaries,'" he says. The trail took them to the Palacio de los Deportes [Sports Palace] in Havana. "Many were sick and wounded. I had several problems with my ears," he recalls. After almost a month, they were transferred to the Naval Hospital, where they stayed for another month, before being transferred directly to El Príncipe [Prince's Castle] prison.

*The trial was a complete hoax,  
even our defense attorney asked  
for the death penalty for us.*

## Prison and return to the U.S.

Humberto was imprisoned until December 1962, when a prisoner's swap was carried out by U.S. negotiators. "We were released in exchange for money, clothing, and medicines in the amount of 60 million dollars, provided mainly by U.S. companies. The conditions in El Príncipe were very bad. The place where I was imprisoned had only one bathroom for 150 men. In my cell it was just the floor. Then they brought us bunk beds. There was a water tank with rats. Drinking this water caused huge stomach problems. My mother and my wife were stripped naked during the visit," he describes. "The trial was a complete hoax, even our defense attorney asked for the death penalty for us. So, you can imagine... We abstained from testifying," he says. Humberto recalls that, once they were released, and were being transported to the place of departure, people shouted at them again. However, now the shouts were different: "Come back again!" they would yell at them. "It should be seen as proof of how much the opinion of the public changed in just two years...", recalls Humberto.





## The eagerness to fight for Cuba

On December 25, 1962, he returned to the U.S., where he was reunited with his family. However, he did not abandon the military. He joined the ranks of the U.S. Army. “More than 300 of us liberated soldiers joined the U.S. Army. We had the enthusiasm and the eagerness to fight for Cuba that we still maintain up to today 60 years later,” he concludes.

*We had the enthusiasm and the eagerness to fight for Cuba that we still maintain up to today 60 years later.*

# Alfredo Sánchez Echeverría (1936)

[#fight against Batista](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#release of political prisoners](#) [#Venezuela-Cuba dialogues](#)

[#exile in Venezuela](#) [#exiled in the USA](#)



2017



*“On the Isle of Pines, one went out in the morning and did not know if he would return alive in the afternoon.”*

**“In Cuba, the solution is not to fix the crumbling streets, but to fix the minds of Cubans,” says Alfredo Sánchez Echeverría, a former Cuban political prisoner who has lived in exile since 1977.**

Alfredo was born in Cuba in July 1936 into an intellectual family. His father was a professor at the University of Havana, and was a member of the last democratic Cuban government, prior to the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. Given that Alfredo's father struggled politically against Batista, the family had to leave the country and were not able to return until the end of 1954.



## **Elections for what?**

In 1958, when Batista fled Cuba and Fidel Castro took power, Alfredo's family was still having political problems. "At one moment I stopped believing in Fidel Castro, and especially after the speech in which he said 'elections for what,'" Alfredo comments. "We struggled to get rid of Fulgencio Batista precisely to re-establish democracy in Cuba. And of course, the basis of democracy is elections," he sums up, emphasizing Fidel Castro's betrayal of "that movement that had cost so many lives and so much effort," he says. From that moment on, Alfredo began to work against the Castro regime.

## **Sentenced to 30 years**

In 1961, when Alfredo was working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and after a transfer of weapons was arranged that were supposed to be used against Fidel Castro's government, he was arrested along with some other colleagues, among them Pedro Fuentes Cid. They were sentenced to 30 years in prison in a trial held a year after their arrest. "A few minutes before, they had withdrawn the death penalty petition for Pedro and me," Alfredo adds.

## **They began to execute people**

That same year, exactly on April 16, 1961, the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion took place, organized and financed by the CIA in which around 1,500 Cuban exiles participated. "Things changed, they began to execute people in droves," comments Alfredo, who recalls how there was a massive increase in the number of prisoners, along with worse treatment and food. "Headcounts of inmates, guards with sticks and bayonets, beatings... These were all practices back then," he adds.

## **You didn't know if you would come back alive in the afternoon**

In the end, Alfredo served 14 years in different Cuban prisons. Among others, he was also jailed in the Isle of Pines prison, a deserted place where political prisoners were sent to do forced labor. In this regard, he mentions the infamous Camilo Cienfuegos Special Plan that was implemented between 1964 and 1967, a forced labor program designed especially for political prisoners. Alfredo speaks of an inhuman amount of work, whether it was moving stones or agricultural work, and many unpleasant situations. "You went out in the morning and didn't know if you would come back alive in the afternoon," he says.

## **Not even nails were sold**

After the failure of the Camilo Cienfuegos Special Plan, Cuba turned to a progressive plan and, according to Alfredo, the prisoners had the possibility of paying off their sentences and possibly being released from prison early. In the end, Alfredo was released in 1975 and, although he had an almost immediate possibility of emigrating, he decided to stay at least for some time with his fa-





mily. “When I left prison, the stores were empty, there was no money,” he says. “You could buy one pair of pants a year and who knows how long it would take to get a pair of shoes,” he adds. However, this same period in the late 1970s saw a great development of tourism in Cuba: hotels were built, and tourists were gradually arriving, creating a foreign exchange market that had an even greater impact on the lives of Cubans. “There was a time when you could not find even nails in the store. I spent so much time looking for a screw because none of the stores had them,” Alfredo says.

### **Invitation to exile**

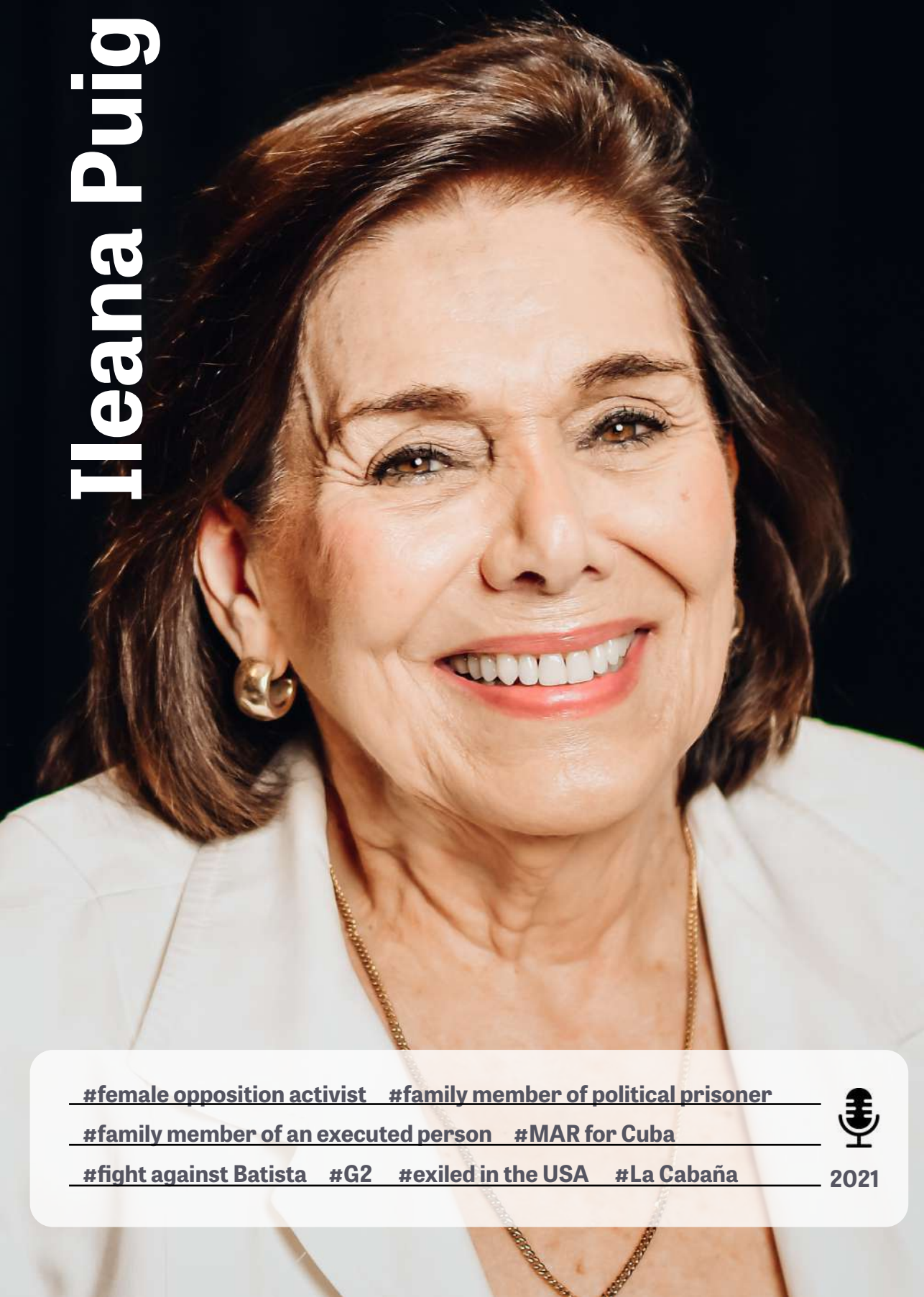
In 1977, Alfredo emigrated to Venezuela, as the political and diplomatic atmosphere in Cuba had eased somewhat, offering opponents of the regime what he describes as an “invitation to exile”. In Venezuela, Alfredo worked as director of a plastics factory and had a daughter. Near the end of the 1970s, he was chosen as a trusted person to handle diplomatic talks between the Venezuelan government and Cuba on the release of Cuban political prisoners. However, despite having managed to free several political prisoners and bring them to Venezuela, this diplomatic situation did not survive for long.

### **Seeking a peaceful way out**

In 1981, Alfredo moved from Venezuela to the U.S., where he worked as a topographer and in 1984 he finished his university studies in civil engineering. Today he lives in Miami and continues to struggle to find a peaceful solution to the Cuban situation.

*At one moment I stopped believing in Fidel Castro, and especially after the speech in which he said ‘elections for what.’*

# Ileana Puig (1937)



**#female opposition activist #family member of political prisoner**

**#family member of an executed person #MAR for Cuba**

**#fight against Batista #G2 #exiled in the USA #La Cabaña**



**2021**



*“My sister and I accompanied our husbands in their struggle against the regime. Not solely because we loved them, but because we shared their desire for freedom.”*

**“We must teach future generations that the lack of compassion has consequences and that freedom has its price,” stresses Ileana Puig, wife and sister of political prisoners, and sister-in-law of an executed prisoner. “Life is not a gift, life has to be fought for,” adds Ileana, an extremely brave woman who, at that age of 84, continues to bear witness for those who could not give it.**

Ileana Puig, née Arango Cortina, was born in November 1937 in Havana, Republic of Cuba, into a cohesive and politically active family that instilled in her a sense of love for her country, the right to dissent and to express what she thought. Ileana remembers her grandfather, an important senator in the 1940's. “When all the parties were in disagreement, my grandfather used to say a very apt phrase, he would say with his strong and overbearing voice: ‘Out with the parties, in with the homeland,’” she says. This phrase meant to highlight the fact that parties should be at service of the Nation, and not the other way around.



## Rino y Ñongo

In 1956 she married Ramón “Rino” Puig, and her sister Ofelia married Ramón’s brother, Manuel “Ñongo” Puig. In November 1956, after their wedding, Ileana began to support her husband Ramón, who participated in youth activities against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Her assistance consisted of raising funds and delivering weapons to the front lines. “My world began to teeter, and the world I was dreaming of, became a little more real. I realized what it meant to dedicate myself fully to a cause,” Ileana says.

*It was the first trial where I realized the extent of the lack of fundamental rights in Cuba. There was no lawyer, no witnesses, the arrested person had no right to speak.*

### G2

When in 1959 Fidel Castro’s new regime began using unjust sentences and frequent executions, Ileana, her husband and her entire family took part in the struggle against the regime. “Both my husband and his brother were 100% involved in the fight against the regime. Both my sister and I shared that struggle, not only because we loved our husbands, but also because we shared that desire for freedom,” Ileana explains.

### The first prisoner of Ileana’s family

One day in August 1959, Ileana’s brother did not show up to a meeting at Ileana’s parents’ house. “He was the first prisoner in the family,” she says. Ileana’s brother was convicted in part of the trial of the case known as the “Trujillo-Batista conspiracy”, formally organized by the Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, with the aim of overthrowing the revolutionary regime in Cuba. “It was the first trial where I realized the extent of the lack of fundamental rights in Cuba. There was no lawyer, no witnesses, the arrested person had no right to speak. They sentenced my brother to six years in La Cabaña prison,” Ileana said. Soon she would have another experience with the judicial system in Cuba. On October 22, 1960, at lunchtime, she said goodbye to her husband, not knowing that for the next 15 years she would only be able to see him behind bars. Ramón Puig was sentenced to imprisonment in La Cabaña prison. At that





very moment, officers from the G2 [General Directorate of Intelligence] entered into Ileana's house. She had to let them in, but tried to threaten them. "When they entered my daughters' room, I told them, 'You will have to kill me before you wake up my daughters.' For the first time I transformed myself from a calm, sweet girl into a wild beast," she says.

*When they entered my daughters' room, I told them, 'You will have to kill me before you wake up my daughters.' For the first time I transformed myself from a calm, sweet girl into a wild beast.*

### **I know why I am dying**

After the imprisonment of Ileana's brother and husband, her brother-in-law, Manuel Puig, decided to participate in military training abroad and to return to Cuba as an infiltrator on March 19, 1961. Unfortunately, due to a lack of coordination, the plan did not succeed and Manuel was arrested. Immediately the G2 officers entered his sister's house, arrested her and sentenced her to 30 years in prison. Ileana's parents faced a complicated situation seeing their daughter, son and two sons-in-law jailed at the same time. On April 19, 1961, precisely at the height of the American invasion at Playa Giron (known also as Bay of Pigs Invasion), Manuel Puig was sentenced to death. The whole family was devastated, especially his wife Ofelia, Ileana's sister, who at the time had four small children. "I told my father: 'Dad, in case Manuel is put on trial these days, they are going to shoot him,' and so it happened. The atmosphere in the society was affected by the invasion, one could feel the hatred towards everything that was not connected to the Revolution," she says. Manuel's last words to Ofelia echo in Ileana's memory to this day: "Ofe, don't worry. Not everyone knows why they die, but I know why I'm dying, so don't worry"! Ileana's father was Manuel's lawyer during the trial and she saw her dad cry for the first time, when he told Manuel's mother: "I couldn't save your son's life, they shot him."

### **I could not abandon my husband, a political prisoner**

Ofelia, Ileana's sister, was fortunately excused from the 30-year sentence and she immediately emigrated with her four children to Miami, while Ileana's hus-



band remained in prison. Ileana's daughters did not miss a single visit in La Cabaña, nor on the Isle of Pines. "At first, I would tell my daughters that daddy was in college. I didn't want to tell them that he was incarcerated, until one of my daughters wanted to be a pioneer. I explained to her what the red scarf represented, and she never wanted to be a pioneer again," Ileana describes. "I could not allow my daughters to grow up in fear, they had to grow up with the freedom to choose their future, without anyone imposing it on them," Ileana explains. Day after day she felt the effects of the scarcity, pressure and fear in society, so she considered emigrating when Fidel Castro announced: "Whoever wants to leave, can leave," she recalls. However, she did not want to leave her husband, a political prisoner. The prisoners lived off of the food provided by their relatives, so he would probably die of hunger.

*I had left my husband in Cuba to come to terms with the death of my parents and to be with my two daughters who at that point didn't even know me.*

### **Either you come with us, or we leave**

Ileana's parents levelled with her that either she would go with her sister to the U.S., or they would leave. "On October 22, 1966, they travelled to Spain and from there to Miami. I never saw my parents again," Ileana laments. She stayed in Cuba, even after her daughters were in exile. Her parents died in 1972. It was during this period that Ileana worked in the agricultural sector, which was mandatory to avoid the prohibition for leaving the country in the future. On February 7, 1973, Ileana arrived in Miami, two days before her eldest daughter's 15th birthday, after seven years of separation.

### **Time heals anything**

"I had left my husband in Cuba to come to terms with the death of my parents and to be with my two daughters who at that point didn't even know me," Ileana says. Moreover, she had to face the judgments from the people in Cuba, and comments like: "What kind of woman are you that you abandoned your husband? What kind of mother are you that you left your children? You have to get divorced to be able to leave the country," Ileana recalls. "But time heals everything. Over time I was able to rebuild my life with my daughters and prepare them for their father's arrival. They knew him from all the prison visits when they were little and he wrote to them when he could. Ramón joined us when our eldest daughter turned 19," says Ileana.



## Protecting her daughters

In the U.S. Ileana tried to protect her daughters, so she didn't talk much about the realities of Cuban prisons or opposition politics, until years passed and conversations about these issues came up. "To what extent were our children hurt by our political position or do they carry this suffering inside? Will they wonder why their parents preferred a political struggle over parenting them? Many women of political prisoners, especially those of us who had to send our children abroad alone, have talked about the impact it has had on our families. However, we don't regret anything," she stresses. Ileana mentions that sometimes she feels a lot of harshness within her, although she did not always feel strong. "When certain subjects come up, I still feel enormous pain within, but the Lord always gives me strength during these difficult moments," she says.

## Growing up without fear

Despite all the vicissitudes in Ileana's life, she has absolutely no regrets, and is determined to continue the struggle against the Cuban regime from Miami, promoting political change in Cuba and, above all, sharing the story of her family. Her husband Ramón Puig is a great support for her. She emphasizes that the cohesion of the family that has persisted despite all the adversities they have endured, which has been possible thanks to their understanding, coming to terms with their emotions and having a common ideology. The cause of Ileana and her husband has always been the same: fight for the homeland and for the future of their daughters. "What I want is justice. I do not gain anything by forgiveness," proclaims Ileana. "In order to achieve that your rights are respected, and to be able to think freely, you have to constantly fight for it," she concludes.

*What kind of woman are you that you abandoned your husband? What kind of mother are you that you left your children?*

# Ángel de Fana Serrano (1939)

#Martí Democratic Movement #Point X #La Cabaña

#plantados #rooted ones #political prisoner #Isle of Pines

#Combinado del Este prison #rejection of Cuba-U.S. negotiations

#Plantados until Freedom and Democracy in Cuba



2018





*No, I don't have to thank the Revolution, I have to thank God.*

**“We wrote a letter on the floor with fellow prisoners opposing the U.S.-Cuba negotiations and 130 of us signed it. We noted in that letter that our freedom should not be linked to any conditions,” recalls Ángel de Fana Serrano, one of the most well-known political prisoners who, during his imprisonment in the Combinado del Este, opposed the negotiations for his release, carried out by the U.S. “I think it is one of the most important documents that bears my signature,” he adds.**

Ángel was born in January 1939 into a humble family: “My father was a shoemaker and laborer, my mother was a housewife. We had a happy life in Cuba,” he recalls. When he graduated from high school, he got a scholarship to an American academy called the Havana Business Academy. In 1957, at the age of 18, he started working in the office of the same shoe factory where his father worked and he remained there until 1961 when the factory was nationalized by the Castro government. Once the factory was confiscated by the state, the owner asked him to go to manage a shoe store, which he still owned. In 1962 he got married, and about 30 days after the wedding he was arrested.



## Activities of sabotage

Ángel de Fana was not a revolutionary and he did not take part in the struggle against the government of Fulgencio Batista. “Although I was aware of what was happening in the country, I liked to read and I read a lot of history books and books on social topics, so I had enough information about what was happening,” he says. Already in 1959, he began to realize that Fidel Castro’s Revolution was converting itself into a communist dictatorship. In 1960, he joined the anti-Castro organization Movimiento Democrata Martiano [Martí Democratic Movement] and took part in activities of sabotage. “We would place explosives in public places to make some noise, and worked hard to spread anti-Castro information. I must emphasize that nobody got hurt,” he clarifies. After some time, he became the Movement’s finance officer and spent most of his time seeking resources and establishing relations with other movements. In middle of 1962 he was appointed leader of the Movement.

*We would place explosives in public places to make some noise, and worked hard to spread anti-Castro information. I must emphasize that nobody got hurt.*

## A black sack over the face

Shortly thereafter, Ángel de Fana was arrested and accused of masterminding an attack against pro-government forces in which an Army soldier died, and of organizing an uprising that took place in August 1962. He was taken to the State Security headquarters in Miramar and later transferred to Las Cabañitas or Punto X [Point X], a place that State Security used for interrogations. “Every time they would transfer you, they would put a black sack over your face so you couldn’t see anything,” he recounts.

## Las Cabañitas

After 37 days of interrogations during which he was stripped naked and had to wear a black sack over his head, he was transferred to the military prison of La Cabaña. “They took me to separate special parts of the prison. All of us political



prisoners passed through Las Cabañitas, so they didn't want anyone to know what it looked like in there. Naturally, we had no visitors," he says. Later, at the end of 1962, he was placed in a cell with other prisoners. At the time there were about 2,000 people jailed. In April 1963 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. "When I was coming out of the courtroom, one guard said something to me that I'll never forget: 'You have to thank the Revolution because we did not shoot you.' And I told him: 'No, I don't have to thank the Revolution, I have to thank God,'" he adds. In July 1963 he was transferred to the prison on the Isle of Pines. "They put me in circular block 1 out of the 4 circular blocks. At that time in each block there were more or less 1,200 prisoners," he recalls.

*They took me to separate special parts of the prison. All of us political prisoners passed through Las Cabañitas, so they didn't want anyone to know what it looked like in there. Naturally, we had no visitors.*

### **Isle of Pines**

In the prison on the Isle of Pines, Ángel de Fana, along with other political prisoners, devoted himself to studying and to reading. "The vast majority of the prisoners were very young and were mostly the blue-collar workers. Almost all of the rich people left Cuba when communism began," he says. In 1964, the Camilo Cienfuegos Special Plan was introduced which was a plan that mandated forced labor. Those who refused to work were beaten and sent to clean sewage drains. "About 10 people were killed in the labor camps for resisting," says Ángel. As difficult as forced labor was, after work there were some educational, religious, and cultural activities that were organized.

### **No snitching, no homosexuality, and no stealing**

The prisoners there also had to follow rules that were not normally observed in other prisons. "There were three rules: no snitching, no homosexuality, and no stealing," he says. Ángel de Fana worked in a marble quarry, where the priso-



ners suffered a lot of beatings and blows with bayonets. In 1966, he was transferred to La Cabaña prison. “There were about 800 or 900 prisoners there. The conditions were very difficult, we all were very hungry. They made us run, but we didn’t run, so we would be beaten,” he says. According to Ángel, there were no visitors, no books. Sometimes, after lunch- which was horrible- the political prisoners would meet and give lectures. Moreover, there was a lack of medical assistance. In 1968, the conditions somewhat improved and some visits were allowed. In 1970, Ángel was transferred to Guanajay prison where the prisoners went on a collective hunger strike. “It is possibly the largest collective hunger strike ever held, since about 800 people did not eat for about 35 days. The first days you are hungry, then you are not hungry, but you are very weak. Suddenly, when mealtime comes, they bring you food which they normally would never give you,” he recalls. After this strike, conditions in the prison improved a little. As for his marriage, he divorced his wife after the first year in prison.

***It is possibly the largest collective hunger strike ever held, since about 800 people did not eat for about 35 days. The first days you are hungry, then you are not hungry, but you are very weak.***

### **Progressive Plan**

In 1970 or 1971, the Reeducation Plan, which included Marxist indoctrination, was replaced by the Progressive Plan. “Even some leaders of the prisoners accepted the Progressive Plan and were taken out of Guanajay prison and transferred to places where they could work,” Ángel recalls. This new strategy was rejected by approximately one-third of the prisoners. “Most of those who stayed considered entering into this program a betrayal,” he recounts. Religious organizations and others were disappearing and those that remained were forced to join a single group. “There were fewer and fewer of us,” he says. After Guanajay he was taken back to La Cabaña prison, where he spent two more years before being transferred in 1976 to the Combinado del Este prison.





## Negotiations and release

Around 1976 or 1977, the Cuban Government reached an agreement with some exile groups in the U.S., and negotiations were held. As a result, the Cuban government agreed to release some prisoners in exchange for an easing of international pressure. There was a group of prisoners in the Combinado del Este prison who did not accept the talks. Ángel was one of them. They flatly refused the negotiations altogether.

## Independent Democratic Cuba

Ángel was offered to be released from prison on the condition of accepting a job and reporting to the police station, but he refused and was sentenced to 7 more months in prison in Boniato. Later on, he was finally released with the obligation to leave the country. His parents had already obtained authorization to leave the country. After some 35 days in Havana, he went first to Venezuela, where he met Huber Matos, who had founded in Miami the organization Cuba Independiente Democrática [Independent Democratic Cuba, CID]. Ángel de Fana agreed to join a radio project which broadcasted from Santo Domingo and a location in El Salvador. He later went into exile in the U.S., where he worked for 10 years in the radio station La Voz de CID [the Voice of CID]. When the radio station was closed by the Clinton Administration, together with Professor Juan Clark he transcribed interviews for his book *Cuba: Myth and Reality*. Later he also worked with Huber Matos on his book.

## *Los Plantados* Until Freedom and Democracy in Cuba

In 1977, he founded the organization *Los Plantados hasta la Libertad y la Democracia en Cuba* [*Los plantados* Until Freedom and Democracy in Cuba]. *Los plantados*, or the rooted ones, were the most “uncooperative” political prisoners and thus endured the harshest punishment. The organization supports opposition groups and political prisoners in Cuba.

***Even some leaders of the prisoners accepted the Progressive Plan. Most of those who stayed considered entering into this program a betrayal.***

# Pedro Fuentes Cid (1939)

#personal meeting with Fidel Castro

#military training in the Dominican Republic #studies of diplomacy

#anti-Castro guerrilla movement #opposition activist

#political prisoner #forced labor camps #lawyer #La Cabaña



2017



*I do not hate the people who are denying us our rights. I simply fight against them, but I do not feel hate them.*

**“I fought for the Cuban Revolution and then I fought against those who betrayed the Revolution which my comrades defended and for which they died. Our Revolution was betrayed by Fidel Castro,” insists Pedro Fuentes Cid, who spent 16 years in different Cuban prisons for defending democracy in his homeland.**

Pedro was born in Holguín in January 1939 to an upper-class family that owned a dairy farm with cattle and sugar cane fields. Moreover, his ancestors were renowned soldiers. As a child, Pedro listened to stories of his relatives fighting against the Nazis during World War II or of his great-grandfather fighting in the Cuban War of Independence against Spain. “The city of Holguín gave birth to 14 generals who fought in the Cuban War of Independence. Walking to school I would pass several houses that had plaques about: so-and-so was born here, another general was born somewhere else, etc.,” Pedro recalls. Since one of his uncles worked as consul general in the U.S, Pedro was able to study at a Jesuit high school in Washington D.C. In 1952, when Fulgencio Batista came to power in Cuba in a coup d’état, Pedro’s family decided to stay in the U.S. and they all moved to Miami. “That coup was the greatest historical catastrophe suffered by the Cuban people because it allowed Fidel Castro to come to power,” he laments.



## I met Fidel Castro

In Miami, Pedro met a number of other Cuban exiles. He says that he met many people opposed to Batista's government. In 1956 he crossed paths with Fidel Castro when a group of people released from Batista's prisons, among them Fidel and Raúl Castro, arrived in Miami. They came to the U.S. to found the 26th of July Movement. "I was invited to meet Fidel Castro in a one-room apartment. Fidel started to make coffee in an Italian coffee pot and started talking. As usual what happened to Fidel once he started talking, he couldn't stop. He talked, talked, talked, as the coffee started dripping and to boil... Coffee that has been boiled tastes very bad, but when he asked: 'Gentlemen, what did you think of the coffee?' they all answered 'Very good doctor, that coffee was very good doctor, very good, very good.' I remained quiet. Then he asked me: 'And you my student friend, how was the coffee?' And I said, 'Well, it was really bad.' He turned to the other people and said, 'You see, this is the only sincere man here,'" he recounts.

*I never trusted Fidel, I never liked him. When I met him, he did not seem to be a human being.*

## Granma Yacht

Fidel Castro invited Pedro to participate in the operation of the Granma yacht, however, because he was a minor, he could not take part. In 1957 he did participate in military training in a camp in the Dominican Republic. The intent was to train soldiers to invade Cuba. However, the camp was dissolved by the president of the Dominican Republic Rafael Trujillo, who stopped Cuban activities in his country due to pressure from the dictator Fulgencio Batista. All the trainees had to escape to save their lives. Pedro left the country thanks to his father, who took him through Puerto Rico to Miami. Finally, in 1959 Pedro returned to Cuba after the victory of the Cuban Revolution, and he worked as a tourist policeman for the revolutionary government because he could speak French and English thanks to his degree in diplomacy from the University of Havana. He was soon asked to form and direct the "pilot consulate", where the new representatives of the Cuban State would be trained to replace Batista's diplomats abroad.

## Overthrowing the communist regime

The course of Fidel Castro's revolutionary government was changing more and more under the influence of the communist cadres. "Ninety-nine percent of us who fought against Batista had nothing to do with the communists, nor did





we sympathize with them, so we started to be more and more suspicious of Fidel's intentions. I never trusted Fidel, I never liked him. When I met him, he did not seem to be a human being," Pedro emphasizes. "We realized that Fidel was betraying us, as the Revolution started to take a different course from the one we had fought for," he adds. According to Pedro, what started to be very alarming was the imprisonment of the collaborators of Fidel, among them, for example, Huber Matos, his military chief, who was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

## *We started to gather weapons and to create the conditions for a guerrilla war in different parts of Cuba.*

### **Triple A**

Pedro joined the union Acción Armada Auténtica [Authentic Armed Action, Triple A]. "We started to gather weapons and to create the conditions for a guerrilla war in different parts of Cuba. We formed fronts within the Oriente province in the East. We set up a hospital for the wounded in Havana. We actively fought to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime," he recounts. In 1961 Pedro and his friend Alfredo Sánchez Echeverría were imprisoned. During an arms transfer operation, they got surprised by state agents. "We wanted to reach the Argentine Embassy, but they were chasing us in cars. I started shooting and they started shooting back. The car was hit by more than 140 bullets. I almost died, as I felt the bullets grazing my skin. Our car crashed into the wall along the Malecón and I fainted. When I woke up, they had us lying down with guns pointed at us," he says.

### **You can get out of jail, but not out of the grave!**

Pedro and his companions were interrogated on several occasions. "They didn't believe us. During one interrogation they shouted at us: 'We are going to send you to La Cabaña prison and shoot you!' During that year when we were awaiting our trial, they shot more than 200 people next to me," Pedro recalls. They were finally sentenced to 30 years in prison and 30 consecutive years with no access to civil rights. The second part of the sentence has still not been completed. "Honestly, when they told me they were asking for 60 years for us, you can imagine the relief I felt. I never expected to get out of prison. You might get out of prison, but not out of the grave! So this information



helped me get through the prison sentence,” he says, with the firm belief that some people in the high command must have intervened so that he would not be shot.

### **Re-education on the Isle of Pines**

Pedro was sent to the Isle of Pines. There were more than 1,000 prisoners in a space built for 700 prisoners. Most of them slept on the floor, including Pedro. There was a “re-education” program that consisted of reading Fidel Castro’s speeches, working on the farm, visiting the big house, and finally gaining freedom. However, Pedro admits that more than 90 percent of the prisoners rejected this program. “Later on, the government decided to subject us to forced labor in different areas, as part of the Camilo Cienfuegos Special Plan. I was sent to a place to break stones with a 30-pound hammer that was so heavy that it almost fell out of my hands. I had already lost 14 kilograms since being imprisoned. These stones were much bigger than me. A fellow prisoner told me: ‘Look, I’m going to teach you, how to do this. You first clean the stone, then you look for the vein, which is the line that runs through the stone. When you find it, you hit it with the hammer, and the stone breaks,’” he says.

### **Agricultural fields**

On other occasions the prisoners were forced to work in the agricultural fields: “We worked excessive hours picking citrus fruits, after what they called breakfast, which was warm water with a taste of coffee and a piece of bread. We wore clothes and shoes that were falling apart and were surrounded by soldiers holding Russian rifles. At one point, the soldiers started shooting at one of our fellow prisoners who had not accepted the “re-education plan.” We could not help him. Whoever was stopping to help him, was shot as well. Many people died.” As the prisoners were getting more desperate, at one point they got hold of more than 40 machetes and rebelled. “We are not going to work anymore. We know they are going to send in troops to kill us, but before that happens, we are going to kill as many guards as we can. Let your bosses know that we are not going to work anymore,” he described. The guards did not attack them, instead, they were transferred to different prisons. Pedro was transferred to the Sandino 3 labor camp on the Guanahacabibes peninsula and then to La Cabaña prison in Havana.

### **A long time without being able to see my homeland**

In 1976 Pedro was conditionally released from prison on parole after having spent 16 years in jail. “I couldn’t believe it was really happening,” he recalls. However, he had to wait 2 more years to be able to leave the country and 3 more to be reunited with his family. “There were about 20,000 of us political prisoners that wanted to leave the island, but the U.S. issued only 1,000 visas a year,” he explains. To speed up the departure process, Pedro co-founded a council of prisoners to conduct negotiations with the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Cuba and finally managed to emigrate to Venezuela. “On the way



to the airport, I had tears in my eyes, as I knew I wasn't going to see my homeland again for a long time," he recalls.

### **Different experiences**

In February 1979, he finally arrived in Miami and, after almost 20 years, he was reunited with his family. "We had totally different life experiences. As I was a stranger to my son, we were going to have to get to know each other again. I had to start a new life," he explains. His brother Leopoldo was a lawyer and advised him to study to forget the bad memories. Pedro graduated with honors with a Master's degree in International Relations and a Doctorate in Law, and then took the Florida State Bar exam. To this day he works as an attorney. "I have been practicing law here for 29 years. During all that time I have never stopped fighting for the freedom and democracy of my homeland, and I will continue to do so for as long as I live," he concludes with determination.

***We had totally different life experiences. As I was a stranger to my son, we were going to have to get to know each other again.***

# Aracely Rodríguez San Román (1940)

[#anti-Castro guerrilla movement](#) [#Western United Front](#)

[#female political prisoner](#) [#female opposition activist](#)

[#Free America prison](#) [#granja América Libre](#)



2018





*"The history of Cuba will never be written."*

**"I would like to be able to return to my country if only to say: 'I set foot again on the land where I was born. I would like to return to Cuba so much and I don't know if I will ever be able to, because the years are accumulating but my hopes are dissipating," says Aracely Rodríguez San Román, who spent 15 years in prison in Cuba for being a member of an anti-Castro group.**

Aracely was born in Cuba in Paso Real de San Diego, a small town in Pinar del Río in March 1940, into a large family of 11 siblings. Although her family was poor, it was full of love and togetherness, as Aracely recalls. However, that beautiful childhood ended in 1959 with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. "Everything changed for my family, when Fidel Castro arrived in Cuba. There was no more peace," she says.



## Western United Front

Already in 1960, three of her brothers and her uncle organized a resistance movement against the Castro brothers in the mountains of Pinar del Río. After harsh attacks on the mountain settlements, her uncle managed to escape and hide in the Venezuelan embassy, from where he was taken to the U.S. where he received training by the CIA to organize acts of sabotage against the regime on the island. When he returned to Cuba in 1962, he rejoined the resistance movement with Aracely's other siblings in the mountains of Pinar del Río, "we formed an organization called the Western United Front." Aracely describes this movement as one of the most important resistance organizations against the Castro regime, which at the time had 1,000 or perhaps more members.

*Everything changed for my family, when Fidel Castro arrived in Cuba. There was no more peace.*

### The First Shot

Aracely's uncle gradually took her brothers off the island to undergo CIA training in the U.S. Aracely's brother, Arsenio, became the head of sabotage operations in Cuba. However, life in the mountains of Pinar del Río was too risky. "On May 13, 1964, Gilberto Rodríguez San Román, another brother who had trained in the U.S. with the CIA, returned to Cuba. On May 16, he was discovered by one of Fidel Castro's militias and was killed," recalls Aracely, moved. After this tragedy, her family was waiting to see what would happen, as they were all part of the Western United Front. Aracely's uncle was its leader, and Aracely herself was the secretary and treasurer of the organization. "My uncle and my other brother, they had to go into hiding. Then they discovered my uncle. Someone who got caught by the Castro forces seems to have said where my uncle was and they discovered him. And my uncle, when he learned that they were looking for him, set on fire all the papers and the house where he was staying, and he shot himself. The only reason that I am alive talking to you right now is because I was not with him. He always told me that if they were going to catch us, he would first shoot me and then he would shoot himself because he did not want me to go to prison. He said I would spend a lot of time in prison, which I obviously did later on, but I was not there on that day," recalls Aracely.



## Dead while alive

At that point, the head of the Western United Front was dead, and many other members of the organization had been killed as well, and Aracely and her siblings were captured by the Castro militia. The only ones who stayed on the family farm were her mother, her 94-year-old grandfather, and her younger brother, who was 14 years old at the time. Aracely was interrogated, they threatened her with death if she did not provide information on the Front, they kept her in a completely dark room, they interrogated her in a freezing room without warm clothes. "I felt so bad and so sad thinking about everything that was happening, especially the death of my brother, which was a very hard thing for me. When I was apprehended, it was the first thing they told me, but I already knew. They threw pictures of him dead on a table. They thought I was going to talk more, but I became even less willing to talk, I felt like I was dead while alive," she says.

*My uncle, when he learned that they were looking for him, set on fire all the papers and the house where he was staying, and he shot himself. The only reason that I am alive talking to you right now is because I was not with him.*

## Prison hell

Aracely ended up in Pinar del Río prison, as the only political prisoner among common prisoners. She was sentenced to 30 years and her brothers to 15 years. One of her brothers was lucky enough to escape from the militia and flee to Havana, where he hid in the apartment of Aracely's sister, who was a widow. In the end, he was able to escape the island clandestinely by boat. "That's how the poor boy spent his 24 years of life, with a pistol and a bullet. He said that if they were going to detain him, they wouldn't take him alive," Aracely says.

## We were all sisters

As Aracely remained in prison in Pinar del Río, other political prisoners were brought in, and she was transferred to Guanajay prison with them. "In Guanajay prison, I felt better because I was held with women who were similar to me, as human beings, and we would immediately become friends," Aracely says. And as she got closer to the other female prisoners, she started to share their pain



as well. “Whatever happened there, we shared. If it was a bad thing, we all suffered, and if it was a joy, we were all happy. For example, a person would arrive from her trial and say: ‘They gave my husband a death sentence’. And we already knew that, if he was sentenced to death, he was a dead man. Many times, we heard about what had happened to people who were not family members, but perhaps friends only, but you suffer anyhow because you know this person was killed undeservingly. I don’t even know how to describe the way they treated those people. I often wondered how they could be so evil, so diabolical, that they had no compassion for anyone. It didn’t matter if it was an old person, a young person, or a child. They killed children, boys... I saw many, many horrors in the prison. As we were all sisters, the pain of one was the pain of all,” Aracely recalls with great emotion.

### **Everyone was already in prison**

She was transferred from Guanajay to Guanabacoa prison. “In Guanabacoa prison, they put us there instead of common prisoners who were transferred elsewhere. You couldn’t even lie down on a bed there, because everything was so dirty. We had to clean it up first and it was terrible,” she recalls. After she spent time in three different prisons, conditions began to ease a little. “After the first few years passed, the bad times were over, as not so many people were imprisoned as before. In the beginning, they were putting people in jail en masse, they shot many of them and sentenced many in droves. But after a while, let’s say a few years, we stopped receiving news of people being shot and because they were all in prison by then. There were thousands and thousands and thousands of men in prison,” she says.

### **What names!**

In 1967, Aracely was transferred along with other political prisoners to a farm-turned-prison called América Libre [Free America], and later on to another one called Nuevo Amanecer [New Dawn]. “What names!” laughs Aracely, emphasizing the irony of the names of the penal institutions. And that’s where her sentence ended in 1979, thanks to Cuba and the U.S. signing an agreement on the release of political prisoners and taking them to the U.S. However, Aracely’s uncle, who had been imprisoned on the same day she was, remained in prison until he served his sentence. “He came out looking like an old man,” Aracely says of her uncle’s appearance after 24 years in prison. Eventually, the family, or at least those who survived the Castro regime, were reunited in the U.S., where Aracely resides to this day.

### **What is coming is going to destroy this nation**

At the end of the interview, she recalls what her father once said. “My father was a very smart man and had read a lot of books. And I remember that, when the revolution triumphed, he told us: ‘The government we had, could not continue, because it had made many mistakes. But this government that is coming, is going to finish Cuba off’. And it did. My father had realized that this government





was not going to be good for Cuba. And he was right. My father is no longer here, and there are thousands and thousands of Cubans here in the diaspora in the U.S. who are not going to be able to see Cuba free, just as I may not be able to see it either, which is what I would like," she says.

### **The history of Cuba will never be written**

"There are so many events that have taken place in Cuba that I believe that nobody can write down everything that happened. It will never, ever be written. All the things that Cuban went through will never be known, ever..., and what we political prisoners went through, that will never be known," Aracely concludes somberly.

*I believe that nobody can write down everything that happened. It will never, ever be written. All the things that Cuban went through will never be known, ever..., and what we political prisoners went through, that will never be known.*

# Pedro Roig (1940)

[#fight against Batista](#) [#fight against Castro](#) [#Brigade 2506](#)

[#Bay of Pigs](#) [#lawyer](#) [#Radio and TV Marti](#)

[#Cuban American National Foundation](#)



2017



*I have never abandoned my commitment to the ideals that led me to confront the Castro brothers. They are still valid.*

**“The problem consists of deciding who determines the common good and how it is distributed. In Cuba, there is a semi-religious, semi-mystical group of chosen individuals supporting the ideology, so they are called the ‘vanguard of progress’ and determine what is the common good and how means are distributed. This vanguard also is tasked with punishing others,” asserts Cuban Pedro Roig, a lawyer who first fought against the Batista regime and later also against Castro.**

Pedro was born in Santiago de Cuba, in the eastern part of the country, in July 1940. His father was a lawyer, notary, and University professor of English, and his mother was an English teacher. “I had n excellent academic training from the Jesuit priests. I am not really a believer, but I have enormous respect for all religions,” says Pedro.



## **Traditions of Santiago de Cuba**

While growing up, Pedro was very influenced by Santiago de Cuba's local culture and traditions. "The Haitian and French refugees, many of whom used to be slaves, influenced the society and culture of Santiago de Cuba, as they brought an enormous respect for the individual," Pedro narrates, emphasizing that there were big differences between Santiago and Havana.

## **Sabotage against Batista**

When Pedro turned 14, his father passed away, and his family moved to Havana, where he joined sabotage groups of the 26th of July Movement, formed by Fidel Castro against the dictator Fulgencio Batista. Since young Pedro had many encounters with Batista's police, his family decided to take him out of Cuba. That's when he traveled for the first time to the U.S. "They sent me to a very remote place in the mountains of Georgia," he recalls. In January 1959, he returned to Cuba on a ship with other returning Cuban exiles. At that time, he thought Cuba was going to change. "I hoped for a change of political culture. At that time, Cuba was one of the most economically developed countries within the so-called third world. Some economists believe that Cuba was about to take off and enter the group of advanced countries," Pedro explains. However, the country was not as advanced in terms of political culture. According to Pedro, a very high level of corruption was socially accepted. "If you could succeed in whatever you did, even if you were breaking the law, this society eventually welcomed you," he says.

## **Castro's inclination towards Marxism**

Pedro joined the 26th of July Movement. However, in the beginning, there were other authorities, not only Fidel Castro, in the movement. Pedro identified mainly with Frank País and José Antonio Echeverría. "These two figures of the anti-Batista struggle had no sympathy for Marxism. They both had a Christian background. Frank even gave lectures on Christianity and had a strong faith," Pedro recalls. A year after the Revolution, Fidel Castro started to display leanings toward Marxism and authoritarian government. Pedro was finishing high school when he began to realize that they were beginning to tell them what to say. He didn't like it: "I have always felt, even while studying at the Jesuits school, that I had the right to express my opinion. Around May of 1960, I began to feel that I didn't fit in that place anymore," he says.

## **Failure at the Bay of Pigs**

In Santiago, Pedro learned of a group being formed and trained in the U.S. to fight Fidel Castro's authoritarianism. "Fidel's dogma was a rigid dogma, inspired in the figure of Lenin. It had nothing to do with the future," he says. So, Pedro left Cuba and joined the group. Since, at the time, the U.S. had information about plans to incorporate Cuba into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, the U.S. believed that it needed to eliminate Fidel Castro's government. "The Americans





had three options: first, to do nothing, but this was unacceptable; second, to invade Cuba, which was discussed, but they decided not to go ahead because of what happened to Russians in Hungary in 1956. So, they decided to use Cubans,” Pedro summarizes. “We knew that we had to fight for the freedom of Cuba, so we did. The Americans used the same method as the one used to overthrow the regime in Guatemala,” he adds. According to Pedro, it was a grave mistake. The context of Cuba was different from Guatemala. At the same time, the U.S. received information that Fidel Castro had sent pilots to Czechoslovakia to train them to operate MIG fighter planes. That is why the U.S. wanted to speed up the mission. Pedro’s battalion trained in Louisiana. However, several last-minute changes were made, and so the operation failed. Another reason for the failure was the decision by the U.S. to cancel the air operation. With the airspace controlled by the Castro regime, there was no chance of success. “There was so much confusion at that time. One of our brigade’s ships mistook our ship for a Castro ship and shot at us. We almost sank. The Bay of Pigs was a very serious mistake. There was no control of the airspace or coast, as promised,” he says.

*The Bay of Pigs was a very serious mistake. There was no control of the airspace or coast, as promised.*

### **Life in the U.S.**

After the failure of the Bay of Pigs, he stayed in the U.S. At first, it wasn’tt easy, as he had to work as a cab and truck driver. Then he learned English and enrolled at Miami Day College, from which he graduated and became a history professor. Later on, he returned to the University and received a diploma in Law. Until October 2010, he worked as director of Radio and TV Martí. “ I have never broken my commitment to the ideals that led me to confront the Castro brothers. They are still valid,” he comments. He also cooperated with Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation in political lobbying which was enormously successful, and they achieved a lot of influence, even in Washington D.C. “They said at the time that the three most important Latin American lobbies in Washington D.C. were Brazil, Mexico, and the Cuban exiles. And that is true,” Pedro concludes.

# Santiago Álvarez (1941)

[#Cuban War of Independence](#) [#Government of Fulgencio Batista](#)

[#exile in 1959](#) [#military operations](#) [#marine navigation](#)

[#Bay of Pigs](#) [#Brigade 2506](#) [#Missile Crisis](#)

[#Legal Rescue Foundation](#) [#Alpha 66](#)



2017



*Communism is the best weapon to exploit the people.*

**“I have always been open to any policy that leads to the changing of the Cuban dictatorship. In principle, I do not agree with the unarmed struggle that the opposition in Cuba pursues. I am not against it, but I do not agree with it either,” admits Santiago Álvarez Fernández-Magriñá, exiled in the U.S., who has dedicated his whole life to the struggle for democracy in his homeland.**

Santiago Alvarez was born in Havana in December 1941 into a politically active family. His grandfather emigrated to Cuba from Spain, even so, from 1885 to 1898 he fought for the independence of Cuba. He was an active member of the liberation army, where he reached the rank of colonel. He earned dividends from different businesses, and he bought a farm in the province of Matanzas. One of his sons, Santiago's father, became the governor of the province, a senator, and a secretary of the presidential cabinet during the government of Fulgencio Batista. In 1959 when the Cuban Revolution triumphed and Fidel Castro started to establish himself as a dictator, Santiago's family left the island. Santiago emigrated in 1960, when he was 18 years old, as a last member of the family.



## Boats

“Since I had spent a lot of time on the beach as a child, I knew how to drive boats. When I was 19 years old, I became a boat captain and led violent operations against the regime. These were not terrorist attacks, but attacks against tactical targets, such as naval bases, power plants, oil tanks or we would take infiltrators to Cuba,” he describes his beginnings in the opposition. When Santiago was escaping from Cuba, some friends of his father stole a yacht called Alisan, which had been confiscated from his father by the regime and they sailed with it to Miami. In 1960 this vessel was used in the first armed incursion against the Castro regime. “The expedition was quickly defeated, around 8 or 10 men were shot, the rest were sentenced to 30 years in prison,” Santiago recounts.

## Bay of Pigs

The mission carried out on the yacht Alisan was not the only one that failed. In April 1961 there was an even greater and more significant failure during the invasion in the Bay of Pigs, also known as the invasion of Playa Girón [the Girón Beach], financed by the U.S. government, in which Cuban exiles trained by the CIA aimed to overthrow the government of Fidel Castro. According to Santiago, his father was a member of the 2506th Assault Brigade, which was full of Cuban exiles who either had strong anti-Castro leanings, or were ex-officials of the Batista regime, or democratic anti-communists. Santiago’s father captained one of the 5 ships that landed at Playa Girón. “My father was very lucky, as he managed to transport all the men to the bay and return. Out of a total of 5 ships, 1 was sunk and 3 were damaged,” he recounts.

## Missile Crisis

Santiago Álvarez also took part in the 1962 October Crisis, better known as the Missile Crisis or the Caribbean Crisis, which was a conflict between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Cuba. It started when the U.S. discovered Cuban bases holding Soviet medium-range nuclear missiles. During this crisis, Santiago almost lost his life when the ship he was captaining sank, the crew had to seek help on the Cuban coast once their food and water ran out. Thanks to the help of his local fellow countrymen Santiago managed to survive and returned with his crew to Key West and then Miami.

## Another military operation

Two years later, in 1964, Santiago took part in another military operation whose purpose was to rescue two agents (a telegrapher and an expert in the infrastructure of the Pinar del Río area) who had infiltrated Cuba and wanted out. “They sent us a message saying that they were in a lot of trouble in the area of Pinar del Río and asked us to get them out. We did not know if they were detained or not. We decided to launch the operation. Arriving at the coast of Cuba we recorded movement on our radar systems. As they came closer, we saw that there were three small boats, camouflaged as fishing boats. The captain warned us:





'If they catch you, they will shoot you, always remember that,'" recalls Santiago. When the Cuban ships cut Santiago's boat off from the others, Santiago started shooting from the machine gun. Meanwhile the second boat of anti-Castro comrades rescued the two infiltrators. Suddenly, a Cuban Army plane appeared in the sky and started bombing the anti-Castro ships. "For the first time in my life I had bombs dropped on me," Santiago admits, and although they managed to escape, this experience affected him profoundly.

## Interventions

Santiago has dedicated his entire life to the anti-Castro struggle and to the struggle for democracy in Cuba. He has never accepted U.S. citizenship. "I have not become American citizen, I will always be a Cuban citizen," he says. In Miami he earned a master's degree in engineering, established a company in the field of urban development and managed to create a considerable fortune with which he finances military and civic organizations both in Miami and Cuba. He is a pioneer and founder of the Legal Rescue Foundation and a collaborator of the Comandos L organization, led by Antonio Cuenca, who also established the anti-Castro organization Alpha 66. Santiago organized several operations to infiltrate Cuba. "After the failure at Playa Girón, I only entered the island twice, once when they sank our ships, and a second time when I helped to take and unload some material to Cuba. Before the Bay of Pigs, I had entered at least 20 times, but after that I organized the operations on my own," he explains.

*In the beginning I did not agree with the non-violent struggle of the opposition activist inside Cuba. I was not against it, but I did not agree with it either.*

## Anti-Castro Activities

Between 1963 and 1965, Santiago organized a large number of anti-Castro activities. "At that time, we landed in Cuba many times. We attacked the oil tanks in the port of Casilda and destroyed them, which resulted in the biggest combat in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs," he emphasizes. He bought a ship called Santrina and traveled throughout the Caribbean. He was not intimidated by the Cuban Aviation who often would chase him. "The boat had a cargo space, where we would put my jeep, I would offload it at any port and we could travel freely on the island. We used



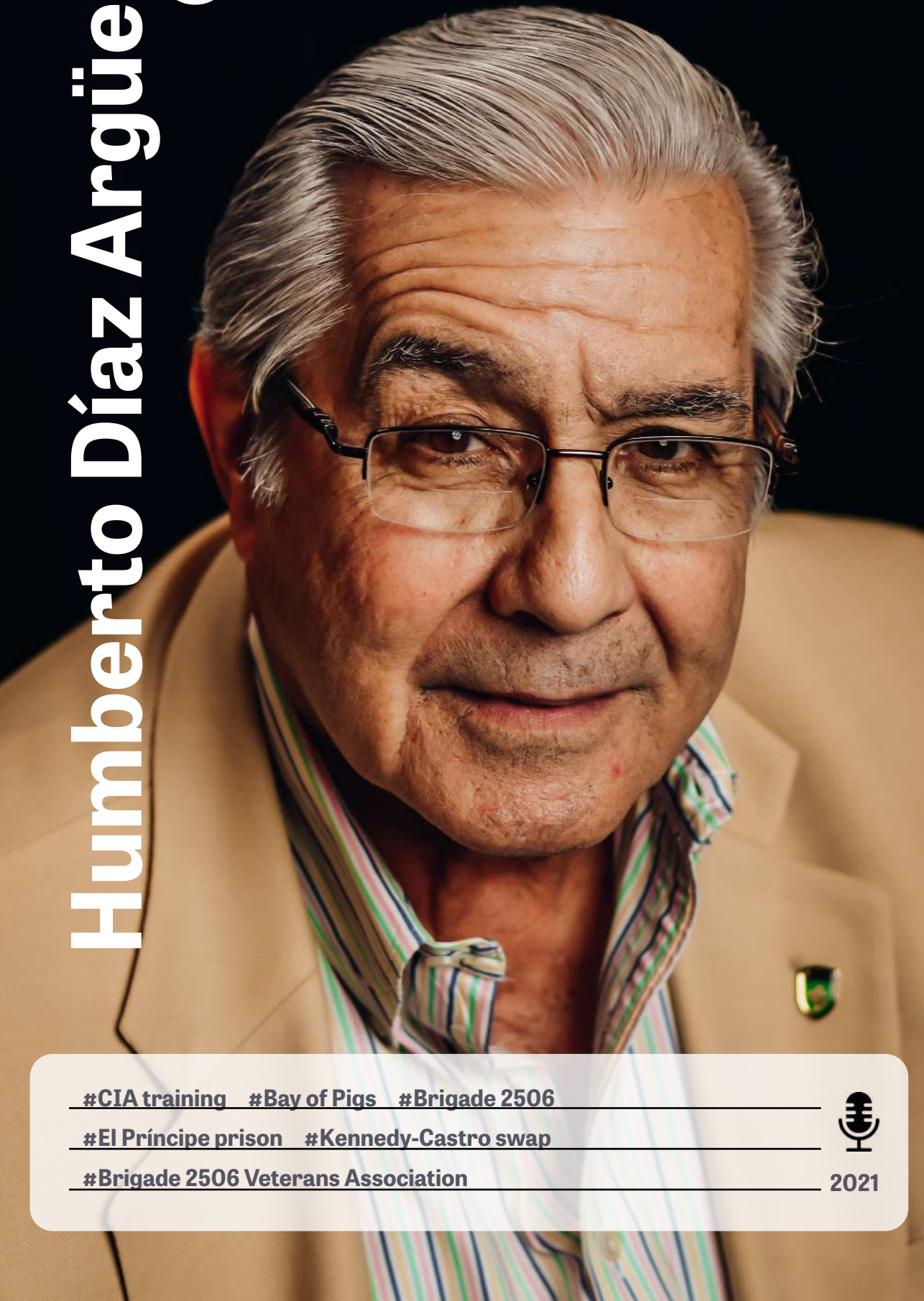
this boat several times also to help hurricane victims in the Bahamas and the Caribbean. That's why we have so many friends who take care of us and protect us when we are being chased by the Castros," says Santiago.

### **Non-violent struggle**

Later, Santiago also began to financially support the peaceful struggle against the Cuban regime. "In the 1970s the situation changed. I have always been open to any policy that leads to the changing of the Cuban dictatorship. In the beginning I did not agree with the non-violent struggle of the opposition activist inside Cuba. I was not against it, but I did not agree with it either. Although I did not share their position, in the 1980s I began to help them financially. I changed my way of thinking, although I never discarded the armed struggle if it had been necessary," Santiago explains. "We bring 40 civilians to Miami every month, half of them are not opposition activists. They have never been in the opposition, have never joined demonstrations, or been arrested, but we all want freedom for Cuba. In order to achieve our goal, we have to bring together the dissident movements in Cuba with civil society," Santiago stated during the interview in 2017. "We provide them with training on social media strategies and networking strategies that were successful in the struggle against communism. Our lawyers teach them how to defend themselves, and we finance them," he declares, and closes his testimony with determination: "Cuba will change only when the population rebels in a peaceful but relentless way."

*In order to achieve our goal,  
we have to bring together the  
dissident movements in Cuba  
with civil society.*

# Humberto Díaz Argüelles (1942)



[#CIA training](#) [#Bay of Pigs](#) [#Brigade 2506](#)

[#El Principe prison](#) [#Kennedy-Castro swap](#)

[#Brigade 2506 Veterans Association](#)



2021



*Nowadays, there is an immense interest in knowing what happened at the Bay of Pigs. For 30 years, nobody has been interested in finding out what happened.*

**“I am not from a perfect island, but from an island that has enormous potential, and it was handed over to the revolutionary government in magnificent condition. This fact can be verified in statistics published by the United Nations in 1959,” Humberto Díaz Argüelles narrates.**

Humberto was born in September 1942 in Havana. He studied in a private Catholic school, and his childhood was abruptly interrupted by the revolutionary events when he was only 16 years old. “Already at that early age, I noticed issues and events in Cuba that caught my attention,” he says. Even though he was very young, Humberto remembers very well the times before the arrival of Fidel Castro. “I remember a country where Cubans got along very well and, even though we had corrupt governments, the country moved forward,” he explains.





## Shock

Humberto was very shocked when he started seeing changes with the new regime. “One day, I was watching live broadcasting on TV. Suddenly I see a black man who is thrown out of a truck on the ground, then the camera pans over and you see that military men with high-powered rifles surround him. They move him towards a tree behind which there is a ditch. They start shooting at him, and he falls into the ditch. I was shocked,” says Humberto. His mother, Estela, who had two PhDs and with whom Humberto joined marches against Fidel Castro, helped him understand what was happening in Cuba. However, at that time, he never joined directly any physical fight.

## Don't speak to me in Spanish ever again

As Humberto's parents were lawyers, he started to understand better what was going on thanks to their conversations. “My mother once said something significant. When Fidel arrived in Havana and gave the famous speech at the Military Camp Columbia in Havana, my mother told my father: 'I am afraid that people are not educated enough to recognize the socialist demagoguery that Fidel is talking about. Suddenly, Fidel said: 'All rents will be cut in half'. And my mother said to my father: 'There you have it.' That's when I started to get into politics,” he explains. Over the next few months, we realized that we could not stay in Cuba: “In one day, Che and Raúl shot 66 people. When I heard this news, I wondered what was going on in my country,” Humberto explains. His mother, who was born in England, went to the British Embassy to apply for an English passport, and they managed to leave Cuba. “The flight from Cuba to Miami takes one hour. In that one hour, my life changed completely. My mother told me: 'Don't speak to me in Spanish anymore, speak to me in English.' She said, 'We are leaving.' That was on October 31, 1960,” Humberto recounts. “That's when the exile began,” he says.

*The training was not appropriate for what we were going to face later when we landed in Cuba.*

## First moments in exile

Humberto's father remained in Cuba. He was not allowed to leave. Humberto and his mother went to Miami and lived in the house of his aunt and uncle. “The first thing I realized was that I had to work. They had frozen almost everyone's accounts,” he says. First, he was working in a supermarket packing groceries. Soon after, he decided to join the training camps founded with the intention of invading Cuba. He had heard about them before leaving Cuba. At the same



time, his father also arrived in Miami. “As I had no siblings. I told my uncle: ‘You can’t go on a mission to defend the freedom of Cuba, and neither can my father,’” he recalls. His uncle was initially opposed to Humberto going to training camps in Guatemala to fight Fidel Castro’s government. “He would tell me: ‘I don’t want you to go because you’re going to be the excuse for the U.S. armed invasion of Cuba, but you’re already going to be dead.’ I told him: ‘Uncle, I have to go. It’s my duty,’” he adds.

## **Becoming a soldier?**

“In early January, I was called to join the training. At 2 a.m., we got on an unmarked plane. They exchanged our clothes, and suddenly we were put on a plane not knowing what was ahead of us,” he continues, explaining how the training phase before the invasion began. Even though they did not know where they were going, no one turned back. According to Humberto, no one knew who financed this training, but the U.S coordinated it. The training was elementary: “The training was not appropriate for what we were going to face later when we landed in Cuba. The Operation was completely different from what we expected, as were the promises made in the training camps. Not a single plane showed up to defend our pilots,” he says. The Brigade 2506 was an anti-Castro group made up of young men, out of which the vast majority were not soldiers. “The name, Brigade 2506, originated from the trainings in Guatemala. It was named after a number that one of our fellow trainees was wearing when he lost his life during the training. His name was Carlos Rodríguez Santana, and he was the first casualty in the mission to liberate Cuba,” Humberto explains. After the training at the Retalhuleu base in Guatemala, the operation was launched. “I have to clarify one thing. Usually, an army battalion has about 900 people. We were just 183 people. Why did they call it a battalion? I think it was to scare Fidel,” he adds. However, he never hesitated for a moment. “The cause was very simple. To free Cuba,” he says.

## **There was never any briefing on what the invasion of Cuba was going to be about**

In hindsight, the invasion of Cuba was destined to fail from the start. “They never told us what the plans were. Never ever,” says Humberto. Some of his fellow trainees were trying to analyze the context during the training and concluded that there was virtually no chance of winning, but Humberto says he didn’t realize it. “I was fully immersed in the training, but the monteros were experienced and realized that we did not have what it takes to win in Cuba,” he says. Humberto describes the invasion as tragic: They landed in the early morning of April 17, 1961. On the afternoon of April 19, they were already defeated.

## **Landing**

“Early in the evening on Sunday, April 16 we were suddenly told to grab our gear as we were going to land. If it had been daylight, we would have been wiped out. It was 2 a.m., and we moved from a cargo ship into simple aluminum boats that



you could buy at any store. No one had trained us how to do that,” he narrates, also remembering how the boat crashed into the reef and other complications. Despite all these adversities, Humberto stresses that most of them did not think at any time that they were going to lose. “It is estimated that we were surrounded by more than 50,000 of Castro’s soldiers. We were a thousand or so and without weapons.”

## *What have we done to deserve this? And if I jump in the water, where am I going to swim to?*

### **Fading spirits**

Their spirits were fading. After four days, we had no food. We were deprived of sleep, we had no sign of support from the U.S., we were walking through the jungle, and our physical and especially the psychological condition was deteriorating. “We ate live crabs and drank urine. The mind wondered: ‘What now? And why is this happening? And why haven’t they given us support? What have we done to deserve this? And if I jump in the water, where am I going to swim to?’ And the last question, which remains unanswered to this day: ‘We came with the best of intentions, so why were we abandoned and left to die?’” Fidel Castro’s army finally captured them. Humberto was imprisoned.

### **The prison**

“It was a gloomy place, a very old prison, a castle built around 1700. There was a bad smell of damp dirt. The food was as if it didn’t exist. We were given a piece of bread with a sip of coffee in the morning. For lunch, we were usually given seven macaroni...we even counted them. We had a horrible soup in the afternoon, made from all the animal waste and water with dead mice in it. I caught hepatitis twice,” recalls Humberto about the condition in prison called El Príncipe. “I was very much insulted when they did the routine search of our belongings at 3 a.m. My belongings were in a cardboard box where I had fewer clothes than a homeless person,” he says. According to him, the trial was a farce. “Our lawyer said we deserved to be shot,” he recalls. In the end, the sentence was 30 years. President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy sent negotiators that should help work out the exchange of prisoners for money, clothes, medicine, etc. This took place on December 24 and 25, 1962. However, some prisoners had been shot before the exchange.

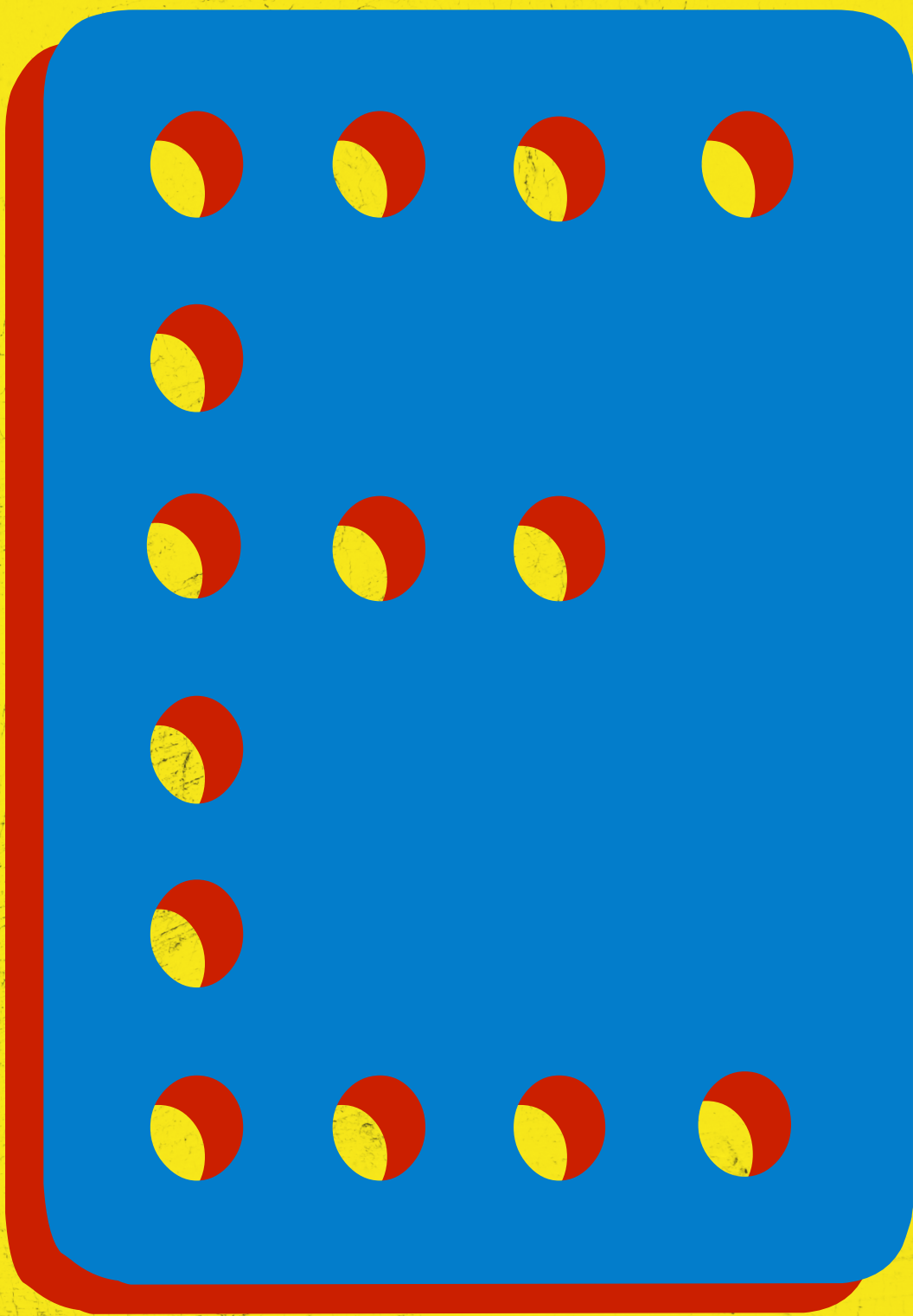


## The reunion

Once again, Humberto's life changed in just a few hours. After arriving in the U.S., he was reunited with his relatives. "We were confused again as we were used to training camps, war and prison, suddenly we were in Coconut Creek in Florida," he says. "We got to the house, where there was a table full of food, but I didn't eat anything. I went to bed. I was jumping up and down in my bed, as I was very happy," he says. Humberto went to college, and in 1968 he earned a degree in Business Administration from the University of Miami and later on, he worked in this field. He did not feel a great need to share his experiences for a long time. He did not feel like a hero and always considered his actions as something natural. "Nowadays, there is an immense interest in knowing what happened at the Bay of Pigs. There was no interest in this topic for 30 years. We discussed it among ourselves, but I have never discussed the operation outside the group of people that participated in it," he explains. Humberto, who was the president of the Brigade 2506 Veterans Association and already has several children and grandchildren, considers that the great task for future generations is to end the fear installed in the minds of Cubans by the regime.

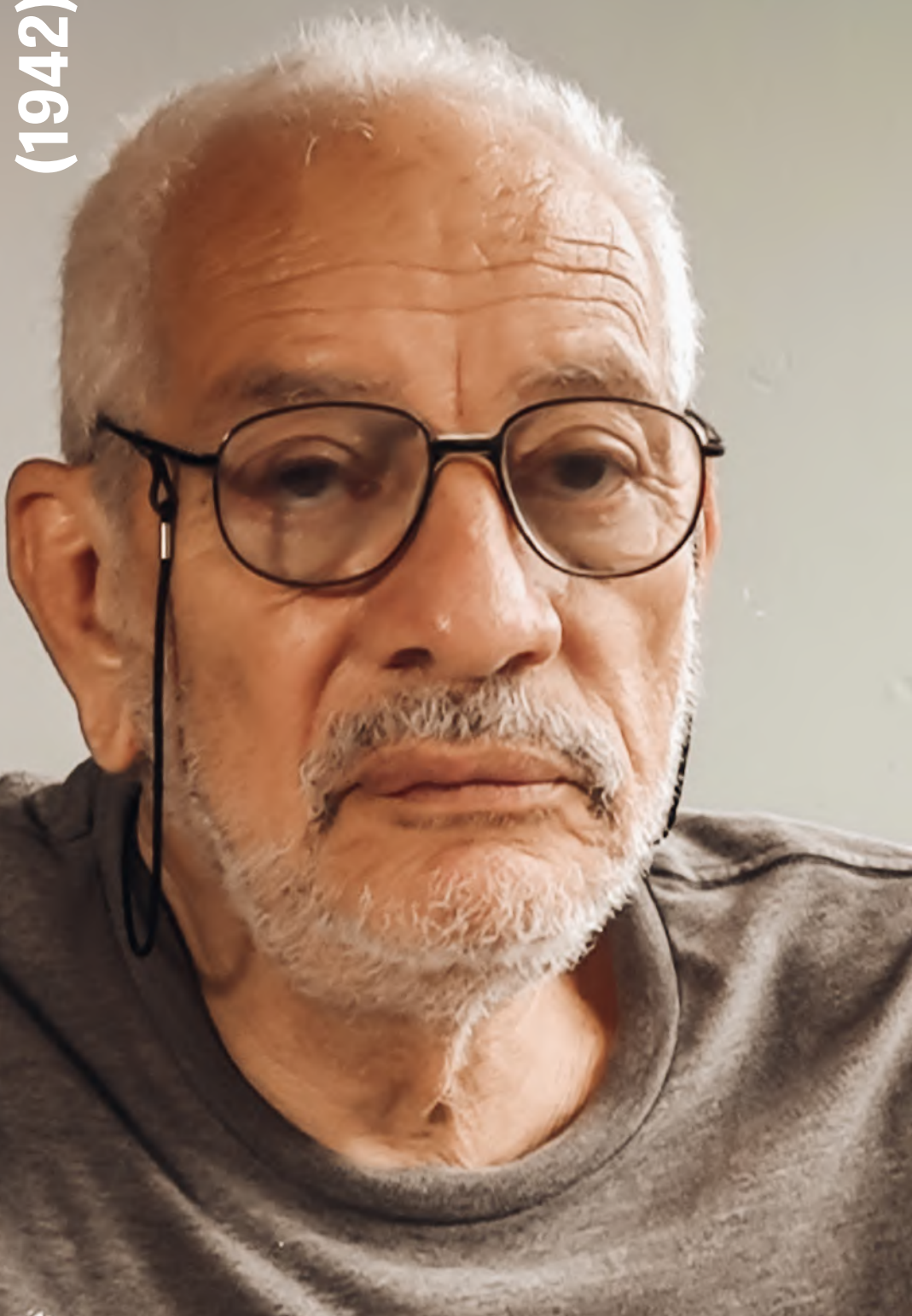
*Our lawyer said we deserved to be shot.*





# Vladimiro Roca Antúnez

(1942)



**#son of the Secretary of the Communist Party**

**#personal meeting with Fidel Castro #studies in the Soviet Union**

**#pilot #opposition activist #Social Democratic Party**

**#Working Group of on-island dissidents**

**#The Homeland Belongs to All**



2018



*“Damn, having parents that support the revolution, it’s hard to believe that you are a counterrevolutionary!”*

**“I met Fidel Castro in person, but I never had any sympathy for him,” says Vladimiro Roca Antúnez about the late Cuban leader. He does not have anything positive to say about Ernesto Che Guevara either. “Guevara, for me, was an obnoxious person, he was always very serious, and I have never been serious,” he admits.**

Vladimiro was born in Havana in December 1942 into a family of revolutionaries. His father, Blas Roca Calderio, was a well-known secretary of the Cuban Communist Party. “My childhood was perfect,” he says. “I had a bit of a difficult character for those times because since I was a little boy, I had always been rebellious,” he adds. Specifically, he “did not tolerate any abuse” and concludes by saying: “All my friends felt protected because I didn’t allow anyone to touch them.”



## Father

Vladimiro describes his father as “the best father I could have had.” He was a communist supporter, but the family did not talk much about politics. “My father was not much of a political talker,” Vladimiro says. Although his father, Blas Roca, did not share with them many political details, Vladimiro grew up closely surrounded by revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideas.

### **I didn't make the victory, but I saw how it was done**

In the late 1950s, Vladimiro participated in the meetings in Boca Ciega, where all who sought to overthrow the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista gathered. “In 1958, at the second meeting in Boca Ciega, I was 16 years old, and I was brewing and serving coffee for others. From childhood, we all knew how to cook. My father used to say that a man who didn't know how to cook was lost, so my mother taught us all to cook. And my area of expertise was preparing coffee because it was, and still is, my addiction. At that second meeting, while preparing coffee, I added salt to the coffee by mistake! The first one who tasted the coffee was Raúl Castro. He spat it out and said: 'This coffee is salty!' I told him: 'Oh, I'm going to make you another one' and he said: 'Look, he wanted to poison us, I'm going to put him in jail!' And it turned out that he did put me in jail. Based on this story, I usually tell people: 'I didn't make the revolution succeed, but I saw how others did.'”

## *I have never trusted Fidel Castro and his people.*

### **Suspicious of Fidel Castro**

After graduating from high school, Vladimiro worked as an apprentice in the cashier's office at the Hoy newspaper [newspaper Today], but he left after four months because of problems with his boss. Cuban Revolution was just triumphing around that time. The success of the Revolution was being felt at this time. When the Freedom Caravan arrived at Ciudad Libertad, in Marianao, Havana, and Fidel Castro made an endless speech, as he liked to do, Vladimiro got very irritated and left saying: “I can't stand that guy.” Many decades later, he sums it up: “I have never trusted Fidel Castro and his people.”

### **Prague Spring**

However, despite having disagreements with Fidel Castro, Vladimiro followed the same ideological path as his father. In 1961, he studied in the Soviet Union





to become a professional pilot. After two years in Europe, he returned to Cuba to serve at the San Antonio airbase. He started to lose confidence in the regime when for example, he had to intercept a boat full of civilians and children trying to leave the island. Thanks to his profession, he was also informed about international events, such as the 1968 Prague Spring. “It was a strange period, as we had zero information in Cuba, we found out about the Prague events from Cuban pilots who studied in Czechoslovakia. We were among the first to learn about the Prague Spring, which brought serious consequences for the people here in Cuba who supported the Czechs in demanding freedom,” he says.

*I remember that once when my father was already sick and going to pass away, I told him that the Constitution was crap. And I remember his words: ‘It is not the best Constitution, but there are good elements that others can improve.’*

### **Not the best Constitution**

In the early 1970s, he had to stop flying because his right hand was not functioning properly. As a result, he didn’t pass the physical exam. “I could still fly as a co-pilot, not captain,” he says. Therefore, he took a six-month course, after which he started working as a statistician of sugarcane mechanization at the National Mechanization Directorate. His antipathy towards Fidel Castro grew even more with the 1976 Constitution. At that time, the ideological paths of father and son split. “I liked to watch my father work, as he imbued peace,” he recalls fondly. “I was critical, very critical, especially of him. We had a close relationship, so I could bring up any problem, and we would discuss any disagreements. “I remember that once when my father was already sick and going to pass away, I told him that the Constitution was crap. And I remember his words: ‘It is not the best Constitution, but there are good elements that others can improve.’”



## Life of an opposition activist

When Vladimiro came into contact with dissidents, he openly expressed himself against the regime. “In 1991, I made my first official statement as a dissident. I remember that I said: ‘I want to be on record as saying that I don’t agree with anything that is happening in Cuba, and I’m going to do everything in my power within the legal framework of this socialist regime to change the system,’” he recalls. “And that’s how my life as an opposition activist started,” Vladimiro recounts. “It’s hard to believe that you are a counterrevolutionary having parents that support the revolution!”

*Of course, it would be meaningless to write an evaluation if we did not present it to the Central Committee. Logically, Fidel Castro did not like the document.*

### Working Group of on-island dissidents

In 1997, together with Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello, Félix Bonne, and René Gómez Manzano, he created the Working Group of on-island dissidents to Analyze the Cuban Socio-Economic Situation. This group of dissidents drafted the document *La Patria es de Todos* [The Homeland Belongs to All], in which they evaluated the results of the 5th Congress of the Communist Party that took place that year. “Of course, it would be meaningless to write an evaluation if we did not present it to the Central Committee,” Vladimiro explains. “Logically, Fidel Castro did not like the document,” he says with contempt.

### Another terrible violation of rights

In 1997 the authors of the manifest *La Patria es de Todos* were imprisoned, although the trial was not held until 2000, which was, according to Vladimiro, “another terrible violation of rights.” The trial was broadcast on TV, in Vladimiro’s words, because “Fidel Castro wanted to scare people.” Vladimiro says that, while in prison, one tends to blame the guards. “However, the guilty ones are not the guards; they are just doing their job, the guilty one is the government.”

### Consistency in words and actions

As for the current situation of Cuban society, Vladimiro affirms: “The only thing the Government does is to entertain people according to the old rule of ‘bread



and circuses.’ As a legacy for future generations, Vladimiro quotes his father: “People should try to align their actions with their thoughts. If they believe in freedom, they should defend it. Not for others, but for themselves.”

*The only thing the  
Government does is to  
entertain people according  
to the old rule of ‘bread and  
circuses.’*

# Néstor Campanería Ángel (1943)

[#Save Cuba](#) [#La Cabaña](#) [#Bay of Pigs](#)

[#family member of an executed person](#) [#asylum in Colombia](#)

[#fight against Castro](#)



2019





*“My wish is that the sacrifice of my brother and his companions is not forgotten.”*

**“We were a close-knit family until the triumph of the Cuban Revolution,” says Néstor Campanería Ángel, who was born in 1943 as the youngest child of seven siblings. Unfortunately, he is the only one that remains alive today.**

When the Revolution took place, Néstor was 16 years old. His older brother, Virgilio, was studying law at the University of Havana, and their other siblings had already graduated from different professions. “My brother Virgilio was the first in the family to be disappointed with the Communist Revolution. Since he was a student of law, he believed that the death penalty that the Castro’s Communist government had installed was illegitimate. In 1902 it had been abolished in the Constitution of the Republic. At the time of the Spanish domination, it had been widely used to repress and intimidate the Cuban people,” Néstor recalls. Virgilio began to speak publicly against the regime, and, already in 1959, the whole Campanería family suspected that the Revolution was moving in the Communist direction. Virgilio and his classmates founded the organization *Salvar a Cuba* [To Save Cuba], which would try to explain to other students the path the dictatorship was taking. “As a student, I would distribute propaganda and newspapers that could help to open the eyes of the people who still trusted the communists,” he says.



## Arrests and life in the underground

At the end of March 1961, Virgilio and his two companions were arrested. Néstor had to leave home and go underground, as they were supposedly looking for him as well. Planned rescue actions were unsuccessful, and these three boys ended up in La Cabaña prison. There were attempts to get them out, however, they were unsuccessful. The boys were interrogated and put on trial. Virgilio Campanería and Alberto Tapia were sentenced to death, and Tomás Fernández was sentenced to thirty years in prison. "From that moment on, I could no longer go home. I was separated from my family. I went from house to house. It was nerve-racking not to have news of what was happening. People were anticipating an invasion but we didn't know any details as to when and where it would take place. Néstor found it difficult to find places to stay during these months, as many of his friends were afraid of possible persecution. However, some of them took the risk, and thanks to them he was able to survive this period. At that time, an uprising started in the Escambray Mountains: "There was a broad resistance all over Cuba. The Cuban underground movement was very active until the invasion of the Bay of Pigs, after which almost half a million people were jailed. "This attempt to take up arms against Fidel Castro failed due to organizational failures. There was great tension throughout the island caused by the planned invasion of the Bay of Pigs.

## The execution of Virgilio Campanería

In the early morning of April 18, 1961, when Néstor was taking refuge in a house of one family and the disembarkation at the Bay of Pigs was taking place, his brother Virgilio was taking place, Alberto Tapia and six other companions were shot at La Cabaña prison. When the family received the coffin, they found three stones instead of Virgilio's body. Since Virgilio was closest to Néstor of all his siblings, his death greatly impacted him. In the early morning of the execution, he remembers that he woke up frightened with a bad feeling. He turned on the radio, and right at that moment, they were announcing the names of the executed people. "I didn't know whether to run away, whether to scream... My brother was the closest to me. He was five years older, and we had shared a lot and had studied together. He was a symbol for me, an example, a guide, a leader, and a counselor. At that moment, I didn't know what to do," recalls Néstor, visibly emotional. After Virgilio's murder, the family began to disintegrate, and life never was the same: "The family divided - some of us left for one place and others for another."

## Colombian Embassy

Néstor remained in hiding until about mid-May of the same year when his mother asked one of his friends to convince him to take refuge at an embassy. "There was very little we could do after the Bay of Pigs invasion had failed." The number of executions increased considerably throughout Cuba: "The fear, the terror and the panic were palpable throughout society." Néstor left the house where he was hiding and took refuge in a house owned by the Colombian Embassy. "When the Government began to confiscate the properties of people who left the country,



many wealthy people donated the house to a consulate of a foreign country, in this case, Colombia, in the hope that if the regime fell, they would recover their property.” Néstor stayed there for three months along with 80 other people and, during that time, he was only able to see his parents and two of his siblings on one occasion. His whole family suffered a lot of persecution: they were stopped in the streets, often interrogated and followed. During his stay at the embassy, Néstor waited for the opportunity for a safe passage out, which finally arrived. Néstor said goodbye to his father and left for Colombia: “I saw him at the Havana airport. It was regrettable, I would have liked to give him a hug or a kiss, but the only thing I could do was shake his hand. He told me: ‘Don’t ever do anything of which we would be ashamed.’ Those were the last words I heard from him.”

## *The fear, the terror and the panic were palpable throughout society.*

### **The Mother Teresa of Calcutta of the Cubans**

The Colombian government rented a large building for all the Cuban refugees. “Each of us had a chore in this house. Somebody would clean the house; another one would cook, etc... Many Cubans took refuge in this shelter, and we lived there for a long time. I will never forget the generosity of the Colombians,” he recalls. Néstor met his future wife, a Colombian girl who lived next door during this period. “Her mother became my mother in exile. She was a little old wrinkled lady who became the Mother Teresa of Calcutta of the Cubans in the shelter. If we needed medicine, she would get it for us. The Colombians treated us very well,” he recalls.

### **Let his sacrifice not be forgotten**

While in Colombia, Néstor obtained a U.S. residency visa. “I did not know what to do. I didn’t know whether to join the army, continue working for the Student Directorate or go back to Colombia and get married there.” In the end, he got married in Colombia but then moved with his wife to the U.S.: “I took any job I could. I picked fruit, I worked in construction company laying railroad lines but I always wanted to do something for Cuba.” He participated in several meetings of Cuban exiles and received training. However, since it made his wife nervous, he decided to quit these activities and dedicate himself exclusively to the family. He recalls that the first years in the U.S. were not easy, he suffered from big culture shock, and his English is not perfect. “There is not much I can do for Cuba, but I don’t want the sacrifice of my brother, my best friend, and my companions who are no longer with us, to be forgotten. That is my wish.”

# René Gómez Manzano (1943)

#lawyer #studies in the Soviet Union #Group of Four

#political prisoner #Corriente Agrarionista

#Association of Cuban Independent Lawyers Corriente Agrarionista

#The Homeland Belongs to All



2017





***“Just as Muslims go to Mecca, those who believed in socialism went to Moscow.”***

**“The regime wants you to clap until your hands are swollen,” says critically René Gómez Manzano, “castaway” dissident, prosecuted lawyer and co-author of *The Homeland Belongs to All* essay.**

René was born in Cuba in 1943. After graduating from high school, where classes were taught in English, he entered the University of Havana to study law. However, in 1953, before his graduation, the Cuban Revolution achieved success so he was unable to finish his studies in Havana. His family supported the Revolution, and therefore he continued studying in Moscow. After five years, in 1966, he finally graduated with a Law Degree. Two years later, he received the same diploma from the University of Havana.



## Mecca of socialists

When he returned to Cuba, he had problems finding a job at first. But then had to take work in collective law firms, from where he was expelled in 1972 for his counterrevolutionary views, and for “demanding to speak with his hand raised.” At the same time, he started working at COMECON [The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance]. Because he had a diplomatic passport, he frequently traveled to socialist countries and cities, especially Moscow - the headquarters of the transnational communist organization. “As Muslims go to Mecca, those of us who believed in socialism would go to Moscow,” he explains about that period of his life when he still believed in the regime.

## Supreme Court

Later, he worked for collective law firms. He joined a team that worked on cassation appeals [a method of challenging final judgments before the Supreme Court], where he defended many Cubans accused of crimes against State Security in the Supreme Court. “That’s how I got involved with dissidents and opposition activists in Cuba,” René recalls. In 1990, his colleagues at the law firm chose him as a delegate to the General Assembly of Collective Law Firms. “By that time, the individual practice of law in Cuba had already been banned. Since 1974, every lawyer who wanted to practice had to join the collective law firms,” René explains. “All lawyers had to apply to join a supposedly new organization called *Organización Nacional de Bufetes Colectivos* [National Organization of Collective Law Firms]. It was six of one, half a dozen of the other,” he adds. “Since we had to apply for membership, more than 10% of the lawyers who were practicing were purged,” he specifies. Fortunately, René was able to continue practicing law but only within the *Bufete Colectivo*.

## Nation without future

Gradually, René started to doubt the benefits of the communist regime. “Socialist economics doesn’t make sense,” René says and believes that Marxist theory is intriguing, but in practice, it fails. He realized all the negative elements that the communist regime brought to Cuba during his travels. “People have no faith in the future, that’s why they want to leave Cuba and go anywhere,” Manzano sums up.

## The appeal of communist ideals

Despite being a dissident, he is still intellectually attracted to communism, “The appeal of communist ideas for me lies on the intellectual level. When I read books on Marxism-Leninism, I find the theory beautiful. There are no exploiters; the property is shared, people are all brothers. That’s the theory, but when you see the practice: Stalin’s regime in Russia, Kim’s dynasty in North Korea, or the Castro brothers in Cuba, it has absolutely nothing to do with the theory. There is no real collective ownership but a capitalistic state that controls the media. It is a bureaucracy with a pyramidal structure, where only the boss designates and



determines what is going to be done. Below him, there is an intermediate level of leaders or bosses. Below them, there is a great mass of the people, which, as a colleague and friend of mine used to say, are supposed to be applauding. Those who are applauding have problems. They clap until their hands are swollen,” criticizes René.

## Breaking the law

Since 1990, he has served two prison sentences since he became dissident. He was banned from practicing law, although he continued to provide legal support. He was unable to work as a defense attorney in court, for which he would have needed special permission from the Ministry of Justice. “They have never given it to me,” René comments. “Even in the criminal proceedings to which I was subjected, they did not allow me to defend myself. Although the law contemplates the possibility of one representing oneself, in violation of the law, they did not allow me to do so,” he adds.

## Corriente Agramontista

René is one of the co-founders of the Association of Cuban Independent Lawyers *Corriente Agramontista*, founded in 1990. However, this association is still not officially recognized by the regime because the system sets up constant obstacles to registering independent associations. Despite its “non-recognition,” as he calls it, the *Corriente* promotes human rights in Cuba.

## Castaway dissident

In 1996 René came into closer contact with Cuban dissidents, founding the Working Group of the on-Island Dissidents to analyze the Cuban Socio-Economic Situation, made up of four people who were later called “the Group of Four”: the late Professor Félix Antonio Bonne Carcassés, Vladimiro Roca Antúnez (son of the old communist leader Blas Roca), Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello and René himself. In 1997, the Group issued the manifest *La Patria es de Todos* [The Homeland Belongs to All]. “The Communist Party Congress was to be held that year. They invited citizens to present their opinions in that Congress. And that is what we did. We wrote this document *La Patria es de Todos*, we published it and, after a while, we all landed in jail. That was the first time I was imprisoned for political reasons,” René says. He spent almost three years in jail. Today, nearly 25 years later, René considers himself a “castaway,” since many of his colleagues have passed away.

## Prison

When René and his colleagues from the Working Group landed in prison, the common practice was to mix political prisoners with ordinary prisoners, thus ensuring that the political prisoners got divided. In the first years after the Cuban Revolution, the practice was exactly the opposite: to put political prisoners together. “In Cuba, it is estimated that there were some 3,000 to 4,000 priso-



ners and a dozen prisons before the Revolution. Today, there are hundreds of penitentiary establishments, from prisons to camps. There are concentration camps which have a more euphemistic name,” narrates René, who describes in detail cells that measure about 6 square meters, with bunk beds and a hole in the floor instead of a bathroom, which often did not have water for days. According to him, the prisoners were kept in inhumane conditions and were allowed to leave their cells only once a week. “It’s not easy to live with others in these conditions,” Manzano describes in a few words.

### **Prisoners of conscience**

“We were immediately recognized as prisoners of conscience by international organizations. Interestingly, nowadays, the regime avoids putting political prisoners on trial by all means, so it usually holds political prisoners without trial, as it happened to me. I was held for more than a year and a half without a formal accusation, and of course, without any trial. But one day, I was suddenly released. They either do this or accuse human rights activists and other political opponents of common crimes. They fabricate cases. For example, a policeman beats a political activist and then accuses them of attacking a policeman. They always try to have the opposition activists accused of common crimes that were never committed,” describes René.

### **Cuba’s problem**

“Our problem does not lie with any foreign country, but with the totalitarian regime that represses its people. As people do not have hope for the future, they dream of leaving Cuba on a raft, surrounded by sharks in the Strait of Florida. Or leaving through Central America, where they risk their lives crossing the jungle full of wild beasts but also full of human beasts: the human traffickers who extort people and rape women. It is a truly desperate situation, and it can only be explained by the fact that Cubans are desperate. They want to leave Cuba and will go anywhere. This is the sad reality of my country,” René concludes.

***Our problem does not lie  
with any foreign country, but  
with the totalitarian regime  
that represses its people.***



# Tomás Ramos Rodríguez (1943)



**[#hunger strikes](#) [#Movement to Recover the Revolution](#)**

**[#Escambray Mountains](#) [#political prisoner](#) [#Mariel boatlift](#)**

**[#CIA infiltrator](#) [#Castro assassination attempt](#)**

**[#National Democratic United Party](#) [#Social Democratic Party of Cuba](#)**

**[#non-violent struggle](#)**



2019



*“I want to celebrate freedom and rest in peace knowing that there is no more communism.”*

**“Sooner or later communism is going to fall, we have to push for it. Communism in Cuba has to be overthrown,” sums up Tomás Ramos Rodríguez, a political prisoner who spent 30 years in Cuban jails.**

Tomás Ramos Rodríguez was born in October 1943 in Villa Clara, into a family who shared revolutionary ideals and supported Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement. In 1958, when Tomás was 15 years old, he moved with his parents to Havana, where in 1959 they celebrated the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. Tomás finished his studies thanks to a scholarship granted by that movement in a military school, whose objective was to send young people to Latin America, during that time especially to Panama, to spread communism. His father, the owner of a shoe store in Havana at that time, no longer felt the same affection for the Revolution and soon distanced himself from the revolutionary movement due to a difference of opinion. During the same year, in 1959, Tomás dissociated himself from its communist ideology and joined the Movement to Recover the Revolution (Movimiento de Recuperación Revolucionaria). There he made good friends by supporting the rebels of the Escambray Mountains, who fought against the ideology and policies of Fidel Castro. Tomás delivered supplies for the rebels in the mountains, and also served as a messenger. In 1962 he was caught and sentenced to nine years in La Cabaña prison, after the deactivation of the Model Prison on the Isle of Pines (today called the Isle of Youth) that had the capacity for 5,000 prisoners.



## **These communists are not going to play with me anymore**

During his time in prison, Tomás made strong friendships with other political prisoners. One of them was Pedro Luis Boitel, a Cuban poet and dissident who opposed the governments of Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro. Tomás and Pedro shared the same cell in Havana's La Cabaña prison. Tomás remembers Pedro with deep respect. "He was a great strategist, a visionary, but above all he was very brave," he says. Pedro Luis Boitel taught Tomás how to do hunger strikes, he taught him how to claim what belongs to you and the nature of protest against the communists. Tomás held hunger strikes during his confinement in the punishment cells. The first hunger strike lasted nine days, and the second 15 days. "In 1972 when I went to visit Pedro Luis Boitel [by this year Tomás had already been released from prison] at the military hospital during his last hunger strike, he told me: 'I'm going to die for sure, and I have the courage to do it. These communists are not going to play with me anymore.' He passed away in May 1972 during a 53-day hunger strike. Fidel Castro let him die," recalls Tomás. Pedro Luis Boitel's body was thrown into an unmarked grave in Havana's Colón Cemetery.

## **Executions every night**

Death was part of prison life. "We heard the men who were put up against the wall to be shot shouting 'Long live Christ the King' and 'Down with communism'. They died like men, shouting fearlessly their convictions," says Tomás. Conditions in the prison on the Isle of Pines were inhuman: there was not enough food, no medical attention, constant torture, there were firing squads and constant threats of explosions, since the central building of the prison had already been blown up by dynamite. Tomás adds that every day they had to listen to Fidel Castro's speeches. In 1970, after nine years, Tomás was released from prison and maintained contact with other released political prisoners, and with the groups that were fighting against communism and other counterrevolutionary associations. In 1980, he emigrated to the United States during the Mariel boatlift, an episode in which thousands of Cubans fled the country. Tomás entered Florida through Key West, where he met Ricardo Rodríguez Lara, a CIA agent. The agents were constantly on the lookout for potential infiltrators. They made him an offer to cooperate and transferred him to the directorate of the CIA, where he was appointed as an agent of the secret services. That same year, in 1980, he returned in a speedboat to Cuba as an infiltrator, with the purpose of trying to overthrow the communist regime with an armed attack. In Varadero, Matanzas province, about 100 kilometers from Havana, Tomás was arrested, accused of illegal entry into the country. "They couldn't pin anything on me. I had a gun, but I threw it into the sea," he says. He was sent to a maximum-security prison, the Combinado del Este in Guantánamo, at the other end of the country where he stayed until 1983 when he was released.

## **Attack on the Castro brothers**

Thanks to the support of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Cuban socialism was perceived as something powerful. "I had contact with the other political prisoners,



and we talked, discussed, we shared information, but we never stopped being part of the opposition,” says Tomás. In 1989 he decided to leave the country again and emigrated as a political prisoner to the U.S. through the U.S. Embassy. In Miami he joined the United National Democratic Party, established in Florida in October 1989. This group sent Tomás and another comrade in a boat to Cuba, with the objective of carrying out an attack against the Castro brothers. However, his accomplice acted strangely, so Tomás became suspicious, and upon entering Cuba he separated from him. Two days later he was arrested by the political police at his home in Havana and charged with the crime of rebellion against the Security of the State. Tomás recounts that he escaped the death penalty only thanks to the intervention of a KGB agent, who interrogated him quickly, and in the end decided to send him to prison for 20 years. Tomás was held in several prisons all over Cuba; he was a prisoner of Villa Marista, the Combinado del Este in Guantánamo, Guanajay or the prison in Havana called by the prisoners “1580.” In total, he spent 30 years behind bars. “In general, I was constantly getting punishments while in prison,” he recalls and continues: “I denounced these punishments a lot on Radio Martí, in the international media, everything is kept in my file. I did this through a group of activists in Cuba, that’s why they moved me from one prison to another, they did so to punish me.” He was released in 2008 after 18 years in prison, when he was 64 years old.

### **Let something new come along**

Upon his release from prison in 2008, Tomás applied to the U.S. government for political asylum, which was denied because he was charged with terrorism. He joined the group of non-violent opponents of the Social Democratic Party of Cuba, who taught him how to leave the violent struggle behind for peaceful struggle. “My friend Vladimiro Roca showed me that peaceful struggles do yield results. I sympathize with human rights, I believe that the concept of human rights does tremendous damage to the regime,” says Tomás. “I want to celebrate freedom and rest in peace, knowing that there is no more communism. I want all this to end now, I want the Castros to leave, and for something new to come place,” he concludes.

***I had contact with the other political prisoners, and we talked, discussed, we shared information, but we never stopped being part of the opposition.***

# Juan Antonio Villar Garrote (1943)



[#failed emigration attempts](#) [#religion](#) [#Catholic](#)

[#Missile Crisis](#) [#UMAP](#)

[#Military Units to Aid Production](#)



2021





*“They said that we were going to stay in UMAP until we become real men.”*

**“In the first days after my arrival to UMAP there was a boy who was from the province of Matanzas. That boy looked like a walking skeleton. A sergeant told him he was a coward, he almost fell down. They took him to the field to serve water. Two weeks later they took him to the hospital where he passed away. He had a sudden severe onset of leukemia,” recalls Juan Antonio Villar Garrote about his time in the forced labor camps called UMAP.**

Juan Antonio was born in August 1943 in Cárdenas, Matanzas province. In 1958, at the age of 15, he started studying at the Professional School of Commerce and started working as well. “In March 1959, a family member offered him the chance to work in a grocery store, where he got to know people and heard many comments related to the revolutionary process that had already begun three months earlier,” he says. For Juan Antonio, the triumph of the Revolution at that time meant above all what seemed to be the end of the era of terror and confrontations in the streets. “That was a relief. In the time before revolution, they used to say: zero shopping, zero cinemas and zero cabarets, the three Zs. If you wanted to go to the movies, you would try going during the day, because if you went at night they would set up some anti-terrorist rules. Since I lived near Varadero, suddenly I could go out to the beach. The three Zs were over, he says.



## The communist process

Juan Antonio was thinking of taking a new job in a paper processing company. However, during the 1959, the atmosphere began to change and it looked like they were not going to recruit new employees due to the nationalizations that were taking place. “Therefore, I continued working in the office of the grocery store,” he says. Juan Antonio gradually realized that the revolutionary process was turning into something quite different from what its leaders had announced at the beginning. “It was not what they had emphasized, it was another process, a communist process,” he explains. Hence, on April 17, 1961, when the Bay of Pigs landing operation was launched, Juan Antonio thought that the next day they would have a new government thanks to the Cubans who were just landing in the Bay of Pigs from the U.S. and who had come to regain their freedom. However, that did not happen. The invasion failed and Juan Antonio’s life changed. He stopped going to the Professional School of Commerce and started noticing the gradual tendencies towards indoctrinating the population. “With everything that was happening, people started to realize either they were going to be manipulated or they were going to be jailed. Some people began to prepare to leave the country,” he says. That was also Juan Antonio’s plan.

*With everything that was happening, people started to realize either they were going to be manipulated or they were going to be jailed.*

## The impossible exit from Cuba and the forced labor camps

“In October 1962, the Missile Crisis happened. On October 24, I was supposed to leave Cuba, but on the October 22<sup>nd</sup> President Kennedy suspended all flights due to supposed rocket installations in Cuba,” he says. After about eight months he received some money from his relatives who had already emigrated to the U.S. so that he could leave via Spain. “ But as the months went by, the opportunity to leave did not materialize. Later I was told that if I left my family’s house they would immediately make me live someplace else. However, there were three elderly people still living in the house and they were already going to sleep in the park at night out of fear. Everything was being nationalizing at the time, so the question was not really only about living someplace else,” he explains.

## Compulsory Military Service Law

Another turning point in the course of his life came in 1964 with the introduction of the law that mandated Compulsory Military Service. “People who had applied to



leave the country got called up to go for their Military Service, because they were not hooked on the new revolutionary process,” he recalls. At the same time, in September 1965, the possibility of leaving through the Camarioca port was opened, where a small group of Cuban refugees left. However, only people over 27 years of age were allowed to leave, and Juan Antonio was 22 years old. In November came the first call for the so-called Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP). “They called me up in June 1966. I belonged to the second group. They said that they were going to create a new type of man,” he says. The UMAP were forced labor camps, through which about 25,000 men passed. These men were mostly young men of military age who for various reasons refused to do the Compulsory Military Service, or were rejected from the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces or were homosexuals. Juan Antonio was a Catholic Christian and these religious men also formed a significant segment in those camps.

### **Forced labor camp**

Juan Antonio was interned in a forced labor camp close to the city of Ciego de Ávila, where he remained for almost a year. The conditions were very harsh. “We would start at 5:30 AM and we would have to be on an ox cart from Monday to Saturday,” he says. Medical care was almost nonexistent. “The first days after my arrival there was a boy who was from the province of Matanzas. That boy looked like a walking skeleton. A sergeant told him he was a coward, he almost fell down. They took him to the field to serve water. Two weeks later they took him to the hospital where he passed away. He had a sudden, severe onset of leukemia,” he recalls. After almost three months he was allowed to have the first visit of his family. In mid-1967 he was transferred. The duration of the work at first was not very well defined. “They said that we were going to stay there until we become real men,” he says.

### **Opposing the revolutionary process**

In June 1968, the UMAPs were closed down. “They gave each of us a file, in my file there was this comment ‘opposes the revolutionary process,’” recalls Juan Antonio. The end of the forced labor camps was due, according to Juan Antonio, mainly to international pressure. In 1970, when he turned 27, he went directly to the Swiss Embassy office and obtained permission to leave for the U.S. However, the Cuban authorities took another year before they gave him permission. Then it was time to say goodbye to his mother. “Nine years ago, people thought they were leaving just for a short time, but then a number of things happened like Playa Girón or the missile crisis, perhaps something else could have happened and the government would have collapsed and the families would have been able to come and go as they pleased. However, after almost nine years, things started to look quite differently and I no longer knew how long I was leaving for. I had no idea when we will see each other again.” Finally, Juan Antonio’s family was lucky enough to be reunited in Miami. For him, the UMAPs should not be forgotten. “We need to explain to new generations what happened,” he says. He considers Castroism to be a denial of the dignity of human beings and a denial of their free will. He does not want to return to Cuba under the current system.

# Frank Calzón (1944)

[#opposition activist](#) [#support for political prisoners](#)

[#Freedom House](#) [#Center for a Free Cuba](#)

[#exiled in the USA](#)



2018



*“Some people who have not experienced communism are seduced by it.”*

**“Fidel had promised free elections in 18 months. He said there would be no more corruption and no political prisoners. He promised there would be freedom of cultural expression and that he had no interest in staying in government.” This is how Frank Calzón remembers Fidel Castro’s promises after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959.**

Frank was born in 1944. When he was a child, his family lived in an apartment house, where his father worked in maintenance. The Revolution came to power when he was fifteen years old. Since Batista’s Police had disappeared, and the rebels were still in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, Frank was one of the Boy Scouts asked by Fidel to direct traffic in Havana. “Every day at 7 AM, they picked me up and took me to a busy downtown Havana street to direct the traffic. This job was very exciting for a fifteen-year-old boy,” he recalls.





## Executions and exile

However, soon the repression started. “The revolutionary government began to shoot the Batista supporters first, and after a while, it began to target Batista’s former enemies and rebels, who had fought with Fidel but did not agree with Fidel’s regime,” Frank recounts. He remembers the change in school curricula and the emphasis on new emphasis revolutionary education. This change in schooling affected his first clashes with the regime, so, to avoid possible arrest, his family decided it would be better for him to go to the U.S., where his uncle lived. Therefore, in 1960 he settled down in New York, where he got a job as a waiter thanks to his father’s friends. Later his family also managed to come to the U.S., settling in Miami.

## Henry Kissinger

In late 1961, Frank joined his family in Miami and began studying again. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he was active for a little more than half a year. After graduation from the Miami Dade College, he studied Political Science at Rutgers University. He helped found a Cuban student organization that sought to combat the Castro regime’s propaganda. Around 1970 he demanded the release of political prisoners in Cuba at the United Nations Security Council. He continued his studies at Georgetown University, where he earned his Master’s degree in Political Science and met Professor Jeane Kirkpatrick, who later became U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during Ronald Reagan’s administration. He received an invitation from her to join a dinner where he met Henry Kissinger: “I disagreed on some things with Mr. Kissinger. The U.S. was obviously looking for a way to negotiate with Havana and get a settlement. I explained to him that if he wanted to know how credible the Havana government was going to be with the U.S., he should start by looking at the promises Fidel had made to the Cuban people and what happened after that,” Frank recalls.

*The revolutionary government began to shoot the Batista supporters first, and after a while, it began to target Batista’s former enemies and rebels, who had fought with Fidel but did not agree with Fidel’s regime.*



## **Political Prisoners**

The Cuban Students Association was founded at Georgetown University. The Association held conferences and invited Cuban experts to discuss different issues. From time to time, members of the Association would demonstrate in front of the White House against any concessions made by the U.S. toward Cuba without the prior release of political prisoners. “Unfortunately, the government in Havana was never willing to release political prisoners, nor was it willing to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to go to Cuba.” Partly because of the work of the Association and partly because of the work of Amnesty International, the Cuban poets Armando Valladares and Heberto Padilla were released.

## **Meeting with Václav Havel**

The organization Democracy International was founded in Washington D.C., and Frank became its Vice-President. This organization brought together dissidents from all over the world. They organized demonstrations and supported each other. After graduation from Georgetown University, he worked at the Organization of American States. He then began working for Freedom House, a human rights organization founded by Eleanor Roosevelt, which fought intensively against communism in Eastern Europe. He worked there until about 1988. Frank was part of the commission that petitioned the U.S. Congress for the release of Václav Havel. When the Berlin Wall fell, Frank had the opportunity to meet President Havel in Prague. “Havel told me, ‘I know why you came to see me: it’s because of the special relationship between Cuba and Czechoslovakia. That no longer exists,’” he recalls.

## **Fight for democracy in Cuba**

On behalf of Freedom House, Frank traveled around the world and tried to enlist the support of major organizations, such as Reporters Without Borders and Pax Cristi, to fight for democracy in Cuba. He spoke several times before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. He supported dissident movements in South Africa, Poland, and many others.

## **When a person is imprisoned, the whole family suffers**

Frank believes that Cuba is a state destroyed by the catastrophic management of the national economy and by the deteriorated relations among Cubans themselves. For more than ten years, he served as Executive Director of the Center for a Free Cuba, where he maintained ties with the diplomatic corps in Washington, D.C., and various human rights NGOs. The Center for a Free Cuba supports activists on the island and their families: “When a Cuban is imprisoned, the entire family suffers. Family members are expelled from universities, and they are left without work,” Frank emphasizes.

# Sylvia G. Iriondo (1945)

[#fight against Castro](#) [#MAR for Cuba](#) [#Brothers to the Rescue](#)

[#International Rescue Committee](#)

[#Cuban Refugee Center](#)



2018



*"The exile community is the living example of a free Cuba!"*

**"We are fighting like never before. We are going to continue fighting like never before. We have seen the farce of the supposed change of command in Cuba. Nothing has changed there. The dictator Raúl Castro remains in control as the first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, the governing body of Cuban society," declares Sylvia G. Iriondo in regard to the inauguration of President Miguel Díaz-Canel.**

Sylvia was born in January 1945 to a dynamic, large working-class family, as she describes it. As a child, she studied in an American school in Havana, so she learned to speak English. "In 1959, Fidel Castro and the group of rebels entered Havana. The majority of the Cuban people at that time celebrated and agreed with the promise made by this group to reinstate the 1940 Constitution, one of the most advanced constitutions in the world," Sylvia recalls.



## **Enslaving the Cuban people**

“Until I was 15 years old, I was a very happy and content teenager. Around this time, everything started to change rapidly and we realized that promises of the revolution were not being fulfilled. The majority of the Cuban people still supported the Castro regime at that point,” Sylvia recounts. “I remember that, in the last years before Fidel Castro came to power, most Cubans, who were already tired of the then government of Fulgencio Batista, said that anything would be better. Unfortunately, this “anything” has been reigning in Cuba and enslaving the Cuban people for almost six decades now,” she says.

## **The struggle between classes**

She recalls that, as children, they heard parents speaking quietly and saw fear in their faces because of the firing squads in the streets and the indoctrination in schools. “There was a growing animosity in the streets among Cubans. We would see images of Cubans who were happy celebrating the confiscation of businesses. It was a very profound change that was taking place in Cuba. People who until then had been like brothers, suddenly started to be part of a struggle between the classes that had never existed in Cuba before,” Sylvia describes the atmosphere in the first years after the triumph of the Revolution.

*There was a growing animosity in the streets among Cubans.*

## **Cubans were not leaving to stay abroad forever**

“I remember the endless speeches of the dictator Fidel Castro, and how he would praise his achievements when he said that his Revolution was greener than the palms and that it was not communist in nature,” Sylvia recalls about the time when most Cubans still believed in the Revolution. Soon, Castro publicly declared himself to be a communist, and “the exodus of Cubans abroad began,” she says. “During that time, many Cubans went abroad not with the intention of staying there forever, but to return to Cuba and fight with all their means to reconquer the freedom that that regime had stolen from our island,” Sylvia emphasizes.

## **We were leaving behind our beloved homeland**

“One day, our parents told us that my father was going on a trip. So, in June 1960, he left with one of his brothers. We didn’t know it at the time, but daddy and his brother were involved in the underground actions that were being organized in Cuba, and their names had come up on the shortwave radio so they were in





danger of being discovered,” Sylvia recalls. In order to continue their work, her father and uncles had to go into exile. And soon, in October of the same year, Sylvia and her sisters also left from the José Martí International Airport to be reunited with their father. We were very sad, and confused because we did not know when we would return to the life that we had had until that day. It was a happy life surrounded by the love of our family and great and sincere friendships. There were many beautiful things we were leaving behind that day and to which we wanted to return,” says Sylvia. Her mother and her last two siblings were able to join the rest of the family in Miami two weeks later.

*I remember the endless speeches of the dictator Fidel Castro, and how he would praise his achievements when he said that his Revolution was greener than the palms and that it was not communist in nature.*

### **Political Refugees**

Sylvia’s father immediately joined the struggle from exile and served as the chief of operations at a clandestine base in the Florida Keys and as a captain of one of the infiltrated ships under the Transportation and Command Group. Sylvia got involved as well. “I was 15 years old, so I had to say I was older. I became a semi-volunteer at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which was the first agency that opened its doors in Miami to aid to thousands and thousands of Cuban families who arrived each day. They were full of hope, and faith, but they had nothing,” Sylvia recalls. Later, she worked at the Cuban Refugee Center. “Our family came to Miami as political refugees, we came for a specific reason and this reason marked our identity,” she describes, stressing that her entire family was completely convinced they would return to their homeland someday.

### **Sad testimonies**

Sylvia expresses enormous empathy towards all Cubans who were arriving in the U.S. with unfulfilled dreams and broken hearts, without money and often without any knowledge of English. “I remember hearing testimonies of older people who, with tears in their eyes, talked about their life that no longer existed,” she recounts. “Obviously, we thought our time in exile would last only about



six months, or a year at most. However, it lasted much longer and was full of hopes, frustrations, achievements and failed efforts,” he adds.

### **Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis**

In 1961, the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion took place. “We thought that those brave men who wanted to rescue democracy in their homeland would succeed and that they would receive the support of the U.S. air force that had been promised. Unfortunately, that did not happen. How many deaths, crimes, murders, how much pain and suffering would have been avoided if on April 17 the handful of Cuban patriots had been able to reverse the damage that this regime had caused in Cuba and it would cause in the future years,” Sylvia says with frustration. And with the same frustration she narrates the events that soon followed. In October 1961, “in the blink of an eye a promise was negotiated that the Americans would not help to invade Cuba,” she says, referring to the Missile Crisis.

### **Cuba cries, sings and dances**

“After these two events, which could have changed our history, we realized that maybe our exile would not last merely six months or a year, but that it was going to be much longer,” Sylvia recalls. She says that the life of the exiled Cubans was paralyzed, because the return to their homeland was not going to happen in the short term, and apart from having to continue with their activities for Cuba, they also had to move forward with their lives. At the age of 23 Sylvia got married and later on had three daughters. She worked in various offices and as a ballet teacher in the dance studio founded by her mother. And it was right there, where, when the Cubans who landed in the Bay of Pigs got arrested, they presented the first Cuban show in Miami. It was entitled “Cuba cries, sings and dances for the benefit of the Cuban political prisoners of the Bay of Pigs”.

*Obviously, we thought our time in exile would last only about six months, or a year at most. However, it lasted much longer and was full of hopes, frustrations, achievements and failed efforts.*



## Mothers and Women Against Repression (MAR) for Cuba

Sylvia later divorced and remarried, to the late Andres Iriondo, they had been married for 37 years and had one child. In 1994, together with other Cuban American women, Sylvia founded the organization MAR por Cuba (Mothers and Women Against Repression). “We had all been involved in the struggle through our families, parents, friends, etc., but after three specific events took place, we decided that we were going to join forces and found our organization,” Sylvia recounts. The first crucial event was the change in policy towards Cuban political refugees. In August 1994, Bill Clinton’s administration announced that Cubans would no longer be considered to be refugees, but migrants. “So, all these refugees who were leaving Cuba on fragile rafts and other makeshift floating objects would be intercepted at sea and returned to the Guantánamo base from where they would return to Cuba,” says Sylvia. The second event happened when “a group of supposed Cuban exiles traveled to Cuba for a conference entitled “The Nation and Emigration.” At that conference a Cuban-American woman thanked the dictator Fidel Castro for what he had done for her country, she called him a master and it was something extremely embarrassing for us as women and mothers who symbolized to a certain extent the suffering and pain of so many mothers who saw their children murdered or sentenced to long years in prison,” Sylvia comments with indignation. And the third event that Sylvia describes as heartbreaking, was the sinking of the Tugboat 13 de Marzo, where “37 Cubans, men, women and children, including a six-month-old baby, were killed,” Sylvia recounts. “After we heard the testimonies of the survivors and saw those images, we decided to found a non-profit organization where we are all volunteers, without receiving any kind of salary or subsidy,” says Sylvia. “The Cuban regime uses false propaganda campaigns where it accuses us, and me personally, of being employed by the CIA and receiving a salary of so many thousands of dollars a year for my work against the Castro regime and against the Cuban people, as they call it,” she adds. “I am not the exception. This is a constant and normal part of the lies spread by the Castro regime to discredit, neutralize and distort the reputation of anyone on the island and in exile who opposes this system of horror,” Sylvia comments.

## Brothers to the Rescue

In the early 1990s, the organization Brothers to the Rescue was founded in Miami, in which volunteer pilots searched in civilian airplanes for Cubans who were trying to escape Cuba on very fragile floating objects in the Florida Straits, so who might be in danger of death. “It was estimated that for every four Cubans who tried to leave the island, only one would reach the land of freedom. The others died on the way or were eaten by sharks,” Sylvia says. “One or two MAR for Cuba volunteers participated in these weekly flights of Brothers to the Rescue. We also collected basic necessities, powdered milk for children, and other things they needed so that their stay in the detention centers would be a little less frightening,” she adds.



## *The Cuban regime uses false propaganda campaigns where it accuses us, and me personally, of being employed by the CIA.*

### **Three small planes**

“On February 24, 1996, one of those humanitarian flights took off in the Florida Straits to save the lives of Cubans who might be trying to escape from the island that day. We left the Brothers to the Rescue base at 1PM. It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining, the sea was totally calm and there were very few clouds in the sky. We were three small planes, which were like motorcycles in the air. The little engines were located at the back of the planes so you barely fit inside. One of the planes was piloted by Carlos Costa, a pilot from Brothers to the Rescue, and he had on board Pablito Morales, a volunteer of Brothers to the Rescue, who had been saved in the Florida Straits previously by Brothers to the Rescue and had promised God that if he reached the land of freedom, he would do for other Cubans what Brothers to the Rescue had done for him. The second of the planes was piloted by Mario Manuel de la Peña and with him was Armando Alejandro. And my husband Andrés and I were there as volunteers on the third plane. This one was piloted by Arnaldo Iglesias, and had also José Basulto, the president of Brothers to the Rescue, on board,” Sylvia narrates.

### **They are going to shoot us down**

“And there, in international airspace, in broad daylight, without prior warning, under the orders of Fidel and Raúl Castro, the regime dispatched planes and shot down first the plane piloted by Carlos Costa with Pablo Morales on board and immediately afterwards the plane piloted by Mario Manuel de la Peña with Armando Alejandro Jr.,” says Sylvia about the attack. After shooting down two of the three planes of Brothers to the Rescue, the third plane, which Sylvia and her husband were on, was still in the air. “We were frantically trying to establish contact with these two planes, we saw smoke and Basulto looked at us and said, ‘they’re going to shoot us down.’ I remember only asking him ‘what do you mean, they’re going to shoot us down,’” Sylvia adds. That day, under the orders of Fidel and Raúl Castro, the regime killed four young men who were in the air trying to save the lives of Cubans.

### **What Cuba could do if it were free**

“Cubans are a hard-working and resourceful people. The Cuban exile community has shown what a free nation can do. Indeed, our exile community has been



one of the most successful communities in the United States. Everything that we in the exile community have achieved in terms of the growth, the successful businesses, and other successes, demonstrate precisely what Cuba could do, if it were free. It is in exile that in spite of everything and everyone and in spite of all the obstacles that we have encountered along the way, were the community still lives, fights, is committed to a cause and, while maintaining its Cuban identity and love for the homeland. I feel extremely proud of us and I repeat again that: we are the living example of what a free Cuba could manage to accomplish," concludes Sylvia.

*We were frantically trying to establish contact with these two planes, we saw smoke and Basulto looked at us and said, 'they're going to shoot us down.'  
I remember only asking him 'what do you mean, they're going to shoot us down.'*



# Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello (1945)

[#female political prisoner](#) [#Cuba's Black Spring](#) [#iron lady](#)

[#Ochoa's execution](#) [#female opposition activist](#)

[#candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize](#) [#Group of 75](#)

[#Group of Four](#) [#The Homeland Belongs to All](#)



2018



*There is no opposition in Cuba, there are only opposition activists.*

**“I find it very difficult to talk about myself, because one spends their life talking about other people. I don’t mean gossiping, but about everything that is happening in the country,” says Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello, a university professor and Cuban dissident, at the very beginning of her interview. However, over the next hour and a half, she measures her words with absolute precision. This hardly comes as a surprise, as her profession is mathematical statistics.**

Martha was born in May 1945 in Havana as the youngest of five siblings. She was approaching her 15th birthday, which is usually celebrated with a magnificent party, when the Cuban Revolution triumphed. She remembers how “bombs were exploding everywhere,” and she also recalls many other limitations under which the Cuban people lived at that time: “We called the situation the condition of ‘the three Zs: zero shopping, zero cinema, zero cabaret,” Martha recalls the years of Fidel Castro’s battles against Fulgencio Batista. Her father supported the new system and her sister, who worked in Batista’s government, was imprisoned in La Cabaña for two months, after which she immediately emigrated to the U.S. Martha faintly remembers how at that time it was still normal to go on weekends to Miami by ferry. However, soon the border was closed and Martha ended up not seeing her sister for another 50 years.



## **A period of total silence**

Right after the victory of the Cuban Revolution, the Castro family began to impose a new political system. “It was a period of total silence. There were no dissidents in the sense in which there were some time later, say in the 1980s. At that time, I personally believed in the Revolution. I really thought it was a social project, and that we were going to make a great deal of progress. And like all Cubans, I was constantly hearing Fidel Castro’s speeches and promises. Of the milk that they were going to put on our doorstep in the morning, of the intellectual level and access to all kinds of development programs... In other words, the years of the 1970s were a time when I lived to work, convinced that the work I was able to do was going to help the country develop,” Martha explains.

## *My awakening came after the death of General Ochoa.*

### **The death of Arnaldo Ochoa brought about a change**

However, the end of her revolutionary dream was about to arrive. “My awakening came after the death of General Ochoa. I think this was a time of transition, when one was beginning to see the problems and the shine had come off the apple, as one might say. Ochoa’s death provoked a change. It was a moment in which some information started to surface that generally had not come out before,” said Martha continuing her story. From that moment on, Martha became aware of the “Machiavellian features” of the regime, as she calls them, and even more so after being questioned about her behavior at the University of Havana, where she was teaching at the time. In her Mathematical Statistics class, Martha conducted a survey among her students about their opinions on the killing of General Ochoa, from which it emerged that none of them had wanted him to be executed. Her superiors practically made her face “a court martial” because of this survey and she received a warning.

### **Today’s opponents have no interest in knowledge**

Despite this warning at work, Martha entered into the opposition. And she points out that, today’s opposition differs quite a bit from the opposition of her generation. “In the past, people were more interested in reading. In 1989 or 1990 my generation of opposition activists were intellectuals and had a certain base of knowledge.” Martha sums up. “But there came a time when there was nothing to read, because anything you bought in a bookstore was simply Bolshevik reading material, or had to do with the Soviet Union, or with socialist countries, or with Marxist philosophy, and so on. So, people’s desire to read disappeared,” Martha mentions. “And the opposition activists right now don’t have that interest



in knowledge. I wouldn't stop reading Granma [the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party] and all the other newspapers for anything in the world. I would never stop watching the TV news, a speech by Raúl Castro, or the summoning of the National Assembly of People's Power for anything in the world. All those things are important because they let you understand how the dictatorship acts," Martha explains.

### **The Homeland Belongs to All**

In 1997, Martha, together with Vladimiro Roca Antúnez, Félix Bonne and René Gómez Manzano, wrote a powerful document: *La Patria es de Todos* (The Homeland Belongs to All). "We decided to describe what was happening in Cuba, because at that time there was no Internet, there was very little information about Cuba. The common knowledge that everyone nowadays has about Cuba, like for example that there is no public transportation, no housing, no food, no medical attention, was not so widespread. Everybody knows it now, but before it was quite hidden. So we decided to produce this document which was shocking in the sense that it divulged information internationally on what was really happening in Cuba. It was written in June 1997 and today, 21 years later, it is still valid, because most of the issues we raised in this document have still not been solved," says Martha. The punishment by the regime came quickly. On July 16, 1997, after sending the document to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the four authors were arrested, specifically for "actions against the national security of the Cuban State."

*We decided to describe what was happening in Cuba, because at that time there was no Internet, there was very little information about Cuba.*

### **An example of dignity**

The trial was televised. "The regime wanted our actions to be seen as counterrevolutionary, as an experience of what should not be done," says Martha. However, the result was quite the opposite: "Instead of the trial being a bad experience for us, it was an experience of dignity, because everyone saw the way in which we conducted ourselves throughout the trial. We were not sad, nor were we crying, nor had we shown any kind of concern about it. When the time came for Martha to speak, she said: "I have nothing to declare, I just want the court to know that after I serve my sentence, I will continue doing the same. So, I am here only and





exclusively to hear the sentence, then to go to prison and after I am released, I will continue doing the same thing.” And so, she did.

### **There is no opposition, there are opposition activists**

In 2000, when she was released on parole, Martha returned to her opposition work, as she had promised at her trial. In 2002 she founded the Assembly to Promote Cuban Civil Society. “There were 365 organizations in the Assembly, it was a moment of unity that would be impossible to rekindle,” she recalls. Unity is lacking in today’s Cuban opposition according to Martha. “First of all, there is no opposition, there are only opposition activists. That wave of people who were connected to one another as part of a great opposition does not exist anymore. Nowadays, there are opposition activists, who are producing various documents. One writes a document, another one writes another document, but they have not found the magic formula for getting the people to follow them,” she affirms. Why don’t Cubans follow the opposition? Martha describes it this way: “Well, it is very simple. First of all, they are not examples. That is very important. For the people to follow you, you have to be an example. And, secondly, the slogans they use and the things they ask for are not in the interest of the people. If you go out in the street and say: ‘down with the dictatorship’, all people around you will run away, because they are afraid, as most likely you are going to be detained by the police. And nobody wants that. In other words, it is not of the popular interest, it does not call for reflection of the people,” explains Martha. “However, there is no mention of ‘we are going to increase salaries, there is no food, there is no transportation.’ They do not speak about the social problems, which are the ones that affect the population. We maintain the slogan of freedom for political prisoners. I am not against the freedom of political prisoners, on the contrary, I would like them all to be free. But that is not what the Cuban people are interested in. The people are not interested in saying ‘we are going to defend human rights’. People do not know what human rights are, people are ignorant about the Universal Charter of Human Rights and its 30 points, because it has not even been possible to explain to the population what human rights are. In other words, this link between the opposition and the population does not exist,” she affirms.

### **Cuba’s Black Spring**

In 2007, Martha was a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. However, at that time she was in prison. She had already been in jail for four years and another 16 years were awaiting her, after the mass incarceration that has come to be known as Cuba’s Black Spring, which occurred in 2003 when 75 dissidents and opposition activists were imprisoned. “Look, Fidel Castro was a stubborn guy and so he decided to put an end to the entire opposition. He thought he was going to do it at an opportune moment when the international community was interested in what was happening in Iraq. And then he said, ‘This is my chance. When I do this, people are not going to be interested in Cuba, because they are more interested where the president [Saddam Hussein] is hiding, or where the troops are. Nobody is going to worry about what we are going to do with the dissidents,’” Martha recounts. In a later speech, Fidel referred to the Group of 75 saying “all of them





not there, nor are the ones that are there all [of them],” Martha recalls, explaining how the Black Spring had failed to end the opposition, even though that was Fidel Castro’s plan.

*First of all, there is no opposition, there are only opposition activists. That wave of people who were connected to one another as part of a great opposition does not exist anymore. Nowadays, there are opposition activists, who are producing various documents. One writes a document, another one writes another document, but they have not found the magic formula for getting the people to follow them.*

### **You do not have tell anything to this nation**

In 2010, after a massive campaign for human rights and freedom for Cuban political prisoners, most members of the Group of 75 were finally released, but without being definitively freed from their sentences. They have remained in a “legal limbo,” unable to leave the island, because if they travelled out, they could no longer enter Cuba without being thrown back into prison. “I believe that all I could have given for the freedom of my country, I have given and I continue to give. I believe that you do not need to explain anything to this nation. Cubans know perfectly well that they live under a dictatorship and they have been losing their fear little by little. Because what you hear on the streets today, you didn’t even remotely hear just five years ago,” Martha concludes.

# Raúl García (1946)

[#Escambray Mountains](#) [#anti-Castro guerrilla movement](#)

[#political prisoner](#) [#confiscation of assets](#)

[#eviction](#) [#Carter-Castro agreement](#) [#forced exile](#)



2017



*“The Castro regime took away our hope, so we went out to look for it!”*

**“The Castro regime took away our hope, so we went out to look for it,” says Raúl García, who at the age of 17 joined the fight against the Cuban government in the guerrilla war in the Escambray Mountains and spent most of his life in prison.**

Raúl was born into a modest peasant family on March 3, 1946. When the Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959 and the communist government of Fidel Castro was installed, Raúl was only 13 years old. He lived with nine brothers on a small farm. His entire family supported the guerrilla movement that immediately after the triumph of the Revolution started to fight the communist system both from the Cuban mountains and from the plains.



## Guerrilla fight with morals

And it was right there, in the plains, when in 1963, at the age of 17, Raúl joined the anti-Castro struggle of the Escambray guerrilla, named after mountains with the same name. “It was a tough life. The fight was difficult and cruel because we were facing an enemy that did not stop at anything,” he recalls. Also, the guerrilla camps were constantly relocated so that the government would not track them down. “It was a guerrilla group that had good morals, and the leaders were real heroes,” Raúl describes.

*It was a tough life. The fight was difficult and cruel because we were facing an enemy that did not stop at anything.*

## They killed 11 fellow guerrilla fighters

On August 15, 1963, despite all the precautions, just a couple of months after Raúl joined the guerrilla, he was captured by the government army along with all his fellow fighters. Between 1963 and 1964, the government forces organized the season of the “most forceful offensive against the guerrilla fighters.” During the shoot-out, he was shot twice in the leg. One of the projectiles wounded his heel that thirteen years later still causes him great pain because the open wound never healed properly. “They killed eleven of us,” he recounts about that day in August. “One of the comrades got even shot nineteen times but survived,” Raúl recalls.

## The devils in jail

Despite being a minor, Raúl was sentenced to a summary trial to 30 years in prison. “I have spent the best part of my life with the devils, in prison,” Raúl says, but without any resentment. “I do not regret it, and I feel proud to have participated in the struggle. If there is anything that I did well in my life, it was just this,” he says with pride.

## They were taken away just for the fun of it

Like many Cuban peasants who rebelled against the regime, his family was never able to return to their farm. This was taken away from them by the government right after Raúl was captured. Along with Raúl’s siblings, his mother was





evicted to the Miramar area, and his father performed forced labor on the Isle of Pines. “Many peasants died of sorrow because they were taken from their farms and never allowed to return. However, no one was officially evicted in Cuba, the word ‘eviction’ is not used, and they say it just didn’t happen,” he recounts. “They targeted them for the fun of it, simply for not being communists,” he adds, now with noticeable bitterness in his voice. In the case of Raúl’s family, those who were not imprisoned could reunite after four long years.

### **Carter-Castro Agreement**

In 1979, after serving sixteen years, Raúl was released from prison, the year an agreement was signed between Jimmy Carter and Fidel Castro. On May 17, 1979, he boarded one of the planes that transported more than 4,000 recently released political prisoners to Miami, where he resides to this day.

### **He did not fight in vain**

Although he spent more than a decade and a half behind bars in several Cuban prisons due to his guerilla past, he is not bitter about it. “Although we did not win, we did not fight in vain,” he says. And even though Cuba’s future still looks complicated and murky, he remains firm in his values. “They should celebrate anyone who fights communism because the communists are really bad,” Raúl concludes.

*Many peasants died of sorrow because they were taken from their farms and never allowed to return. However, no one was officially evicted in Cuba, the word ‘eviction’ is not used, and they say it just didn’t happen.*



# José Caballero Blanco (1947)



[#religion](#) [#literacy campaign](#) [#UMAP](#)

[#Military Units to Aid Production](#) [#Mariel boatlift](#)

[#writer](#)



2021



*“In these concentration camps, I saw things I never imagined I would see: despotism, abuse, mistreatment, people would be left to die...!”*

**“I was born in Cojímar, where Hemingway took notes for his book *The Old Man and the Sea*. At that time, it was a very humble fishing village where everyone knew each other,” narrates José Caballero Blanco, who was born in June 1947 into a working-class family is closely linked to the port of Havana.**

“My grandfather started working as a day laborer with a crew of Chinese laborers unloading coal ships,” he continues. His grandfather, father, and uncle worked in the dock of the Cuban capital. José’s mother was a housewife. They later moved to Guanabacoa, which is now together with Cojímar, part of East Havana. Despite his modest social background, José attended a private school. “My mother was the godmother of the owner of the school, so my sister studied for free, and my parents only had to pay for me,” he explains with a smile. At the same time, he highlights that teachers were very important in his upbringing as teaching was for them “a passion, not a profession.”



## The disaster and Machiavelli

“When I was 11 years old, the disaster happened, yet everyone was hopeful that the Revolution would bring freedom. Nobody knew that Machiavelli had planned how to betray the hope of the Cuban People,” he says while using language full of metaphors. He refers to the naivety of most Cubans at the time of the triumph of the Revolution. He was 11 years old and did not quite understand what was happening. However, he does remember the atmosphere of terror that existed in Cuba in the years leading up to the Revolution. “There were many bombs in Havana. We lived near the dock, and since colonial times a cannon was shot there at nine o’clock every night. I was not aware of the nine o’clock cannon shot, and when I felt the explosion, I started to run away”. In 1961, he was enrolled in the Regime’s literacy campaign: “I was offered a scholarship to study Russian, but, in seeing the chaos and destruction, my parents told me not to accept the scholarship, so I didn’t even get to study the first letter of the Russian alphabet,” recalls with disappointment. His father started to prepare the documents that were needed for José to leave the country. Unfortunately, he was scheduled to leave Cuba the day when the Missile Crisis started, so all flights were suspended. José had to remain in Cuba.

*When I was 11 years old, the disaster happened, yet everyone was hopeful that the Revolution would bring freedom. Nobody knew that Machiavelli had planned how to betray the hope of the Cuban People.*

### The UMAP: a slow death

When he reached the age of compulsory military service, the Cuban military counterintelligence determined that José was not a reliable person and denied participation in the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR). The reason for this was that he was a religious person and also because he had filed an application in the past to leave the country. Therefore, he was sent to the Military Units to Aid Production, also called UMAP. These Units were labor camps that changed the course of his life and marked him forever. “In these concentration camps, I saw things I never imagined I would see: despotism, abuse, mistreatment... People would be left to die,” he remembers. José arrived at the UMAP when he was 19 years old. “They recruited me on the day of my birthday. I never thought I would have a birthday party with so many guests,” he says with irony.



## Harvesting sugar cane

Life in the forced labor camps was not easy. “They took us out to the fields without giving us food,” he recalls. The work was hard. They had to cut sugar cane with machetes, and José had never done this kind of work before. He was not used to it. “The first day, I got thirty blisters on one hand and twenty-odd on the other,” he says. “They made us walk five kilometers in boots full of mud carrying water for forty men. Anyhow, usually by 10 a.m. there would be no water. I learned to drink water from in-between furrows in the sugar fields to quench my thirst,” he says. The only way to escape from work was to get wounded by a machete. Therefore, some inmates would go so far as to self-mutilate or ask fellow inmates to give them a blow with the machete to get hurt. José’s camp was in Camagüey province, and he passed through several different locations there. The food supply often did not arrive in full because the distributors and the officers would steal part of it. “A breakfast for 120 men would be made from 20 cans of milk.” This is how many workers would always work under the watchful eye of the lieutenants. Despite the strict regime, there were cases of rebellion, such as the one that started when one worker became seriously ill, and the others decided to demand medical attention for him by not complying with the established rules. José also recalls a case of a boy who suffered from leptospirosis, a bacterial disease transmitted to humans from animals (in this case, probably from rats, which were everywhere). The lieutenants let the young man go to the hospital. However, he died after four hours.

*There is no such thing as a profile of a revolutionary. However, what does exist is the profile of a profiteer, one who profits from the Revolution.*

## Medical care

When one inmate passed away, the conditions in the labor camp in terms of access to medical care improved: “They started to allow people with health issues to be checked by doctors. These were usually University students from the last year of their studies of Medicine who had been expelled. There was a huge purge from Cuban universities at that time: those who were not deemed suitable for the Revolution were expelled from their studies,” he explains. According to José, some of these doctors were the best students. At the time, it was common for the regime, which was immersed in a transition to Communism, to perform evaluations of how fit a particular person was to serve the Revolution. However,





José is unable to define what qualities were required. “There is no such thing as a profile of a revolutionary. However, what does exist is the profile of a profiteer, one who profits from the Revolution,” he explains.

### **We were disposable material**

José compares the forced labor and reeducation camps to the German extermination camps. “We were disposable material, but they killed us more discreetly. There were no mass executions, although there was one shooting. However, for example, 97 people committed suicide,” he says. Moreover, he describes his theory of the three levels of oppression that the inmates faced in the following way: “Cuba is a prison surrounded by water. The fence is huge. It’s 90 miles long, as this is the distance between Cuba and Florida. Then the second level was represented by the UMAP fences, which were very high and contained fourteen strands of barbed wire. And there was the third level that was even bigger, which was the prison of a person’s mind. ‘If I escape, I’m going to lose my parents, who are going to try to protect me. How can I be forcing them to be part of that?’ These are the three levels of oppression, of which the mental prison is the strongest one of all,” he says.

***We were disposable material,  
but they killed us more  
discreetly.***

### **You can forgive, but you can’t forget**

José spent eight months in the UMAP camps. When he was released on February 7, 1967, he could not walk for six months. Despite the communist indoctrination, he maintained his Christian faith. “The Christian faith is an antithesis of what the communists propose. They propose hatred as a state policy. There is nothing more different from a Christian person than a Communist. Religion unquestionably limits people from committing bad deeds, but the communists have no limits,” he says. To free himself from the hatred and rancor suffered at the hands of the Cuban State, he resorted to writing literature. “Even after 20 or 30 years, I was still their prisoner because every time I remembered them, the worst memories came back.” He decided to write a book about the UMAP camps titled *UMAP – Una muerte a plazos* [this book has not been translated to English, and the Spanish title uses the acronym of the UMAP camps and it can be loosely translated as Death that comes gradually, little by little]. In writing this book, he chose to overcome the hatred while remaining true to his motto: “You can forgive, but not forget.” He succeeded in publishing this book despite not having completed high school. “UMAP was a very hard school for me, but it





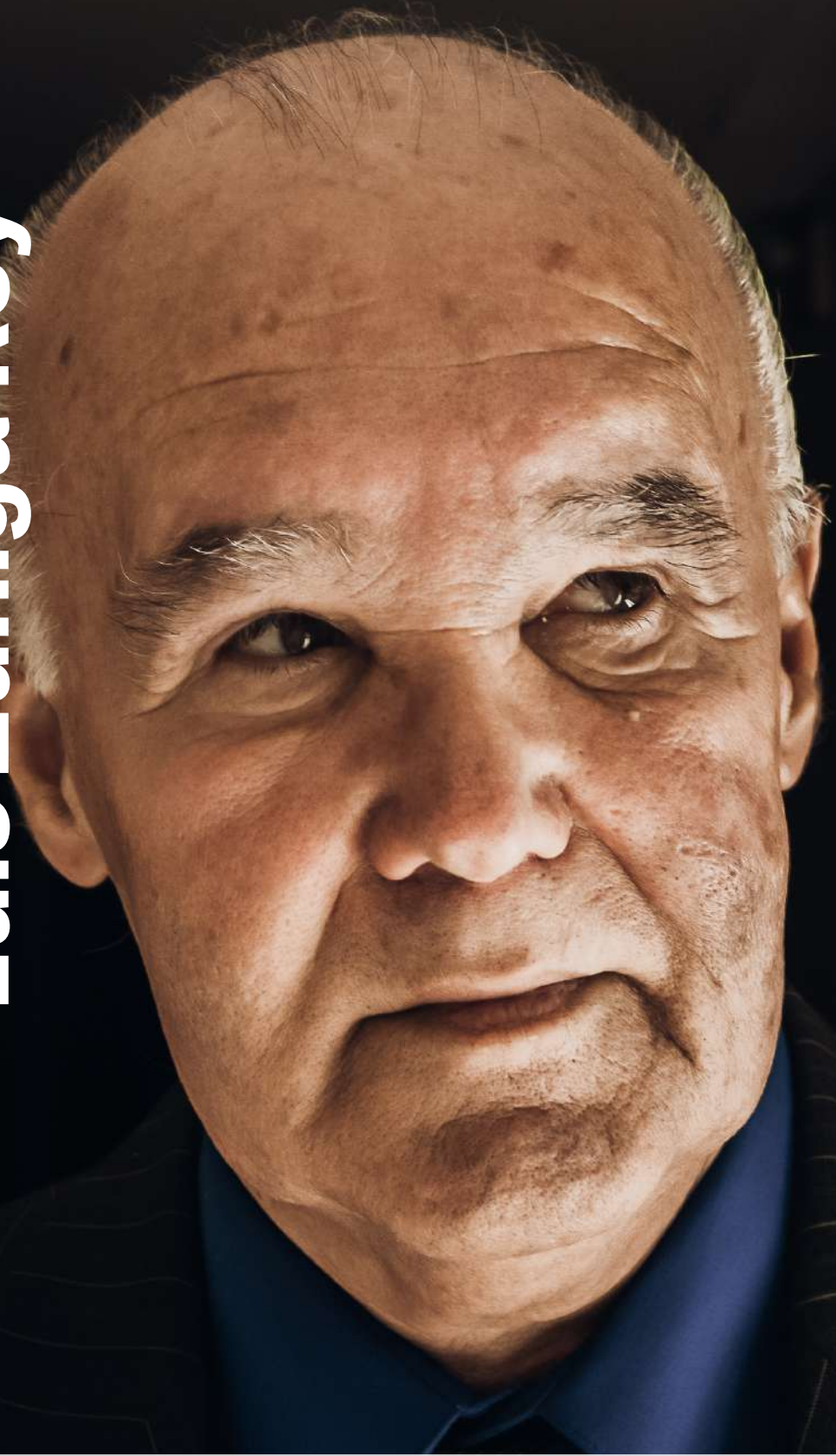
helped me to learn to appreciate what really matters in life, and it allowed me to find refuge in my faith." The camps continued to operate for about another year. They were later closed due to strong international pressure.

## Emigration

On May 15, 1980, José left Cuba with his family as part of the so-called Mariel boatlift, a mass emigration of Cubans, who traveled from Cuba's Mariel Harbor to the United States between 15 April and 31 October 1980. His sister, who had left Cuba earlier, went to look for them on a boat. "There were 21 persons and three crew members on that 24-foot boat, and a quarter of that boat was flooded. We sailed for nine hours and ran out of gas about 15 miles off Key West. Another boat came and towed us to the shore." In Miami, he held several jobs, including a mechanic and salesman. "It was hard, but I'm not complaining. My daughters were able to study whatever they wanted without being forced into a mandatory career. I have one daughter who is a nurse and another who is an opera singer. She has performed all over Europe. José wishes that all Cubans, like his daughters, have the freedom to be whatever they want to be. He refuses to visit Cuba for now." I do not want to spend a single penny in Cuba as I would be helping this dictatorship to stay in power and to continue enslaving the Cuban people," he concludes.

*UMAP was a very hard school for me, but it helped me to learn to appreciate what really matters in life.*

# Luis Zúñiga Rey (1947)



[#opposition activist](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#attempt to escape via Guantánamo](#) [#human rights activist](#)

[#Santa Clara prison](#) [# Tugboat 13 de Marzo](#)



2017



*“What matters to me is the overall goal, to achieve real change in Cuba. We are all in this together.”*

**“In 1958 I had just started studying in high school and in 1959 the Fidel Castro’s Revolution triumphed. I continued studying until the fourth year when, as was the norm at the time, they asked me what I wanted to study in the future. I wanted to become a lawyer, but since I had not integrated myself with revolutionary, I was denied this chance. From then on, my concerns turned into resentment,” recalls Luis Zúñiga Rey as his first clash with the Cuban regime.**

Luis was born in Havana in June 1947 into what he describes as an ordinary family. His father worked for Sinclair, an English oil company. His mother was a housewife and he also had an older brother. The Cuban Revolution had a significant impact on Luis’ adult life, as it pushed him to choose a different university career than the one he wanted.



## First steps in the opposition

Luis started studying Agricultural Engineering at a University. “I enrolled in the University studies not because I was motivated to study, but because the Law of Compulsory Military Service would have meant being placed in the Armed Forces,” he says. After his freshmen year, he already knew that they were going to dismiss him from the university for not having affirmed the revolution. He managed to change his career to the field of Industrial Engineering in English, where the persecution was a bit lighter since it was a career that few people wanted to study because it was in English. In 1966 during his sophomore year, he was already conspiring against the Cuban government. “I joined the opposition because I did not like the regime’s control and interference in people’s individual lives, the arbitrary measures they used against people, the limitations placed on civic space, and forcing people to collaborate and participate, even if they did not sympathize with the regime,” he says.

*I was held in cells without windows, where the windows and doors were covered with steel plates. There was no light, almost permanent darkness*

## Armed struggle

In the 1960s the people who wanted to fight against the regime embraced the idea of armed struggle. However, Luis was too young to join the armed fight. Given that he was studying engineering, he was copying the plans of strategic places. “I remember that I copied the plan of Villa Marista, where many political prisoners in Havana were held,” he says. Later he also participated in the activities to receive the infiltrators on a beach near Havana and in the Pinar del Río area and collected information on different types of practices of the regime. In 1966, he was arrested for the first time and accused of conspiring against the regime. He was detained for a month and a half.

## The arrests

After his first arrest, his situation at the University got more complicated as he was constantly under surveillance. Although he was a good student (he was



even offered a scholarship to study in Czechoslovakia) he was unable to graduate, and the university told him that without affirming the revolution it was impossible for him to graduate and he was expelled from the faculty. He was advised by his family to leave Cuba, but as he was trying to escape, he was arrested and sentenced to 2 years in prison. After 8 months of detention, during the transfer to another prison, he tried to escape with some fellow prisoners. He tried again to leave Cuba, but he was arrested when he was crossing the border of the Guantánamo naval base and sentenced to 4 more years in prison.

*Of course, I did not accept it and I paid the price. I was beaten up a lot, I suffered from hunger, a lack of medical attention, mistreatment of all kinds. The more you rebelled, the worse they treated you. I was not willing to accept the impositions of the communist regime inside the prison.*

### **The escape attempts**

In Santa Clara prison, Luis understood what the windowless cells were like. "I was held in cells without windows, where the windows and doors were covered with steel plates. There was no light, almost permanent darkness," he recalls. After 2 years of detention there, he was transferred to the Manacas prison. "Manacas was like a concentration camp with barbed wire fences, dogs, and guard towers with people holding machine guns," he says. He stayed there until the end of 1973, when he was transferred to a hospital due to a health condition and managed to escape. "My escape was like a novel, or like a movie. I managed to cut the bars of the window with the small piece of a saw that I got from a nurse and I managed to outwit the guards at the door. Since we were escaping from the second floor, my companion broke his foot, as he fell from the second floor, so I had to carry him. It was horrible," recalls Luis. Then he escaped from Cuba by crossing through the minefields of the Guantánamo naval base.





## The price of not accepting the rehabilitation plan

In August 1974, while trying to help some friends who were in hiding and persecuted in Cuba, he was arrested once again. Unfortunately, the motor of the boat with which they were trying to escape broke down. "I promised them that if I managed to cross the border of the Guantánamo base and reach the U.S., I would return to help those who were in hiding to leave Cuba," he says. He was sentenced to 25 more years in prison, of which he served 14. During those years he suffered a lot of violent abuse from the regime because he did not accept their plan for his rehabilitation and communist indoctrination. "Of course, I did not accept it and I paid the price. I was beaten up a lot, I suffered from hunger, a lack of medical attention, mistreatment of all kinds. The more you rebelled, the worse they treated you. I was not willing to accept the impositions of the communist regime inside the prison, so I paid the price many times over. On one occasion they even went so far as to torture me. They put horns on me that emitted strange noises with unbearable tones. The noise was so horrible that a fellow prisoner who was being held in a cell next to me committed suicide. He hanged himself with a pair of socks. The situation was unbearable," Luis recounts. Later he was transferred to another prison where he spent about seven years in windowless cells.

*On one occasion they even went so far as to torture me. They put horns on me that emitted strange noises with unbearable tones. The noise was so horrible that a fellow prisoner who was being held in a cell next to me committed suicide. He hanged himself with a pair of socks. The situation was unbearable.*

## The release and the denunciations

In 1987 he was transferred to Havana and in 1988, when the UN Human Rights Commission traveled to Cuba, they interviewed him. Luis denounced all the mistreatment, torture, and murders that took place inside the prisons. That same year Cardinal O'Connor of New York arrived in Cuba to plan the visit of Pope



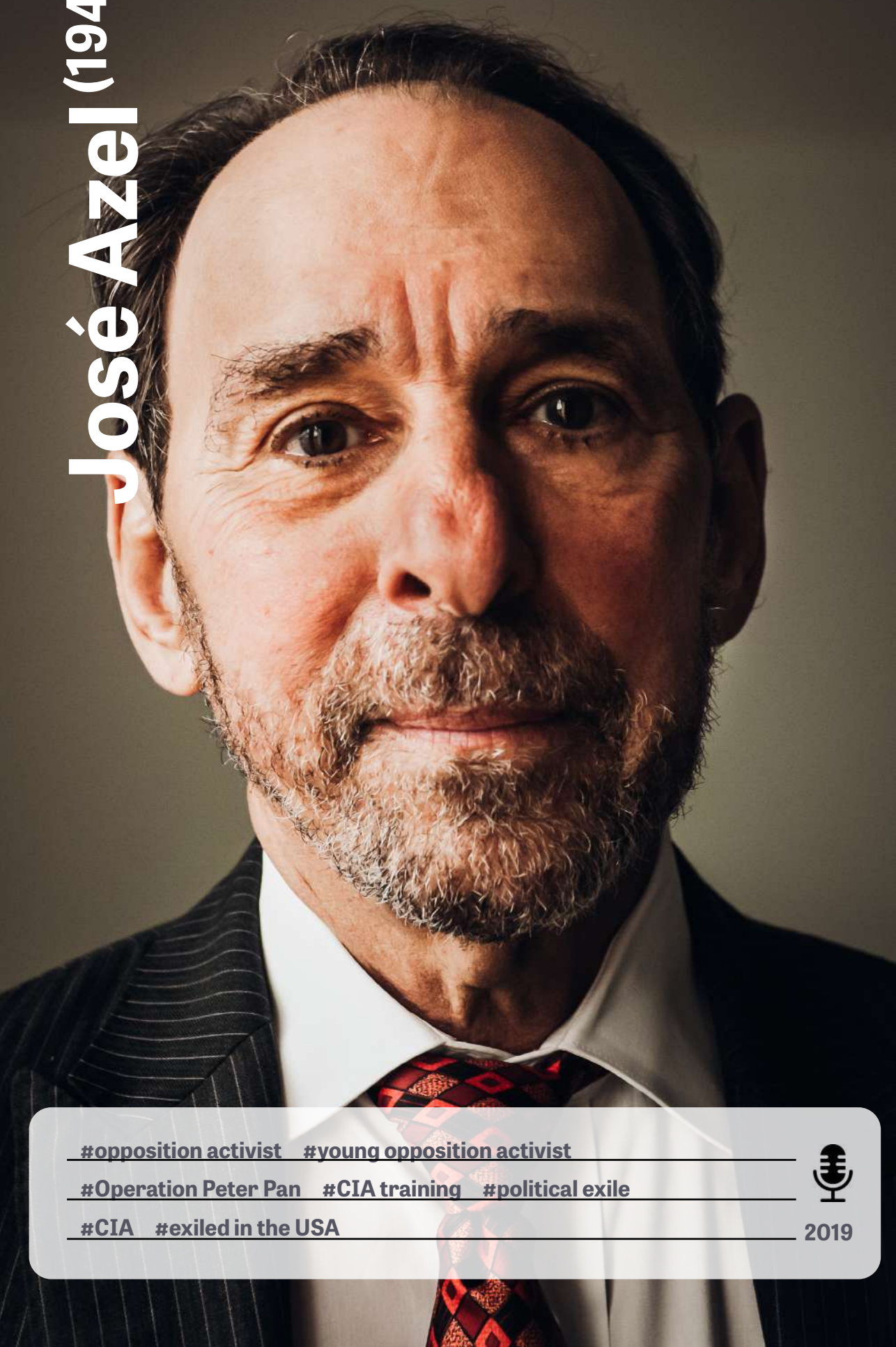
John Paul II and asked for Luis' freedom. He was deported from Cuba on December 30, 1988.

## Human Rights

Since Luis could speak English and knew U.S. history, it was not so difficult for him to start a new life. He met Jorge Mas Canosa of the Cuban American National Foundation, which he considers to be the most powerful organization in exile. He started working for this foundation, denouncing the practices used in Cuban prisons to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. He also lectured at universities in Latin America, explaining what the real situation was in Cuba. He also helped write and edit a testimonial on the sinking of the Tugboat 13 de Marzo. He says: "This was possibly the most horrendous crime ever committed in the history of Latin America, where more than 40 women and children were murdered in Havana Bay." At the same time, he continued to support dissident movements in Cuba. After Jorge Mas Canosa passed away, he founded the Council for Cuban Freedom, where he continues to serve as executive director. George Bush appointed him a U.S. delegate to the UN. In short, Luis has done tremendous work in the field of human rights denouncing internationally the crimes of the Cuban regime.

*The sinking of the Tugboat 13 de Marzo was possibly the most horrendous crime ever committed in the history of Latin America.*

# José Azei (1948)



[#opposition activist](#) [#young opposition activist](#)

[#Operation Peter Pan](#) [#CIA training](#) [#political exile](#)

[#CIA](#) [#exiled in the USA](#)



2019



*I consider myself purely Cuban-American. I have two homelands, but I still retain my Cuban roots.*

**“Although I was perhaps twelve years old at the time, I immediately joined the underground movement and began to conspire against the government of Castro brothers,” says José Azel.**

José was born in March 1948 in Havana into an upper-middle-class family. His mother was a teacher and died of cancer in 1958. His father worked as a lawyer and always wanted to stay in Cuba. Once José left for exile in the U.S., he never saw his father again. “My father was very intelligent. I think he realized very quickly what was going on,” José recalls. He had two older brothers, and together they began a new life in the U.S. after leaving Cuba.



## Getting me out of Cuba

After the failed landing attempt at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, few Cuban-American exiles planned to overthrow the Castro regime in Cuba but did not succeed. State Security came looking for José at his home. Until that time, his family knew nothing of his involvement in anti-government activities. “My family immediately started the process of getting me out of Cuba. In June, just a couple of months after the frustrated invasion, my father managed to put me on a cargo ship to the United States.” There he was picked up by his older brother, who had arrived in the U.S. a few months earlier. “My brother was 17, and I was 13 years old when we started a new life in the United States.”

*Our parents were afraid that we would be indoctrinated in Marxism and Leninism.*

## With Peter Pan into exile

Their departure took place within the framework of Operation Peter Pan, which was a clandestine mass exodus of over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors (aged 6 to 18) from Cuban families that opposed the Castro government to the United States. The operation took place during the first years after the Revolution. “Our parents were afraid that we would be indoctrinated in Marxism and Leninism. They were also scared that some boys would be sent to the Soviet Union where pioneer organizations were being created (and others) to place children on farms as workers. The Cuban government started a well-organized campaign to separate children from their parents,” he recalls, explaining the situation that led to the massive exile of Cuban children to the United States. It is worth mentioning that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Catholic Church were also involved in this rescue operation.

## Coping with new life

Life in the new country was not easy: “We had to face the issues of real life at a very young age. At that time, we were between 10 to 16 years old. I was fortunate to be in South Florida. Many of these Cuban kids ended up living in cold and snowy states until their parents could join them. In my case, sadly, I was never able to be reunited with my dad,” says José. He has no memories of saying goodbye to his father, perhaps because he mentally blocked out that moment in his life. In addition, the departure took place in secret, so he did not have the





opportunity to say goodbye to his friends. José maintains that, according to some studies, this group of exiled children became very successful professionally thanks to the harsh conditions they had to face at a young age. However, he recalls that many of them often had personal problems because, as he says: “We grew up alone and often without our family members.”

### **Baskets full of tomatoes**

Because of the privileged economic situation of his family, he suffered an enormous shock when he arrived in the U.S. He had to do different jobs to earn money: he washed dishes in restaurants, worked as a waiter, delivered newspapers in the wee hours of the morning, and picked tomatoes on weekends. “For many years, every time I had to buy anything for myself, I would mentally calculate how many baskets of tomatoes that purchase required,” Jose recounts.

### **Training to fight Fidel**

In the beginning, he lived with his brother in a house of Cuban friends. Later, they rented a house in very poor condition that became a sort of temporary shelter for many of the young Cubans arriving in Miami, including another brothers. “Basically, the house was falling apart. I don’t remember what my brothers paid because I was the youngest, and they took care of the rent. It was a wooden house, very old which had no door or windows, but there was nothing to steal,” he recalls. In the U.S., the Azel brothers were receiving training to confront Fidel Castro’s government: “Today we know that these activities, in almost all cases, were CIA activities. In our group, two American trainers taught us how to shoot. They taught us self-defense techniques and the functioning of the parliamentary systems.” However, after the assassination of President Kennedy, these programs practically stopped. Since we needed to start a new life and due to the failures in the fight against Fidel Castro, these activities ceased definitively.

***Today we know that these activities, in almost all cases, were CIA activities.***

### **It was not easy to be Cuban**

José then began to study and was helped by his older brother: “Basically we had a good education, good values, and my brother was very enterprising.” His two brothers, although in Cuba one studied architecture and the other law, were never able to practice their profession, so they worked in less qualified jobs in



the U.S. In the beginning, studying was very difficult for him: “The only class I understood was mathematics because the teacher did numbers on the blackboard. In the other classes I had no idea if it was history, geography, or what it was because I did not understand anything.” Alongside his studies, all three brothers continued to work. José recalls that it was not easy to be Cuban in the United States at that time. There were many confrontations between groups of Cubans and young Americans, who were often very ignorant: “They would tell us why we didn’t go back to Cuba, why we didn’t take a car, as they didn’t understand that Cuba was an island. There were always these kinds of clashes. But I don’t remember it as something sad. I remember it as part of the experience that forms us in life”. Later on, José earned a Master’s degree in Business Administration and then a Ph.D. in International Relations at the University of Miami. In doing so, he followed the advice given to him by his dad, who stressed the importance of education. “I remember his words: ‘study because knowledge is the only thing no one can take away from you.’”

### **A businessman**

After finishing his studies, he set up several businesses that allowed him to retire around the age of 45. Thanks to the economic success he achieved, he returned to the University of Miami and dedicated himself to Cuban Studies. There he resumed his activism and had the opportunity to testify before the U.S. Congress and participate in conferences on Cuban affairs. “I was able to continue this struggle at the academic level,” José says with gratitude. At the same time, he has been educating young Cuban dissidents who come to the U.S. about democratic institutions and the free market. His political leanings are that of classical liberalism. He is a constant defender of individual liberties and a small government with little involvement in people’s lives.

*They would tell us why we didn’t go back to Cuba, why we didn’t take a car, as they didn’t understand that Cuba was an island.*

### **Purely Cuban-American**

José has published several books about Cuba’s past and future, writes newspaper columns, and published a book of poems. He describes himself as a political exile and does not plan to return to Cuba until there is a change: “I became a U.S. citizen and have great love for the United States. Today I consider myself



purely Cuban-American. I have two homelands, but I still retain my Cuban roots. It is part of my identity and part of what has been a very long struggle. I have never thought of simply ignoring this part of my history and embracing another culture. On the contrary, I have always been part of everything that is the struggle against the Castro government, against communism, against all kinds of totalitarianism," says José. Regarding Cuba's future, he argues that the current generation that should raise the nation out of the totalitarian system but has little notion of what democracy and the free market are: "Without these values it is very difficult to build a free and prosperous society."

*I have never thought of simply ignoring this part of my history and embracing another culture. On the contrary, I have always been part of everything that is the struggle against the Castro government, against communism, against all kinds of totalitarianism.*

# Laida Arcia Carro (1949)

#Plinio Prieto #Escambray Mountains #exiled in the USA

#Coalition of Cuban-American Women

#Óscar Biscet



2019



# *Truth leads to freedom.*

**“I believe in God and in men,” these were the last words of Plinio Prieto, before he was shot. “He was a man who died with great dignity, and I am very proud of him. He was completely devoted to the cause,” says his niece, Laida Arcia Carro.**

Laida was born in Havana, Cuba, into a family that did not support the direction taken by the Cuban Revolution in the years following its triumph. The ultimate consequence of this stance, which impacted the whole family, was the execution of Laida’s uncle, Plinio Prieto, an English teacher and commander of the guerrilla that rose against Fidel Castro in the Escambray Mountains. Plinio Prieto was captured and sentenced to death, but his fate was nothing exceptional at the time: “What they wanted was to eliminate any leadership that would take away the totalitarian power of the island of Cuba,” explains Laida. Plinio Prieto’s children and close relatives had to go into hiding and finally managed to go into exile in 1962 to the United States. Laida was 12 years old: “We were forced to leave our country,” she recalls.





## **The false story about Escambray**

Meanwhile, Fidel Castro's government created a false story about the men who rose in Escambray: "That they were bad men, that they broke into houses, stole things and raped women... all that was a lie," Laida says, and for this very reason she considers it essential to talk about her uncle. The shooting of Plinio Prieto tremendously affected other family members as well: "My grandmother had anxiety attacks for the rest of her life. I was ten years old, they didn't tell me what had happened, but as my mother would faint often, I got scared, and I knew something terrible had happened." Once family members began to leave Cuba, Laida's parents also decided to go into exile. In the end, the authorities permitted them to leave in 1962. Before leaving, they managed to donate many belongings to their maid, since they knew the regime was going to confiscate everything. "I have lived with the anguish of emptiness, of not having my home, the place where I was born. Almost all Cubans of our generation feel the same. It is an anguish as if something is missing and that anguish in my case does not go away," says Laida.

## **In many places, but not in Cuba**

As for the departure from Cuba, Laida says that, at first, all Cubans thought it would be temporary. As a young 12-year-old girl, she was perplexed about what was happening. Once off the island, Laida recalls that nobody talked about what had happened. Even though there was some help for the exiles in the U.S., her parents immediately started looking for work. Her father realized that he would not find a job in Miami, so the family decided to go to Virginia, where he was offered a job as an architect: "It was very nice. When we arrived, the director of the company was waiting for us. They knew the conditions in which we were coming, they helped us rent a house, they even gave us towels," she recalls. They stayed in Virginia for four years, but her father was diagnosed with cancer, and the family had to return to Miami to seek treatment.

## **Husband of the Operation Peter Pan**

Later, her mother found a teaching job in Alabama, and that's where the whole family moved. At that time, Laida met her husband, who had come to the United States through Operation Peter Pan - a clandestine mass exodus of over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors ages 1 to 18 to the United States over two years from 1960 to 1962. They were both studying at the University of Alabama, Laida majoring in Education and her husband in Medicine. For the next few years, Laida and her husband lived and worked in Louisiana, Sevilla, Miami, and the Dominican Republic, where her husband eventually earned his medical degree while Laida wrote her master's thesis. "Merengue in the morning, in the afternoon, at night, but the people were very nice. I was teaching Art in the public schools," Laida recalls of those years.

## **Support for Cuban dissidents: the case of Óscar Biscet**

When her husband became a doctor, Laida began to support Cuban dissidents. "One Cuban doctor was protesting abortions, specifically the number of abortions



performed in Cuba. A child would be born alive, and they would let it die,” Laida says. It was the case of the doctor and human rights activist Óscar Biscet. It all began in 1997 when he made a study of Rivanol, an abortion method imported to Cuba from Vietnam: “They inject the mother, and the child is born. They do it at any stage. Children were born alive even though their organs were not fully developed,” Laida describes the Cuban practices against which Óscar Biscet protested. Because he was persecuted and tortured by the regime during his research and especially after the publication of his conclusions, Laida proposed to him: “Óscar, I will translate this into English, and we will take it to the United Nations.” He dictated everything that happened and Laida recorded it and translated it into English.

### **A coalition of Cuban-American Women**

After a while, Laida founded the Coalition of Cuban-American Women to raise awareness about Biscet’s case. She contacted various organizations for help. However, it was tough to get support: “Everything seemed like a joke. I documented at least twenty arrests, including beatings. Once, he was beaten so badly that he could not speak. I sought support from Christians because he was a Christian; from blacks because he was black; from doctors from trade unionists, and I knocked on the door of scientific organizations. The world was deaf and mute,” says Laida. In the end, in 2011, enough pressure was generated to get Óscar Biscet out of jail along with the release of other political prisoners from the 2003 crackdown on Cuban dissidents called Cuba’s Black Spring.

### **They do not know what freedom is**

Regarding the support of Cuban dissidents, Laida says that it was difficult because there were many intentions to discredit her in the eyes of the Cubans: “They would tell the activists about me: This counterrevolutionary lives comfortably, eats ham, has air conditioning in her house and look, where you are. You are in jail having a very bad time’. They tried to divide us, and many times they succeeded. But Biscet would always tell me: ‘the more they say these things, the more I believe in the opposite,’” Laida recalls. To have a more peaceful life, Laida decided to dedicate herself to the arts: “I have distanced myself a little from all that pain.” According to her, the situation in Cuba is decadent. So many years have passed since the Revolution, and many people don’t know what happened in 1959, and the generation of dissidents who still remember what happened are quite old. In addition, Laida believes that the opposition has been provided with too many material things and that has caused some corruption in the struggle: “If I ask any Cuban who resides on the island: What is freedom? they don’t know... You have to know what freedom is to be able to fight for it. Generations of Cubans have been brainwashed and do not know what freedom is. The concept of freedom in Cuba does not exist, critical thinking does not exist. They have been subjugated throughout all their lives,” concludes Laida, stressing that there are political prisoners and dissidents on the island who must be supported.

# Enrique Encinosa (1947)

[#Alpha 66](#) [#Abdala](#) [#Cuban National Liberation Front](#)

[#military actions](#) [#double agent](#) [#Brothers to the Rescue](#)

[#PEN Club of Cuban Writers in Exile](#)

[#writer](#)



2019





*I have fought with guns in hand,  
with computer in hand, and before  
the computer, with pen in hand.*

**“When I was eight or nine years old, there was a shootout in front of my house in which a rebel was killed. When I went to school in the morning, I came out of the house and saw stains of blood and bullets embedded in the wall of the house,” recalls Enrique Encinosa as he talks about his first encounter with the struggle against dictator Fulgencio Batista.**

Enrique, born in 1947, comes from a family with a long history of struggle against Cuban governments. In the 1930s, his father participated in the opposition fights against the re-elected president Gerardo Machado, defending democratic elections in Cuba. Enrique describes his childhood as happy and fun: riding bicycles, going to the beach with his friends, and snorkeling in the sea. But this happiness was interrupted by Fidel Castro’s struggle against the government of Fulgencio Batista. In January 1959, the Cuban Revolution triumphed: “Violence and public shootings became part of everyday life. Even though I was 10 years old, I was shocked, and I knew that something was not right,” Enrique says.



## Board of the Cold War

“During the political turmoil in Cuba, many people realized that the Revolution was turning away from democracy in the direction of communism. Therefore, anti-Castro groups started to appear on the scene,” Enrique recounts. At that time, Enrique’s family went underground and joined the armed resistance, supported by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America (CIA). “Cuba was a playingfield of the Cold War. It was no longer an issue between Cubans. It was a question of the Soviet Union against the United States,” Enrique describes. During the early 1960s, guerrillas against the Castro regime appeared and started planting bombs, carrying out attacks, freeing people from jail, and taking up arms. In his family’s house, there were weapons, explosives, and opposition leaflets. “My father told me: ‘you know there are weapons here, you know there are explosives here, you know that if they catch me doing this, they will shoot me, you have to keep quiet, don’t even tell your grandmother.’” In November 1961, Enrique left the island with his parents for Miami. Enrique knew that his country was Cuba despite going abroad: “At the age of 13 I already knew that my cause was linked to Cuba forever”.

## Abdala

In 1971 Enrique joined the Alpha 66 organization, where he raised funds, sold raffle tickets, and distributed opposition leaflets. However, he wanted to fight, which led him to join the group named after José Martí’s poem: Abdala. In March 1971, 16 members of the organization entered the United Nations building in New York (UN) and chained themselves to chairs with handcuffs while 30 other members, including Enrique, blocked the entrance to the building. “We took over the UN building symbolically, as an act of protest, because Cuba’s political prisoners were forgotten for years.” This act attracted a lot of interest in the organization, which grew to more than 800 active members in exile.

## Cuban National Liberation Front

In 1972, Frank Castro and Enrique created a secret movement called the Cuban National Liberation Front (FLNC), with an objective of military action against the regime. In 20 months, 36 operations were organized, including the destruction of a ship, a Castro boat, shooting at military posts, and bomb attacks on the Cuban embassies in Jamaica, London, and Mexico. “But the Abdala group broke with the FLNC because we thought we were not getting any results as there was no reaction from inside Cuba.” When Enrique was in charge of the Cuba section within Abdala, he developed a code system for communication between anti-Castro supporters in Cuba and those outside the island.

## The work of a double agent

Enrique clearly remembers the day Frank Brian from the FBI called him and said: “Look, your cousin is one of the ten most important members of the Central Committee in Cuba; you are the perfect guy to become a double agent.” En-





rique accepted the offer, so he began to infiltrate the Castro circles. He worked as a double agent from 1976 to 1978, but he does not wish to reveal many details of this period of his life. “There are things I can’t talk about. I signed a lot of papers with the FBI and the CIA,” he says. The Castro spies were happy to have Enrique, as they thought they could win over his cousin for espionage. His duties as a double spy ended when the Castros wanted to set him up and send him for training in Cuba. However, his CIA colleagues warned him. “They told me, ‘don’t go, we have a problem with infiltrators in Mexico, there is a Castro official,’” he recalls. Apart from his work as a double agent, Enrique was active in the military area and participated in different missions in Nicaragua and Suriname. Enrique supports military actions to overthrow a totalitarian regime, a mission to which he dedicated more than 15 years of his life. In addition, together with his friend José Basurto, who was a pilot, he founded the organization *Hermanos al Rescate* [Brothers to the Rescue]: “We saved more than 3,000 lives of Cuban rafters trying to escape Cuba on homemade rafts by sailing across the Straits of Florida to Miami. One of the most wonderful things I have done in exile is to save so many lives,” he says.

### **Fighting the regime through writing**

In the early 1980s, he started to take notes to use later to write books. “I have always been fascinated by the history of the Escambray guerrillas,” Enrique says of his other passion, literature, which became another important avenue to fight the regime. He conducted more than 200 interviews with Cuban ex-prisoners. In 1981 his book “Escambray: The Forgotten War” was the best-selling book for six consecutive months in Miami. In the mid-1980s, he was contacted by Radio Martí (the most important radio station for Cubans in exile at that time) to run a program about Cuba. He worked as a journalist for 12 years in this radio station. He also created the program: *Testimonio de Cuba sin censura* [Cuban Testimony without Censorship]. Today, he moderates a program dedicated to politics on *La Poderosa* radio. Apart from journalism and writing, Enrique founded the PEN Club of Cuban Writers in Exile, “which has been instrumental in confronting the Castro regime intellectually,” he adds. It is worth mentioning that Enrique is also passionate about boxing and is, in fact, an internationally recognized boxer. “If you give up, it’s over. If you don’t give up, you still have a chance. I have learned through boxing that I can’t give up,” he says.

### **Promises that are not fulfilled**

According to Enrique Encinosa, the appeal of the Cuban regime consists in that “there are always people who are bitter or frustrated and communism is a promise. But communism has no logic, it is an exploitation of man by man.” According to Enrique, Cubans should oppose the totalitarian system with any means available under the existing circumstances because there are always economic or social limitations. The best example of this opposition, according to Enrique, is the Escambray guerrilla: “The best that could be done at that time was done,” he concludes.

# Félix Navarro Rodríguez (1953)



[#teacher](#) [#education](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#Cuba's Black Spring](#) [#fight against Castro](#)

[#opposition activist](#)



2018



*! Fidel Castro must be suffering in his grave, because he had the opportunity to make Cuba a more beautiful jewel than it was when he came to power, and he betrayed it. !*

**“I am an optimist, but I have to admit that, if in ten years we have not finished with communism, Cuba will disappear...,” says Félix Navarro Rodríguez, a Cuban dissident, and one of those prosecuted in Cuba’s Black Spring in 2003.**

“Cuba is being destroyed, just walk through the streets which are in shambles, where water is running like milk from a cow’s teat. The buildings are in ruins and are collapsing. Over 80 sugar mills have been shuttered. If the regime lasts for 10 more years, all that will be left of Cuba is dust and ashes,” warns Félix. But as hopeless as it may sound, his optimism prevails. “However, I believe that we’re not going to allow it. A lot of good initiatives are being set up. And I believe that very soon we are going to show unity of action in different organizations. I assure you that this is going to be the case. And when we achieve unity, the dictatorship will be finished in a matter of minutes.”



## **This is communism**

Félix Navarro Rodríguez was born on July 10, 1953 in the Cuban municipality of Perico, in Matanzas. He comes from a peasant family that lived on a farm called La Paulina, and Félix was the third of four children. His father forbade his older sister from going to school, saying that women should devote themselves to sewing, but Félix started primary education at the age of seven. Since he already knew how to read, write and do basic math, he went straight to the second grade. In 1961, Félix's father took him out of school after the U.S. invasion of the Bay of Pigs took place. He was a committed anti-communist, and so, when Fidel Castro gave his first speech after the triumph of the Revolution Félix's father said: "We're screwed, dammit. This is communism; we will be miserable," as if he knew what to expect from the Castro regime. And when the invasion happened, he took Félix out of the school, saying that "the regime is about to fall." However, the regime did not fall, so in two years later, in April 1963, Félix returned to school.

*I assure you that this is going to be the case. And when we achieve unity, the dictatorship will be finished in a matter of minutes.*

## **People could not believe that I am the one doing the graffiti**

After his high school studies, Félix began working directly as a teacher in a school in the countryside. He has spent 22 years teaching, first on the elementary school level and then on secondary level, specializing in physics and astronomy. In December 1992, when he was a principal of the Crucero Aurora elementary school, State Security arrested him for putting up anti-Castro posters. "People could not believe that I would be the type of person putting up posters and doing graffiti," says Félix about his beginnings in the opposition, which date back to 1988.

## **Change of opinion**

In 1988, Félix changed his mind and sided against the Castro's after he had returned from the Isle of Pines. There were no problems with transportation and supplies on the Isle of Pines but in Matanzas the situation was quite the opposite." I arrived in Matanzas on July 22, 1988 and I could not get bread until August 22, 1988. That's when I realized how dire the situation was, I began to listen to





Radio Martí, and my life changed. I also completely disagreed with what happened with General [Arnaldo] Ochoa,” he says.

### **Nowadays, even the street sweeper suspends classes.**

Based on his extensive teaching experience, Félix is highly critical of Cuba’s education system. “There is no one beyond the Minister of Education that can cancel a class. And nowadays, even the street sweeper on the corner can decide to skip a class. Children of elementary school age are constantly on the street. Are they even taking any classes?” He does not criticize only the frequent cancelling of classes. “When they come here to do homework at my house, I can see that the standards are very low. The teachers don’t check the notebooks. The kids make so many spelling mistakes... And it is even worse to listen to what they say when they talk to each other in the streets. They use so many obscene words, even in front of the teachers. Education begins in the cradle, but the important part takes place in the classroom. We have to stop this crisis of education system or schools will disappear in Cuba,” he says. “Moreover, there is an army of teachers, who are unprepared for and unfit for teaching. They were hired just to fill a gap, so it is not surprising that the education is so bad. As José de la Luz y Caballero, an illustrious Cuban and teacher, believed, in order to be a good teacher, you have to love the profession. You will not solve the crisis by employing unexperienced teachers, or teachers who do not have any pedagogical training,” denounces Félix.

### **I never thought it would be the way it was**

In 2003, due to his activities of an opposition activist, Félix was jailed as a part of the Group of 75. This refers to the group of opposition activist who were prosecuted and imprisoned in Cuba’s Black Spring. “We were used to being arrested often and spending eight or nine days in the detention center in Matanzas. We would be threatened there with jail time for illicit association, disseminating enemy propaganda, spreading false news, or wanting to sell Cuba to the *imperio* [empire, which means the U.S.]. But the Black Spring was different. The first day of arrests happened on March 18, 2003. I was coming from Havana, where I had attended a meeting of Todos Unidos [All United], when I was detained in front of my house. I thought it was going to be a detention like all the others I have experienced. I never expected what was coming. On the evening of March 30 or 31, they took me out of the cell to one of the offices, which was unusual as they would usually interrogate and threaten us during the day. That day the sky was full of stars. A lady dressed in black, who pretended to be, or I think she was, the secretary of the Provincial Court, handed me the prosecutor’s request which suggested 30 years of imprisonment,” Félix recounts.

### **It takes a family to fight, especially if it is to fight communism.**

During his stay in various Cuban prisons, Félix was strongly supported by his wife Sonia and his daughter Saylí. The regime would try to sow discord in his family by trying to convince him that his wife was being unfaithful to him. They





had been married since 1980, and these tactics made it even stronger. “You need a family to fight, and you need it even more, if you are fighting against communism,” Félix recounts. Families were an important voice that would spread information about what was happening in Cuban prisons. “We all became the voice of those unfortunate people behind bars,” says Félix. He is very proud of the work of the Group of 75, and of his own contributions: “We dealt a very big blow to the dictatorship. Some of us stayed in Cuba. And those of us who did so are going to die in Cuba, not on our knees, but with our heads held high. We will continue to denounce, fight and propose change for the good of Cuba and for the Cuban people,” he says.

*You need a family to fight, and you need it even more, if you are fighting against communism.*

### **We must be in Cuba to bring about change**

In 2011, Félix received his extra penal license, which amounts to a suspended sentence, and was released from prison. It was the same for many members of the Group of 75 that did not go into exile upon their release and the question arises as to why. “We have to be in Cuba to bring about change for all Cubans who support us, we need to end the dictatorship,” he explains.

### **United in the conviction that we must change this system.**

When it comes to the subject of the opposition today, Félix feels a certain nostalgia or sadness. “I am self-critical because we have not been, I have not been, able to unite Cubans to bring about change and many decided to leave the country,” he explains bitterly. “Most young Cuban professionals are leaving the country because we have not been able to present them with an initiative that would be attractive enough,” explains Félix, but he immediately proposes a solution: “I believe that we must continue working in this direction. We must first unite the different sides of the opposition. We have to leave aside our egos that some of us, including me, manifest in our actions. We have to find unity in our common purpose which is the conviction that we have to change this system and build a new system where the citizens are the ones who decide, where totalitarianism disappears, do you understand?”

### **A farce instead of a Constitution**

Félix is concerned and worried about the current affairs in Cuba. At the time of the interview the hot topic of the day was the proposed new Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, which was approved through a popular referendum in



February 2019. But although the new proposal sounded promising, Félix and other opponents were not convinced. “This is a farce. We did not pass a constitutional constitution, but 33 people led by Raúl Castro wrote it and have disseminated it,” Félix exclaims.

### **The harvest of ten million tons of sugar**

The interview, naturally, also touched on historical topics. Among them, the harvest of 1970 when government tried to solve the economic crisis by planning to produce 10 million tons of sugar, and the entire population had to take part in it. Félix was in high school, and instead of attending classes he had to plant sugar cane in the fields.

***Communism is: death, hunger, misery and destruction. A destruction of humankind.***

### **Special Period**

In the early 1990s, with the fall of the USSR and the disappearance of traditional markets, came the so-called Special Period, which was a long period of economic crisis that got worse in 1992 with the U.S. imposing economic embargo on Cuba. Félix recalls how difficult those times were. “There was nothing, not even a soap,” he says. During this period, Cubans used a special kind of cactus instead of detergent that destroyed the fabrics of the clothes. Félix believes that current situation in Cuba is comparable to the Special Period as there are “no resources generated in Cuba,” he says. He describes today’s crisis as “worse than the previous one, since there is not even bread,” and illustrates the situation with the example of bakeries that have to use flour substitutes, because there is no flour.

### **Fidel Castro betrayed Cuba**

“Communism is: death, hunger, misery and destruction. A destruction of humankind,” Félix says. “Fidel Castro must be suffering in his grave, because he had the opportunity to make Cuba a more beautiful jewel than it was when he came to power, and he betrayed it.”

# Elena Larrinaga de Luis (1955)



[#Cuban Observatory for Human Rights](#) [#Antillana Iron](#)

[#Sacred Heart School](#) [#Federation of Cuban Associations](#)

[#support for Cuban Exiles](#)



2020



*“The day the window opens in Cuba, I assure you that fresh air will come in.”*

**“We no longer belong to ourselves, we belong to the homeland.” This is a phrase that was always repeated by supporters of the Castro government, as Elena Larrinaga de Luis recalls. “With this motto, the Revolution claimed the right to tear apart society and families, so many feared that their children would be taken away and sent to Russia,” she adds.**

Elena was born in Havana in December 1955, into a Catholic family. She grew up in a familiar and loving environment created by her understanding parents. However, everything was beginning to change in Cuba. On January 1, 1959, the Cuban Revolution, led by Fidel Castro, triumphed, which meant a 180 degree turn in everything related to the social, political, and economic aspects of the island.



## **Marxism became almost like a religion**

Elena remembers that time with dread, because, as she says: “Marxism became almost like a religion in 1959”. Elena’s parents always watched over the education of their children and did not want them to be educated in communist schools. “Fidel closed all private schools. He monopolized education,” she recounts.

# *Marxism became almost like a religion in 1959.*

## **Forced migration**

Elena’s father, Severiano Larrinaga Aguirre, who was born in Spain and was the vice president of the José Martí Steel Company, also known as Antillana de Ace-ro [the Antillana Steelworks], seeing that things were changing on the island around 1959, decided to take his children, including Elena, out of the country. “I was only five years old. I recall that we were in the house in Tarará, all lights were off, the furniture covered up and they took us out of the house, but I had no idea where we were going,” she recalls. “We moved to the United States to live with an uncle in Washington D.C., where we were going to wait for my mother to arrive from Cuba,” Elena adds.

## **I learned what it meant to be an exile**

“In Washington, my mother found the Sacred Heart school, to which she was always very devoted,” Elena recalls. The school was one of the best in the city. “We studied in the same school as Kennedy’s children and with the children of other important personalities in the United States,” she says. But not everything was rosy for the children and even less so for Elena. “Because of everything we had gone through, I had problems. It was very difficult for me as a five-year-old to understand what was going on. I wet my bed many times out of anxiety and I was so embarrassed that I didn’t say anything and slept in wet sheets,” Elena recalls.

## **Freedom to think for ourselves**

Despite these bad memories, there are also beautiful ones. “I remember that my house was a refuge for relatives, friends, acquaintances, and other people who had to flee Cuba like us. That’s where I learned what an exile was,” she says. “Despite everything that was happening, nobody spoke negatively about the Cuban Revolution. My parents instilled in us the freedom to think for ourselves and not just to go along with what other people say,” she adds.





## Life in Spain

Around 1967, Elena and her family moved to Spain. “My mother did not want to continue living in the United States,” she recalls. They first lived in Bilbao, in northern Spain, and then moved to the capital, Madrid. “My mother found again the Sacred Heart school for us to study at,” she recalls. In Madrid, Elena’s younger brother was born. “Thanks to my brother, my mother felt alive again, and having a Spanish son made her love Spain very much,” she says. Among dissimilar anecdotes, she says that she learned a lot from both her father and her mother, but that her mother was more strict and had a stronger personality.

*We decided once to make a draft of a political transition for Cuba, based on the Spanish model. The polarization has to end.*

## School in Switzerland

Her parents sent her to study in Switzerland. “Every time I talked to my father on the phone, I ended up crying,” Elena says. Fulgencio Batista’s son also studied at that school. “Despite my father’s enmity with Batista, since he did not agree with Batista’s coup d’état in Cuba, he allowed me to be friends with his son, a friendship that has lasted up to today,” Elena says. She says that her father educated her to be tolerant and instilled in her the need to always listen to people’s stories. Elena lived in various countries around the world which shaped her as a woman activist fighting for human rights.

## Getting closer to the island

Although she had to leave Cuba when she was only five years old, Elena has been denouncing the abuses of the Cuban government for more than six decades. She, and her team, created many initiatives. “We decided once to make a draft of a political transition for Cuba, based on the Spanish model. The polarization has to end,” she says. Elena has been part of and has created movements in Spain to help exiled Cubans integrate into this country. Moreover, she has followed the cases of political prisoners very closely. “Among other things, I have been the president of the Federation of Cuban Associations in Spain and I had the pleasure of looking after the political prisoners during the Black Spring in Cuba, and I was very moved by their life stories. My father always told me that



it is not the circumstances that make the man, but the man who makes the circumstances,” she says. “A bad government generates, apart from a national catastrophe, many additional problems,” she adds.

### **Failed return**

Elena decided to return to Havana after many years. “Through a friend, I found out that I could go to Cuba, so I purchased a ticket and traveled to Cuba,” she says. There, State Security was waiting for her, preventing her from entering the island because of her activism. “They interrogated me for several hours and did not let me enter the country, but I swore I would return,” Elena sums up. After many appointments at the Cuban Consulate in Madrid, Elena received a permit to travel to Cuba. “I’m not going to lie to you. State Security let me visit everyone. I met with Laura Pollán, Oswaldo Payá, [Guillermo] Fariñas... I wanted to meet the opposition activists, this was necessary for me to be able to understand many things,” she says. Her visit to Cuba was very short, but fruitful, according to her own words. From there, several projects in support of the Cuban people began to take shape in Spain and Europe, such as the creation of the Cuban Observatory for Human Rights (OCDH). “The voices of Oswaldo Payá, Laura [Pollán], Bertha [Soler], Coco Fariñas and many others started to be heard. We accompanied Fariñas to the European Parliament to receive the Sakharov Prize. Payá and the Ladies in White had already received the same award,” she says of the achievements of the Observatory on the international level.

*The greater the obstacle, the greater the glory for the one who overcomes it.*

### **The winds of freedom sweep over everything**

Elena is not worried about Cuba’s future. “I think the future will be fantastic. I see Cuba’s future without a monolithic government, which I know will eventually collapse economically,” she says. It bothers her a lot that the Cuban government depends on countries like Venezuela, or at one time also on the Soviet Union. “Are we Cubans not capable of taking care of ourselves?” she asks critically. She also believes that improvements in Cuba require patience and a good analysis of everything. “The greater the obstacle, the greater the glory for the one who overcomes it. This phrase describes everything because the day the window opens in Cuba, I assure you that fresh air will come in,” she concludes.

# Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía (1956)



[#Physics teacher](#) [#armed struggle](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#20 years in prison](#) [#Combinado de Guantánamo prison](#)

[#Boniato prison](#) [#Boniatico prison](#) [#torture of prisoners](#)



2020



*Communism can be overthrown much faster through armed struggle, although it is a violent method. There are many people who are willing to die for the homeland.*

**“My name is Echemendía, and here I am. They didn’t manage to kill me,” Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía told one of his former prison guards he met by chance on the street, after having served 20 years in prison. This seven-hour interview with Francisco is a testimony on the conditions of one of the toughest prisons in Cuba.**

Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía was born in September 1956 in Santiago de Cuba. His father, Francisco Enrique, was a soldier and participated in the assault on the Moncada Barracks to overthrow Fulgencio Batista. His mother, Magdalena, who had relatives in Las Tunas, decided to move the whole family there to “avoid problems with the terrorists of the 26th of July movement,” which was a military organization created in 1953 by a group led by Fidel Castro to overthrow Fulgencio Batista. Francisco’s mother used to be a teacher before the Revolution, and Francisco remembers her as a brilliant, open-minded, and educated person who “talked to him about human rights when this concept was still not known.” While his brothers turned out to be militant communists, Francisco, already at the age of 13, had doubts about Fidel Castro’s regime. “It is unbelievable how this dictatorship separates families,” Francisco says.



## **Not anti-revolutionary, but anti-communist**

In 1959 when the Cuban Revolution succeeded, “all military officers started to work for Castro,” Francisco says. However, his father was never a communist. “He always taught me about the mistakes made by the communists in Spain, Russia, or China... That’s why I was never a communist,” explains Francisco, who witnessed the sorrow of his father as he had to reinvent his career after the Revolution and ended up working as a blacksmith. “Many people tell me: you are an anti-revolutionary. I tell them: no, I am anti-communist,” Francisco clarifies.

## **To be like Che**

After the Revolution, Francisco says that “the educational system remained the same for some time” and had a good standard as it was taught “the old-fashioned way. The teachers’ job was to teach and not to fulfill any plans,” Francisco comments on the educational system, which would soon change drastically. “Be like Che” soon became one of the schools’ main themes, referring to Ernesto Che Guevara. “They started to twist history. It was no longer the history of Cuba. It was the history of the new communist system that prevailed,” Francisco recalls. “They taught us to hate imperialism and the people of the United States,” he says about the educational system of his post-revolutionary childhood. Francisco felt an internal conflict between what his father would tell him at home and what was taught in school.

***We lost almost everything. That’s the impact of dictatorship; it destroys everything.***

## **From beige to olive green**

When the Revolution triumphed, “There was not much change, as private property still existed, and there were big international companies in Cuba. The only thing that changed was the military suit - from beige to olive green. These changes happened without people noticing them. Then the crisis came. Nothing was private anymore; everything belonged to the Revolution,” Francisco recounts. “Even polishing shoes in the street was a hostile activity,” he adds. When people started to quietly sell things door to door, that’s when the Cuban black market came about.”

## **For blacks, the poor and underprivileged**

“The main message of the communist propaganda claimed that the Revolution was made for the blacks, the underprivileged, and the poor people. We were poor,





underprivileged and black, so the Revolution was supposedly made for us,” narrates Francisco. However, a small farm his family owned was confiscated from them, and turned into a state dairy farm. “We lost almost everything. That’s the impact of dictatorship; it destroys everything,” Francisco says.

### **The harvest of 10 million tons of sugar**

Francisco recalls that in 1970 Cuba dedicated all its resources to achieve the production of 10 million tons of sugar: “Despite all the plans and efforts put into fulfilling this plan, it was not achieved. This was an economic and political setback for the dictatorship. They said: ‘We will turn this setback into a victory.’ I don’t know what victory they were talking about, as there was no victory. We had no sugar, nothing. The economic damage was immense, and the country fell into a monoculture. Even wood was imported from Russia because they destroyed all the forests in Cuba to plant sugar cane,” Francisco narrates.

### **The world at our feet**

As a teenager, Francisco was “semi-rebellious,” that’s how he describes himself. He wore tight pants and generally liked to be dressed according to the latest fashion. He listened to English music. This type of behavior was considered an “ideological deviation.” Moreover, Francisco was a Christian, and every Christian was considered a possible counterrevolutionary. However, as he rightly adds: “We were young and thought we had the world at our feet.”

### **Military service**

“I liked military service and all the weapons,” Francisco says about the compulsory military service. However, after only seven months of service, he was expelled from the military, even though he wanted to serve in the Angola War, which was just starting. “It was a paradox; I wanted to go to war, even though I was not a communist. I would have liked to go because I would have a gun in my hands,” he recounts. A few years later, in the mid-1970s, Francisco wrote on a wall: “Down with Fidel,” which was “in those time very daring.” Moreover, he used oil paint which did not easily come off. This time around, he was not captured.

### **Pressure to talk politics in classes**

In 1978 Francisco graduated from the Faculty of Physics, where he had studied in night classes. He immediately began working in a special school and remembers the relentless pressure to instill political discussions in the lectures. “I didn’t talk about politics. My classes were excellent, but I had to declare the partisan nature of the classes, and I refused to do that. I always said that my purpose is to teach and not to teach politics,” he says. In those days, there were quotas set by the Communist Party on the number of students who had to pass the exams. It was an extremely high quota: 96 percent of the students had to pass. “The more students in your class passed, the more you got paid. But that’s dishonest, so I went against the tide,” he adds. Thanks to his attitude, Francisco won the love of his stu-



dents, and still likes to remember those times. However, in the midst of those moments that seemed almost idyllic, in 1982, Francisco ended up in prison because he went to the Habana Libre hotel to get dollars to buy shoes for his children but was caught with the currency in his hand, specifically with five dollars. “In those times, even foreigners would end up in prison for selling dollars to Cubans. The government used to hate dollars so much, and now they love them so much,” Francisco says ironically.

### **First time in prison**

Francisco spent about 13 months in two prisons: La Cabaña and the Combinado del Este, where he met many prisoners convicted for drug trafficking, but also political prisoners, such as Mario Chanes de Armas. They spent endless hours talking about Fidel Castro, with whom he had been in prison in the past. He described him as “an arrogant, stubborn, distrustful man, with an aptitude for doing evil things,” recalled Francisco. “I learned a lot in prison. I came out thinking that we had to organize a strong action against the dictatorship,” Francisco said. In early 1984 he was released from prison and returned to work in that special school in the Vista Alegre neighborhood of Santiago de Cuba, where he worked as an electrician. According to his memories, the 1980s were “one of Cuba’s best periods,” because the crisis did not arrive until the 1990s with the so-called Special Period, a period of economic crisis caused mainly by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. “We lived in peace and happiness. Everything was relatively cheap, and nobody talked about opposition in the streets. When I would mention my prison experience, people thought I was crazy,” Francisco recalls.

### **Glasnost and perestroika**

Francisco dated a woman who worked at the Soviet Embassy, and thanks to this relationship he got to know the diplomatic staff. Thanks to these contacts, he learned about the movements known as glasnost and perestroika, which were never mentioned in the Cuban press. “If you realize, the hypocrisy is not only Cuba’s problem, but the international communist movement forced people to be hypocrites and to have two faces,” he says about those Soviet diplomats.

### **Distribution of books**

It was also thanks to these connections that Francisco got his hands on books that were banned in Cuba, which he decided to distribute on the streets of Santiago de Cuba. “I would take them in small packages and would distribute them on the streets, so that Cubans would realize what glasnost and perestroika were. I would tie the books with a rope and put them on the benches in the streets, then I would pretend to be in a hurry to catch a *guagua* [bus] and would leave the books on the benches for others to take them. People would take those books home, and when they read them, they would start questioning Fidel Castro’s promises,” Francisco recounts.



## Double life and armed cell

Although he refused to talk about politics in his work at the school, in his private life, he led a “rebellious” life, as he describes it. He started with the dissemination of banned literature. Still, little by little, he convinced himself that armed struggle was necessary to overthrow the dictatorship. He formed an armed cell believing: “We can overthrow communism much faster through armed struggle, but it is a violent process. However, there are many people who are willing to die for the homeland,” he says. Around 1988 or 1989, he was investigated by police for the first time due to his illicit activities, but he was not imprisoned. However, in 1990 when the Soviet Union fell, he started to collect weapons to attack the regime. His cell collected Winchester rifles, shotguns, pistols, ammunition, explosives, and knives and began to demolish buildings, towers in Guantanamo, gas stations, etc. Francisco does not consider these events as terrorist acts. “We were going to die,” he says bluntly. All his comrades were imprisoned “for being in contact with me and for committing these acts.” One of them, Fermín Álvarez Álvarez, according to Francisco, turned out to be a traitor. At 5 a.m., Fermín came to Francisco’s house and told him that the police had released him. “That’s when I knew he had turned me in.”

## I had to go on

Within 20 minutes, his house was surrounded, and all he could do was to get rid of the guns quickly. “The whole block was surrounded, and they took me out in handcuffs,” he recounts. They took him to a special cell for interrogation. “If you knew we were already after you, why did you keep going?” the officers asked him. “I am prepared to die for the homeland, so I had to go on to end the dictatorship,” Francisco replied. They tortured him for several days in an inhospitable cell, at almost zero degrees Celsius. Then he was transferred to Mar Verde prison, and from there to Boniato. “Something was different with this time spent in this prison; I noticed voices that talked about the opposition, even though they were distant and very weak.... Francisco recounts.

## Firm anti-communist stance

During two decades in prison, Francisco’s stance remained firmly anti-communist. Because of his rebellious attitude, he was deprived of visits. He had no more visits than two a year, and for seven years, he could not have a single visit. “I was rebellious for 20 years. I never stood firm in front of an officer or in front of anyone. I never walked with my hand behind my back because I said it was not a natural way to walk,” he says. During his time in prison, his family had economic problems. Once his mother had to walk 20 kilometers from Boniato prison to the house. “She walked for six hours because she didn’t have 20 cents to catch a *guagua* [bus]. I have never forgotten this,” he says. Meanwhile, his wife Ana Cecilia was raising their two children, while Francisco was constantly trying to contact them. His letters were never delivered.



## Political prisoners

Subsequently, Francisco was transferred to Guantánamo prison, where he spent two years with other high-profile political prisoners. He was later transferred back to Boniato where he was placed in special department called Boniatico. “Boniatico is a prison within a prison, and it is a prison famous for special punishment regime where the guards commit crimes on the prisoners and where prisoners were murdered. It is a place where police brutality reigns. The guards who worked there had criminal psychosis, so they didn’t think twice about killing someone,” Francisco describes.

## Hunger during the Special Period

The Special Period started in Cuba the 1991, a period of economic crisis induced primarily by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There were extreme food shortages in Cuba which reached unimaginable extremes in the prisons. Francisco, who was 1.72 meters tall, weighed 114 pounds (about 52 kilograms) at the time. “The hunger was so extreme in Boniato that some prisoners would take an aluminum jug, cut their vein from here to here with a blade and let their blood drip into the jug. When the jar was full of blood, they mixed the blood with water and salt and then make sausage out of their own blood by cooking the mixture in bonfires they set with polyfoam. That is what they would eat in Boniato prison,” recalled Francisco. “Moreover, prisoners desperate to get food from the prison hospital would inject themselves with the blood of HIV-positive people, cut their veins, pull out their intestines, or they would pierce their eyes so they would go blind,” Francisco narrates, visibly moved. He remembers a skinny guy who injected urine into his left knee so that it would get infected. They had to amputate the boy’s leg. “He wasn’t asking for food. He wasn’t asking for freedom or anything. He just wanted a very simple thing. He was just asking to please be taken to Havana prison, as he was from Havana and his family could not come to see him in Boniato. He had to lose a leg to be taken to Havana,” sums up Francisco.

## Torture in Boniatico

What memories stand out the most of Boniato are the memories of the torture to which the prisoners were exposed. “When I arrived at Boniatico, there was a concrete bureau table, about 40 meters high, 2,5 meters long, and about 50 centimeters wide. There was a piece of wood fixed to the table with about 20 or 25 nails. There was a torture device hanging on each nail. For example, there was a *black jack*, as they called it there. On another nail, there was a twisted electric cable, an oxtail, a tanned beef loin, a blunt machete, guava sticks, rubber truncheons, or electric batons... Some batons were made in the Soviet Union and had a hole that would shoot pepper spray at the prisoners. When the prisoner started to choke, they would hit him in the head. The electric baton would be used to give electric shocks to the prisoners,” he says.



## **The prisoner's medicine: beating**

But there is still more to tell about the torture at Boniatico. “Every one of these batons and torture instruments had another name written on a little sign. There was, for example, the word baton, or the name of other torture devices, written on the sign, and next to it there was a word: aspirin, dipyrone, amitriptyline (sleeping pills), drops... all names of medicines. When a prisoner called a guard and said: ‘Officer, my head hurts, my stomach hurts, my foot hurts, I would need some medicine or take me to the hospital please,’ the guard would say: ‘Oh, what do you need? I will go get it from the hospital’. If it was, for example, amitriptyline (sleeping pills) because the prisoner could not sleep, the guard would take the baton or the cable that represented the amitriptyline, and they would handcuff the prisoner there in the cell. ‘So you wanted two pills of amitriptyline?’ And they would beat him twice with that baton over the head until he would pass out. That was the prisoner’s medicine – beating and more beating. That’s what they did in Cuba,” Francisco concludes.

## **The dictatorship took away my whole family**

In 2004, Francisco’s father passed away. “My dad was very proud of me,” he recalls. However, instead of the two hours that prisoners usually get to say goodbye to their loved ones who passed away, Francisco had only a mere eight minutes. In these eight minutes, he saw some of his family members, such as his children, for the last time: “They grew up not really knowing who I am,” Francisco sums up. Today he does not know the whereabouts of his children. He only knows that his daughter is a jazz musician in the Netherlands. “The dictatorship took my whole family away from me. This is what you have to go through when you embrace an idea,” says Francisco.

## **They never saw me fall**

Francisco Herodes Díaz Echemendía was released on February 15, 2020, after having served 20 years and ten days in prison. “I am black, humble, poor, underprivileged, honest, Christian, Cuban, and anti-communist. I have always repeated this,” he sums up. “I have spent 20 years and ten days in prison, and I never gave in. I have always said that I am just a simple mortal, and if I managed to persevere, other people can too. What helped me not to give up? In the first place, it was God; this is undeniable. Secondly, my love for the freedom of Cuba. My patriotism, my strong conviction, my honor, and my dignity, those are the values that never let me give up,” he concludes.



# Sergio Perodín (1956)

[#Tugboat 13 de Marzo](#) [#Guantánamo Naval Base](#)

[#exiled in the USA](#)

[#Human Rights Commission](#)



2018



*It has never even crossed my mind to return to Cuba because they have hurt me too much.*

**“We decided to leave Cuba on the tugboat because it had the best chance of getting us out of Cuba as it was a very powerful ship,” recounts Sergio Perodín about the decision to leave Cuba after fierce persecution. There was only one problem: it was the Tugboat 13 de Marzo.**

Sergio Perodín was born in June 1956 into a working-class family and maintains that he did not belong to any anti-government groups, describing himself as an “ordinary worker.” His life was lonely, as he worked as head of the food service for the Cuban Transport Company in Havana while his family lived in Holguín. “I have no idea why State Security turned against me and started to follow me,” he says.



## Accusations

“Now and then I would receive information through a friend that the government was accusing me and my sister of belonging to the human rights movement in Cuba,” he says. This was not true, Sergio recounts. There was a different reason for these accusations. “They were trying to force me out of my job and this was the reason why I made the decision to leave Cuba,” he says.

## Tugboat 13 de Marzo

He then started to prepare the departure of his entire family (his wife and two children), to escape persecution by State Security. He took time off from work to find a way to escape Cuba. “I ran into a friend from the neighborhood, a person I had known for years. I shared with him my plan as I knew he was thinking along the same lines too,” Sergio recalls. This man introduced him to the captain of the Tugboat 13 de Marzo. Sergio and his friends explained their plans to him and tasked him with finding a boat that could take them. “He was the secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, but he wanted to leave as well. It just so happened that I knew his children through work, so we could talk in confidence,” he says.

## State Security infiltration

With help of other friends, they managed to get enough fuel. However, as the preparations took a month and a half, State Security managed to infiltrate the group and prepared to attack the ship. “Fidel Castro said that this boat could not leave Cuba, that it had to be sunk first and that all the people have to be killed, that he was not interested in children or anyone,” Sergio recalls.

***Fidel Castro said that this boat could not leave Cuba, that it had to be sunk first and that all the people have to be killed, that he was not interested in children or anyone.***

## Havana Bay

Despite everything, the group felt that the ship was ready to leave. They were meeting with the port personnel, who had information about the surveillance of the authorities, and therefore the departure was postponed twice. In the end, 72



people boarded the ship. While trying to leave the bay of Havana, they saw the first ship that came out in search of them and realized that they had been discovered. This vessel began to spray very the tugboat with powerful water cannons. Most of the people on board had to hide though some stayed on deck to show that there were children on board as well. The blasts of water destroyed much of the tugboat. Subsequently, two other boats came out and the three Castro vessels forced the tugboat out into the bay. These boats were normally used to extinguish fires on ships.

### **Destruction of the tugboat**

“They took us seven miles out, where our boat could no longer hold up. Two boats were hitting us from behind, and so they managed to crack the hull of the tugboat. The seawater began to enter the tugboat and soon there was a lot of water below deck,” said Sergio and the tugboat started to sink. The people who were inside could not get out. “The ones who managed to get out and survive were those of us who had stayed up on the deck, plus 20 people. We sank along with the tugboat because it was such a big gush of water,” he recalls. Some clung to a cooler that slipped off the tugboat and floated. However, the Castro boats began to circle the survivors, trying pick them off one by one, Sergio recalls, and many were of them were run over.

*The ones who managed to get out and survive were those of us who had stayed up on the deck, plus 20 people. We sank along with the tugboat because it was such a big gush of water.*

### **Murders**

After some time, the attack suddenly stopped and the coast guard began to pick up those who remained. “At that point, out of 72 people, there were only 31 left. I was almost dead because I had my little son holding onto my neck,” he recalls. When Sergio recovered a little he could see that in the area there was a boat with the Greek flag. Since it was already about 5 AM, we could see it clearly. “It seems that the Castro people got scared that the people on this boat were watching the murders they were committing. They quickly left the area,” recalls Sergio.



## Sharks

They were taken to a military base, where the desperate survivors were looking for their relatives, hoping that they had been put on another boat. “I asked the general who was waiting for the people to get off the boat, and the murdered responded that whoever we didn’t see in the group must have been eaten by sharks. My son was 7 years old and the one who passed away was 11 years old. My wife, who was 31 years old, also died,” he narrates. The official version broadcast on TV was that the waters were full of sharks and that no bodies had been found, Sergio recalls.

*My son was 7 years old and the one who passed away was 11 years old. My wife, who was 31 years old, also died.*

## Guantánamo

Sergio spent a month and a bit in prison and then was placed under house arrest. “I was able to evade surveillance thanks to some friends, and so we made a raft out of balsawood at the house of a friend and we managed to get on it in the early morning,” he recalls. Nine people left, including several of his family members. They sailed for about three days until the U.S. Coast Guard picked them up and took them to Guantánamo. They stayed in camps along with a large number of Cuban refugees who were beginning to arrive as rafters in 1994. “President Clinton gave the order for those who are picked up at sea to be taken to Guantánamo,” he says. According to Sergio, some 35,000 people passed through Guantánamo during this time. Doctors and human rights commissions were also helping the refugees. After about five months, Sergio Perodín and his son were granted permission on humanitarian grounds to travel to the U.S.

## New life

Arriving in the U.S. was difficult. First, Sergio filed complaints through human rights organizations. He also traveled to Geneva, where he spoke in front of the Human Rights Commission. After about 2 months he had to start working to survive. The situation improved little by little, as he founded a new family. “We have been doing well, as we both work. We have been able to rebuild our lives. My son, who was 7 years old at the time, earned a degree in architecture. We have put our family back on track,” says Sergio, who is not thinking of returning to Cuba because of the trauma and damages he suffered.



# Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces (1957)



[#lawyer](#) [#human rights activist](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#opposition activist](#) [#independent journalist](#) [#Cubamet](#)

[#poet](#) [#Escambray Cleanup](#)



2018



*“I have not planted a bomb in this country, I was not a member of an opposition movement, I was just a lawyer telling the truth.”*

**“I am completely convinced that the Cuban government is like a giant factory for dissidents. It is the one that creates dissidents,” says Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces, who is a lawyer, writer, independent journalist, and opposition activist. “I have always considered myself a dissident, however being a dissident in my opinion does not have a bad connotation. In Cuba though if you are a dissident, you are considered a political enemy of the Castro regime, and so you are rejected by the society,” he adds.**

Roberto was born in September 1957 into a family divided along ideological lines. While his father was a supporter of the revolution, his maternal grandfather had a collection of Reader's Digest magazines full of Western ideas. Roberto, from a very young age, noticed this clash of opinions. “I realized that my father was full of regret that what he longed for had not come to pass,” Roberto recounts.



## Not as much as him

His cousin was 16 years old when he fought in the rebel army of Escambray and then spent three years in jail. This divided Roberto's family even further, since his father took part in the so-called "Limpia del Escambray" [Escambray Cleanup], where he fought against the rebel troops. This division had a big impact on Roberto when during his childhood. In 2019, his father passed away. Roberto remembers him fondly, while singing a song by Pedro Luis Ferrer: "My father was a *fidelista* [Fidel's supporter], I was not as much as him, but whoever touches him, will have to face me." He stresses that family relationships should not be influenced by differences of opinion, much less political ones, and adds that the Cuban family "is very divided and it is the regime's fault."

## A conflicted revolutionary

"I have always been a very revolutionary person, but I have always been a conflicted revolutionary," says Roberto. "I did not get along well with others because I have not been and never will be a docile person. I want God to give me the strength to continue being the same. I do not think that people should blindly go by what someone else tells them, but to seek their own answers," he says. "And I will never agree with the lack of freedom in this society," he adds.

## Double standards

As a child, he learned that things had to be said in the right place at the right time because if you didn't comply with this rule, you were immediately questioned. However, at the same time he is sure that "everything that is imposed by force provokes rejection, as you are not allowed to choose of your own free will," he says, for example when choosing jeans to wear to parties in Cienfuegos or choosing American music from Miami to listen illicitly. "The prohibition produced worse results than if they had just allowed young people to listen to whatever they wanted," he says. "I practiced double standards as well: at school, I was a revolutionary and in the afternoons I listened to that radio," he says.

## From the member of Young Communist League (UJC) to ideological diversionist

"I was not a militant activist of the UJC, although I wanted very much to be one," he describes his wish, which was fulfilled a few years later. However, during his pre-university studies, he got very disappointed with the educational system. And in 1986 they kicked him out of the UJC. The reason? "Ideological diversionism," he answers. And while he was on the verge of studying Philosophy or Journalism, he ended up studying Law. "And now I am a journalist without having even studied it," he laughs.

## The Electronuclear Plant

In 1976, he began studying at the Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas. Despite not being fully opposed to the regime, some classmates started to avoid him because of his opinions. And in 1978, when he was voted by other students to beco-



me the president of the Law School, his revolutionary views started to dissipate. In 1981 he was called to perform his community service at the Juraguá Nuclear Power Plant, which proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back. The directors of the plant reproached him that his wife of that time was not a socialist. "This is where my rebelliousness began to manifest itself and I realized that it is important for me to speak my mind," he says. "If I had been an obedient person, I would be the member of the Central Committee today, I am convinced," he adds.

### **Antipathy towards the regime**

Roberto later returned to Guantánamo, where he completed his studies and became a criminal defense attorney. "A career in law shows you all the evils of society, not only the evil that exists in simple citizens, but also within the structures of the state, as you learn about the abuses of the police and the courts. This experience had a deep impact on me. I didn't expect state corruption to be so big," confesses Roberto. That is why he gradually was transformed into a specialist in human rights. With each new human rights case, his antipathy towards the regime grew bigger. Anything he said in court to was subjected to detailed scrutiny from the authorities to the point where he was eventually banned from working in criminal law, and forced to turn to civil law. However, the case that proved to be the turning point of his life was about to come.

### **Accused of the same crime**

In 1998 he worked as an attorney on a case of a notary who was his friend, accused of having participated in an illegal purchase and sale of a house. During this case, Roberto submitted an official letter of complaint to the Council of the State. Immediately afterwards, he was summoned to his collective law firm and threatened with being imprisoned if any information in his letter was not true. Just one month later, Roberto was arrested at the house of his father-in-law and accused of participating in the illegal purchase and sale of the house, that is, he stood accused of the same crime he defended as a lawyer. He was sentenced to eight years in prison. He recalls that later on, he spoke to some man by the name of Denis who admitted to having been forced to testify falsely in the case of his notary friend and to incriminate Roberto as well. "Every time I think of that, many things come back to me," he confesses while visibly moved.

### **"CR" for counterrevolutionary**

If Roberto had already parted ways with the regime in the 1980s, by the time he saw the red letters 'CR' (counterrevolutionary) stamped on his file he knew that there was no turning back. Roberto was without question a dissident. "In Cuba, one becomes a dissident just for demanding their rights and justice," he says. "I didn't plant a bomb anywhere in Cuba, I wasn't a member of an opposition movement, I was just a lawyer telling the truth," he says, and that's why he ended up in a Cuban prison, in "a world that had nothing to do with mine," he adds, in cells that "I would never have thought existed in Cuba," Roberto says. "I asked myself, 'My God, how can there be so much injustice,'" he recalls.



## **Become more humane**

Prisoners were made to work, but Roberto always refused, “I was a university graduate and I didn’t go to prison to work, but to read,” he says. In 1999 when he entered prison, he decided that to maintain his mental sanity, he would come out of there more educated than before. And so, he began to devour enormous amounts of books to escape the day-to-day reality of life in prison.

*I have always been a very revolutionary person, but I have always been a conflicted revolutionary.*

## **Proud of his family**

Roberto witnessed many suicides of desperate prisoners. As it was usual, these suicides were recorded as heart attacks so that no one would ask any questions. Roberto witnessed how desperate prisoners wanting to get out of prison for a little trip to the outside world injected oil into the veins of their legs, causing inflammation and so they had to be hospitalized. Some of these attempts resulted in amputation. Roberto talks about corruption in the prisons and little houses located outside the prison for the “trusted prisoners.” He also remembers the courage of his family. He feels very proud of his mother who moved to Guantánamo and lived there for 4 years, 8 months, and 12 days to be closer to her son. Roberto also fondly remembers letters he received from other political prisoners, including one from Oswaldo Payá, which he says he “treasures” very much.

## **A marked man**

On August 12, 2003, Roberto was conditionally released from prison on parole. “I left with high expectations and with the desire to not hold onto any grudges. However, as soon as I got out, I realized that my life would never be the same again, that I was a marked man,” he says. He could not find any work, even though Cuba needed lawyers. When applying for vacancies in the universities, he was told “that he did not meet the political and moral requirements” and other similar excuses. The regime even tried to revoke his law license and make it impossible for him to practice law. “I am a law graduate in a country where there is a shortage of lawyers and there is no work for me,” he sums up.





## **Living like an illegal person**

In 2012, to feed his family, Roberto took a job as a journalist for Cubanet, an independent online newspaper. Since that moment he has been constantly harassed, detained, and subjected to searches of his home. In 2015, his house was searched for the first time and even his personal belongings were confiscated, including recordings of his children's voices when they were little. "I am learning to live as an illegal person," Roberto comments. He often receives "warning letters" of various kinds, including threats to his children's lives or his wife's employment status. State security officials often call him to intimidate him. "I feel bad for them to see how low they can go. A captain once told me when he stopped me: 'We are a stone and you are the egg. We can break you when we feel like it.' And I kept looking at him and thinking for myself: how low this man has fallen to think that he can break another man as if he were God," he says.

## **No journalist in Cuba has rights**

"Only people who let themselves be broken or can't stand the pressure anymore, break," says Roberto, who has never stopped publishing articles and poems, despite receiving many "warnings" from the regime. Life in Cuba is not easy for both independent journalists and artists. "In Cuba when an artist steps away from the official line, no matter how brilliant he might be, he will immediately have problems," he says. "When I started writing for Cubanet, had I known, what it was like to be an independent journalist in Cuba, I would have never accepted it," he laughs, but immediately confirms that he is eternally grateful for being able to say what he feels. "No journalist in this country has rights. There is international solidarity with us, but in Cuba, all journalists risk getting a bullet in the head," he says.

## **All the evil comes from the Cuban dictatorship**

"It is difficult for me to live in Cuba as I live under constant stress. When I go out I don't know if I'm going to return home," Roberto says. In September 2019, a few days after the recording of the second part of his interview, Roberto de Jesús Quiñones Haces was detained again and served one year in prison. "I have a very clear conscience that I have not committed any crime and that all the evil, in this case, comes from the side of the Cuban dictatorship. The regime has not had the decency to investigate what happened. They do not have the courage to recognize that they were wrong, because they consider it a weakness, while in my opinion it would have been a sign of greatness and decency," concludes Roberto.

# Julio Alfredo Ferrer Tamayo (1958)



#lawyer #judge #indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness

#indicator of social dangerousness #legal support for dissidents

#Cuban Legal Association #family member of political prisoner

#Cubalex



2018



*In the Cuban criminal process, the right to defense and due process are not respected.*

**“The criminal process is inquisitorial. It is like a fight between a lion and a tied-up monkey,” says Julio Alfredo Ferrer Tamayo, a Cuban lawyer who, at the time of the interview, was under the threat of being deprived of his liberty for allegedly committing the crime of Falsification of Public Documents. Despite this threat, Julio was not imprisoned. However, his wife did serve six years in prison.**

Julio was born in October 1958 in a humble neighborhood of Santiago de Cuba. The desire to practice law began during his childhood with the example of his father, Julio Lorenzo Ferrer, who served as a popular judge in the neighborhood court: “I saw my dad make fair decisions,” recalls Julio. Therefore, after his high school studies, Julio received the offer to opt for the military pre-vocational school of Hermanos Marañón in Daiquiri, which was part of a study program of the Ministry of the Interior. He did not hesitate and signed up. His career as a lawyer was about to begin.



## The boom of services in personal safety

Julio excelled in mathematics and his results matched more senior students from his school. He admits that some of his classmates in the *barrio prieto*, as he affectionately calls the mostly Afro-descendant neighborhood, may have suffered from racism and rejection. His career was already clearly on track, so when it came time to choose a college degree, he opted for a law degree at a Havana branch of the Ministry of the Interior that was “raising” its future employees. “It was the boom of personal security services,” Julio recounts. “There were two days of class and one day of work,” he adds, specifying that he provided personal security services. However, in the third year of his career, he realized that a military career was not exactly to his liking and began looking for other options.

## Working in the courts

After finishing his Law Degree at the University of Havana in 1985, he decided that he would “work in the courts” and, therefore, he soon got his first job in the courts of the Ministry of Justice. He was appointed Professional Judge of the Municipal Court of Guanabacoa, where he worked for approximately one year until he was transferred to the Provincial Court, specifically to the Fifth Criminal Court of the Province. He later became president of the Sixth Criminal Court in Havana.

*I have always disagreed with the indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness.*

## Indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness

“I have always disagreed with the indicator of ‘pre-delinquent social dangerousness’ [a legal term used in Cuba which indicates a proclivity of a person to commit crimes],” he summarizes, highlighting one of his major concerns about the Cuban judicial system, which he views in general terms as “inefficient.” And it was this disagreement, though not the only one, that got him into trouble with the Castro regime. He recalls a popular party in Guanabacoa in which the police tried to arrest people who they deemed displayed a high “pre-delinquent social dangerousness,” without having committed any crime, only as a preventive measure. Julio was a judge at the time, and he released them immediately. “The indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness’ is not a crime, it is a state, it is like a sack that allows the authorities to put in anyone whom they want to remove from society,” summarizes Julio.





## No right to defense

“There is no right to defense or due process in the Cuban penal system. And in the case of the indicator of ‘pre-delinquent social dangerousness,’ it is worse, as there is no possibility of defense. The Ministry of the Interior, or police authorities prepare a file on a person they consider to be dangerous. This file is extremely secret for that person, and they do not know that a file is being prepared against them. The persons or authorities used for this purpose give their testimony with the certainty that they will never appear before a court to publicly confirm the testimony they have given. In other words, whoever gives that testimony has the certainty that they can say whatever they want to the detriment of that person, and they will never answer for it. This file, under the control of the prosecutor’s office, is then submitted by the latter to the court. In the process of presenting it to the court, they detain the person so that they can be declared in a state of ‘pre-delinquent social dangerousness.’ At that moment, the person is detained and cannot find a lawyer to prepare a defense in his/her favor. This person only has the right to be defended by an attorney when the file is already in court, the court has accepted it, and the trial to declare him/her in a dangerous state is about to be held. The accused can appoint a lawyer, but when that lawyer arrives, they are unable to present any evidence in favor of that person. The lawyer can only quickly review the file and have a very short interview with the person he will defend. In my opinion, defense is not even remotely a defense,” says Julio.

## Supposedly dangerous people

The problems were yet to come. A thorough analysis was carried out on Julio’s conduct regarding the immediate release he approved on supposedly dangerous people. “They finally agreed with me, but there was still this confrontation with the Ministry,” he adds. Despite this, he continued working as a judge for another eight years, until 1993, when he concluded this work.

## Complicated fame

That year his daughter was born, Julio needed to support his family and tried to join a *bufete* [collective law firm]. He was not allowed to do, as he says, “as revenge for his behavior as a judge.” In Cuba, attorneys are not permitted to maintain private law offices so the Cuban Government has authorized several Cuban law firms or *Bufetes*. He worked for a year as a legal advisor until, finally, around 1994, he managed to join a law firm. He specialized in the indicator of ‘pre-delinquent social dangerousness.’ In his words, more than 75% of those accused of this alleged crime are innocent. Julio became known for his successful defense cases: “I have earned fame which was problematic for me. A rumor began to develop among the authorities that I was getting rich, that I must have demanded a lot of money from my clients. Then they began to interrogate the clients. The Cuban system’s aversion against Julio, specifically of the Ministry of the Interior, was growing, and the Ministry was constantly looking for ways to remove him from the collective law firm. According to Julio, around 2004, after





the false testimony of a girl about an alleged swindle committed by Julio, he was expelled from the law firm and left without a job. However, the worst was yet to come.

### **New conflict with the authorities**

Because of his legal experience, people would ask him for help in legal matters, even after he lost his job. In 2008, representatives of the Cuban dissidents asked him for collaboration in legal matters. That year, Julio joined the Cuban Legal Association, “trying to give this Association a legal channel.” Four years later, around 2012, suddenly another accusation of an alleged crime of swindling appeared. However, the accused on this occasion was not Julio, but his wife Marienys Pavó Oñate. Naturally, Julio was her defense attorney, so “the conflict with the authorities began again.” Starting on February 20, 2015, Julio was deprived of liberty for six months. “The purpose was to put me to prison and thus prevent me from the representation of my wife,” he explains.

*The indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness is not a crime, it is a state, it is like a sack that allows the authorities to put in anyone whom they want to remove from society.*

### **Trial of his wife**

In September 2015, Julio looked into his wife's case upon his release from prison. He was surprised to learn that his wife was notified of the criminal proceedings as if she did not have a lawyer. Therefore, Julio submitted the necessary documentation to act in the proceedings as a lawyer from the first instance. “And then what happened? They were forced to recognize that I was the attorney. What should they have done at that time? Go back to the beginning of the process and give me all the rights as an attorney. What did they do? The court forged a new document. The document through which the court accepts the accusation is called opening order, a resolution by which the judge decides to admit the accusation and open the trial. They had already made a document stating that my wife did not have a lawyer. When I proved to them that I was the lawyer in the preparatory phase, they should have annulled that and taken



measures with the authorities, especially the investigator. But to protect the investigator, they issued a new opening order pre-dating the presentation of my documents to pretend that my documents had not been extracted. The conflict with the court began again with the judges and the police in coordination with the prosecutor's office, to see how to remove me from the process. They issued bans on me until they decided to appoint a public defender for my wife."

*Of course it has something to do with me. It is fundamentally a retaliation against me. They could not penalize me directly.*

### **Retaliation**

When asked if he believes that his wife's imprisonment has something to do with him, he immediately replies: "Of course it has something to do with me. It is fundamentally a retaliation against me. They could not penalize me directly because I did not work for any state institution at that time. I was linked to the Cuban Juridical Association, and I did not pursue any activity with a state institution, through which they could have gotten to me."

### **Straitjacket put on the future of Cuba**

His wife served six years in the Women's Prison of the West, popularly known as Manto Negro. "All those years, my wife has been lonely and has sacrificed a lot," Julio summarizes movingly. In October 2018, Marienys was finally released. Julio, in the meantime, worked as a specialist lawyer for the legal information center Cubalex, supporting Cubans on legal issues and denouncing the Cuban judicial system. "The Communist Party cannot continue imposing its will on people... It is like a straitjacket on the future," Julio concludes.

# Enrique García Díaz (1958)

#Embassy of Cuba in Perú #Latin Press #CIA

#Directorate General of Cuban Intelligence #training in Russia

#Secret Service Operation Officer

#Defector of Cuban Intelligence service



2019



*“I wanted to denounce communism in Cuba to the whole world; it became my obsession.”*

**“In Cuba, the Intelligence service was a toy of Fidel Castro,” says Enrique García Díaz, who worked for the Cuban General Intelligence Directorate and later defected and fled Cuba to denounce the crimes of Cuban communism.**

Enrique was born in April 1958 in Havana. His family was supportive of communism, the Revolution, and was well-off. His father joined the 26th of July Movement and participated in the uprising against the regime of Fulgencio Batista. When the Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959, Enrique’s father occupied essential positions in the government. “He integrated himself into the system and even embraced Marxist ideas,” Enrique comments. Since childhood, Enrique has defended communist principles, but “it was due to his upbringing rather than by conviction.” In July 1975, his father was transferred to Peru to the office of Prensa Latina [Latin Press], the most important newspaper for Fidel Castro’s regime. With the permission of the Ministry of the Interior, he was able to take Enrique with him, even though they were moving to a country with a non-communist policy and economy.



## Cuban Embassy in Lima

Upon arriving in Peru, Enrique was surprised by the free market and the freedom of the press, which would later lead to a change in his political thinking. At the age of 17, out of political loyalty to his father, he was offered a position at the Cuban Embassy in Lima. "At that time, Lima was the transit point for all the subversive groups in South America who were given passports without stamps," Enrique says of his first work experience. Over time he was assigned tasks that were given only to people of trust, for example, moving rented cars loaded with weapons from one place to another - activities of which the Peruvian government was aware. After the Embassy experience, Enrique accepted a position offered to him in the General Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior. At that time, the most important institution in Cuba.

## Walter Díaz

To join the General Intelligence Directorate (DGI) Enrique had to undergo a very complex process, including going through special training, psychological tests, and several investigations of his personal and professional life. He was assigned a false name, Walter Diaz, and was posted in Peru. "They told us, 'Your work begins where legality ends. You will forget the Constitution, and everything will be illegal,'" Enrique describes the welcome speech he received at the DGI. Enrique proved his worth and received further training in in Russia. Here, he focused on surveillance and undercover pursuit with the best agents, politicians, and technologies of that time. He was even invited to the commemoration of the 1917 October Revolution in Red Square with the participation of President Brezhnev. Enrique remembers how comfortably he lived in Russia. "We lived very well at the academy. We had abundant breakfasts and lunches, and we had a maid." In 1986 he was promoted to a higher rank and attended a training program at the Russian academy again. This time it was exclusively for DGI directors.

*They told us, 'Your work begins where legality ends.'*

## The DGI

Enrique believes that t two columns support the Cuban dictatorship. The first one represented by the gigantic apparatus of the DGI, which controls and represses every Cuban citizen, including their jobs and educational opportunities. The second one is foreign counterintelligence, a special service that infiltrates the intelligence service of the leading Western countries. "This explains the tolerant attitude towards the Cuban dictatorship. Every government has its infiltrators," Enrique adds. The DGI has departments in four geographical zones, and they belong either under the External Counterintelligence Division or the Support Divisi-





ons. When Enrique worked in the DGI, it had more than 600 operational agents located abroad and approximately 1300 employees. To this day, each DGI division heads several departments: “The least talked about department was called the ‘Department of Illegals’, where false identities, evidence, or civil registrations were fabricated,” Enrique emphasizes. The departments with which he collaborated the most were the U2 Departments. These departments administered activities targeting Cuban exiles living abroad. The Department of Special Operations, which was the armed wing of the DGI that trained Cuban terrorists, and the Department of Psychological Warfare, which used the media as an instrument to distort reality. The information gathered by all these departments was firstly presented to Fidel Castro; some reports were given to Raúl Castro and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a long-standing leader of the Communist Party of Cuba.

## **Cuban Embassies**

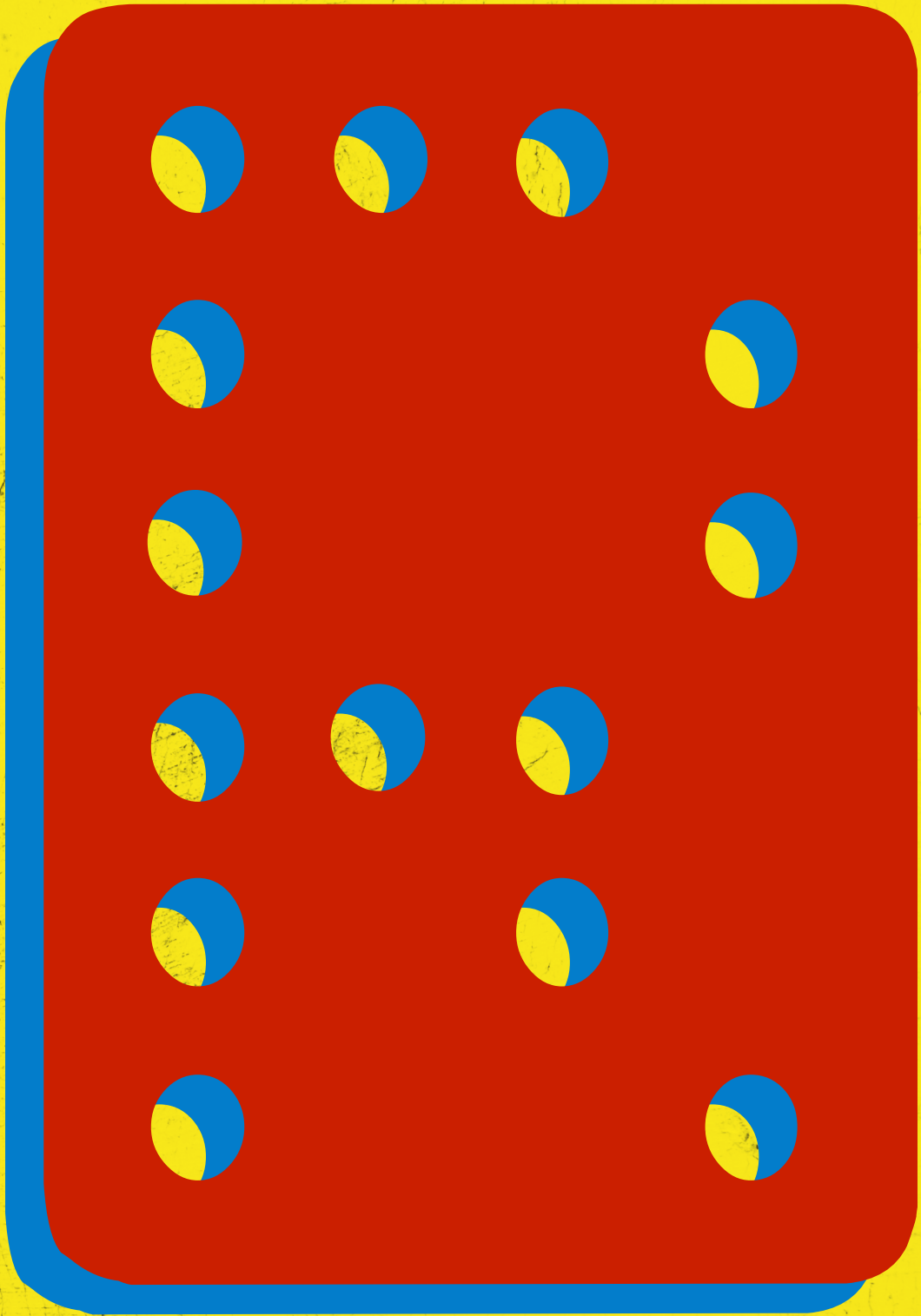
As an Operations Officer of the DGI, Enrique worked in several Cuban embassies: Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Thanks to this job, he traveled throughout Latin America and Europe. By the mid-1980s, when Enrique returned to Cuba, he was already convinced that the Bolshevik Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, and other communist revolutions served only a select few, the elites of society. In the communist countries he visited, he was shocked to see many people living in extreme poverty. “In the end, I discovered that Marxism might seem like a nice idea, but it was garbage. In the case of Fidel Castro, he was never a Marxist. During his life, he only read about four little books on Marxism.”

## **My name is still Enrique García**

In 1987 Enrique was sent to Ecuador as Cuba’s foreign trade representative. At that time, he was already determined to defect. “I became obsessed with doing something to change Cuba. I wanted to destroy the Cuban system. I didn’t know how many years of life I had left, but I had the capacity to denounce what the Cuban dictatorship and communism were doing to Cuba.” As he was a military officer and an important Operations Officer, he could not return to Cuba and conspire against the regime from the island itself, so he traveled to Ecuador on a commercial mission. That is when he started to cooperate secretly with the CIA. In 1989 the CIA moved him out of the country.

## **I didn’t come to look for a new life**

“I didn’t come to the United States to look for a new life. I came to look for support to denounce communism on an international scale and help destroy the Cuban system,” Enrique says. Until 2000, he collaborated with the CIA, sharing a lot of information about the DGI and Fidel Castro’s regime. After his defection, he was sentenced to death and lost his family in Cuba. “I have never accepted a new identity in the United States; I was not hiding myself. I still call myself Enrique García. If I had been afraid, I would never have done it.”



# Sirley Ávila León (1959)



#female opposition activist #Young Communist League

#UNPACU #Radio Martí #Hablemos Press

#Christian Liberation Movement #victim of assassination attempt



2017



*“I did not want to overthrow the government. I only wanted true democracy, where everyone could participate.”*

**“I’m going to kill you right now,” a worker Sirley hired to take care of her farm told her and then attacked her with a machete. The Cuban government had sent him to assassinate her because she, as a delegate of the People’s Power, denounced the peasants’ human rights violations and critical living conditions. She survived by a miracle.**

Sirley Ávila León was born into a peasant family that owned agricultural land and a farm. Although the Cuban Revolution ended in 1959, the family was able to keep their land and continue farming. “Our house was very comfortable, my father had a private tractor and a sugar cane mill, and the house was always full of people. I was indoctrinated from the beginning in school. I grew up as a normal pioneer. I did not know anything else,” recalls Sirley. She belonged to the Young Communist League (UJC). Her image of the happy life of all Cubans began to dissipate in 1981 after she saw the police demolish a peasant neighborhood in the city of Las Tunas.



# *I felt obliged to try to change the lives of those hard-working people. I demanded the rights of the peasants in the Government Assembly.*

## **Never thought to be a counterrevolutionary**

When agricultural cooperatives were formed in the 1980s, the Communist Party forced peasants to join them. According to her account, if the peasants refused, they were proclaimed as individual owners and therefore, counterrevolutionaries. That is why peasants surrendered their land, animals, and equipment. However, the cooperatives never functioned, resulting in the peasant exodus to the peripheries of the cities. “I saw how they mistreated women with sick children. They took them out of their homes in the cities. As a militant of the UJC, I complained to the police because that was not what the Cuban government was proclaiming. I sincerely complained with the regime. It never crossed my mind to be a counterrevolutionary. I thought that everything the regime said was true,” she says. In 1988 her father died, and her mother became ill with Parkinson’s disease. Sirley took on the responsibility of caring for her when the country was facing a socioeconomic crisis known as the Special Period.

## **Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba**

When her son turned 16, Sirley insisted that he become a member of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba (FAR). “I pushed him to stay in the service, as it is nice to defend the homeland, so I pushed him to continue serving the homeland.” In 2004, the state salaries were very low, there were food shortages in the country, and the state canceled her mother’s financial support. Sirley decided to return to the countryside and manage the farm in Limones, Majibacoa municipality, Las Tunas province. In the countryside, she learned about the peasants’ discontent, the critical conditions of the infrastructure, and the non-existence of public services.

## **Delegate of the People’s Power**

Therefore, in February 2005 she ran for the position of a delegate of the Municipal Assembly of People’s Power, the highest body of state power in her demarcation. She put a lot of effort to support the peasants, so she was selected.





“I felt an enormous responsibility and pride. I felt obliged to try to change the lives of those hard-working people. I demanded the rights of the peasants in the Government Assembly,” she says. She complained that the state agency did not buy the produce it was supposed to buy, nor did not buy it on time, or even went a year without paying for it. She was still convinced that the local leaders were responsible for the misery, as she still trusted the government.

*The criminal dropped his machete, started running and looked at me saying, ‘I’m going to be in jail for three or four days and when I get out I’m going to shit and dance on your grave and the farm is going to be mine.’*

### **First conflicts with the regime**

In 2006 Sirley requested that the state build a new school in the municipality. “I asked the State Council to build a school in the area because the children were walking up to nine kilometers to the schools to which they were assigned,” she describes. “Their answer was that the school could not be built because there was no material. In the end, the parents built the school, but in 2010 the government closed it because, according to them, there were too few children.” Sirley always looked for ways to improve life in the countryside, so she opened a library in her house. She also organized community work, inviting neighbors to pave streets, drain swamps or prune trees, all with her resources. When Sirley escalated the issue of the school’s closure to the Ministry of Education in Havana and wrote a letter to President Raúl Castro [president of the Republic of Cuba from 2008 to 2018], the threats began. “Since I was not receiving answers from the authorities, I pressured President Raúl Castro to provide me with answer, or else I was going to denounce the case before international organizations. The government claimed that Cubans were free, that we all had rights, and I believed it. But my denunciations culminated in five attempts on my life,” she says. They poisoned her water well, killed several of her animals, vandalized all the walls of her house, assaulted and kidnapped her and took her out of the province, or set her bed on fire during a night that fortunately she was not present.



## Have a democracy in Cuba or lose your life

After seven years, the country's leaders removed Sirley as a delegate of the People's Power. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. She denounced it to various human rights organizations. "On September 8, 2012, I had my first contact with dissidents. I found human rights groups in Holguín, the independent journalists of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), and Radio Martí. I just wanted people to know that I was being physically, economically, and morally attacked," she explains. Despite her denunciations, the government began to fabricate crimes against her and attack her even more. At that moment, she assumed the moral commitment of not abandoning the struggle until there was democracy in Cuba or lose her life. Sirley formed a cell of UNPACU in her neighborhood and began to cooperate with other independent organizations, such as the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), Hablemos Press [Let's Talk Press] and the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Havana, where she had free access to the Internet room. Thus, she became a well-known activist. However, persecution intensified.

*The rights and freedoms are afforded only to the rulers. That is why I fight for human rights in Cuba - for freedom for all.*

### Machete blows that almost killed her

The health of Sirley's mother, who lived in Las Tunas, began to deteriorate, so Sirley looked for someone to take care of her farm. She hired a couple, but the man was an ex-prisoner who tried to kill her, as well as spreading false information, saying that Sirley had sold her farm to him. In May 2015, Sirley returned to her house to harvest mangoes when the ex-prisoner confronted her: "Why do you want mangoes or want anything at all if I'm going to kill you right now?" he said. Then he pulled out a machete and struck her head. Sirley lifted her hand, and he chopped off her hand. The man made another blow with the machete and broke her arm. With a third blow, he fractured her shoulder. He continued assaulting her with the machete. A blow to her right knee severed tendons causing Sirley to fall. He cut her again in the left knee and so on twice more. Then he stood up and shouted, "And now I'm going to chop your head off." A lady who was visiting the farm ran out to call for help. "I looked up to heaven and said, 'My



God, if this is what I deserve, I'm going to die with dignity," Sirley recalls. Had it not been for the attacker's grandson, who suddenly appeared at the door, he would have murdered her. "The criminal dropped his machete, started running and looked at me saying, 'I'm going to be in jail for three or four days and when I get out I'm going to shit and dance on your grave and the farm is going to be mine,'" she recounts. Sirley says that she had to shoo away the dogs that began to lick her hand and the rest of her body which was covered with blood. By a miracle, she was able to get help from the neighbors. The ambulance they called never arrived, and after two hours, the State Security showed up and tried to put her in a car. The peasants did not allow it. Finally, an old, broken ambulance without a doctor arrived.

### **God did not allow me to die**

The way she was treated in the hospital convinced her that they were trying to kill her. "At the General Hospital in Las Tunas, I was laying in a bed and waiting outside of the operating room for more than five hours. The nurses would say, 'Ah, she is passing out, ah, do not fall asleep, Ma'am,' but they didn't treat me. I spent eight hours there without medical attention," she says. Due to pressure from neighbors, other people, and activists such as José Daniel Ferrer, leader of UNPACU, after 11 days, she left the hospital. "More than a hundred people came to defend me. It was a total defeat for the regime that tried to kill me. God did not allow it, he took care of my life, and all the people the government tried to keep away from me joined together." Sirley was handicapped for ten months. In September 2015, four months after the attack, she was notified that the trial of her attacker, Osmany Carrion, was held without her presence and without the opportunity for her family to participate. In his defense, the criminal insisted that Sirley owed him 8,000 Cuban pesos. He was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for robbery with force and intimidation. However, Sirley adds that the attacker did not serve even one month in jail.

### **Transfer to Miami**

In March 2016, with the help of her friends and international organizations, Sirley was transferred to Miami, where she obtained proper medical attention and where she resides to this day. However, she worries daily about her son and the rest of her family. Despite this, Sirley continues to fight with determination against injustices in her homeland. She participates in international human rights conferences and has even been invited to the U.S. Congress and the UN. "The rights and freedoms are afforded only to the rulers. That is why I fight for human rights in Cuba - for freedom for all. I did not want to overthrow the government. I only wanted true democracy, where everyone can participate."

# María C. Werlau (1959)

[#female opposition activist](#) [#fight against Batista](#)

[#fight against Castro](#) [#Bay of Pigs](#)

[#female human rights activist](#) [#Cuba Archive](#)

[#Cuban Memorial](#)



2019



*“Every cell in my body is Cuba.”*

**“My mother belong to a cell of the 26th of July Movement. She came from a very well-to-do family but, like many of her friends, she was against the Batista dictatorship,” says María Werlau. Her parents married in Miami in November 1958 and returned to Havana after Batista fell. “They came to Cuba from Miami together with the leadership of the 26th of July Movement, so my story is totally linked to all the events in Cuba from the moment that I was conceived in my mother’s womb,” says María.**

María was born in Havana in August 1959. Her father went into exile in the U.S just before the triumph of the Revolution for which he had been fighting. It was still during the government of General Fulgencio Batista. “Her father and her brothers had fought in Che Guevara’s column of the rebel army in the Sierra Maestra and they decided to withdraw because they executed a soldier and it was an act they did not agree with,” comments María. After leaving the rebel army, her father met his future wife in Havana, who was to become María’s mother.





## Conspiracy against Castro

Her father got a job as a manager at the Sugar Institute. “However, very quickly he realized that the situation had gotten radicalized and that this was not what he had signed up for, as executions, looting and terror started to be the norm,” comments María. Therefore, her father began to conspire against the government of Fidel Castro and when he learned that the revolutionary authorities were looking for him, the family immediately started to prepare his departure from the island.

## Brigade 2506

Their arrival in the U.S. was difficult because of the scarcity of resources. The Cuban government had frozen bank accounts and nationalized property. María’s father, together with her brother-in-law, went to work in Puerto Rico where they opened a small business. “My father came back to join Brigade 2506, that is, the forces that were being organized in exile to liberate Cuba from communism,” she explains. María’s father participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. He received training in Guatemala to set up explosives on bridges and to organize the entire operation. When the invasion failed in the Bay, he escaped with others and after about four days in hiding, without receiving any help, was discovered by Cuban troops.

*My father came back to join Brigade 2506, that is, the forces that were being organized in exile to liberate Cuba from communism.*

## Photo of a dead paramilitary

María’s father was shot and died. “I can imagine how hard that must have been, as they had this dream of liberating Cuba from communism and they had left their families because of that. I think my father died when he was 28 or 29 years old. My mother’s close friends were the Bay of Pigs widows,” she recalls. During the time of the invasion, the family knew nothing about the fate of María’s father until her mom saw a photograph in a magazine in a doctor’s office. “It was a picture of a dead paramilitary soldier. It was my father,” María says.

## Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Chile

After the events at the Bay of Pigs, the rest of the family began to arrive in Miami, but soon most of them dispersed throughout the U.S., except for her uncle who



emigrated to Puerto Rico. He was followed by María's mother, who decided to move there to help him with the administration of his company. "It was an oasis for us. My mother made the decision not to talk about the previous events anymore and we had a peaceful time," she recalls. In 1978, María went to study at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. "I studied the Cuban topic from an academic point of view, but life took another course. I got pregnant very early, left the University with a baby and got married. Moreover, my brother had died, which was devastating for us," she says. María and her husband then decided to move to Puerto Rico, but after a while they separated.

### **Uneasy infatuation with the Revolution**

While in Puerto Rico, she enrolled in an MBA training program for professionals of Chase Manhattan Bank. Upon completion of this program, she met her second husband at a banking conference. They married and both went to work at Chase Bank in Venezuela. They lived there from 1984 to 1986 and María gave birth to a second son. Later, they worked in Chile and there María pursued a master's degree in International Relations. "Students from many Latin American countries were there at the time and the Latin American left has always been infatuated with the topic of Cuban Revolution. Sometimes it was uncomfortable," she says.

### **Comparing dictatorships**

At that time, Chile was under the Pinochet dictatorship and María could not help herself but to compare the two dictatorships. "I realized that there was indeed a dictatorship in Chile. However, when I went to a bookstore in Providencia, which is a fairly commercial neighborhood, I bought a book that told the story of a Pinochet general who had gone to the north [of the country] and shot people. You could buy the book in the bookstore during the Pinochet regime. In other words, there was a huge contrast with Cuba... Obviously Chileans who lived through the dictatorship thought it was atrocious, but it was very different," she says. In 1993, María's second husband was transferred to New York, so the couple returned to the U.S. They lived together for seven years in New Jersey until they got divorced.

### **Cuba Archive**

In New Jersey, María returned to the Cuban topic, and she began to dedicate herself fully to it. She joined different organizations and projects as a consultant and around 1997, together with Armando Lago and Ricardo Bofill, she started to co-write a book about the victims of the Castro dictatorship. "I thought it was very important to focus on human rights and on the victims. I realized that this approach was missing, as the exile community was very focused on political messages, the political direction of the movements and the leaders, and not on the stories of the victims, which is what provokes empathy from the people who hear about it," she says. Together with her mother, Armando Lago and another colleague, she decided to found an NGO called Archivo Cuba [Cuba Archive].



## Experiences from around the world

Armando Lago began to compile the lists of victims based on the log book from prisons. “He began to build a fantastic, massive work, which was the basis of the Cuba Archive project. Once the transition in Cuba takes place, we want people to be educated about transitional justice to provide a reference for reconciliation, inspired by experiences from around the world. That is why we created an institute, a kind of think tank. Even though María’s mother and her colleague Armando Lago passed away in 2008, the work has continued.

### Cuban Memorial

The database was used to for another project as well, titled the Cuban Memorial, an interannual happening during which white crosses are placed on a field at Florida International University (FIU) to commemorate the victims of the Cuban regime. “I was very touched to see people coming and crying in front of the plastic crosses. In the case of my father, we did not have the opportunity to organize a proper burial. For example, the Cuban government never confirmed the death of my father. This project was very important because it gave us access to the testimonies of the relatives of the dead and witnesses of the events we were documenting,” she says.

### Cuba Archive

Meanwhile, the Cuba Archive project, which aims to promote human rights through research and information, continues. “This project collects the data on deaths that are the result of the revolutionary process, deaths from all sides of the political spectrum. For example, in the case of the Bay of Pigs invasion, we have data from both sides. The project is conceived to create a culture of life, to make a comprehensive memory of the political violence that has taken place in Cuban history. In addition, we collect data on two dictatorships because the project begins in 1952 with the Batista dictatorship,” says María. As she said in 2019, at the time of this interview, they were finishing up documenting data of the Batista dictatorship. “This never ends,” she says.

*I was very touched to see people coming and crying in front of the plastic crosses. In the case of my father, we did not have the opportunity to organize a proper burial.*

# Sebastián Arcos Cazabón (1961)

#26th of July Movement #Granma yacht #opposition activist

#Moncada Barracks #Villa Marista prison

#Combinado del Este prison #Cuban Committee for Human Rights

#acts of repudiation



2017



*"I do not intend to return to Cuba until I can do so as a free man."*

**"Those who fought for freedom and democracy in Cuba were deceived. Fidel Castro turned the Revolution into a communist dictatorship with the sole objective of keeping power for himself," says Sebastián Arcos Cazabón, who comes from a family that initially supported the Cuban Revolution fully.**

Sebastián Arcos Cazabón was born in June 1961 in Havana. His relatives participated in the struggle against the regime of Fulgencio Batista: his uncle Gustavo Arcos Bergnes was one of the assailants to the Moncada Barracks in 1953, where he was wounded. Later on, he founded, together with Fidel Castro, the 26th of July Movement and was one of its prominent leaders until the victory of the Cuban Revolution.





## Important positions within the revolutionary government

Sebastián's father, Sebastián Arcos Bergnes, had participated in the student revolts against the Batista government. Later on, he became one of the 26th of July Movement leaders in his native province, Las Villas. Both his uncle and father were arrested by Batista's police. Another of his uncles, Luis Arcos Bergnes, participated in the landing of the Granma yacht in 1956, and was killed by Batista's army in Sierra Maestra. When Sebastián was born, his relatives occupied important positions within the new revolutionary government. His uncle Gustavo worked as ambassador in several countries, and his father was a vice minister in several ministries that would later disappear during Fidel Castro's government. "I grew up in a family that was or had been directly linked to the new revolutionary government of Fidel Castro. This changed relatively quickly," Sebastián recalls.

## Communist course

His uncle Gustavo began to criticize the totalitarian and Stalinist course of the Revolution. Therefore he was arrested and sentenced to ten years in prison for crimes against the powers of the State. "This is a kind of 'crime' that accommodates any activity that the State considers contrary to the revolutionary process," he describes. His father supported his uncle, so he had to leave the high posts and return to his profession of a dentist. "In those early years, I was too young to remember all these events, but they were difficult years as I have been able to confirm later in conversations with my mother and my father," describes Sebastián.

*We had to survive with what was left from Republican Cuba, as revolutionary Cuba did not produce anything.*

## Revolutionary Cuba did not produce anything

Sebastián's family became a typical family of the periphery, and they soon understood that it was impossible to confront the dictatorship without being disappeared. His early childhood memories are normal, like those of any child. They lived on the outskirts of Havana on a farm, and Sebastián spent time playing with his friends: "It was an undoubtedly happy childhood," he says. However, he gradually realized that there was a scarcity of everything. The things that they (and other families) owned were made in the 1950s: "We had to survive with what was left from Republican Cuba, as revolutionary Cuba did not produce anything."



## Concept of school-work

“One of the first political memories I can think of are school trips by *guagua*, [local Cuban name for bus], but on the way we had to sing songs about Fidel,” Sebastián recalls. He was admitted to the Vladimir Ilich Lenin Vocational School, located on the outskirts of Havana, which was based on the new schoolwork model of learning. It was elitist, as it only admitted students with the best results. The students of this school only visited their families one day a week; the rest of the time, they lived at the school. This separation was intended to facilitate the indoctrination of the students, who were subjected to interviews about their families, Marxism classes, and semi-military discipline. The academic rigidity contrasted with the corrupt practices, which made it easier for the children of high-ranking officials of the regime to continue studying there. What was also very apparent was the difference in the standard of living of the children of the families of high-ranking officials. After finishing high school in 1979, he began studying biology at the University of Havana. He stayed at the university for only a year and a half “because several things happened in Cuba during those years that changed my life for good.” First, the Cuban government’s reaction to the events at the Peruvian Embassy. Second, the acts of repudiation and official violence. “I became convinced that the government was nothing more than a fascist government,” he explains.

*I became convinced that the government was nothing more than a fascist government.*

## Villa Marista was the most palpable symptom of the Cuban terror

His family decided to flee, so his father and uncle began to look for options to leave the country. Unfortunately, the fisherman who was supposed to help them leave on a boat was a government informant, and they were all arrested. His mother and sister were released, but he, along with his father and uncle, were imprisoned for almost three months at the State Security headquarters in Villa Marista prison, located in Havana. “Villa Marista was the most palpable symptom of Cuban terror for all Cubans. People could not walk on the sidewalks of Villa Marista, they had to walk on the sidewalks on the other side of the street because access was not allowed to anyone unless State Security had summoned the person,” Sebastián describes. Later, they were sentenced: his uncle to seven years, his father to six years, and Sebastián to one year in Combinado del Este. During that year, which he spent in the cell with his father and uncle, he learned much about the struggle against the Batista regime, and he also met several of the most important dissidents. When he returned home, his mother and



sister were already about to leave the country. However, Sebastián had to stay in Cuba because the government would not authorize his departure abroad. He stayed living with his grandmother and found it very difficult to get a job.

### **Cuban Committee for Human Rights**

Meanwhile, in the Combinado del Este prison, his father and uncle developed close ties with the Cuban Committee for Human Rights. His father was released from prison in 1987, and both immediately became activists of the Committee. Later in 1988, his uncle Gustavo even became director of the Committee. They expressed their activism openly in the streets of Havana, were helping people abused by the government, and were reporting rights violations through foreign diplomats. These denunciations began to reach the Human Rights Commission in Geneva through the government of Ronald Reagan, who appointed the Cuban Armando Valladares as U.S. Ambassador to this commission. In 1990 the Cuban government was accused of systematic violation of human rights.

*Thousands of people were forced to attend that act of repudiation... They broke the windows, they broke the door, they destroyed the garden...*

### **Acts of repudiation**

The regime's response was immediate, a massive act of repudiation against Sebastián's house was organized: "Thousands of people were forced to attend that act of repudiation," as are being called the acts of violence and humiliation towards critics of the government. "They brought students from neighboring schools, they brought buses with construction brigades that were in the neighborhoods, they broke the windows, they broke the door, they destroyed the garden... That act lasted more than twelve hours," Sebastián recalls. In the following days, more repudiation acts were organized against him and against his uncle's house. Sebastián was expelled from his job and had to start working in construction.

### **Police hostility**

Meanwhile, the dissident movement was growing rapidly, and the international community began to pay more attention to what was happening in Cuba. At the same time, police hostility increased, and his father and uncle were arrested



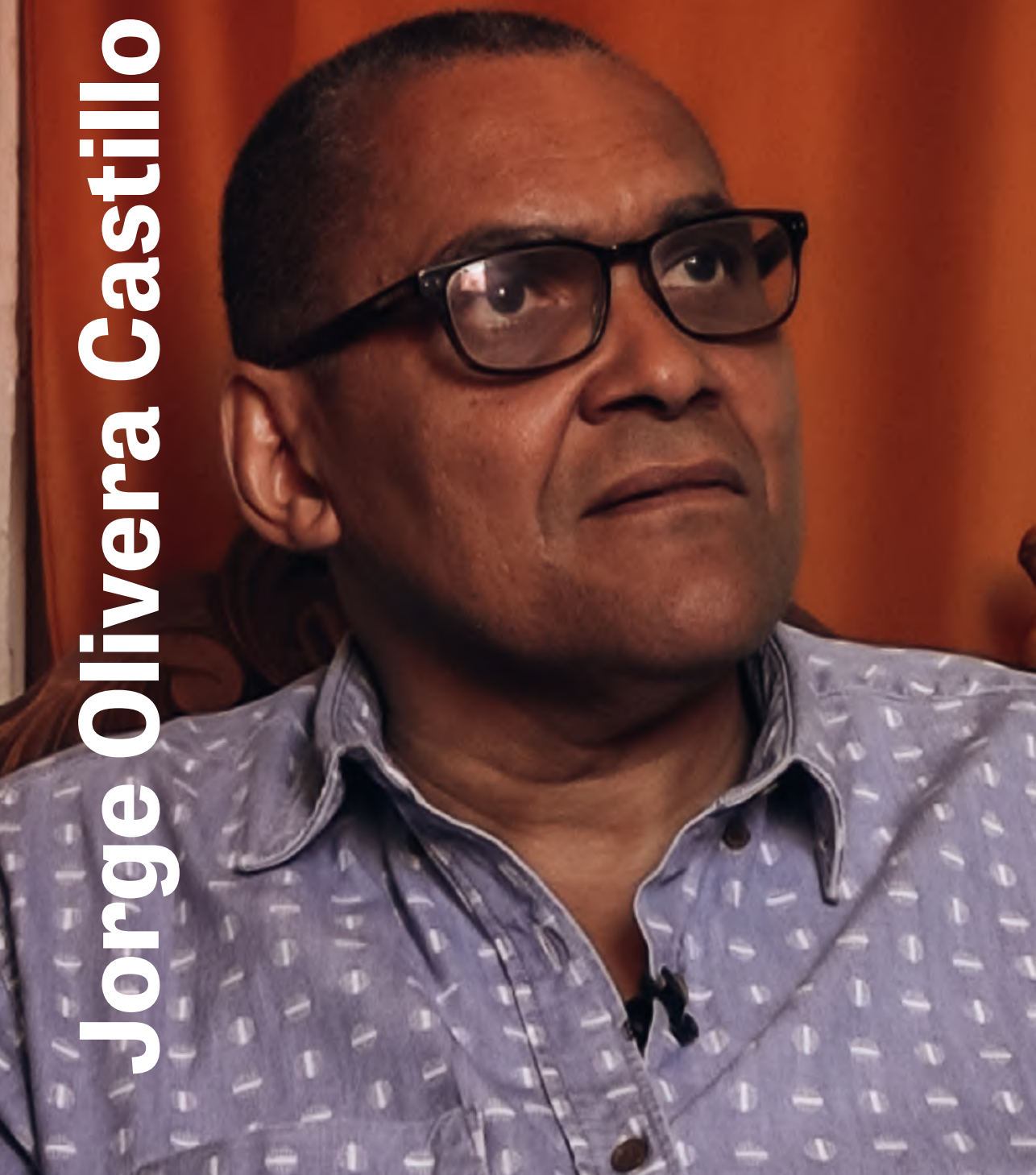
several times. In 1992, his father was sentenced to almost five years for an alleged crime of incitement to rebellion: “It was a completely mock trial organized by the political police where neither my father nor the defense played much of a role.”

### **Trip with no return**

In late 1992 Sebastián was allowed to leave Cuba and traveled to the United States to visit his mother and sister with the intention of returning to his homeland. However, he was told that if he returned to the island he would be imprisoned immediately. He began studying at Florida International University where he works to this day. His father was released in 1995 after a long international campaign and died in the United States two years later from a tumor that developed in prison. Sebastián continues to work for the Cuban opposition from the United States.

***Villa Marista was the most palpable symptom of Cuban terror for all Cubans.***

# Jorge Olivera Castillo (1961)



#poet #Angolan War #opposition activist #rafters

#Radio Martí #Havana Press #Cuba's Black Spring

#Independent Writers Club of Cuba



2018





*Edgar Allan Poe imagined so many sinister things. I experienced them.*

***“History is a very strict prison. Whenever you can, venture out to the yard. Don’t think that you would escape. It is useless and dangerous.” This is the poem *Warning*, written by Jorge Olivera Castillo, who is a writer, Cuban dissident and political prisoner.***

Jorge Olivera Castillo was born in the Belen neighborhood, in Old Havana, in 1961. He recalls that, just after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the neighborhood was known more for the number of brothels than for the picturesque colonial buildings that attract tourists to Cuba. Jorge recalls having a humble childhood, in which his illiterate grandmother and his mother gave him many good pieces of advice. His mother had to take care of the family budget since his parents had separated. However, in spite of having his father far away, they were always very close inside of his mind. As a little boy, Jorge had no idea that he would follow in the footsteps of his father.



## The Microfraction

Jorge's father, Marcos Orlando Olivera Sardiñas, as a young man was a member of the Socialist Party and actively participated in the struggle against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. He worked as a proofreader at the newspaper Periódico Hoy [Newspaper Today], and in 1967 was indicted in a plot against the Castro regime, called The Microfraction or also the Trial against Escalante, after the name of its leader, Aníbal Escalante. Jorge's father spent more than four years behind bars, and it was precisely that experience that led Jorge to join the political opposition in 1993. "My father was the driving force for me and although I did not agree with his him, I greatly admired his sense of conviction," says Jorge.

*My father was the driving force for me and although I did not agree with his him, I greatly admired his sense of conviction.*

### Uprooting children from the bosom of the family

Jorge had a scholarship and studied at the Oswaldo Herrera Polytechnic Institute. "I realized that by giving scholarships to students, the regime was taking away the power of the parents as it usurped the space that belongs to them in education. And therefore, today we witness many moral and ethical issues in youth which are a result of the separation of children from their parents at very complicated ages. I believe that it is a part of State's indoctrination to give scholarships to students and separate them from the parents' guardianship. It is a program of social control: to manipulate the minds of the students and to uproot them from the family's bosom," he thinks.

### There is nothing voluntary in a totalitarian system

In the early 1980s, Cuba had its military bases in Angola and Jorge got deployed to the war in Angola. He recalls he was very fragile as he contracted malaria, he remembers the constant bombing and the anti-personnel landmines. He also recalls the barbaric behavior of Cuban soldiers who demanded sex with the Angolan women in exchange for a few cans of tuna. He sums up his 26-month experience in this war as traumatic and even today he still feels some after-effects, despite not having directly seen live combat. "Young Cubans went to Angola to waste time and many lost their minds," Jorge recounts. When asked why he went to war voluntarily, he answers: "Everything is voluntary in quotation marks,



as there is nothing voluntary in a totalitarian system. If I didn't go, I would have been blacklisted."

### **Taking off the last masks**

Jorge worked as an editor at a TV station, which he describes as "a crucial tool of the policy of conditioning people's minds." He ended up on the blacklist that he talked about anyway, although as a war veteran, he managed to keep his job a bit longer. In 1991, he tried to leave Cuba on a raft. "It was this moment, when I realized that the only option I had was to leave Cuba," he confesses. However, they were captured by a military boat. He was not expelled from his job, but only demoted in position. He felt humiliated, and it no longer made sense for him to work there. "The time had come to take off the final mask," he says, referring to his decision to quit his job. In March 1993, he made his first broadcast on Radio Martí and thus became a dissident.

### **Creating an environment of rejection**

In September 1995, he began working for the independent agency Havana Press, where he was still employed at the time of this interview. In 1997, he experienced his first act of repudiation, when the police visited him for the first time. This event initiated a conflict with his mother-in-law which resulted in the breakup of his marriage. "The regime does not have scruples to break apart the family union and create an atmosphere of rejection," Jorge describes. But that was only the beginning. The Black Spring of 2003 was not long in coming.

### **Political imprisonment**

In March 2003, 75 people, known as the Group of 75 were put in prison. "I thought that the Cuban government would never dare to do this, to attract international attention in this way," says Jorge, still astonished. The total number of years in sentences given exceeded 4,000, and, according to Jorge, the trials did not respect the basic rules of a democracy. He was not able to speak to his lawyer until about five minutes before the trial. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison and so began his time in "the terrible conditions of political imprisonment." Initially, he was sent to the Combinado prison in Guantánamo, more than 900 kilometers from his place of residence, which was a common practice to further break family ties.

### **Beatings that echo in the mind**

His first memory of prison is the "frightening scream" of a man that was beaten in front of his eyes. "I can't get rid of these visuals," he recalls. He was kept in an isolation cell for nearly nine months, later he was transferred to Guantánamo prison and then to Agüica prison, which was closer to Havana. Finally, he finished his sentence at the Combinado del Este in Havana, where he received the extra-penal license, which is type of a suspended sentence, and was released for health reasons.



## Psychology of survival

As Jorge recalls, prisoners would do anything to get the extra-penal licenses to get out of prison. “Prisoners would sew their mouths shut with a needle in cold blood,” others would “put feces in their wounds so that it would rot and their limb would need to be amputated” and many other things. During all that time, Jorge gradually developed a way to survive: “a psychology of survival” and “a design for coexistence,” as he calls it.

### The creative spark of solitary confinement

The most difficult times were the months in solitary confinement, but even then he tried to make the most out of them. “When I share the beginnings of my professional career in literature, not only as a reader but as a writer, I say that these skills developed in a hostile environment. I do not know why this happened when I was in the isolation cells in the Combinado Prison in Guantanamo. I guess I had accumulated so many intense experiences that I had to convert them into literary expressions. I was very lonely, so I had to fill the space somehow. I did not talk to anyone, my only visitors were the rats, the ants and the wasps that entered through the bars of the window. And so, while standing on a little wall, looking out the window, seeing the grass outside, I thought about the good moments of my life, my family, my wife and my children. That was a way to fill the space. Because when you are in a prison, a day can last a week,” he says.

### Shared experience of father and son

Jorge’s father died two months before the Black Spring, so he did not live to see his son being sent to prison. “Since my dad was in prison, from the time he got out, he never got involved in politics again. He told me that he didn’t want me to go through the same experience. All people are affected by imprisonment. And all the more so, when it is unjust,” says Jorge.

### Confessions before twilight

In 2005, after his release from prison, Jorge’s first book was published. He had written it while in prison in Guantanamo. In 2006, he published “Confessions Before Twilight” which were followed by “Guest from Hell, ten short stories about the “horrifying and terrible conditions” in Cuban prisons, which, in his words, he wrote in “record time.” It took him no more than a week, as he lived under the constantly threat that if he continued writing, he could be imprisoned again. “Sometimes you learn more from literature than from history,” Jorge sums up. With this conviction in mind, in 2007 he founded the Independent Writers Club of Cuba.

### Nowadays, Cubans live like slaves

“Cuban society is a sick society in many ways,” Jorge explains. “It is a society that has put a policeman in everyone’s mind. People in Cuba live in fear, no one



trusts anyone, everyone suspects that the neighbor or their friend is a policeman. Breaking these patterns is very difficult because they have been passed down from generation to generation. There is constant indoctrination that is being put out through media and in the schools. This all leads to a general stagnation, which favors the government, and so of course the regime does all it can to maintain the status quo. And what is the most concerning is the inability of Cubans to sustain themselves economically. As they are unable to make ends meet based on their own efforts, whether physical or intellectual, they are dependent on the State. And since there is no legal way to make a living under these conditions, the Cuban has to either live off of remittances from family or friends that have settled abroad, or illegally, which makes them prone to being blackmailed. When a Cuban is forced to commit a crime according to the established laws in order to survive, and I do mean to survive, not to live in luxury, he becomes an ethically compromised being, a being who is prone to being blackmailed. Since he is doing something illegal, he is already in a weak position within society, because they will ask him: 'But how did you buy this?' That is to say, it is a system based on servitude. When you analyze how Cubans live today, we are slaves," he says.

### **Castroism is globally legitimized**

Despite his constant struggle against the regime, he is not too positive about the possible end of the dictatorship. "It really takes time for society to change, and we have not yet emerged from Castroism. And I don't think we will get rid of it in the short or medium term. I really don't think so. Castroism, has been legitimized, it is part of all international forums, it is accepted and the level of criticism is minimal. For example, with respect to Venezuela and Nicaragua... It is accepted and tolerated. The only thing that exists, the only country with which Cuba does not have diplomatic, commercial or economic relations, is the U.S. which has been to certain extent used as a source of legitimacy for the Cuban government. Unfortunately, Castroism is accepted in Europe, and these are very important countries in the international context. The dictatorship has been accepted. And in the United States the issue of Cuba has become more of an electoral issue than anything else," he stresses.

### **The future of Cuba**

"I have invested almost 25 years in the struggle for democratic Cuba," Jorge summarizes, and adds that, even if he does not personally live to see the change, he is happy for having fought for it. When visualizing what Cuba would be like in 15 years, he turns to the words of the late Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals, paraphrasing him: "In the future, Cuba will be capitalist and poor. But not necessarily democratic."



# Guillermo Fariñas Hernández (1962)

#personal meeting with Fidel Castro #military school

#Angolan War #studies in the Soviet Union #political prisoner

#human rights activist #psychologist #hunger strikes

#Sakharov Prize #non-violent struggle



2017



*“I was taught to hate those who are different from me, but the theory of nonviolent struggle teaches us to love those who think differently.”*

**“I saw what our anti-guerrilla troops were doing. I did not participate, but I observed everything they were doing. We acted like Nazis in Ukraine or Belarus with our scorched earth tactics. The units tasked with destroying the guerrillas got three times more Cuban rum than the others. They got them drunk to appease their conscience, which shocked me. When I was in Angola, I realized that we acted like the Nazis; we were just wearing different uniforms,” recalls Guillermo Fariñas Hernández, nicknamed “Coco.”**

Guillermo (Coco) Fariñas Hernández, born in 1962, was trained as an assassin from the age of 12. In 1974 his father sent him to one of the Camilo Cienfuegos Military Schools, popularly called “Los Camilitos,” where young Cubans prepared for military deployment to Latin America and Africa. Until then, Guillermo lived in the city of Santa Clara, located in the center of the island, a city known for its violence and criminality. His father’s decision was based on a desire to remove his son from the marginalized neighborhood where they lived. “Death was our daily bread. I was raised in the part of town where I saw death daily,” Guillermo says of his childhood and adolescence. “Where there is violence, death is always present. Several siblings or parents of my friends said that they would not survive beyond their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and that they would rather die in a shoot-out with the police. These are the circumstances in which I grew up,” he adds.



## Training to survive in the jungle

However, the violence he witnessed at Los Camilitos was even more intense. The trainers intentionally supported the cruel behavior of the children. The training had a clear objective: to survive in the jungle in Latin America and Africa, where Fidel Castro was trying to export the Cuban Revolution. Homosexuals or young people who did not fit in were frequently intimidated and beaten. “We received hard training to become killers capable of surviving in extreme conditions. We learned judo, karate, kung-fu, among other martial arts. Military service is planned violence, nothing more,” explains Guillermo. Thanks to his good results, he obtained a scholarship for a military school in the Soviet Union. “Many students wanted to have a military career. At that time, I felt fulfilled, as my worldview was a Marxist worldview, an intolerant totalitarian worldview. I believed that the worst system was capitalism, and the best one was socialism,” he admits.

## We behaved like the Nazis in Angola

In 1975, when Guillermo was 13 years old, the civil war began in Angola, which soon converted into an international conflict. The U.S. supported the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola. The opposing side, represented by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, was financed by the Soviet Union and Cuba. On November 4, 1975, Fidel Castro sent the first Cuban troops to Angola. “During one of his drunken binges, Raúl Castro ordered to send us to Angola, in the middle of the war. I was placed in command of ammunition and sabotage and reporting directly to Raúl Castro. I participated in 11 raids and was wounded in my leg and back. I didn’t die, -, that bullet didn’t kill me. I survived thanks to what I carried in my backpack,” he says. “My comrades and I concluded that we were behaving like Nazi Germans, just wearing different uniforms. Socialism was not as good or as humanitarian as they were telling us at the time,” says Guillermo.

*During one of his drunken binges, Raúl Castro ordered to send us to Angola, in the middle of the war.*

## The Tambov wolves

Guillermo returned from Angola exhausted. “The war left a toll on me. I suffered from survivor’s guilt syndrome, as it is called in psychology, but at that time, I didn’t know that yet.” Coco Fariñas’ life story may seem paradoxical. He grew up in a violent and dangerous neighborhood, was trained as a professional





assassin, and took part in the African conflict. While at an elite military school in the Soviet Union, his eyes opened and he became a convinced anti-communist. The military academy was located in the city of Tambov, about 480 kilometers from Moscow. This territory was known for the anti-Bolshevik guerrilla movement, and although the movement was defeated in 1922, rebel groups called “the Tambov wolves” remained in the area. “The town was divided into two parts. On one side, the peasants lived in wooden houses with wells in the yard, and on the other side, the military personnel lived in houses with all modern amenities,” recalls Guillermo. There were soldiers from all the countries of the socialist bloc at the academy, including Cuba. However, they all maintained contact with the local population, and some of Guillermo’s classmates even got married there: “They tried not to mix us with the non-military families. At first, I didn’t understand why. The locals had grown up surrounded by the anti-communist ideology and, thanks to them, several children were born in camps in Siberia.

### **Becoming an anti-communist**

“I became an anti-communist,” he says. At school, Guillermo learned how to wage war in the name of communism, and from local Russians, he learned what communism meant. “I read *Animal Farm* and *1984* by George Orwell in Russian. I became familiar with samizdat literature which was literature critical of the regime secretly written and circulated in the Soviet Union. I learned about everything that had happened in 1949 in Poland. The massacre of the officers in Poland, the betrayal, and the division of Poland between Stalin and Hitler in 1939. I learned about the Moscow trials or the assassination of Trotsky. The samizdat literature allowed me to understand these events that we did not know about in Cuba. This kind of literature was transmitted in this local Russian community, and as I was digesting it, I became an anti-communist,” he describes his gratitude to “the wolves of Tambov.”

### **Meeting Fidel Castro**

In 1985, during military training in Russia, Guillermo Fariñas Hernández was wounded, which ended his military career. Upon returning to Cuba, he studied psychology. At university, he began dissident activity, which led to constant surveillance by State Security. On three occasions, he was almost expelled from the university, although he was still a member of the Young Communist League (UJC). The conflict culminated when Guillermo defended his thesis on the effectiveness of the re-educational system of minors within the Ministry of the Interior. “I researched and criticized the program. I showed corruption, nepotism, sexual abuse (sexual relations were requested from the female relatives of the minors who were being re-educated). The students learned how to lever a window grill and other techniques used by delinquents,” he says. His thesis was discussed in secret, and the Ministry of the Interior took the copyright of his thesis. As Guillermo says, “they kidnapped it.” Although he managed to graduate, he was classified as politically unreliable and could not find a job. In the end, he worked in several hospitals as a pediatric psychologist. In 1993, in the middle of the Special Period, Fidel Castro inspected the hospital in Havana, where Guiller-



mo worked and announced the hospital's closure due to planned repairs and modernization. Guillermo did not like this so he confronted Fidel Castro directly. "Cubans were starving, so I asked Castro 'Are you telling us the truth?' Fidel got angry, and of course, I was fired. This hospital is still closed and unrepaired to this day and will be demolished. He summarizes that the communists don't do what they say they will do."

*I had to employ a method of confrontation with the government that did not involve violence. The most important thing is to be prepared to love the one who is doing you wrong.*

### **Incarcerations and hunger strikes**

Guillermo entered into an open battle with the communist regime when he started to publish denunciations about corruption in the hospitals and the black market. Powdered milk for children, towels, soaps, bed linen, and other necessities that the European Union donated to Cuba to support the health system during the economic crisis became black-market items. The hospital director, together with her close colleagues, resold these items and medical supplies. Guillermo did not remain silent and told her: "People like you, who steal milk from sick people and sick children, who do not recover from their illnesses, because they do not have sufficient food, what they deserve is two shots in the head." This is how he ended up in prison for the first time.

### **Moral conviction of the judges**

The court spent 11 months investigating his crime. Finally, the court sentenced him to another 11 months in prison based on a judicial practice called "moral conviction of the judges, "which is applied when there is no evidence against the accused, but the judges are convinced that the person is guilty. "When I got out of prison, I had nowhere to go, the State Security forced my partner to leave me, so I returned to Santa Clara. I got in touch with Raúl Rivero [Cuban poet and journalist], a close friend of mine, and with the CNN television channel, I stood in front of the hospital with a sign 'Down with corruption. I was beaten, interrogated, and accused again," he recounts.





## Hunger strikes

Once arrested, he declared his first hunger strike, which lasted 120 days and resulted in a disciplinary measure carried out on the director of the hospital. This was a significant achievement, so the hunger strike became a method to fight the Cuban communist regime. His second hunger strike landed him in prison again. “Although after I ended the hunger strike, my health condition was very poor, I could not walk and was close to death, but I always kept going,” he adds. Guillermo Fariñas became a nationally and internationally recognized human rights defender. In 2010, he carried out a 125-day hunger strike with other activists in the name of nonviolent struggle, accusing the Cuban government of having killed activist Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died on hunger strike the same year. “With the support of Las Damas de Blanco [Ladies in White], my fellow prisoners, Cubans in exile, the international community, and the Catholic Church, we managed to free 116 political prisoners from Cuban jails,” he stresses. Undoubtedly, for many of them, this release saved their lives.

## The non-violent struggle for democracy

In 2013, Coco Fariñas changed his strategy of confrontation with the Cuban government: “I had to employ a method of confrontation with the government that did not involve violence. The most important thing is to be prepared to love the one who is doing you wrong. You have to have the courage to receive a beating and not hit back,” he explains how non-violent struggle works. Although his friends often ask him why he allowed himself to be beaten, Guillermo answers: “I was always taught to hate those who were not like me, but the theory of non-violent struggle teaches us to love those who think differently, to love those who slander me, who shoot at me, who hit me. Guillermo Fariñas is also a journalist. He established the Cubanacán Press news agency and is currently general director of Producciones Nacán [Nacán Productions] and *Nacán* magazine. In October 2010, he received the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. “I maintain alertness. At any moment, they can assassinate me, as they did with Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, Sakharov Prize winner, or Laura Pollán, founder of Ladies in White. Both died under strange circumstances. I am prepared for this. The non-violent struggle gives me strength,” he concludes.

# Álvaro Alba (1963)

[#journalist](#) [#Exodus Program](#) [#studies in the Soviet Union](#)

[#radio Mambí](#) [#Radio and TV Martí](#) [#exiled in the USA](#)

[#opposition activist](#)



2018



## *Fidel Castro and Stalin were soulmates.*

**“If there was something identifiable that Fidel Castro and Stalin shared, it was that they were soulmates,” says Álvaro Alba, a Cuban journalist, historian, and fervent critic of Castroism living in exile in the United States despite being born into a privileged family that was supportive of the Cuban regime.**

Álvaro was born in December 1963 into a military family in Matanzas which predestined him to a life in a privileged class: “It was a life where you did not question what was happening in the country. Since you had a good education, schools were equipped with everything you needed, there was no shortage of food, your school had a swimming pool where you would relax after your studies... As I was in a boarding school, on weekends, there always was a party at some classmate’s house,” says Álvaro. Belonging to this privileged class meant being removed from the daily reality of most Cubans: “Since all of the students around me belonged to a special social class, no one was concerned about the existence of political prisoners or the reasons why so many people were leaving the country. I never came across a pamphlet or any anti-establishment book that was being handed out. It was a life where the regime was accepted, where nobody questioned the fact that there were no elections, and young people enjoyed a life full of parties and summer vacations on Varadero beaches. It was a joyful and peaceful life, without any questioning of politics.”



## **It was cruel to maintain this system**

Álvaro began his studies in Havana, but in 1980 he moved to the Soviet Union (USSR), where he began to study Law, International Relations, and History. He left Cuba as a young man who was convinced that the Castro regime's political system was the correct one, but right in the cradle of communism, his ideas were beginning to be molded towards the opposite side. "I started reading *The Gulag Archipelago* [by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn] several times but it was difficult to read it in Russian. So I decided to read a book that I thought was not as difficult, the *Kolyma Stories* by Varlam Shalamov, which horrified me. I was horrified when I read this book, seeing the ruthlessness and the cruelty of how human beings were treated in this system. He further explains: "While studying Russian and Soviet history and literature I came to understand that communism in Cuba had no future and I realized that it was cruel to maintain this system," he explained. So he began to question the communist regime until he eventually became a dissident.

## **One of the moments that marks your life**

During Easter in 1983, Álvaro visited a church with four classmates. The liturgy made an impact on him: "I had never entered a church in my life, even though there were plenty in Cuba and there was even a convent of nuns on the corner of my street, as I knew it was forbidden and it was not the right thing to do." Similarly, in Moscow he "deciphered" an old childhood memory: in his Latin class, he was reminded of a well-known phrase that his grandmother used to sing to him when he was a child, which he had thought was just a verse from some song. However, it was the Lord's Prayer in Latin, which he came to realize his grandmother had sung to him as a subtle way to pray with him, until she decided that it was too risky to continue because of the oppressive nature of the regime, and stopped doing it: "I realized that the repression in Cuba was so strong that my grandmother, in order not to hurt me, had stopped singing what I thought was a song. It is a moment that marks you, that makes you think about where you come from and what is happening in your country," says Álvaro.

## **Solidarity among the Soviet people**

Despite the geographical distance between the USSR and Cuba, the life of Cubans in Moscow was subject to the decisions of the island's government: "Our passport was never renewed. The passports we had as students or the passports that officially allowed us to stay in the USSR had to be renewed every two years. And when you tried to get it renewed, they told you no, and you had to leave the country. Personally, I wrote a letter to Eduard Shevardnadze [Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR under the presidency of Mikhail Gorbachev, 1985-1991] asking for permission [to stay in the USSR]. There was, however, an agreement between Havana and Moscow in Soviet times that mandated that, in order for you to live in another country, you had to have the authorization of the other country. In other words, a Cuban national had to have Cuban autho-





rization from the Cuban government authorizing him to stay in the USSR and a Soviet national had to have authorization of the USSR to allow him to stay or to live in Havana". During his struggle to stay in the USSR, he met many important people who supported him, such as Jelena Bonner (human rights activist and wife of physicist Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov), and the dissident Sergey Kovaliov. "We found a lot of solidarity among the Soviets that we did not expect and for that we will always be grateful," Álvaro concludes.

### **Baptism in journalism**

Apart from a brief trip to Cuba in 1988, Álvaro remained in the USSR after 1989, so obviously the letter to Shevardnadze worked. What he did not know at that time was that Eduard Shevardnadze would trigger another important milestone in his life. In 1989, Álvaro was back in Moscow, where he had started working as a correspondent for the ABC newspaper. In 1990, Shevardnadze resigned and Álvaro was "baptized in journalism", as he called his first job assignment for ABC covering this development. However, this was just the beginning, as Álvaro had a great career ahead of him, full of travels all over the USSR, covering issues in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, etc.

### **Sorrow for Cuba**

During all this time, however, he felt a deep "sorrow for Cuba", as he puts it, and therefore he pushed himself, together with his Cuban compatriots living in the USSR, to found the Cuban Union. They realized that here in the very seat of global communism there were "more political and civil liberties than in Cuba". From there, the Cuban Union began to cooperate with various human rights organizations, demanding freedoms for Cubans with representatives in the USSR. Álvaro remembers one of the demonstrations that took place on January 28, 1991, where a group of about thirty people, including his wife and young son, demonstrated in the bitter Russian cold in front of the Cuban embassy in Moscow. However, the denunciation of the human rights situation in Cuba was not met with a positive response, but the protest, like many others, was brutally repressed by the police. "Even my little boy was beaten and had his winter coat torn," Álvaro recalls.

### **Exodus**

Cubans in the USSR presented their denunciation of harassment before the parliament in Moscow. Later on, the Cuban-American National Foundation and the "Exodus" program were created - which allowed Cubans to take refuge in the United States based on a series of interviews conducted at the US Embassy. In 1993 Álvaro signed up for this program and received the opportunity to travel with his family to the U.S. "Under this program, almost ten thousand Cubans from all over the world entered the U.S.," Álvaro said of the "Exodus" program.





## The disintegration of the Soviet Empire

Álvaro took advantage of his journalistic experience and immediately after his arrival in the U.S. started to work for the Cuban-American radio station Radio Mambí. About five years later, in 1998, a vacancy opened up at Martí Noticias and he joined the station as a reporter. Here he had the chance to witness the fall of another totalitarian regime, that of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014. He experienced firsthand the talks at the Hotel Ukraine, which became a hospital for the wounded. He remembers the release of Yulia Tymoshenko, how political prisoners were let out of jail, and the tears of joy he cried with his son: "It was one of the most important moments. I did not witness a free Cuba yet, Cuba is not free or democratic, but I did see the disintegration of the Soviet empire, I saw fourteen republics declaring themselves free, fifteen counting Russia," he recounted. As if it were yesterday, he remembers and describes the details of how on December 25, 1991, the Soviet flag was lowered in Moscow, and the Russian flag was raised. Today, however, not everything is as rosy as it seemed: "In March 2000, I was there for the first of Putin's presidential elections. I never thought that the country would again take on the authoritarian and dictatorial features that Russia displays today," he concludes.

*I did not witness a free Cuba yet, Cuba is not free or democratic, but I did see the disintegration of the Soviet empire, I saw fourteen republics declaring themselves free, fifteen counting Russia.*

### Broken family ties

When Álvaro is asked how the fall of communism affected his relationship with his military father, his sadness is perceptible: "The case of my family is like that of other Cuban families. My father did not accept my decision to stay in the USSR. He wanted me to return to Cuba and participate in the construction of socialism on the island so from the beginning of the 1990s, until perhaps 1998, we had no communication." In fact, since his last brief stay in Cuba in 1988, Álvaro has not seen his family in person again, with the exception of being able to meet his sister in Mexico in 2002 thanks to a special invitation that allowed her to leave the island. However, the family ties that were broken by their differences of opinion about the Cuban regime seem to have been rebuilt with the next generation, that is, with Álvaro's children, who were able to reconcile with their grandfather,



and they were able to do that “despite the fact that my youngest son is a member of U.S. military,” Álvaro laughs. “The generation of my children was able to understand the generation of my parents. Maybe it was possible because my two sons have never been to the island and have not lived in Cuba,” he explains.

### **The essence of communism**

The trajectory of Álvaro's life has led him from being a person in support of the Cuban regime to the other “shore”, that is, to a person who is critical of communism. His career in journalism allowed him to witness some of the most important events of the late 1980s and early 1990s: he saw the fall of the Soviet regime, he observed with emotion the freedom that was reclaimed by many countries... This experience, together with his excellent training in history and literature, makes him one of the most appropriate persons to debate about the communist regime: “The essence of communism, I believe, is the suppression of freedoms: be it the freedom of the individual, the right to own private property or the freedom to live your life as a human being. It takes away your freedom of choice, it takes away your right to private property, and in the end, if you do not submit, it takes away your life. I believe that this is a great evil, the nefarious essence of a system where free thinking is not tolerated. Castroism combined all these elements, it added a tropical accent of a country full of palm trees, beaches, and music, which has enchanted the political left of the entire world, but deep down it is one of the most authoritarian communist regimes that has ever existed.”

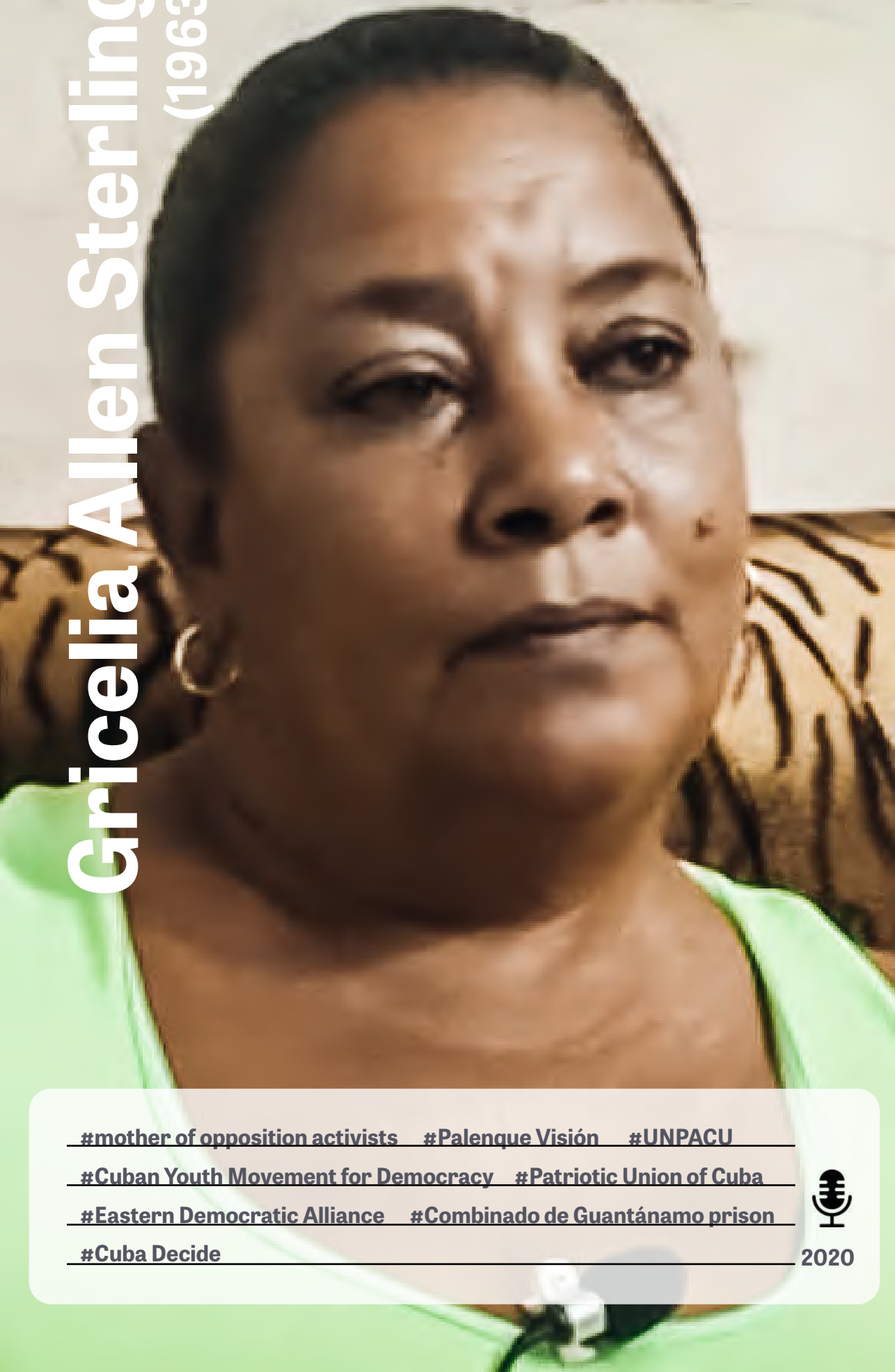
### **Soul mates**

He calls Castro and Stalin “soul mates” because of numerous coincidences in their lives: “They were both raised in religious institutions, they were failures in their personal lives, as their daughters, Svetlana [Alliluyeva, the only daughter of Joseph Stalin] and Alina [Fernández Revuelta, daughter of Fidel Castro, conceived out-of-wedlock but recognized by him], rebelled against them, and their generals, [Mikhail Nikolayevich] Tukhachevsky and [Arnaldo] Ochoa [Sánchez], at some point confronted them despite having served them previously. Besides, both of them had a totalitarian conception of power, which does not allow dissent, and both were capable of killing anyone.”

### **The stunted Cuban**

What was Álvaro's opinion in 2018 about the future of Cuba? “They say that pessimists are well-informed optimists. I am a pessimist. I am a pessimist because the Cuban people have been stunted. We are all marked, we are all hurt, we all have a division in our family, we all have a dead relative who drowned in the Straits of Florida, or who spent twenty, ten, fifteen years in jail. And as a result it will take two or three generations for a democracy to exist in Cuba, for it not to matter whether or not a Castro is in power, and to make sure that Cuba would not fall into the hands of drug cartels and that corruption would no longer be a fundamental indicator of the Cuban economy.”

# Gricelia Allen Sterling (1963)



#mother of opposition activists #Palenque Visión #UNPACU

#Cuban Youth Movement for Democracy #Patriotic Union of Cuba

#Eastern Democratic Alliance #Combinado de Guantánamo prison

#Cuba Decide



2020



*My children are members of Cuban opposition; I will never turn my back on them.*

**Hunger strikes, arrests, convictions, and beatings; this is the daily life of a family that opposes the communist regime in Cuba, a reality that Gricelia Allen Sterling, mother of two young opposition activists, describes. She adds: “I will not sit around waiting for my children to be killed. I will do whatever it might take.”**

Gricelia Allen Sterling was born in November 1963 in the city of Guantánamo. Her life has never been easy, especially when in 1982 her first son Enyor Díaz Allen was born: “His father never took care of him. I raised him alone, with the help of my parents,” says Gricelia. In 1989 her second son, Eider Frómata Allen, was born, and a few years later, she had a daughter. It was precisely in the midst of the socioeconomic crisis of the Special Period. “I had to take care of my children so that they would grow up in a stable environment, and I had to be very creative while cooking as we did not have much to eat. It was hard. It was a difficult situation in all aspects,” Gricelia says. In addition to the famine in Cuba, she had to face various illnesses of her children - asthma, dengue fever, and leptospirosis, a disease that at that time was fatal. “There was no medicine. Many children died from leptospirosis in the 1990s, so it is a miracle that my son is alive,” she adds gratefully. Her children grew up. They finished elementary school and high school, even the mandatory military service. However, Gricelia never had the peace of mind that her children were safe as her sons joined the opposition movement in her country.



## Enyor Díaz Allen

Enyor decided to join the opposition, and in 2008 he approached his neighbor, who was an independent journalist. He then joined the Cuban Youth Movement for Democracy in Guantánamo, where he met its founder, dissident Rolando Rodríguez Lobaina, and joined the Eastern Democratic Alliance. In August 2008, he was arrested for demonstrating publicly as an opposition activist for the first time. The following year, he was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison for participating in a protest against the communist regime and demanding respect for human rights. During this incident, he was transferred from Baracoa, where the march took place, to the Combinado prison in Guantánamo. History repeated itself in August 2010, when he was detained during the Guantánamo State Security operations. To demand fair and legal treatment, Enyor immediately went on hunger strike. In 2011 he was arrested for taking photos of an act of repudiation, a term the Cuban authorities use to refer to acts of violence and humiliation towards critics of the government. Enyor wanted to publish the photos in the independent newspapers Hablamos Press and Cubanet, where he worked as a correspondent. All these incidents and confrontations with the National Police were painful moments for Gricelia: “For me, as a mother, it was very difficult. I already knew that when any Cuban person expressed any idea which was different from the thinking officially authorized by the regime, it was a problem.” Since the persecution, threats, and attacks against Enyor, his wife, and the rest of the family members were never-ending, in 2014, Enyor decided to emigrate to the United States.

*For me, as a mother, it was very difficult. I already knew that when any Cuban person expressed any idea which was different from the thinking officially authorized by the regime, it was a problem.*

## Eider Frómeta Allen

Gricelia's second son, Eider Frómeta Allen, followed in his older brother's footsteps by joining the opposition on December 1, 2011, when he participated in an opposition march. As a result of his participation, he was arrested and transferred to the premises of State Security. Here he was attacked and injured in the head by a high-ranking officer. He then had to be hospitalized and underwent surgery. “I went to complain directly to the State Security, then to the Department of Attention to Citizenship, but it was always my son's word against the officers' word. As





a mother, I already knew what was coming. Both sons were members of the opposition, so the harassment I suffered- prisons, threats, detentions- was twofold. “Gricelia describes when her second son joined the opposition movement. Eider was sentenced to one year in prison, initially in La Majimiana correctional facility, a labor camp, and later, he was transferred to the Combinado prison in Guantánamo. Upon his release from prison, he resumed his activities in the Cuban Youth Movement for Democracy until he was imprisoned for the second time in 2014 when he was charged with the crime of assault for allegedly throwing a stone at the car of the head of State Security in Guantánamo. In addition to being sentenced to one year in jail, he was fined 5,000 Cuban pesos, which is a difficult sum to pay.

## **UNPACU**

“Imagine, his wife was six months pregnant, and when his son Eider was born, he was in prison and could not even see him,” recalls Gricelia. When Eider was released from prison in 2015, he started working as a freelance journalist in the newspaper Palenque Visión. In 2019 he decided to join another independent organization, the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU). He started promoting the Cuba Decides movement to advocate for independent elections in his country. During this period, he was again arrested by State Security and sentenced through an arbitrary trial to a year and a half of imprisonment in the Combinado prison of Guantánamo. In January 2020, Eider was attacked by another inmate who was a member of the Inmate Council. After this incident, Eider was transferred to the Camagüey high-security prison. His sentence was extended for six years, until 2026, due to this crime of disorderly conduct in the penitentiary establishment.

## **I will do what it takes for my children**

Gricelia’s children, Enyor and Eider, have been victims of persecution, threats, attacks, invasive surveillance, fines, travel restrictions, denial of employment and reprisals against family members. Gricelia’s family has experienced all these types of violations of their rights and freedoms. “All people around Eider bad-mouthed him. His neighbors and police officers told his wife that she had no future with him. His wife suffered many threats, even nightly house searches,” Gricelia narrates and adds: “On another occasion, during the incarceration of my youngest son, they suspended his visits because he did not wear his uniform, nor could he use the telephone.” Another type of harassment that has marked her family are the arbitrary trials without lawyers: “I had to hire a lawyer, but my son Eider could not speak with him before the trial,” she says. Not only her children have faced the aggressions of the State Security, Gricelia also suffered: “One day the National Police threatened me with Article 370, for having published the situation of my son Eider in social media. The National Police insisted that I was receiving money from abroad from the counterrevolutionaries and that I was on the list of citizens who received money from the CIA,” she recalls one of many interrogations. “I am not an opposition activist, I have never been a counterrevolutionary, but my children belong to the opposition, and I will never turn my back on them. For my children, I will do whatever it takes,” Gricelia stresses.

# Maritza Lugo (1963)



#female opposition activist #human rights activist

#family member of political prisoner

#Democratic Party November 30 #female political prisoner

#plantados #rooted ones #hunger strikes #Los Plantados



2018



*"If Cuba is free, we will return to lift up this society."*

**"I grew up among hard-working Cuban peasants. These people were not too educated, but always tried to raise their children in a simple, clear, true and fair way." This is how Maritza Lugo describes her upbringing in Santa María del Rosario, where she was born in 1963. Despite not knowing the concepts of democracy and freedom, even as a child, she felt that injustices were occurring in the country. "When I was taking the pre-university courses and I saw how the regime beat my classmates at school just because they wanted to emigrate, I said: 'this can't be right'," says Maritza.**

From that moment on she began to confront the regime, defending her schoolmates. Because of these protests, she was prevented from entering university and playing sports. "From then on, living my life became a real problem," she says.



## Horrible things

Maritza had to stay at home because of all this, so she married quite young to one of the leaders of the Cuban opposition, Rafael Ibarra Roque. Together they began to get involved in an opposition human rights group. However, this group was dissolved by the Cuban authorities. Later, around 1992, they joined the Democratic Party 30 de Noviembre [30 November]. After some time, Rafael Ibarra Roque took over the leadership of the Party, because the person who had been leading it had emigrated to the U.S. "The party was weakened, because it had suffered many blows. As this organization was made up of former political prisoners who had belonged to the same group as Fidel Castro, Fidel had particular hatred for this group and so the government sought revenge against it," she says.

## Cells in the provinces

Her husband tried to reorganize and raise the organization throughout Cuba with cells and groups in the provinces. "We had to study, because in Cuba there is so much ignorance about what democracy is, what freedom is... You can hardly fight, because you don't know what to do," says Maritza. As a result of the activities of the Democratic Party November 30th, the authorities brought false charges against her husband, imprisoning him for 18 years. They accused him of sabotage and launched a strong smear campaign against him. "The government started to out together a campaign against him saying that he had raped a girl... horrible things," she recalls.

## Total helplessness

Maritza was left alone with her two daughters. In addition to her husband's imprisonment, the authorities took away their domestic animals. "They said it was illegal enrichment. They left me in total destitution," she recounts. However, Maritza received some help from abroad and from friends, so she took over the leadership of the Democratic Party November 30. Many movements joined the Party and Maritza traveled all over the island. It was during that time that the persecution by State Security against her began, as they did not like the fact that people were meeting in her house and that the number of sympathizers of the 30th of November Party was growing. The persecution escalated to such an extent that Maritza was arrested and accused of two charges: pre-criminal social dangerousness and bribery. The first had to do with her activities as an organizer of an opposition movement, and the second with her activity of going to prisons and clandestinely recording testimonies of political prisoners.

## Everything was a lie

On one occasion she managed to convince a guard to let her in with her recording device, however, all was revealed, and both she and the guard were accused of corruption. "I just talked to the guard and I convinced him. I even defended him in the same trial, I said I didn't know him," she says. Once arrested, while still waiting for her trial, she stopped eating, thus protesting against her arrest, which according to her there was no basis for. As a result of her attitude, she was placed in an isolation cell of minimal dimensions, where it was impossible to even tell whether it was day or night. As





she did not give up her protest, her case was brought to trial more quickly. She later learned that her case was constantly being made public on Radio Martí, and international pressure was brought to bear on the Cuban authorities. “I was nobody important, but they made me more important by jailing me in an isolation cell. Despite the fact that I had done nothing wrong. They took me to trial, sentenced me to two years and sent me back to prison,” she says.

### **Recognized female opposition activist**

After 20 days in prison, thanks to the international pressure, she was sent home to serve her sentence. There she recovered and began her opposition activities again, this time with an emphasis on the Church. “There were some very good priests who even asked for the freedom of political prisoners, but there were others who would close the church to us because they were scared of us. For instance, the State Security would visit them and tell them that they were going to close the church if they let us in, many things happened,” she says. After three or four years, she was accused again and was imprisoned in the women’s prison Manto Negro [Black Cloak]. This time she entered as a recognized opposition activist. She was placed in a work detail with other prisoners, where she dedicated herself to various activities: she gave martial arts classes, led prayer groups, and gained a lot of respect among the prisoners, to such an extent that they would inform her when the guards asked them to keep an eye on her.

### **I regret many things**

During her time in prison, Amnesty International tried unsuccessfully to visit her, and at the same time the authorities sent her to Camagüey prison, where she was able to meet her husband. However, she did not know that it was all part of a strategy to prevent people that were interested in her case from seeing what the real situation was like. “I regret a lot of things... I regret that my daughters had to grow up with my family and their father’s family, they could only come and see me and their dad in prison. That period of their life was very hard for them,” Maritza sums up.

### **Released from prison and exiled**

Once released from prison, Maritza traveled to the U.S. on January 11, 2002. “Today I am just another exile,” she says. According to her, arriving in a new country was very difficult, especially adapting to a completely different world. “Everything here is very complicated, from getting a credit card to a job. Everything is very difficult,” she adds. Once in the U.S., she began to work with other political prisoners, such as Ángel de Fana and Mario Chanes de Armas for the organization Los Plantados. In this way she was able to unite her generation of political prisoners with the previous one. She denounced human rights violations in Cuba at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. However, as he says, the administration of President Barack Obama withdrew the subsidy they were receiving, making it impossible for them to continue their work. Even so, they continue to receive complaints by e-mail from Cuba and they help to disseminate them. “It hurts a lot to know that a totalitarian regime continues to govern in Cuba and we can’t do anything about it,” she concludes.



# Berta Soler Fernández (1963)

**#female opposition activist #human rights activist**

**#Ladies in White #family member of a political prisoner**

**#Cuba's Black Spring #exiled children**



2018



*“I don’t know when I am a mother and when I am a woman, but I am always a human rights activist.”*

**“Look, we are married, we have two children and I am a member of an opposition group, I am a human rights defender. You tell me if this marriage is going to continue,” her husband, Ángel Moya Acosta, told Berta Soler Fernández in 1999. For Berta it was a real surprise, since “between the two of us, I was always the one badmouthing the regime,” she recalls. He is a political prisoner of the Black Spring and she is the leader of the Ladies in White. And still today, hand in hand, they continue to fight.**

Berta Soler Fernández was born in Matanzas in July 1963 as the youngest of seven siblings. Her childhood was marked by the death of her father when Berta was only seven years old. “We were dirt poor,” Berta says when talking about the financial difficulties they faced, but her mother always did her best to make sure the family was happy. Berta’s voice resonates with gratitude towards her mother, who always knew how to throw “a nice *Quinceañera* party, as if we didn’t have money problems,” she recalls.



## A Lady in White

In 1981, Berta finished her studies and became a medical technician in Microbiology. In 1984 she moved to Havana, where she worked as a microbiology technician at a obstetrics and gynecology hospital. However, she had a strong desire to continue studying, so she enrolled in the program for working individuals at the Faculty of Pharmacy, and in 1984 she changed the primary focus of her studies for a degree in Biochemistry. She did not finish her studies, but she continued to work at the hospital in Havana until 2009 when she was forced to leave because of the constant persecution by the State Security which had assigned a person to keep an eye on her. She did not want to “put the lives of many newborns at risk”, she says and she continues to share her life story, listing the reasons that forced her to become what is she now, a Dama de Blanco (Lady in White).

## Ángel Moya

Her current life is shaped by being a Lady in White. However, her activism is also marked by her 35-year-old marriage to Ángel Moya Acosta, a Cuban dissident, and human rights activist. They met at a party in 1982, and they got married six years later. Their marriage survived Ángel's deployment to Angola in the late 1980s. In October 1991, their first daughter was born, and four years later, in May 1995, their son was born.

## Her husband's change of heart

In the early 1990s, Angel Moya's behavior changed, and Berta began to understand why. It turned out that, since 1995, Angel's opinion about the Cuban regime had been changing, and little by little he became involved with the opposition movement. The basis for this abrupt change of opinion of a former Cuban soldier lies in his deployment in Angola, where he saw first-hand how the regime handled military operations, how money was being wasted, how the soldiers' families were falling into poverty because the regime did not take care of them... And finally, while listening to Radio Martí, he realized how the regime was treating political prisoners which he did not like. In 1999, Angel confessed to Berta his change of heart and said that he had joined the opposition movement.

## Karate instead of prison

“[Ángel] had told me about State Security summoning him and bothering him,” says Berta Soler about the time right before her husband was imprisoned for the first time. He was then jailed four more times. “It was hard for me, as my two children were small,” she continued. “Ángel was held in Agüica, Matanzas. When we're going to visit him, I tricked my children by telling them that he was in a karate school. Instead of telling them that the prison was called Agüica, I told them it was called 'Agüita' [Water]. So I didn't tell them that he was in prison, but that he was in school. So essentially, I was lying to them, which was wrong,” says Berta.



## **My husband is not a murderer**

In 2003, during Cuba's Black Spring, Ángel was among the 75 dissidents and human rights activists who were imprisoned. At that moment it was no longer possible to continue lying to the children, as Ángel was sentenced to 20 years in jail. "Mommy, why did you lie to us before?" her children would ask. And she didn't just have to explain it to her children, but suddenly to her neighbors as well. Her house was subjected to thorough searches by State Security and the neighbors would stare at her all surprised. "I started to admit that he was a human rights defender, and not a murderer so that it would be clear who he was. Because many people thought that he was still a military man," Berta explains. "In Cuba people live with double standards. Today they might yell at you for being a dissident and tomorrow they will leave Cuba. Today they might yell at you and tomorrow they will be off asking any embassy to help them leave the country. Today they yell at you and afterward when they are home, they complain about not having food, or money to buy clothes, shoes, and backpacks for their children," says Berta.

*In Cuba people live with double standards. Today they might yell at you and tomorrow they will be off asking any embassy to help them leave the country.*

## **My children were understanding**

"My children were very understanding, they never blamed us for anything, and they told us that we were both exemplary parents. They said this to us and they have continued saying it. So, we didn't have to instill these kinds of beliefs in them, as they could see the reality for themselves as they lived it. But I did talk with them to explain some issues so they would understand. And they did. They understood it well," Berta explains how she had to share with their children the information that their dad had been sentenced to 20 years in prison.

## **Children, husband, and activism**

When Ángel had already been in prison for seven years, Berta left her job and began to dedicate herself solely to human rights and to fight for the freedom of her husband and other political prisoners. "In 2009, when I decided not to



work, I just had my children, my husband, and the activism as a Lady in White. It was very difficult, the whole time.... I have to be very grateful to my sister, who supported me a lot. Sometimes I didn't even sleep at home, I had to stay at Laura Pollán's house [the first leader of the Ladies in White], or go to another place, or another province. And my sister took care of my children. I talked a lot to the children about the importance of behaving well, of being good students, being respectful, and also I made sure they understood what their parents were doing, what I was doing, and why," Berta summarizes.

### **We carried the pain inside**

"We decided to dress in white because we were expressing that we carried the pain inside. The white clothes represent our wish for justice and love," Berta explains the reason why this became the name of the human rights movement and why the clothes they wear are white. However, there was a difficult moment coming up. "On October 14, 2011, they handed over to us the body of Laura," she recalls. The death of the first leader of the Ladies in White was a shock for all of them, but especially for Berta. "We were a perfect duo, me and Laura," she recalls. Just four days later, on October 18, 2011, the group of 58 Ladies met in the meeting room, and Berta proposed herself as a leader. Her proposal was unanimously accepted.

### **They underestimated me**

After Laura Pollán's death, State Security thought the Ladies in White would dissolve. "State security started saying that I was a dumb, illiterate black woman and that I could not lead the Ladies in White. Now that Laura was dead, they

*Only God knows that I am on the right path and that all of us who identify as human rights activists, we have been put on this path. It was God's will for us to become activists who advocate for the freedom of our husbands.*





thought that there was nothing more to do, the Ladies in White were finished. They underestimated me. I told them so a year later: 'You underestimated me, I've been here for a year already. Okay. And here I am,' she says with enormous strength in her voice. "Violence begets violence. But that is not the case for us, as violence makes us stronger," she adds.

### **We were all born to be Ladies in White**

And so it is. Berta Soler, together with the 450 other women that make up the Ladies in White movement have continued with its activism up to today. At the time of this interview, the movement had already organized 146 Sunday gatherings in public places, where they- all dressed in white- demanded democracy, freedom of political prisoners and advocated for respect of human rights in Cuba. "Only God knows that I am on the right path and that all of us who identify as human rights activists, we have been put on this path. It was God's will for us to become activists who advocate for the freedom of our husbands. Sometimes I don't even know when I am a wife, or when I am a mother. It seems to me that I am almost always an activist or a defender and promoter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," says Berta. Her husband, Ángel Moya, remains by her side. Their children were sent for security reasons to the United States, where they remain in exile. Berta and Ángel continue to fight for freedom in Cuba. "I think that when one feels love or pursues a goal out of love, the effort is not so difficult, even if it is difficult," she concludes.

***Violence begets violence. But that is not the case for us, as violence makes us stronger.***

# Orlando Gutiérrez Boronat (1965)

[#opposition activist](#) [#exiled in the USA](#) [#Alpha 66](#)

[#Cuban Democratic Directorate](#) [#professor](#)

[#historian](#) [#Federation of Cuban Students](#) [#Radio Republic](#)

[#Agreement for Democracy in Cuba](#)



2018



*The communists thought that because we were leaving the country, we were no longer Cubans. They were completely wrong.*

**“The departure was permanent. The communist regime did not allow people to return, nor did it allow visits,” says Orlando Gutiérrez Boronat, a university professor and a founder of the Cuban Democratic Directorate.**

Orlando was born in November 1965. His family from his mother’s side came from the eastern part of Cuba, while his father’s side of the family came from the west. “My family did not have large amounts of money, they were not rich in the material sense, but they were very rich spiritually and morally,” Orlando comments. “They had a very special bond with Cuba. My grandmother venerated the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre [Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre], which is the most important religious symbol of Catholic Cubans as well as for many non-Catholic Cubans. She also revered the memory of José Martí, who is sometimes called the apostle of the Cubans,” he recalls.



## Organic unity with Cuba

His great-grandfather held important positions in the Cuban Congress. “He passed on to me something that is difficult to describe: a sense of organic unity with Cuba, which goes beyond the dictatorship in power. This is a sense of responsibility for Cuba and the notion that our life is part of this common destiny,” Orlando comments, emphasizing the historical depth of what this sentiment meant about being Cuban that goes back to the struggle for independence and the constitution of the Republic.

## Cuba between 1898 and 1959

“We have to note that Cuba had already achieved a lot between 1898 and 1959. And anyone who realizes this will also see how exceptional it is to be Cuban. Being a Cuban person represents a very powerful mix of Spanish, African, Chinese descendants, and some others, that blended together organically and produced a very hard-working and creative nation. And this was the country that lost everything to be free in 1959, even with all the political problems [that existed before the Revolution], we had achieved impressive growth,” says Orlando, whose parents felt they had contributed to this growth, saying that “they were building the Republic, and the Republic was building them”.

## A push for Cuba

Orlando remembers that, at first, he believed in the Revolution, thinking it would give Cuba the push it needed to develop. In this sense, Orlando compares Cuba to Taiwan noting that Taiwan is now a functioning state while Cuba has regressed. “If Cuba does not take a radical change of course in the short term and does not create an open economy and society, with free multi-party elections, if it does not draft a new constitution, develop the rule of law, it is going to be a completely failed state,” he comments.

## Indoctrination programs

Orlando recalls the television programs he watched as a child: The Three Musketeers, Henry of Lagardere, William Tell, but he also remembers a soap opera about “some guerrillas who go to the mountains and overthrow a dictatorship,” obviously referring to Fidel Castro’s seizure of power. “My parents forbade me from watching those episodes because they thought it was indoctrination and propaganda,” he recalls. It makes him laugh when he also recalls a game of darkening squares that used to be published in the newspaper. If the squares were filled out properly, they resulted in Che Guevara’s face. “I remember, when we finished the game, my mother said: ‘Garbage, what kind of crap this is. This is not for children, they don’t even respect children anymore,’” he says. Orlando had to take that newspaper out of the trash can to realize once again that his family did not agree with the new regime.

## The departure was permanent

In 1971 he left Cuba with his parents. “Leaving my country, I realized that I would never see my uncles, aunts, and grandparents again, which was difficult to imagine



as we were a very close-knit family,” he says. Before leaving Cuba, his father showed him the main monuments in Havana. “He told me, ‘look around well, so you can remember your country, as we are leaving, and most likely we will not come back.’ I remember touching the metal doors of the Capitol, I remember the Malecón. They are unforgettable memories. To be separated from one’s homeland, family, neighborhood, and friends has a profound impact on one’s soul. And so, at a very early age, I realized that something was terribly wrong with Cuba,” Orlando recalls. “What would have become of me if we had stayed in Cuba? I think I would have joined the resistance,” he says.

### **Nothing good was awaiting us in that regime**

The family traveled from Cuba to Spain, then to Nicaragua and finally, a year and a half later, they arrived in Miami. “Arriving in Miami, we got the news that my grandfather had died. My father sat under a mango tree, and told me: ‘Let’s remember your grandfather for a minute.’ My grandfather had always asked my father to get me out of the country, away from the communist regime, even though he was staying, because he knew that nothing good could happen under that kind of regime,” he recalls. “This atmosphere of family unity unquestionably contributes to my identification with the homeland and my nation,” he adds.

### **Trans-territorial nation**

“We have very strong memories of Cuba that shape our identity. We are Cubans born or raised in exile, which is a nation outside of the territory of Cuba. Communism turned Cuba into a trans-territorial nation,” he sums up. “The Cuban communists thought that because we were leaving the country, we were no longer Cubans,” he adds. “They were completely wrong. Being a member of a nation is a spiritual bond, a foundation of the soul, it does not simply disappear,” he describes. “The exiled Cubans in the U.S. were for the most part very successful, but they did not forget that they were part of a spiritual union of the Cuban nation,” he says.

### **A proud American and a proud Cuban**

Orlando was educated mostly in the Cuban area of Miami in the U.S. “I am proud to be American, to form part of this great republic, but I am also proud to be Cuban,” he says. He remembers, with special affection, the theological education he received at La Salle College. “There has been a strong push to de-Christianize Cuba. In the early years after the Revolution, Castroism tried to do away with the Christian religion in Cuba. And many young Cubans were shot by the firing squad shouting ‘Long live Christ the King,’” he says. “I do not agree with the current policy towards Cuba of the pontiff,” he says about Pope Francis.

### **The bell that shook up the Cuban people**

At the age of 13, he started having conversations about why he had left Cuba and read many books on Cuban history that confirmed how important Cuba was for him and further forged his national sentiment. “My family was well off, but I felt they





suffered from a kind of nostalgia and sadness for Cuba,” he recalls. He decided to get involved in organizations that were striving for Cuba’s freedom. His cousins participated in Alpha 66, and he enlisted as well. He later participated in the Cuban Patriotic Board, founded in 1980, “on the same days when 11,000 Cubans flooded the Peruvian Embassy,” he recalls. “It was a bell that shook up the Cuban people,” he adds, recalling how the people of Miami took to the streets. “I remember the power of the unity of Cubans who came out to support our brothers in Cuba. This event concluded my first lesson of what it meant to be Cuban,” he says.

## Reigniting the rebellion

Orlando became more and more involved in the struggle for a free Cuba and joined the Organization for the Liberation of Cuba. “This group was trying to reignite the rebellion inside Cuba and I continued being the member until later, at the University, I helped restart the Federation of Cuban Students,” he says. “There was a very important tradition of struggle in Cuba, which is the tradition of the *directorios* [directorates],” he recalls the student movements that formed to fight against the dictatorship. On November 27, being the Student Day, in memory of the executions of medical students by the Spanish colonial authorities, they organized an initiative in which more than 200 people participated. In 1999, thanks to the organization Jóvenes Cubanos Libres [Young Free Cubans] and its international congress, all representatives of the different Directorates existing in the past sat at a table and committed to forming a new directorate. “I remember that the last plenary session lasted 24 hours straight,” Orlando recalls. And that’s how a new board was formed: the Cuban Democratic Directorate.

## Objectives of the Directorate

The objectives of the Directorate were to connect with the dissident movement in Cuba at the time, as well as with the civil resistance, the nonviolent struggle against the dictatorship, and to search for international support for the struggle inside Cuba. “We were fully committed to the Directorate, as we were trying to unite the struggle, contribute to its effectiveness, support dissidents, and educate Cubans. We fought very hard to do that,” Orlando recounts. The Directorate continues to operate up to today, and it got closer with the Internal Resistance Movement in Cuba. It formed an international network that continues to function to this day, as well as a radio station that broadcasts into Cuba, Radio República [Radio Republic]. Moreover, it developed a program to assist political prisoners inside Cuba, achieved the Agreement for Democracy in Cuba which lists 10 points that describe the future transition in Cuba and how it should happen. Among many other initiatives, the Directorate contributed to the formation of the Assembly of the Cuban Resistance, which helped to foster unity of the organizations fighting for change in Cuba.

## Overcoming the wall of separation

“It has been an effective and fruitful struggle. We have been doing what we can. We have been meeting excellent people who helped to outline in a clearer and more detailed way the aims of the resistance movement. “I think we managed to over-



come the wall of separation that the Castro regime had built between the Cubans inside and outside. We have built a bridge with our brothers in Cuba. I will never forget the four Cubans who died when the Brothers to the Rescue planes were shot down. One of them was a member of the Board of Directors, Mario de la Peña, who loved Cuba very much and has always served the Homeland. I believe that we free Cubans have managed to build this bridge of unity through determination and sacrifice, so that we will not be separated by communism,” he adds.

### **A country that is a prison**

When asked what he would say to a 25-year-old French student who wanted to go to Cuba, as an example of a person unfamiliar with Cuban history and politics. “I would tell him that he has to understand that Cuba is a country that inherited a culture of freedom and the rule of law but if you want to go to Cuba, you have to read enough about its history to understand what happened. And secondly, it is important to understand that you are going to visit a country that is a huge prison,” Orlando says.

### **This is freedom**

In the early 1990s, Orlando had the opportunity to travel to post-communist European countries. He mentions the example of Václav Havel: “I will never forget the president of the Czech Republic arriving at a book presentation, all by himself, driving his own car, talking to students. I get emotional remembering that. I said to myself: ‘This is freedom,’” Orlando recounts. “I remember that Czechs were telling me: ‘Changes start much faster than you think, they begin as changes in the personality of human beings,’” he recalls. “The Cuban people need to see themselves differently. They need to see all they can be,” he adds.

### **Demographic disaster**

“Cuba is going through a demographic disaster. It is the only Latin American country that has a negative birth rate. Every year there are fewer Cubans. It is the Latin American country with the highest suicide rate, with the highest rate of abortions. It is the Latin American country with the highest number of political prisoners. It is a country in which young people cannot find opportunities and dream of emigrating. It is a country with a bankrupt economic system that needs constant foreign subsidies to survive. In 1959, Cuba was able to feed itself, today Cuba cannot feed itself without food imports, mainly from the United States, which is the country that donates and sells the most medicines to Cuba. This is all leading to a terrible situation where the population in Cuba is disappearing, it is becoming an underpopulated country. I do not currently see any willingness on the part of Cuba’s communist leadership to change this course to save the country,” Orlando summarizes, closing the interview and stressing that it is necessary to join forces and fight harder than ever “to re-found Cuba”.

# Juan Carlos González Leiva (1965)

[#lawyer](#) [#letters to Fidel Castro](#) [#human rights activist](#)

[#Fraternity of the Independent Blind of Cuba](#)

[#Cuban Foundation for Human Rights](#) [#political prisoner](#)

[#victim of prison torture](#)



2017



*I call a spade a spade. I express myself freely, but I am radical in my opinions.*

**“If the governing elite in a free and democratic country paid a little more attention to poverty, it would be difficult for communism to thrive,” warns lawyer and dissident Juan Carlos González Leiva, who despite being blind is determined to continue denouncing human rights violations committed in his country.**

Juan Carlos González Leiva was born in 1965 in the town of Colorado in the Cuban province of Ciego de Ávila. He comes from a humble family. His father worked in the sugarcane industry, which was confiscated by Fidel Castro after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. “My father earned 20 U.S. cents a day and my mother, besides raising eight children, took care of domestic animals and washed clothes for other farmers. Also, we cultivated some pieces of land that belonged to the state,” Juan Carlos recalls. “Our home was a hut made of balsa wood and bark from a royal palm tree, located in the middle of the field, and it had a dirt floor and no electricity,” he adds.





## Visual Impairment

Juan Carlos was born visually impaired as a result of very difficult forceps delivery. He could not see with his left eye and had reduced vision in his right eye. At the age of 21, he completely lost his sight. Because of his eyesight, he started elementary school at the age of eight, was only able to finish the sixth grade, and was not able to attend high school. From the age of 16, he worked in the sugar company, although his father did not want him to because the sun, the windy conditions in the plains, and the soil worsened his eyesight. For five years until 1986, Juan Carlos worked at night as an official water irrigation worker in the sugar cane plantations. However, as a result of the strenuous night work and conjunctivitis, he eventually lost his eyesight completely and could no longer work in the fields anymore.

*Thanks to the Bible I learned about the truth, freedom of thought and spirit, and the patriotism behind Christian thought. I felt that I received training in spiritual and cultural thought.*

### Law student

Juan Carlos, after six grades of schooling and five years of hard work in the fields, completely lost his eyesight. “Since I couldn’t work in the fields, I decided to become a lawyer,” says Juan Carlos. “There was the possibility of taking some free tests, without teachers, in a peasant workers’ high school, I relied on help from friends and family. My goal was to become a lawyer, so I moved to the capital Ciego de Ávila, where I studied from 8 PM until 7 AM,” says Juan Carlos, adding that in 1991, after three years, he finished his pre-university studies. He then began studying at the Agricultural University of Ciego de Ávila and graduated with a Law degree at the University of Havana in 1996.

### My wife is more of a lawyer than I am

“One might ask, ‘How did I manage to finish college as a blind person?’ “I married my wife in 1990 and she read all the law books to me. She was more of a lawyer than me... There are books like *Capital* by Karl Marx, which is as fat as brick, or *The History of the State and Law* by Julio Fernández Bulté, a very





thick book as well which has many pages. I imagine it was very boring for my wife to read them to me since she even didn't like law as a subject," commented Juan Carlos. During college, he wrote two letters to Fidel Castro. In the first, he criticized the economic situation in Cuba, and in the second letter he accused Castro of genocide and other human rights violations mentioning specifically regarding the sinking of the tugboat '13 de marzo' which was an incident where 37 Cubans drowned who had intended to ask for asylum in the U.S.. There are allegations that the tugboat was sunk on purpose by the Castro regime. Weeks later, he received a visit from State Security agents, who opened a file on him and emphasized that he was not going to have any problems. Three months later, someone broke into Juan Carlos' house and tried to assassinate him. He publicly denounced this harassment via Radio Martí, an opposition news media outlet based in Miami. In 1997 when Juan Carlos applied for a position of a lawyer in the Ministry of Justice, he was rejected because he was blind, a dissident, and connected to the free press.

### **Where everyone sings**

At the age of 16, he read the book *Presidio Político* [Political Prison] by Cuban poet and politician José Martí, the leader of the independence movement of the Republic of Cuba in the 19th century. The libertarian ideas of this book, together with the contents of the Bible, had an impact on Juan Carlos: "Thanks to the Bible I learned about the truth, freedom of thought and spirit, and the patriotism behind Christian thought. I felt that I received training in spiritual and cultural thought. And when a journalist told me one day 'Working only for oneself is selfish', I decided to dedicate my life to a humanitarian and political cause, based on the thoughts of José Martí and the Gospel," he says.

### **Fraternity of the Independent Blind of Cuba**

In 1998 he founded the Fraternity of Independent Blind of Cuba, which has been active since 1999 up to today. In the same year, he established the Avileña Foundation for Human Rights which converted itself into the Cuban Foundation for Human Rights, an institution that protects and stands up for human rights in several provinces of the island. "We managed to create several press agencies in provinces such as Camagüey, Las Tunas, Sancti Spíritus, and others. We have created 50 independent libraries and have provided support to political prisoners; we have been carrying out very intense work," he details. In February 2002 he called for a congress of opposition figures of the Cuban regime. In March 2002, he was visited by State Security because of this. "The police, State Security, and the Special Brigades, which are trained to give beatings, were mobilized. They took me to a center that is called 'Everybody Sings' center because everybody ends up confessing due to the torture techniques used in the center. As people were protesting in front of the building where I was arrested, they took me out clandestinely to a police center in another city," he recalls his imprisonment in Pedernales prison in Holguín, where he immediately went on hunger strike.



## Two years of torture

From March 5, 2002, to April 25, 2004, Juan Carlos Leiva was imprisoned without trial and tortured in unspeakable ways. Chemical substances were poured over his body during the night, burning his skin in such a way that it looked like a massive attack of wasps and ants. He was also tortured through psychopharmaceuticals. “They gave me something that made me confused and I was like a broken record, repeating information and mixing reality with fantasy. They would systematically pour chemicals on my body which burned my skin and caused hallucinations, severe headaches, and allergies. I almost went crazy. At one point I thought about snitching, denouncing my friends, and the struggle... I thought I was not going to endure this... God gave me strength to resist,” he narrates. The trial took place after 26 months of detention and in 2004 he was sentenced to four years in prison. Due to his health condition and the intervention of the opposition, he was allowed to serve the remaining two years of his sentence under house arrest. The Cuban government gave in because of the scandal of imprisoning a blind human rights activist. “It took me a year to recover physically. Because of the hunger strikes and torture, I developed diabetes in prison. As of 2005, I was able to partially recover, could remember names again and even participate in meetings,” Juan recounts.

## Acts of repudiation

When Juan Carlos fully recovered, he returned to activism and independent journalism and worked as a reporter and contributor to the international press. In May 2007 the pro-government forces organized acts of repudiation against him, in which he was called a *gusano* [literally a “worm,” a derogatory for Cuban counter-revolutionaries] and subjected to loud music from morning until midnight. Fortunately, Juan Carlos was able to turn to the international community for support, as well as from Cuban dissident leaders, and Cuban civil society. Juan Carlos’ reaction to the acts of repudiation was contrary to what the regime expected, as he tried to unite the entire opposition. “We gathered 50 leaders in the house of an opposition activist in Havana. We organized the Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs in Cuba, we united the Cuban opposition, with Félix Navarro, José Daniel Ferrer, and Laura Pollán being present,” says Juan. Together, they began monitoring the situation in Cuban prisons, established cooperation with embassies and NGOs, and created a recording and information center to raise awareness to galvanize civil society. “We have created an archive that lists more than 300 deaths of common prisoners who hanged themselves or were beaten to death, killed by attack dogs, or were starved to death in the prisons. Moreover, we documented attacks against the Ladies in White. I am proud of this work,” Juan says.

## Crimes in prisons

“They would leave exposed wires in the bathroom so that I would hurt myself, I would find pieces of nylon and dirt in my food, they would spit in my food. They would put some substance in my cell, so I hallucinated mixing reality with fan-



tasy, I would repeat the same things. I could not move, speak, or scream, I was paralyzed for three or four hours,” recalls Juan. He decided to denounce everything. “I thought no one was going to believe me that this kind of horrible torture was taking place in the prisons. However, if 10 people say the same thing about these crimes, murders, and acts of torture are taking place in the inmate centers, they will have to be investigated,” he says.

### **To bread, bread, and to wine, wine**

Juan Carlos is determined to continue with human rights activism inside Cuba and to continue denouncing the crimes of the regime. He hopes to “encourage and revive the civil opposition movement, to achieve a peaceful transition to improve the situation in Cuba,” Juan Carlos sums up. The fact that he is very direct in his criticism often brings him into conflict with his family, the Church, or other activists. “In Cuba, there is a saying: ‘to bread, bread, and to wine, wine’ [English equivalent: ‘To call a spade a spade’, thus to speak clearly and directly even about unpleasant things]. I express myself freely, but I am very radical in my opinions,” says Juan Carlos. “I think that the ambition of human beings can reach the stars. Similarly, the ambitions of the people in charge of the Cuban regime are similar. Collective ambition can cause a lot of damage, especially if wealth and power are badly distributed and the government is poorly run,” he concludes.

*I think that the ambition of human beings can reach the stars. Similarly, the ambitions of the people in charge of the Cuban regime are similar. Collective ambition can cause a lot of damage, especially if wealth and power are badly distributed and the government is poorly run.*



# Ileana Álvarez González (1966)

[#feminist](#) [#censorship](#) [#literature](#) [#writer](#)

[#Alas Tensas](#) [#violence against women](#) [#femicides](#)

[#National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba](#)

[#UNEAC](#)



2020



*“I have come to realize that the Cuban government is scared of feminism.”*

**“I don’t want to be Che Guevara. I want to be myself, I want to be Ileana. Why are you forcing me, at the age of five, to say: ‘We will be like Che?’” emphatically asks Ileana Álvarez, a Cuban writer convinced that Cuba cannot be a democracy as long as it does not accept differences and diversity.**

Ileana was born in Ciego de Ávila, Cuba, in a marginalized neighborhood known as “Chincha Coja.” From an early age learned to live with violence both in the neighborhood and at home; her father was an alcoholic who caused constant instances of domestic violence. Ileana’s childhood and adolescence were marked by the premature deaths her grandfather, who did not accept the Revolution and committed suicide; her brother, who was murdered by a policeman out of revenge because her brother was dating the policeman’s wife; and her father, who died of cancer after much suffering. She was not able to say goodbye to him. The death of a woman who marked Ileana was Milagrato, a neighbor who was murdered by her husband. Milagrato’s death was the first death caused by gender violence that impacted Ileana’s life. As a young girl, she learned to isolate herself and take refuge in literature.





## The Catholic Church

At a time when religious repression was extreme in Cuba, Ileana was harassed at school for practicing the Catholic religion and going to church. Despite being a gifted student, she feared she would not fulfill her dream of attending University. Her teachers threatened to put a negative comment in the dossier which assessed student's political background, or anyone who did not have a behavior showing "acceptance of the Revolution." One day her teacher said in front of all the children: "We are very sorry, but Ileana is the only rotten apple in the school, as she is the only girl that attends the Catholic church." At the age of ten, she was booed by all the other children. That same teacher prevented her from entering the Camagüey Vocational School, the most direct route to university.

*We are very sorry, but Ileana is the only rotten apple in the school, as she is the only girl that attends the Catholic church.*

## The university is for revolutionaries

After a tough pre-university course in the countryside, Ileana was admitted to university and was able to study philology [linguistics]. From the University of Las Villas [in Villa Clara], she remembers the lack of freedom of expression and censorship in the classes. While Ileana devoured the books of Russian dissident writers and Cuban protest writers of the 1980s, they were never mentioned in the classrooms, nor were those books ever explained. She heard the news about Perestroika and Russian magazines that contained topics of political restructuring. Still, their teachers continued telling them that the Cuban Revolution was better than the USSR, and those magazines ended up disappearing from Cuba. The most challenging experience Ileana had as a university student was when she tried to save, together with some fellow ecologists, the university botanical garden that was inundated by toxic waste from the Faculty of Chemical Sciences. When State Security learned that she was the group leader, she had to leave because she was threatened with expulsion from the university. According to Ileana, the indoctrination of students in the Cuban university means that there is no room for any kind of diversity in real life. Ileana suffered another very difficult moment when her fellow student in the Faculty of Philology who was a homosexual committed suicide. According to Ileana, he "could not stand the intolerance." Ileana dedicated her poem *Elegy* to him.

## Censorship of literature

After graduation from the university, Ileana began working in a publishing house and as director of the cultural magazine *Videncia*. It was there where she discovered the figure of the censor, who, according to her, is "the protagonist of Cuban cultural life." She was often reprimanded and told that a specific poem she wanted to



publish was too controversial. Ileana says she has a clear conscience because she never censored others, and always fought to defend the publication of all the texts she selected. During this time, she took her “first feminist step, giving space to the voices of women writers, who were- in many cases- made invisible.” Ileana produced two anthologies of poetry written by Cuban women. The second one, *Catedral Sumergida* [Submerged Cathedral], included Cuban women authors living in exile. It was very complicated to get approval from the authorities, but in the end, she managed to include almost forty female voices from exile.

## Feminism

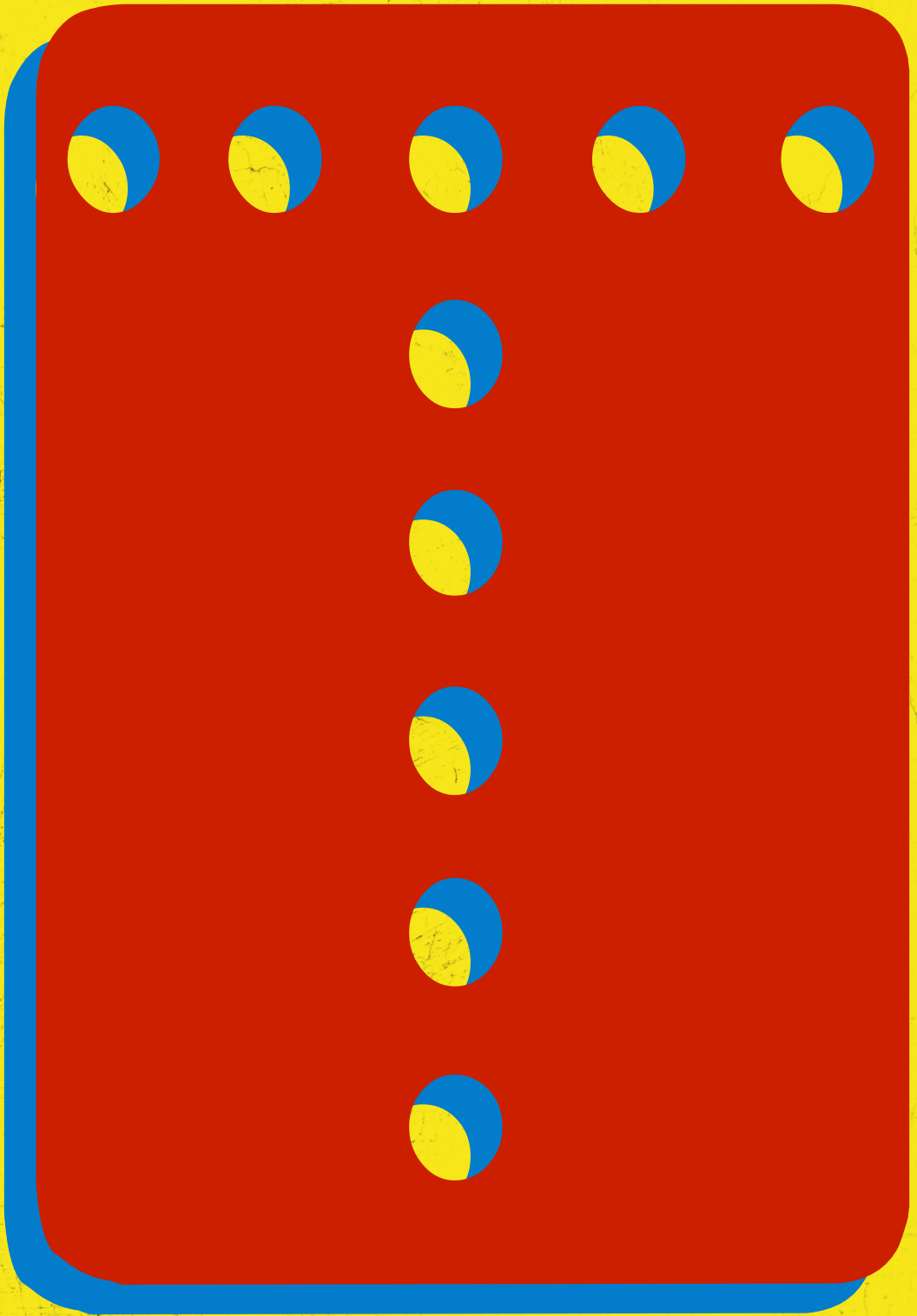
In 2016 Ileana founded the independent magazine *Alas Tensas* [Taut Wings], the first feminist Cuban magazine. With this project, Ileana intention was to talk about feminism to Cuban women and raise awareness about violence against women, especially femicides. The Cuban government, at that time, still denied their existence in Cuba and did not provide data on this topic. The magazine *Alas Tensas* immediately became a target of the State Security since it revealed the unequal situation of Cuban women: “I have concluded that feminism scares the Cuban government. The discrimination and violence against women were made invisible as supposedly one of the achievements of the Revolution was gender equality,” Ileana states. Shortly after founding *Alas Tensas*, she received a call from the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba [UNEAC] telling her that she has a choice between directing the feminist magazine or directing *Videncia*. Ileana decided to continue with *Alas Tensas*, thus ending her employment with the Cuban government.

## The persecution

According to Ileana, her first interrogation by State Security was very harsh, with shouting and hits to the table. However, she did not break until they began to attack her children. They arrested her eldest son for taking a cable to a friend to play video games. They threatened to charge him with “receiving” (i.e. acquiring it illegally), and they revoked her youngest son’s discharge from the Military Service. Her mother called her in fear; her friends were distancing themselves from her. She did not even receive the support of other Cuban feminists; she felt alone and isolated in Ciego de Ávila.

## The exile

Ileana and her husband, fellow writer and freelance journalist Francis Sánchez, decided to emigrate to Spain, taking advantage of the fact that Francis had Spanish nationality. Although both were “regulated,” they were forbidden from leaving Cuba. In July 2018, they received the support of several people whose identity Ileana prefers not to reveal and managed to travel with their younger son to Madrid. A few months later, they were followed by their older son. Despite the difficulties of starting a new life in a foreign country, Ileana says she is acclimated to Madrid and continues to promote and improve her Cuban feminist magazine *Alas Tensas*. Ileana wants to leave a mark, however small, with her work. As one of her favorite writers, José Lezama Lima, says, “to make a scratch on the stone of existence.”



# Fernando Ginarte Mora

(1968)



[#confiscation of assets](#) [#countryside boarding school](#)

[#Isle of Pines](#) [#artisan](#) [#Christian Liberation Movement](#)

[#Varela Project](#) [#Association of Independent Artists](#)



2020



*I say to the police officers that I fight for them, for their families, and for their rights.*

**“Since my childhood, I have been singled out as problematic, for not fitting in with the imposed ideology,” stresses Fernando Ginarte Mora, a dissident and artist, who is determined to achieve the right of free artistic expression in his country.**

Fernando Ginarte Mora was born on November 30, 1968. His grandparents had a farm and a business during the times of President Fulgencio Batista. During the Revolution that triumphed in 1959, the soldiers of Fidel Castro’s Rebel Army would take groceries from their family store without paying, and they would do it in the name of the Revolution. In 1970 the private properties were nationalized, and Fernando’s family lost the farm and everything they owned. His father was forced to join the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and worked as Provincial Chief of the company established by Fidel Castro himself, called “Fruta Selecta” [Select Fruit]. In addition to the feelings of animosity towards the regime, Fernando grew up with a hatred towards the Rebel Army for having unjustly murdered his great-uncle Frediberto Mora who was blindfolded and shot in the back in the Sierra Maestra. “I grew up with this story shared often around the kitchen table. My grandmother would often cry, as she couldn’t even put flowers on the grave of her brother,” says Fernando, and adds: “We were against the communist government from the beginning of the Revolution.”





## At the age of 18, I was already a dissident

Since his childhood, Fernando was stigmatized as a troublemaker for not fitting in with the ideology imposed by the regime. In 1980, when Fernando turned 12, he refused to participate in an act of repudiation against Cubans who wanted to leave the country through the Port of Mariel. This refusal to participate had its consequences, as he was sent to a school in the countryside on the Isle of Pines for disobedience. “First of all, they wanted to isolate me so that no one would join me or copy me. These schools contributed to anthropological damage of the Cuban nation because the children did not see their relatives for ten months or more,” he recalls. Fernando finished his high school studies in another school in the countryside located in Baire, where he also worked hard in the agricultural sector. He continued his studies of Physical Education at a university. At the age of 18, Fernando already had a strong political conviction and in the first year of his studies, he had 17 “stains” on his school record for *desacato* [contempt of authority]. “I did not embrace the system. I don’t like to be abused, and I want my rights to be respected,” he says. In the 1990s, when he studied at a university, the country was affected by a deep socio-economic crisis called the Special Period. “It affected all of us. I wore the *chupameados*, shoes with soles made of tractor tires. We suffered from hunger and lack of basic necessities,” he says. In 1993, Fernando refused to join the compulsory military service. As a consequence, he was banned from completing the last year of his bachelor-level studies and thus, never graduated.

*First they don’t target you, but those around you. They make sure that your family thinks that you, being a dissident, are the cause of all bad things that are happening to them.*

### My life became a living hell

In August 1994, Fernando participated in the first “Maleconazo,” as were called anti-government demonstrations in Havana. However, he did not formally join the dissident movement until 2005, when he got to know Agustín Cervantes, a Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) member and a political prisoner. That is when he became MCL member himself. “Agustín, upon his release from prison, came to my house, we talked, and in the end, I signed the Varela Project. In Baire, dissidents are called ‘los varelistas’ [“the Varelists” = activists of the Varela Project],” he says. “I immediately began to collect signatures for the Varela



Project, distribute declarations of human rights, demonstrate, and so on. My life became a living hell in the form of repressions, deportations, etc..." describes Fernando, and adds: "First they don't target you, but those around you. They make sure that your family thinks that you, being a dissident, are the cause of all bad things that are happening to them." A few years ago, Fernando tried to support his sister during a surgical intervention in Havana. He was deported to Baire without any explanation, and his transfer lasted a total of 16 days. Fernando was also detained several times. "They didn't want to let me go, they dragged me all over the place, I didn't know where I was. They humiliated me," he says.

### **Artisans of the city of Baire**

In 1993, when Fernando turned 25, he decided to dedicate himself to handicrafts. "I brought the art of woodworking and wood carving to my town. I founded an Association of Independent Artisans in Baire," he says. "I applied for permission to be self-employed several times, but due to my activities in the opposition, I was always denied," he explains. Unfortunately, under pressure from State Security and the boycott of his handicraft business, Fernando was unable to practice his trade legally. Neither could other members of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU) do so. "All dissidents had to withdraw from official government boards. Due to my activities, the regime attacked the group, and so I withdrew because my goal was for the group to continue," Fernando adds.

### **Being a dissident is a sacrifice**

Fernando is currently the President of the Association of Independent Artists. "I look for artists to become part of our group, and we already have more than 200 members," he stresses. Fernando also has a relationship with the San Isidro Movement (MSI) in Havana and its leader Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. "Today, San Isidro is the main voice of Cuban culture. They are courageous, and it is an excellent initiative. We also cooperate with independent poets, writers, and painters," he says. Fernando is constantly being threatened with the possibility of being disappeared. He gets different fines, and his children are being intimidated. However, he is determined to continue in his rebellion. "As a nation, we are not politically mature but in Baire, dissidents are respected. It is a sacrifice to be a dissident. That is why people respect us and greet us on the streets. Even the police tell me that they recognize that I am a dissident and know what I do. I respond to them: 'I fight for you, for your family, for your rights,'" emphasizes Fernando.

# Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna (1968)

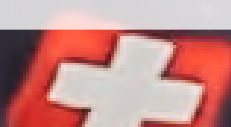
[#opposition activist](#) [#human rights activist](#)

[#Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration](#)

[#multiculturalism](#) [#antiracism](#)



2020





## *I believe in and defend diversity and multiculturalism in Cuba!*

**“In Cuba, people of African descent are condemned to social death, and this must be changed,” exclaims the national coordinator of the Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration (CIR), Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna, who dedicates his efforts to combating racism on the island.**

Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna was born in December 1968 in Havana, in a family supportive of the revolutionary process. Juan enjoyed, as he says, a modest and quiet childhood and did not have any serious wants or needs. “In comparison to my parents, who worked hard in the fields, my generation consumed a lot of socialist realism and had a healthier and happier childhood. I’m member of a generation that was full of enthusiasm for socialism, which turned bitter later on,” he says. His father often took him to cultural houses, in particular, Juan fondly remembers his visits to the Czechoslovak House of Culture.



## Forbidden books

As a teenager, he was interested in reading prohibited books. “Forbidden books did not circulate much, but I remember that Milan Kundera’s books were wrapped in the Granma newspaper [official newspaper of the communist regime],” he recalls. Juan had access to Western music and enjoyed listening to bands, such as Kiss, Queen, or The Beatles. He also enjoyed the “imperialist” literature that broadened his horizons. “That’s how we learned to question our own generation, to question socialism and the Revolution,” he says.

*Forbidden books did not circulate much, but I remember that Milan Kundera’s books were wrapped in the Granma newspaper.*

## Cuban internationalism

After finishing the Compulsory Military Service, he decided of his own free will to stay in the army, even participating in the Angola Civil War in the late 1980’s. “We had been sold on the idea of a better future, on the fact that socialism is better than capitalism. I was seduced by the words of Fidel Castro about the nation,” Juan explains. When he finished his training, he decided to look for a job to help his mother with the upkeep of the house and worked as an administrator at the Office of the Agricultural Land. “My father was a hero of the Millionaire Movement of sugarcane harvest, who was often featured in the newspapers. He was a Communist Party militant and was never at home,” he stresses. As Juan was always interested in the cultural environment and literature, at the age of 30 he resumed his studies and graduated with a degree in Socio-cultural Management, where he studied more in depth the racial issue in Cuba.

## People of African Descent in Cuba

“Today people talk more openly about racial issues in Cuba, but before it was a totally silenced chapter of Cuban history,” Juan explains. “They did not teach us the African base, we have gotten some information about the African influence through folklore. It’s outrageous that this is the case, when one considers that African descent heritage is the basis of the Cubanity,” he adds. Juan Antonio managed to teach himself the importance of the racial aspects in Cuba which is the main point of his interests up to today and how he managed to grow intellectually. “In Cuba there is anti-black racism embedded in Cuban society. Even today we still don’t have access to studies on the topic of cultural racism, pan-Africanism,





negritude in Cuba, for example, by Carlos Moore,” regrets Juan, mentioning this writer and social researcher as someone dedicated to the study of African and Afro-American history and culture. At the same time, he exposes the rhetoric of the Cuban government that defends itself against the denunciations of racism on the island. “When the communist regime wants to silence the noise of the movement against racism, it tells the story about the fight against racism in Africa, missions in Angola and Ethiopia. However, there is nothing like that at the domestic level! In Cuba, people of African descent are condemned to social death,” he said.

### **Independent libraries**

In 2003, when Juan Antonio finished his socio-cultural studies, he started looking for a job. He joined the project of Independent Libraries founded by Berta del Carmen Mexidor. The project started in 1998 when Fidel Castro proclaimed that there were no banned books in Cuba, but rather a lack of money to buy them. The objective of the project was to give Cubans access to books, magazines, documents and other publications that were inaccessible through state institutions. Juan joined this project without hesitation, and he also joined the political opposition. “I found out about it from a neighbor of mine, she was part of the Independent Libraries group and was also one of the first Ladies in White, a group of women who every week took to the streets to demand the release of their husbands,” Juan recounts. Among other dissidents, Juan Antonio met opposition leader Oswaldo Payá and participated in the Varela Project, advocating for political reforms in Cuba in favor of greater individual freedoms. Activism soon became his new life goal.

***In Cuba, people of African descent are condemned to social death.***

### **Citizens Committee for Racial Integration**

In 2008, Juan co-founded the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration (CIR) with the purpose of eradicating racial and social stereotypes in Cuba and to this day serves as its national coordinator. The CIR obtained significant support from *Islas* magazine, a widely-circulated journal in the country. Juan Antonio was also part of the Cuba Section of the International Congress of Social Sciences, which was mostly comprised of official delegates from the Cuban state participated, but CIR representatives also managed to join. “Since 2013 we participated in the mission in Washington where we presented our beliefs and we started to assist regularly,” he proudly quotes. The CIR was able to take advantage of the technical, strategic and administrative support of the Spanish platform La Solidaridad (The Solidarity), through which CIR was able to connect



to the broader international movement against racism. “I have participated in missions in Colombia, Brazil and Costa Rica. Although on several occasions the Cuban Government prevented us from attending a public discussion in Cuba, we were received in the U.S. Congress, the United Nations and we have acted as international electoral observers,” emphasizes Juan Antonio.

### **Domestic context**

In the domestic context, the CIR has managed to carry out projects aimed at supporting marginalized groups, for example, with the Animando Sonrisas project [Smiles Encouraged Project], or with community work in peripheral areas, where the majority of the population is of African descent. “The Cuban government has only timidly acknowledged the need for a discussion on the racial issue. It is necessary to create pressure on the Government, to raise the issue, to raise awareness about the issue.

*We had been sold on the idea of a better future, on the fact that socialism is better than capitalism. I was seduced by the words of Fidel Castro about the nation.*

### **Social pyramid**

The people of African descent in Cuba are on the lowest level of the social pyramid and we have to change it,” he points out. In addition to the racial issue, Juan Antonio is interested in the political debate. “There is a part of the left that is not revolutionary, that is not interested in power. I personally know Manuel Cuesta Morúa who is a member of the Arco Progresista [Progressive Arc], an opposition political party with a lot of hope,” he clarifies. However, Juan clarifies that the CIR is not a political movement, but a social movement. However, despite its social character, it still suffers harassment from the national police, as well as threats, persecutions and the occasional confiscation of personal belongings. “We are in the eye of the hurricane and are very much repressed by state security. I have been detained and interrogated countless times,” Juan emphasizes.



## **The Cuban government is reorganizing**

One of Juan Madrazo's concerns is the reorganization of the Cuban Government that started in 2018, consisting of issuing new laws and decrees, which in the end are not in favor of decreasing poverty or inequality. "We need a more inclusive, tolerant society, however, the leaders of Cuba are stimulating much hatred by condoning acts of repudiation and through its Rapid Response Brigades. It is the same as when I was a child, the government has not changed its ways," regrets Juan, and that is why he directs his efforts to stimulate the spiritual, cultural and educational growth of the Cuban population. "We are all protagonists of change and empowerment," he says.

## **The bleeding of human capital**

Another concern for Juan is the loss of human capital on the economic and cultural level. "We have many challenges within Cuban civil society. As an activist, and a citizen, it worries me, that there are so many who have gotten frustrated and left, so we are facing now the aging of Cuban society and the empty nest syndrome," he stresses. "Cuban society needs political mobilization, which is capable of being strategically coordinated and inclusive, and not divisive," he says. He is ready and willing to support civil society, because he believes in diversity and will always support multiculturalism in Cuba.

# Regis Iglesias Ramírez (1969)



[#Information Agency Latin Press](#) [#Christian Liberation Movement](#)

[#Varela Project](#) [#Oswaldo Payá](#)

[#political prisoner](#)



2020



*“I want to return to Cuba, even if I suffer the same fate as Oswaldo Payá. I owe it to him and the Cuban people.”*

**“In Cuba everything is politicized. Sport is politically manipulated. Back in the days, you were frowned upon even for listening to rock and roll music. The regime rejected it because its lyrics incited freedom. It was very difficult to be young and like rock and roll, as it caused many, many scuffles between the police and the rockers,” says Regis Iglesias Ramírez.**

Regis was born in Havana, Cuba, in September 1969. He had a happy childhood and was surrounded by people who had different opinions. “We understood each other and never criticized each other for thinking differently,” he says.





## Family ties to the regime

Regis' maternal grandparents went into as soon as the Revolution triumphed. They were labeled as *gusanos* [a derogatory term to designate counter-revolutionaries] or *vende patrias* [traitors willing to sell their homeland]. His grandfather was a bodyguard at the Presidential Palace until 1958. "He was always linked to the military, then he founded a company that made wicker furniture, which was taken over on January 1, 1959, after the triumph of the Revolution," he says. My father was always linked to the regime. He studied Political Science and then worked for the "Disinformative" [sic] Agency Prensa Latina [Latin Press], as a correspondent, first in Beijing and in 1980 in Tokyo." Regis says he received an eclectic education in politics. "You could say that in my family there were no *gusanos*; in fact, many sympathized with Fidel Castro," he says. I was raised to follow good manners. "I was raised by my great-grandmother, with whom my mother was very close. She lived through the period of the Republic in Cuba and the family participated in the War of Independence. I also had a great aunt who trained to be a nun and was closely linked to the battle of Playa Giron, or the Bay of Pigs Invasion. She was imprisoned in front of the Sacred Heart Church in Havana," he says. "I have learned from my grandfather many things that have helped me become the man I am today," says Regis.

*I called Oswaldo and told him that, if he permitted it, I could shout slogans through the microphone against the Cuban government, as all the international press would be in Cuba during those days. Oswaldo told me that I was crazy and, if I did that, the government would wipe me off the map.*

### Trip to Beijing

In 1978, Regis travelled to Beijing. "My father was stationed as a Prensa Latina correspondent there and he was allowed to take his family. In Beijing, I realized that the economic situation of socialist countries, such as China, Russia, and former Czechoslovakia, was not so good," he says. Capitalism is an economic



system, while communism is an economic, political, and social system that pretends to be a religion,” he says.

## **Politicized Catholic Church**

In 1986, the Cuban National Ecclesial Encounter was held in Cuba. “In the conclusions of the final document, Fidel Castro was called the president and Batista a dictator. The document did not mention the committed Catholics who shouted ‘Long live Christ the King’ and were shot by the regime in La Cabaña, thus demonstrating that in Cuba everything is politicized, even the Catholic Church,” Regis denounces. “These were the times when Oswaldo Payá was beginning to stand out within the Catholic Church,” he adds.

## **Creation of the Christian Liberation Movement**

In 1988, the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) was created, founded by Oswaldo Payá, who, according to Regis, “preached by example.” In 1991, the Pan American Games were organized in Cuba. “I was selected to work as a sound engineer at the opening and closing of the event. I called Oswaldo and told him that, if he permitted it, I could shout slogans through the microphone against the Cuban government, as all the international press would be in Cuba during those days. Oswaldo told me that I was crazy and, if I did that, the government would wipe me off the map,” Regis recalls.

## **Giving voice to the voiceless**

The MCL worked on more tangible and palpable issues in Cuban society. “We started campaigns for change in Cuba. The first was the campaign for the National Dialogue in 1990 when we gathered the first collection of signatures. The idea was to give a voice to those who had no voice so that they could claim their rights,” says Regis. The MCL was very clear that “the transitions from communism to democracy, to freedom, and to change in Cuba could not be achieved through violence,” Regis says, adding: “Payá did not want that.” In 1992, the MCL proposed the so-called Transitional Program and began to collect signatures, calling for Fidel Castro’s resignation.

## **Varela Project**

In 1998, Oswaldo Payá conceived and directed another campaign: the Varela Project, which advocated political reforms in Cuba in favor of greater individual freedoms. “We started by forming Citizen Committees in different parts of Cuba, of which the regime is very afraid,” Regis comments. It is worth mentioning that in 2003 there were more than 120 Citizens’ Committees in Cuba. The task of obtaining signatures for this project was tough, “especially because of the repression suffered by the Cuban opposition. We had to take the matter seriously because the signatories had to give their personal data when they signed. We obtained 11 thousand signatures that were delivered to the National Assembly of People’s Power,” Regis recalls.



## Arbitrary detentions

The Varela Project experienced a great boom and also repression commensurate with its success. “In 2003 marks the start of arbitrary detentions of independent journalists, activists and members of the MCL who had participated in a meeting at the house of the Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba,” recalls Regis. Fidel Castro, at the time, proclaimed that “they were going to go after the Cuban opposition,” Regis says, adding that Castro “blamed the U.S. for meddling in Cuba’s affairs and inciting political change on the island.” In 2003, Regis was arrested along with other MCL members.

## To the dungeon

Regis Iglesias, Tony Díaz, Roberto de Miranda, Omar Rodríguez Saludes, and Efrén Fernández, all members of the MCL, were subjected to a summary trial, without the right to reply or even to defend themselves. “The witnesses were State Security agents that had infiltrated the MCL and the opposition,” he recalls. Regis was sentenced to 18 years in prison. Oswaldo Payá was not allowed to be present at the trial, which was held in the Criminal Chamber of the Marianao Municipal Court. “Our families would go out of the courtroom often to inform Payá and some of our comrades about how things were going inside,” he recalls.

*Oswaldo was not only our political leader, but he was our moral and ethical reference in the struggle against the Cuban regime. He was our friend, brother, teacher, and father. He never made any pact whatsoever with State Security.*

## Oswaldo Payá

During the interview, Regis highlights the importance of the figure of Oswaldo Payá in his life. “We learned many, many things from him. For example, rather than civil disobedience, Oswaldo Payá preferred to force state obedience, to force the regime to fulfill its promises and its laws,” he recalls. “Payá argued that



to reach freedom you had to meet with people, educate them, be a reference for them, and above all be coherent. Everything you do had to obey and respect the law," he adds. "Oswaldo was not only our political leader, but he was our moral and ethical reference in the struggle against the Cuban regime. He was our friend, brother, teacher, and father. He never made any pact whatsoever with State Security," he says.

## **Prison**

On the day of the trial, Regis and his companions were transferred to the prison, where, he recounts, conditions were subhuman. "There were rats, a fetid stench, strange liquids running down the walls, maggots in the food," he recalls. "We had no communication with the outside world, but I always told myself that this was a race of endurance, not speed and that it was necessary to undergo all of this to achieve change in Cuba," Regis adds. "In the dungeons, we lived moments of great pain and powerlessness. For example, on visiting days, they did not allow my family to see me twice, once in the Camagüey prison and once in Cienfuegos, simply because they felt like it," he reports. "I got hit on the head with a shackle by a guard for defending another prisoner who had a mental breakdown. All the prisoners respected us. Once I was detained in a cell with 36 prisoners, out of which 28 were jailed for homicide, and nothing ever happened to me. It was because in the MCL we showed respect toward the marginalized, and were always fighting against the arrogant," he recalls.

## **The regime already wanted to get rid of us**

In 2009, the situation of the Cuban opposition was complicated. "The Ladies in White" asked Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino to intercede on behalf of the political prisoners. He met with Raúl Castro, who spoke with Fidel Castro. And it was true, the regime already wanted to get rid of us. In those days an official communiqué was made explaining that the political prisoners in poor health would be released, and would be sent to Spain, which had promised to receive us," Regis recalls.

## **I did it for my daughters**

It was very difficult for Regis to leave Cuba. "I did it for my daughters, who asked me to leave the country during a phone call I had with them while in prison, and so I abided by their wishes," he says. Years have passed and Regis has not been able to return to Cuba. On January 1, 2020, he tried to enter the island. "I was going to Cuba from Miami, but they wouldn't even let me board the American Airlines plane," he says. "I don't regret leaving Cuba, because my daughters have the life they wanted here in Spain and they live in freedom, but it is frustrating and painful to have a life project that I have to keep postponing and I don't know if I will ever be able to resume it again," he concludes.

# Francis Sánchez (1970)



#writer #confiscation of assets # countryside boarding school

#Ochoa's execution #Árbol Invertido #opposition activist

#exile in Spain #poet #cinema



2020





*We are but survivors of the grand experiment with totalitarianism in Cuba.*

**“The Cuban regime has always functioned thanks to a benefactor, be it the Soviet Union, Venezuela or whoever,” summarizes Francis Sánchez, a writer and founder of the online cultural magazine *Árbol Invertido* [The Inverted Tree].**

Francis was born in Ceballos, Ciego de Ávila province of Cuba, in September 1970. He grew up in a working-class family. His mother worked from the age of 12 and his father, the son of Spanish emigrants, worked in agriculture and as a mechanic.



## Passion for cinema

Francis grew up in a family environment which supported his interest in culture, especially cinema. “My father was passionate about movies. He was a simple mechanic and farmer, but he loved books and was constantly working on improving himself,” he says. “My father raised money to buy the Ceballos movie theater and buy in installments. He wanted the family to work in it. Our city had a very vibrant cultural life,” he says. Owning a movie theater was a very good business at the time, so Francis’ father decided to buy a Chevrolet to set up a mobile movie theater and to bring cinema to all the places where people did not have access to it.

## Cinema as an ideological tool

Unfortunately, all this would soon come crashing down. “In 1959, when the Revolution commanded by Fidel Castro triumphed, they realized that cinema was an important tool to use to spread their ideology. They were afraid. One day the military officers and Alfredo Guevara, who headed the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, showed up and took over the cinema which my father was never able to pay off. They only managed to recover a bunch of vinyl records thanks to my brother,” Francis recalls. Around 1968, all private property was suspended, even a warehouse where Francis’ father was working as a mechanic was confiscated. “They humiliated my father. He never recovered from the shock. The regime offered him a job as a projectionist at the same cinema they had just taken over, where my father had already worked for three years,” Francis recalls.

## The experimental town

The municipality of Ceballos was chosen in the province of Ciego de Ávila to implement what Fidel Castro would call the project of schools in the countryside. “It was a horrible experience for me as I had never been separated from my family and having to be boarded in such a center was a trauma for me. We lived there with all kinds of people. The most violent students would guard the dormitories where new students were staying and so we were intimidated. They were 12 of these schools built in Ceballos,” he says. But Francis never got accustomed to this type of school. “I often ran away from school. Many, many times the teachers discovered me. Sometimes I would run away at dawn having to walk several kilometers home. When I got home I would hide under the bed so my parents wouldn’t see me. At that time, I even thought about committing suicide,” he says.

## Cousins

Since he never was able to adapt to this school, for the 9th grade his family enrolled him in a school in the provincial capital, Ciego de Ávila. “I repeated the grade because I did not take the final exams. It was a time when I wasn’t paying much attention to my studies. At that time, I went through a strong bout of depressi-



on and spent three years inside of my house. I was also getting psychiatric treatments. I was not prepared for life,” he recalls. His cousins were entertaining themselves by stealing car parts. “As a minor, I was in jail for a week, because I knew where my cousins were hiding the stolen things. They threatened to put us in a juvenile correctional facility. Later on, my cousins and I started to make a raft to emigrate from Cuba. When it was ready, I didn’t want to take the chance so I stayed in Cuba, but my cousins managed to get to the U.S. safe and sound,” Francis recalls.

*I enjoy my freedom in exile, since I didn't have it in Cuba. I think that I found my place in exile. The Cuban regime is a well-oiled machine, where you can't live without repression, without violence. The same violence will one day turn against the government when things change.*

### **Being a writer was my way of being a coward**

Since childhood, Francis liked to write poems. “I always dreamed of being a writer, I won quite a few poetry contests. I was told that I had a talent for writing and when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the literary advisor, Aimée Pino, published my first poems,” he recalls. However, literature was always closely scrutinized by Fidel Castro’s regime. “The literary workshops were always targeted by State Security agents and representatives of the Cuban Communist Party. They always saw literature as a double-edged sword and that the attendees of those literary workshops were trying to free themselves from all those ideological and aesthetic conditions being imposed on us. We tried to read a variety of things. For me, being a writer was my way of being a coward,” says Francis. In those years, the government began to ban books by various authors. “Such was the case of the novel *Paradise*, by José Lezama Lima, which existed only in one copy per province. My friends and I, who attended literary workshops and were passionate about reading, became great thieves of books banned by Fidel Castro. We went to the provincial library in Sancti Spiritus and stole the only copy of Lezama Lima’s novel,” Francis says jokingly. “Once I wanted to steal the collection of



censored books from the National Library in Havana. In the end I was caught and detained for four days. After a while, when I thought that this issue had already been forgotten, I was summoned to a trial by the Popular Provincial Court of Havana. In the end they dismissed the case, I think it was because it was not a serious matter, as the case involved only books,” he says.

### **Love comes through the church**

“I didn’t know the church, I discovered it by chance,” says Francis. “It was where I met my wife, Ileana Alvarez, with whom I have two children. I came there mainly because I was interested in reading the Bible. At that time it was so difficult to own a Bible and there was a lady in the church who gave me my first Bible. Neither I nor Iliana liked dogmas,” he summarizes. Francis and his circle of friends who were also writers, became a threat to State Security. “We created the magazine of the diocese of Ciego de Ávila, Imago magazine, where we addressed many issues, which the government probably didn’t like. Ileana Alvarez won the first award in Catholic journalism in Cuba for her book *How the life of José Martí was related to the life of Christ*,” he recalls. “The church was a place of dissidence and in those years, it was a challenge to be Catholic and to profess the faith,” she says.

### **Ochoa**

In 1989, General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez and his comrades were executed by firing squad in Cuba. Francis’ friend Reinaldo Hernández Soto wrote an open letter to Fidel Castro opposing Ochoa’s execution. “Days went by and we knew nothing about Soto. Later we found out that he had been accused of contempt of court and was sentenced to five years in prison. We then realized that State Security had their eyes on us and our friends because of our reactionary ideas,” Francis summarizes.

### **The outcry over the Francis’ book *Federal Reserve***

Francis had written a book titled *Federal Reserve*, which at the time had not yet been published. “It existed only as a manuscript which suddenly disappeared. We assumed it had been stolen so that State Security could see what it was about. This is a very painful passage in my life, because the person who had taken the book was a friend of mine nicknamed Barquito. He was one of my best friends and at the same time was a member of the State Security,” Francis recalls. When he found out that Barquito had taken the manuscript, he didn’t want to believe it, as Barquito was a close family friend. “A few days later, Barquito died of a heart attack,” Francis says with emotion. “I forgave him, but I don’t think he forgave himself. I think he couldn’t bear the burden of guilt, because we trusted him completely,” he adds. After that, *Federal Reserve* went through an approval process: “In the end they approved the book for publishing and I only had to make one change,” Francis summarizes.



## Homage to Carpentier

“My like-minded friends who were also writers and I proposed to celebrate the Day of the Writer, paying homage to Alejo Carpentier. We contacted the wife of the late author and she agreed, but then the regime started putting up obstacles. We were told that we could not celebrate this day because the wife of the late Carpentier was very upset that her husband’s name was going to be used for counterrevolutionary purposes, which was not true. That’s when I got fed up as I realized the obsession of the totalitarian regime to try to restrict any individual or private initiative that does not come from the regime,” he says. After these events, Francis’ brother asked him to leave Cuba for the good of his family, but at that time, Francis was not willing to listen to his brother.

## Problems

“Ileana [Álvarez] founded at that time the feminist magazine *Alas tensas* [Tied Wings], which aimed to raise awareness on gender-based violence in Cuba,” he says. In the same period, Francis was also invited to Prague to inaugurate an exhibition on the reality of Cuba. “On my return to Cuba, I started having real problems with State Security. They started to mess with my family. If anything happened to my family I would not forgive them,” he sums up. It is worth mentioning that one of Francis’ sons was detained as a minor by the political police, and Francis realized that none of this was a coincidence.

## Preparations and exile

“Since my grandparents were Spanish, I could become a Spanish citizen,” Francis says. “I filed the necessary paperwork and waited, until we were able to leave Cuba. We had to leave one of our sons behind, but he joined us later. Upon arrival in Madrid, we were welcomed by a friend, to whom I will be eternally grateful. We also received help from several organizations. Twenty-one days after our arrival in Spain, I received a call from Cuba and was told that my mother had died. It was very hard for me,” he says with emotion.

## Exile

“I enjoy my freedom in exile, since I didn’t have it in Cuba. I think that I found my place in exile. The Cuban regime is a well-oiled machine, where you can’t live without repression, without violence. The same violence will one day turn against the government when things change,” Francis comments, adding that Cubans are “nothing more than the survivors of the grand experiment of totalitarianism in Cuba.” To conclude, Francis paraphrases words of the poet Eliseo Diego: “We were born here. The fact that we were born here and not anywhere else is not a coincidence. We are here to bear witness,” he concludes.



# Pablo Díaz Espí (1972)

[#Diario de Cuba](#) [#exile in Germany](#) [#exile in Spain](#)

[#journalist](#) [#Cubaencuentro magazine](#)

[#Mariel boatlift](#)



2020



*Being a journalist who writes against a dictatorship is very easy; being a journalist in a democracy is going to be much more difficult.*

**“Castroism has seized Cuba’s history. It has dominated its present, and it is even going to mortgage out the country’s future,” says Pablo Díaz, director of the newspaper Diario de Cuba, who has been living and working in Spain for 20 years as an independent journalist and who is very pessimistic about Cuba’s future.**

Pablo was born in Havana in 1972. The family of his mother and his father supported the revolutionary process. His maternal grandfather had been arrested and tortured by the government of Fulgencio Batista and was hiding in Matanzas when the Revolution triumphed. Pablo’s mother was very passionate about the new government and actively participated in the literacy campaign throughout the country. His father, Jesús Díaz, was from a humble family, and as he excelled in writing, he won important prizes in literature and later became an intellectual critic of the government. Moreover, Pablo’s father founded the famous cultural magazine, *El Cairmán Barbudo*, and the university magazine, *Pensamiento Crítico*. Due to the critical nature of some of the articles, he started to have problems with the regime. Pablo says that he realized at a very young age that the system in which he was growing up was very politicized, full of lies and manipulations. He also noticed that the history classes started to have ideological features. “I started having a dissident attitude, when I realized that I wanted to escape from the collectivist system in which I lived.” From then on, he says he rejected the regime, to the point of deciding not to go to university.



## Maríel boatlift

Pablo was especially marked by the 1980 Maríel boatlift, a mass emigration of Cubans to the U.S.. He remembers how the Cuban government made children march on the streets and insult Cubans who were locked up in the Peruvian Embassy while they awaited to be transported to the U.S. He also remembers the acts of repudiation organized in front of the houses of the families who decided to leave the island (it took some time for the Cuban government to negotiate their departure with the U.S.) He remembers that one day, as he was sitting in the street, some people came to pick up his friend whose family had left for the U.S. on the Maríel boatlift. He never saw him again.

## Military Service

With his mind always pondering exile from Cuba, he did three years of compulsory military service and was assigned as an embassy guard for the Ministry of the Interior. There he came into contact with Cuban troops returning from the Angolan War who served in the police force. Pablo says that these soldiers who came back from the war were debased and that it was difficult to live with them. He thinks of these years of military service as if it was a prison, which he survived by secretly reading books while guarding the door of the Uruguayan Embassy. The fact that he was one of only eight recruits (out of the total number of 80) who refused a permanent position in the Ministry of the Interior made his situation even more difficult, as he was considered a rebel.

## Exile in Berlin

In 1990, only 15 days after finishing his military service, Pablo went into exile in Berlin, where his father already lived on a scholarship for writers. His father waited for his son's arrival to definitively break with the Cuban regime and announce his exile. He did so through an article in the magazine *Der Spiegel* entitled *The Rings of the Serpent*, which stirred much criticism. He also received a threatening letter from the Cuban Ministry of Culture. Pablo enjoyed living in Berlin and was impacted by the fall of the Berlin wall. As he witnessed the collapse of the communist regime, he felt the confirmation of "the falsehood of totalitarianism." For five years, he studied at the prestigious Film and Television School and lived in an atmosphere of anarchy, art, and freedom.

## Trip to Cuba

Returning to Cuba was not his plan, but in 1996, when he was working in a TV station, he got a job to shoot a documentary on the island and decided to accept it. He spent almost a year in Cuba in a period of three months. He decided to travel around pretending to be a German with a forged German passport. This experience allowed him to be invisible in his own country. Cuba was experiencing the Special Period, and he was deeply affected by what he defines as a situation of "massive prostitution" of both men and women. "They were not asking for money or anything in return; they just wanted to escape for a few moments the reality they were living," he says.



## Journalism

The trip to Cuba inspired him to get closer to the Cuban exiles and become interested again in the situation of his country. In 1999 in Madrid, he founded with his father the digital magazine, *Cubaencuentro*, the first Cuban magazine which aimed to break the separation imposed by the government between “Cubans from inside” and “Cubans from outside,” and which was criticized by both the Cuban government and the Cuban opposition for that global vision of Cuba. Ten years later, in 2009, together with a group of writers, he founded *Diario de Cuba*, an online newspaper that offers general information from Cuba. Except for the times when his reporters in Cuba were targeted, Pablo says that directing *Diario de Cuba* has been a pleasant and easy experience. “Doing journalism against a dictatorship is very easy; doing journalism in a democracy is going to be much more complicated,” he says.

## Pessimism about Cuba’s future

Pablo is very pessimistic about the future of the island. He believes that Castroism has put an end to Cuba’s dream of independence. He believes that the only option for Cuba is to be a country of a service sector that will depend on the U.S. At the same time, he is sure that Castroism is not only a historical period, but it created a culture that will affect the future of the country: „It will leave it impoverished, devastated in terms of human talent, with a robust demographic outflow, racism, and international mafias at its doorstep.”

*Castroism has put an end to  
Cuba’s dream of independence.*



# Luis Eligio D'Omni (1972)



#Sierra Maestra #Cuban Army #countryside boarding school

#Omni Zona Franca #independent artist #Endless Poetry

#performance #exiled in the USA



2021





## “Exile is my masterpiece.”

“The neighborhood watchmen, along with other people, wanted to get us out of our house. They called in the police; it was an important moment in the neighborhood. The police patrols were going to take my mother out. And she took the *luz brillante* [a gasoline-like product used for cooking], poured it all over us and herself in front of everyone, and said: ‘Whoever wants to get us out of here, come on,’” recalls Luis Eligio D’Omni. His mother was ready to set her whole family on fire. “This experience was a very strong example of public activism to me. I didn’t even know what activism was, but it impressed me,” Luis recounts one of the first acts of rebellion against the Cuban authorities that he experienced as a child, and that marked him forever. The police could not get them out of their house that day.

Luis Eligio D’Omni was born on July 10, 1972 under the name of Eligio Pérez Meriño, in a family from Sierra Maestra. After the triumph of the Revolution, his mother contributed to the literacy campaign in the Cuban capital and stayed there. “Fidel took her around Havana. At one point, he was showing off all the literacy campaign workers around Havana to communicate to everybody, ‘here is my first great achievement’.” His mother wanted to name him Luis, but in the end, decided to satisfy his father’s wish, a senior military officer in the regime, and named him Eligio. However, she was called him Luis, and as everyone else followed, suddenly his name was noted down as Luis Eligio in the elementary school record. As for the surname D’Omni, which he always pronounces with a prolonged, mumbled “m,” as if it were a mantra, it comes from the name of the artistic group Omni Zona Franca. Luis and other members of the group took this name. Today everyone calls him Omni.



## Neptuno Street

Luis grew up on Neptuno Street in the Centro Habana quarter, a few blocks from the emblematic Malecón, a wide avenue that stretches along the northern coast of the Cuban capital. “Most of the sidewalks on Neptuno Street were made of granite and marble. The squares were full of stores, shopping malls, and movie theaters. It was a street where people would go for walks. It was still beautiful when I was born,” he recalls. However, the deterioration of the neighborhood started to show very soon. A few years later, he found a photo of the street taken before the Revolution in an old house they later lived in. “It was full of posters, posters, posters. You couldn’t see the street. And the marble sidewalk... the street was beautiful, full of art that can only be produced when you live in freedom and prosperity. Then I looked outside and saw the destruction.”

## Solitude

The house where he lived during his childhood was in very bad shape. “There was a hole in the ceiling. Once my brother fell from the bathroom downstairs, another day it was me who fell down.... We lived in these conditions until we were teenagers,” he describes. Luis was a very sensitive child who suffered from nightmares and mystical and religious apparitions. A family members who practiced Afro-Cuban syncretic religions impacted him. The family was not opposed to the Revolution. However, according to Luis, they instinctively and naturally complained about it. Luis’ mother was in the army and was frequently mobilized. As a result, he spent a lot of time alone during his childhood. “I was very lonely. It was so annoying to listen to the noise of the old buses that were in bad shape due to a shortage of spare parts and Russian gasoline and that passed by Neptuno street. The sound was so loud and annoying,” he says. I felt lonely even though, at times, there were up to 13 people living with us in our very small house. “There were very loud family arguments. There was no radio, no television,

*I concluded that this regime was stealing everyone’s life.*

no refrigerator. Many times, I would go to bed hungry,” he recounts. His mother had many boyfriends. According to Luis, she had to live this way to support the family: “I remember going to a pizza place with my mom and her new boyfriend once. I was eating a pizza, and they were looking at me. It was like, ‘Let’s take the kid out for a pizza so he doesn’t go to bed hungry.’ They didn’t eat anything.” As for his father, Luis met him only once when he was an adult. “My mom brought him in almost by force,” he recalls. and they did not manage to understand each other. Luis was already involved in artistic groups, so they never saw each other



again when the two parted ways. “I concluded that God was trying to tell me that I never really needed that father.”

## **Memories of the past and struggles of the present**

Luis got his education thanks to government scholarships. He spent a long time living in different boarding houses where students were housed. “I would go to see my mother every two weeks. I would often arrive on Friday, and my mother would be mobilized. The communist system took children away from their families,” he says. Luis realized that his mom always worked for the regime, so they had no family life. “I concluded that this regime was stealing everyone’s life,” he says. Life in the boarding school was hard. The houses looked luxurious and very comfortable, as they were confiscated from rich families, but life there was full of violence and humiliation. “There was always a female dorm master, but the strongest students, who were violent, were in charge inside of these dorms,” he explains. Luis belonged to the rebel group that opposed these boys and often got seriously injured.

## **Breakdance and bread with butter**

One of his favorite hobbies was breakdancing. “It’s an activity of independence, identity, and protest. We would stop traffic, and the police would take us to jail. It was an exercise in activism, but we didn’t know it. When breakdance competitions took place, the violence stopped,” he recalls. Students in the boarding schools often go hungry, but he remembers some meals that he loved. “At breakfast, they would make bread with butter, and they would bake it in the oven. It would turn out crusty, and all the butter would come out.” Luis was a problematic student, who would lose things, would fight, and refuse to work in the fields. However, because his mom supplied the institution with supplies that were lacking, he didn’t suffer much persecution. “She brought a lot of pencils and sheets of paper. That gives you the idea of the crisis. My mother would steal them from her workplace. The director didn’t even ask her where it all came from,” says Luis.

## **The first act of rebellion**

Luis witnessed an act of rebellion against the authorities for the first time at school. “We were all in the dining room. The principal was saying that imperialists would attack us and we had to be prepared. Some boys started shouting that this was a lie. They explained all the details as to why that was a lie. It was the first time I heard this kind of speech,” he says. Another moment he considers important was his first contact with rock music. He discovered this style of music thanks to a Bolivian colleague. “He showed me the music of Led Zeppelin. Then in 1985, I saw the movie the Beatles at the boarding school. I behaved well so I could attend. I can’t describe the excitement,” he explains and says he was especially fascinated by the fact that the musicians did whatever they wanted. After finishing high school, he studied industrial mechanics. Luis devoted a lot of time to reading and writing from a very young age. And it was precisely thanks



to reading books that he started to question the Revolution. His mother took care of an old lady who left them her house when she passed away. It was an old house that preserved the spirit of the pre-communist era. "There was nothing from the revolutionary period. It was like a time machine. The floor and the stained glass were preserved, the whole ceiling was decorated. The television set from the 1950s worked. The drawers were full of Palmolive soaps. The library was huge, rich, and beautiful. It was incredible. Luis started reading and didn't stop for years: "I devoured them," he recalls. Despite the ideas he got from those books, he didn't feel like a counterrevolutionary." I still admired Fidel Castro. I think that started to change only when I joined Omni Zona Franca," he says.

## The birth of Omni

By the end of the 1990s, Luis had already had some 15 years of serious literary work under his belt. His life reached another turning point. He encountered two movements: Omni and Zona Franca. "They were two groups, one gathered writers and the other sculptors. Both were founded under the guidance of a poet whose name was Juan Carlos Flores. He was the custodian of a gallery in Alamar that hosted alternative projects. The Omni guys were there. Above it, there was the Casa de Cultura [Cultural Center]. Juan Carlos Flores was an extraordinary poet. We would just go there to listen to him," says Luis. The name Omni was suggested by another member of the group, Amaury Pacheco, the Omni Poet, who practiced mysticism. "The word Omni came about in one discussion, and everyone loved it. Amaury said, 'This movement has to be like a drop that expands endlessly after falling into a lake. Luis started to practice meditation with Omar Pérez [Cuban poet and son of revolutionary leader Ernesto Che Guevara]. "We would meditate in sessions that lasted up to 72 hours without moving. I would feel pain, and my mind, spirit, and body would reach an intense unity," he says.

## Omni Zona Franca

The history of Omni Zona Franca is full of harassment and censorship. At the beginning, it was still part of the official institutions. Luis and other group members performed everywhere: on buses, in the streets, on the beaches. At the same time, Luis dedicated himself to audiovisual art. "A lot of people gathered to watch our performances. The police would always be there as well. We were at war. " For a long time, Luis did not have a very negative opinion of the Revolution. However, some members of the group were fiercely opposed to the regime. "One of them told me: 'Fidel Castro is a son of a bitch. I don't believe in Fidel Castro. If you're going to do anything about Fidel Castro, don't count on me.'" The situation changed drastically at the end of 2010. "They tried to incorporate the group into the institutional system by taking us to biennials around the world. The Havana Biennial officially welcomed us in 2009," he says. However, the movement was not planning to follow the path of the others. "We ended up making a *piñata* (which is a decorated figure of an animal containing toys and sweets that is suspended from a height and broken open by blindfolded children as part of a celebration). The *piñata* that Omi Zona Franca made represented the offici-



al institutions and the Revolution, and we smashed it,” he says. They also made another installation consisting of articles from the *Nuevo Herald* newspaper that spoke about the situation in Cuba from the dissidents' point of view. Despite conflicts with the authorities, the group was growing mainly thanks to the boom in electronic communication.

## Endless Poetry

The group *Omni Zona Franca* was finally expelled from official institutions in 2009 when it organized the festival *Poesía Sin Fin* [Endless Poetry]. “It was a festival with 14 shows in a month. We put together hip hop shows where poets and writers were placed in a poetic ring with the toughest rappers of the time,” explains Luis. The location of these events was an amphitheater, and four thousand tickets had been sold. In the first shows, “the poets read protest poems, and the rappers expressed extreme critiques of the government. *Los Aldeanos*, *Escuadron* [Patriot] ...So the authorities said, ‘This can’t happen.’” As artists were arriving from all over the country, the regime decided to stop it at all costs. The authorities asked the theater group *Cuerpo Adentro*, led by Luis’ wife at Susana Gil, to cancel its participation in the festival. “We said no, that this was censorship.” The *Cuerpo Adentro* group demonstrated against the censorship in a park surrounded by a crowd of people. “The next day, the Rapid Response Brigades and the special forces, dressed like those in the movies, showed up. It was a very tough time.” The festival was moved to the homes of movement members who took advantage of the internet to communicate with artists in exile and with the world. They denounced the abuse on social networks, and suddenly even CNN ran a report on them. Intellectuals from all over the world were writing them letters of support. “The next day, renowned official writers were inside our house crowded with people, to read a poem by Reinaldo Arenas. This act of repudiation organized by the authorities organically turned into a demonstration of support for the festival.

## Emigration

In 2013, Luis emigrated to the U.S. “Nobody deserves to live in the 62-year Holocaust-like terror that the Cuban people have been living in,” he says. However, he also mentions how difficult living in a new country is. “Being exiled from Cuban has been one of the most painful things anyone has to go through. It is difficult to be uprooted, maintain a culture in a country where your culture does not exist, give all your energy to build a nation that is not your nation, and endure that you cannot return to your country. And I say this with a deep appreciation of the U.S., as I feel welcomed here,” he says. Luis considers the exile his masterpiece, composed of personal experiences, messages, bills, his production company *Omni-Kizzy Productions*, and much more. “Freedom is everything,” he concludes. Everything. *Omni*.



# Enrique Figuerola Miranda (1978)



[#opposition activist](#) [#Varela Project](#) [#Boniato prison](#)

[#pre-delinquent social dangerousness](#) [#Patriotic Union of Cuba](#)

[#UNPACU](#) [#Ladies in White](#)



2020



*I owe my hatred for the regime and my desire for change in Cuba to the government!*

**“I urge all Cubans to unite because united we will achieve change in our Cuba,” insists Enrique Figuerola Miranda, human rights rapporteur and opponent of the communist regime, who has been imprisoned without trial on several occasions.**

Enrique Figuerola Miranda was born in July 1978 in Havana, Cuba. He spent his childhood in Santiago de Cuba, where he moved with his mother. She passed away when Enrique was only 11 years old. The death of his mother affected him considerably, and he soon rejected his studies and his hobby, wrestling. Enrique was moved from school to school, and not all of them had a good influence on him. The effect of the violent environment of the school and the dynamics between his brothers, trying to survive as best they could, led Enrique’s first imprisonment. He was incarcerated at the age of 16 for violent robbery. “Today, I am aware that it was a mistake. As we were five orphans, I was just a child trying to find something to eat and wear. In prison, I was not afraid, but it broke me. I had to fight to be able to eat from the first day,” he recalls. Even though Enrique was a minor, he was placed in the Boniato prison in Santiago de Cuba. “I was a young boy. In Boniato, the inmates were stabbing and killing each other. I saw many deaths and several executions,” he describes. He was released from prison in 1995.



## Varela Project

“State Security often visited my neighbor Pachi. I was interested in finding out what was happening to him, so I approached him and discovered a peaceful opposition that impacted me,” he recalls. In 2001 Enrique began to get closer to the opposition movement. He started to participate in the seminars and debates of the Republican Party, of the political activist Manuel de Jesús Díaz Preval, known as Pachi. Pachi was also a member of the movement led by dissident Oswaldo Payá, who carried out the Varela Project that advocated political reforms in Cuba in favor of greater individual freedoms. In 2002, Payá personally presented the signatures supporting the project to the National Assembly. However, without success, the events culminated in March 2003 in Cuba’s Black Spring. At that time, still, without political conviction, Enrique participated in the project by recording reports, trying to obtain as much footage as possible to present to the government, and thus demand the rights of every citizen of Cuba. “Félix Varela was a person with an ideology of the future. The Varela Project, named according to him, called for the union of all citizens, as I am calling them today, regardless of race, material differences. Differences should not matter,” he stresses.

*Félix Varela was a person with an ideology of the future. The Varela Project, named according to him, called for the union of all citizens, as I am calling them today, regardless of race, material differences.*

### Indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness

In 2003 thanks to his activities linked to the opposition movement, he was marked as a counterrevolutionary. In 2003 was sentenced to four years in Boniato prison for the crime of pre-delinquent social dangerousness, which consists of punishing someone before he commits a crime. He was imprisoned for requesting the release of the 75 political prisoners of the Black Spring. “When I was imprisoned, the experience was a total turnaround for me. I owe my hatred for the regime and my desire for change in Cuba to the government,” he says. After two years, he finally got out of prison and tried to return to normal life by working as a maintenance man for a church. He was removed from this job due



to the intervention of the state police. In 2009, when he worked as a self-employed butcher, he was accused of *atentado* [an armed assault], while defending himself from an attack by the state police. He was sentenced to six years in the Boniato prison but was released in 2011 thanks to a pardon signed before the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. In the same year, he joined the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU) and formally became an activist for human rights and democracy in Cuba. The regime responded to his activities with repression. “We already know what happens when you are part of an organization that doesn’t fit in with the regime. The life of the opposition activist is bad, in the worst sense of the word,” he says.

## Hunger strikes

In July 2012, he was arrested at the carnival of Santiago de Cuba for photographing alleged police violence. Officers of State Security detained his brother and his wife, who were accompanying him. For this reason, Enrique declared his first hunger strike and persisted in it for more than 40 days, until he achieved the release of his family members. He was transferred again to the Boniato prison for the crime of *atentado* [an armed assault]. Once in prison, faced with the cruel reality of political prisoners, he decided to organize a general strike among the inmates. “I started secretly divulging written messages spreading the concept of human rights, and I reached the inmates one by one,” he explains. He said that he managed to get more than 40 inmates to join his demonstration against prison mistreatment. Despite being subjected to psychological torture during this general strike, Enrique declared his second hunger strike. “They took my mattress away at 6 a.m. and gave it back to me at 10 p.m. My water rations were cut down. I had no medical attention. I could not go out to the yard, and I had no visitors. But I do feel that I achieved my purpose,” he says.

## 53 political prisoners

In 2015, after three years of imprisonment, Enrique was released before serving his full sentence. His early release was possible thanks to an agreement between then-Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama. “Raúl and Obama made a contract through which U.S. released those who were Cuban agents in the U.S. and Cuba released 53 political prisoners. I was the third political prisoner to be released, although Raúl never acknowledged that we were political prisoners, he called us prisoners of interest of the U.S. government,” he recalls. Since then, despite intimidations, fines, prohibitions to leave their home, repressions, threats, physical and psychological attacks, detentions, and more, Enrique and his wife Mercedes Echevarría Guevara, a member of the Ladies in White, remain in the opposition movement to achieve change in Cuba. “At any moment I can go to jail because I do not intend to pay the fines or stop my activities as a human rights defender,” Enrique stresses, while he adds: “We have not succeeded because we have not felt like it. We will be only able to achieve change if we unite. I call for the union of Cubans because we all want the same thing, but we have to unite”!

# Lázaro Mireles Galbán (1983)

**#LGTBIO+ #March of the Banned Ones**

**#Actions for Democracy**

**#Cuba Democracy Now**



2020





*"We hope for the best for Cuba.  
We wish for Cuba to be prosperous,  
free and democratic."*

**"In general, people need to understand that homophobic and anti-LGTBIQ+ sentiments are widespread in Cuba and how this fact defines your existence," says Cuban activist Lázaro Mireles.**

Lázaro was born in March 1983 in Matanzas. He grew up with his maternal grandparents in the countryside. The family had a dairy farm near Matanzas and his childhood was very peaceful. Until the age of 14, he lived an ordinary life, although at that time, he was already well aware of his sexual orientation. Since he could not confess to his family the fact that he was gay, he was using different ruses so that his family would not discover the truth. "When I was 15 or 16 years old, I was dating a boy, but I told my family that I was dating this boy's female cousin," he says. However, due to a mistake and some bad luck, the family found out the truth.



## Teenager

The family relations were never good, according to Lázaro, and this event caused total chaos in the family. His mother never accepted his sexual orientation and when the atmosphere became unbearable, Lázaro no longer had a reason to continue living there. He was 16 years old when he left his family with a very simple dream: to live his life with peace of mind. “When you are a teenager and you live with your family, at a certain moment, you realize that you have to forgive them what they put you through because you have to understand that there was a lot more going on than meets the eye,” he says.

## Activism

Lázaro had already become an activist in high school and started work with youth and the LGTBIQ+ community. He changed his high school several times, but at the age of 17 he graduated, then studied at a vocational college and after graduation started working. Lázaro says that at the time his life was “crazy,” marked by being Cuban and homosexual. The truth is that he did not stray far from the doors of the faculty, because he got his first job in health promotion and prevention in the Department of Sexual Education of the province of Matanzas. He has remained to this day very enthusiastic while talking about this work. “They supposedly had offered me this job because they had seen that I was an activist,” Lázaro emphasizes.

*When you are a homosexual in Cuba, there comes a time when you discover the power of the regime.*

## First clashes

Unfortunately, at this stage he experienced his first clash with the autocratic system. “They wanted to inflate the statistics on health prevention,” he says and explains the situation at length with examples. In general, the problem consisted of financial resources not being used for the projects that they were allocated. “For example, coordinators were supposed to use a minibus that was given to one project in Matanzas to go to meetings and carry out activities for the community, but the minibus was given to the director Dr. Chachi to use,” he says. Lázaro affirms that it is because of all this manipulation that the LGTBIQ+ community in Cuba today does not have spaces where they can freely meet. It was because of similar events that Lázaro decided to quit his job at the Prevention Center and started to create his own project in the Educational Cultural Center.



## Scams in health projects

After his first work experience, Lázaro got involved in different community-based projects. “However, when you are a homosexual in Cuba, there comes a time when you discover the power of the regime,” he says. In 2006 Lázaro faced his first major persecution when one of his projects was cancelled and he was fired from his office. All this happened in reaction to a dispute he had had with his colleague Belinda over the financing of a project supported by Medi-Cuba Switzerland, during the official visit of the Swiss delegation that came to the province. Specifically, there was a global fund earmarked for a specific diet that people suffering from HCV [Hepatitis C Virus] had to receive, but they received nothing. Lázaro inquired as to why and he also said that if they would not receive it, he would not participate in this official event. A few nights later, they cancelled the big event that Lázaro had been preparing for a long time, without giving him any explanation. A few days later he went to his office and his colleague Belinda told him: “That’s so that you, faggot, learn that you can’t mess with me,” says Lázaro. As a result, the police came to his house and told him that, from that moment on, they were going to follow anyone close to him and those who were suffering from HCV. And they did. It is worth mentioning that most of these people, suddenly involved in this investigation, had never received the diet provisions to which they were entitled.

## Cenesex and Mariela Castro

One day his path crossed with Mariela Castro, daughter of the former Cuban President Raúl Castro. She is the director of a Cuban institution called Cenesex. Although at first the community believed that with the arrival of Mariela Castro everything would be possible and that the situation with Cuban homophobia was finally going to change, Lázaro did not believe that this is the case and has continued to be critical of this institution and its director. He personally met Mariela Castro during his regular work day and his impression of her was very negative. “There were a lot of people with a lot of illusions and Mariela was only interested in the cameras and journalists,” he says. However, according to Lázaro, before Mariela arrived, many people were not interested in LGTBIQ+ issues in Cuba at all, and when she came on the scene, she put the issue on the agenda. Mariela chose a representative for the project in each large city, and in Matanzas, she chose Lázaro.

## Phony project

Lázaro says that Mariela made many promises that in reality turned out to be completely false. She promised to create official spaces in all provinces where the community could organize their educational activities, or that she would push for marriage equality. In Lázaro’s opinion, the only objective of Cenesex is to collect money for projects with no benefits for the LGTBIQ+ community. “It’s [political] theater to make the world believe that in Cuba things are changing.” When asked if he thinks Cenesex is an institution created as a “smokescreen,” Lázaro replies, “The initial objective of Cenesex was to provide sex



education for the population, which it did. However, in terms of its support for the LGTBIQ+ community, which only started long after Cenesex as an institution had been founded, Cenesex is a phony project with no real value for LGTBIQ+ community,” says Lázaro.

### **A symbolic wedding**

In 2010, Lázaro recalls that Mariela Castro denied that there was the possibility of promoting same-sex marriage, which, in his memory, still resonates to this day. However, since 2012 the official press has been reporting that Mariela Castro claims that Cuba is ready for same-sex marriage. “What is happening within Cuban society is at odds with the reality,” says Lázaro. When it seemed that the issue of equal marriage had already been firmly promised by Mariela Castro, Lázaro organized in Matanzas the first big symbolic same-sex wedding. The atmosphere was friendly and emotional, and showed that Cuba was ready. However, it ended bad for many of the participants, as they were dismissed from their jobs, persecuted and harassed by the regime. Lázaro had to leave his home and all his projects were cancelled by official orders. “The year of 2011 was quite difficult for me in this sense. I kept fighting, I was threatened, and there were even investigations into my life,” Lázaro describes.

### **Exit as a salvation**

Although in 2012 he was allowed to organize a project to combat homophobia in Varadero, at that time his visa to Germany was approved. With his health in a precarious state due to the stress experienced by the persecution, Lázaro left for Europe, and from Germany he continued to Spain, where he currently resides. There he has resumed his activities with the LGTBIQ+ community, and has his dedication to political activism. After a violent encounter at a demonstration in Madrid he joined the platform Cuba Democracy Now. And on January 26, 2019, he joined an international campaign organized in front of the Cuban Embassy, an event known worldwide as the *Marcha de los Prohibidos* [the March of the Banned]. As of June 2019, he also been participating in the movement *Actions for Democracy*.

### **Conflict with the Embassy**

In reaction to the *March of the Banned*, the Cuban Embassy put together a list of all the Cubans who participated. At that time, Lázaro had to renew his Cuban passport, so he went to the Cuban diplomatic mission in Spain to get it renewed. On February 6, he arrived at the Embassy, but they refused to let him in and told him that they were not going to renew it. “But why? I don’t need it to enter Cuba, it is my official document, it is the only thing that indicates that I am Cuban,” Lázaro was surprised. The response from the embassy worker was simple: “Anyone who has problems with my country has no business being here,” she said. “Ma’am, your country is my country too,” Lázaro objected. Thus, began his conflict with the Cuban Embassy. He was forced to make his case public through the media. The Embassy released an



official statement where it denied everything. “What is happening in Madrid is just a show by those who only want to destabilize the good functioning of the revolutionary process. It is not true that citizen Lázaro Mireles has made any kind of legal proceedings at the Embassy,” the communiqué read, as Lázaro recalled. Shortly after this publication of his case, he was offered a “VIP procedure”, as Lázaro calls it, according to which, in less than 15 minutes he was issued a passport that they had not been able to give him in a year. “It is a right of all Cuban citizens,” says Lázaro.

### **We hope for the best**

“We hope for the best for Cuba, we wish for Cuba to be prosperous, free and democratic, but this is not going to happen in the short term”, says Lázaro. He says there are two conditions: first, the Cuban people must be the only trigger for these changes. And second, the work of the opposition. For now, he is pessimistic about the future of Cuba, but this does not mean that he will stop fighting with all his strength and passion. Giving up fighting is not one of the options in the near future either. Lázaro will continue to live by his life motto, inspired by the great Cuban thinker and independence hero José Martí: “Actions speak louder than words.”

*José Martí used to say:  
‘Actions speak louder than  
words.’*



# Abu Duyanah (1984)

#writer #cultural platform Demógenes

#Friendship Movement #muslim #opposition activist

#Cuban Association for the Education of Islam



2020



*“Cubans have a serious problem: everyone wants to be Fidel Castro. And those who do not want to be like Fidel Castro want some Fidel Castro to lead them to freedom.”*

**“Outside Cuba, people consider me to be a writer, while in Cuba, I’m scum for the regime,” says Abu Duyanah, a Cuban writer, activist, and human rights defender.**

Abu, whose whole official name is Niovel Alexander Tamayo Formén, was born in 1984 in Manzanillo, Granma province. A few months after his birth, his family moved to Havana, where he has lived until today. From an early age, he was different in his thinking. He questioned communism, both to himself and to his classmates and teachers. “I didn’t want to be like Che,” Abu recounts.



## Indoctrination of children

His questioning caused him problems at school. Although he admires some teachers and the quality of their teaching and says that “many did not emphasize political issues,” the vast majority of them indoctrinated the children. He also observed the social differences. While they had to raise funds for some children in the school to help them buy shoes, others wore American brands. Abu understood that “the system was different from what was being taught in the school very early on.”

*Cuban culture is conditioned to satisfy the regime, the tyranny. From the first moment when he took power, Fidel claimed that art had to celebrate the regime, the dictatorship, and outside of that, there was no art.*

## Going beyond what is established by the regime

As a young man, he was interested in books about anarchism, and in general, in the culture of social protest. He describes himself at that time as “an individual who wanted not only to question but to change the situation around him...” Apart from his leanings towards anarchism, Abu began to dedicate himself to literature and art, which represented an important moment on his path to become an opposition activist: “I wanted Cubans to see that it is possible to go beyond what is established by the institutions and by the regime,” Abu explains.

## Demóngeles and Movimiento Amistad

Within the framework of this thinking, he founded the Demóngeles project, which encourages Cubans to actively participate in making changes in Cuba: “As citizens, we are tired, and we want things to change,” Abu emphasizes. Within another opposition project, Movimiento Amistad [Friendship Movement], they carried out a series of actions, the most notable of which was a march for non-violence. One of the main objectives of the march, according to Abu, was “to claim our rights beyond literature,” and, of course, to stop the violence against Cubans, be their opposition activist or not, “to stop persecuting people who have a different opinion,” Abu explains.



## **Repression against anything different**

An essential part of Abu's life story, which increases the persecution by State Security, is his Muslim religion. Abu started to be interested in Islam as early as 2001 and converted to Islam in 2010. He was the first Cuban who managed to make his trip to Mecca. He describes Islam as a religion that "explains the basics," making an effort during the interview to dispel some stereotypes about this religion, such as the use of the the hijab or terrorism. He dedicates himself to informing Cubans about Islam but continues to be persecuted by State Security for professing his faith. "There is a strong repression against anything different," Abu concludes.

## **Cuban Association for the Education of Islam**

In 2012, he founded the Cuban Association for the Education of Islam, which, however, he could not legalize. "In Cuba, they invented a Register of Associations, according to which there can only be one organization for each issue. If you want to defend the forests, for example, and you manage to form a group of people who support you, the regime will create an organization that has the same objective, will legalize this organization, and will prevent you from legalizing your association," Abu explains. Since 2000, there has been an Islamic League of Cuba loyal to the regime. "I was told that if I want my group legalized, I have to stop opposing the regime," he adds.

## **Demanding human rights**

Abu is an activist but also a writer. His work is dedicated to social justice. Although the author himself describes his writing as fictional humor, the basis of his stories and novels is "the vindication of human rights," he says. "As a writer, you want your work to reach the public," Abu continues. But that's where the problem lies: for the Cuban government, he does not count as an artist because he is an opponent. "A dictator tells me that this is not art," he claims. Although supposedly paid to protect artists, the government institutions do not respect anyone who is not aligned with the official thinking. The regime only respects the artists who, according to him, "are mediocre, not that they are bad, but the themes they use, do not interest anyone," he describes. "Cuban culture is conditioned to satisfy the regime, the tyranny. From the first moment when he took power, Fidel claimed that art had to celebrate the regime, the dictatorship, and outside of that, there was no art," Abu explains.

## **Dictatorship always kills someone**

"I used to believe that if the system complied with its laws, the country could function to a large extent. But I don't want that anymore; I want it to end," Abu says. "I am an opposition activist. I always thought that I was not a revolutionary and against revolutions. Revolutions always cause bloodshed, even if you don't want it. Dictatorships do not want change, and will always shed blood. As a pacifist, I was against that. I didn't want that to happen. But I don't care anymore



what the regime does. If they want to kill me, or if they want to kill someone, let them do it because it's their nature. I have come to take the position of an opposition activist, even though it was not my intention. And although I have always said that I am not a revolutionary, I think I have no other way... I have to accept that they call me this; I have to recognize it because what I need, what this country needs, what I want for my children, or the children of my friends, is for the system to change. I want communism to disappear from my country, " Abu explains the reasons that led him to join the opposition. At the same time, Abu has a rather radical opinion about the opposition abroad. "The change has to be made by the people who are in Cuba. The activists who live abroad have to understand that those who left, left. They should not have left. They should have been here. People get upset with me for saying this, but I don't care. Because there are activists here who don't have food," he says.

*I want to think that Cuba is going to get better as a country and that there is going to be a democratic system in which Cubans are allowed to participate. Where rights are respected, where Cubans are recognized as human beings.*

### **We can do nothing but go against**

"This regime can continue without a president; the system works thanks to State Security. You can remove Díaz Canel and replace him with whomever. Raúl can die tomorrow, and everything will continue because the machinery has been set up to keep the regime," Abu describes the current situation and the situation of the last sixty years under the dictatorship. "Cubans are already changing. Because they have had enough. They see that we live in misery and repression. If we had repression, but we would live like Europeans or Americans, we would say: 'Well, we have repression, we don't have rights, but we have all the things we need. I can settle for not participating in politics and not having freedom of expression.' But we have neither freedom of expression nor freedom of movement, and I don't have economic freedom either. I have no food, no milk for my children, no medicine for my mother, no medicine for my grandmother, the





hospitals are a disaster. What do I have? I have nothing,” he sums up. However, as disappointing as these words might sound, Abu does not give up: “What can we do? We can’t do anything but go against it,” he adds.

### **Possibility of being happy**

“In the long term I want to think that Cuba is going to get better as a country and that there is going to be a democratic system in which Cubans are allowed to participate. Where rights are respected, where Cubans are recognized as human beings, and where everyone is equal, has the same opportunities, and where they have a chance to be happy,” Abu concludes.

*The change has to be made by the people who are in Cuba. The activists who live abroad have to understand that those who left, left. They should not have left. They should have been here. People get upset with me for saying this, but I don't care. Because there are activists here who don't have food.*

# Ariel Maceo Tellez (1986)



[#independent artist](#) [#opposition activist](#) [#poet](#) [#regulado](#)

[#cultural platform Demóngeles](#) [#San Isidro Movement](#)

[#ADN Cuba](#) [#Decree Law 349](#) [#countryside boarding school](#)



2020



*“Dissident art in Cuba is persecuted as if it were an opposition political party.”*

**“They have threatened to put me in prison for two years simply for not working for the state, but I’m not interested in that, I’m interested in making art that spreads the message of democracy,” stresses Ariel Maceo Tellez, one of the leaders of the independent cultural movement who fights against the censorship of art in Cuba.**

Ariel Maceo Tellez was born in 1986 in Havana, into a family that admired the communist ideology. His father worked in the military, therefore Ariel, since childhood, participated in the public marches and had to listen to the endless political speeches of Fidel Castro. During high school Ariel wanted to become a soccer player at the professional level. “I watched Spanish soccer players on TV, I wanted to be a professional football player in Cuba; instead at 15 years of age, I was sent to school in the countryside,” he talks about the educational system from that time, where young Cubans were forced to work in the agricultural sector while studying outside their cities and far from their families.





## From military service to poetry

After finishing his pre-university studies in 2003, Ariel began his military service. “In Cuba, the daily news on TV show military excersises being done against an invented enemy. In Cuba there is nothing to conquer,” Ariel emphasizes. “Military service took two years of my life. some people enter their military service and never get out, they simply lose their lives there,” he says. In 2004, after leaving the army, he began working at the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT). Several of his friends were musicians or artists. Ariel turned to literature, photography and in his free time began writing poetry. “I didn’t know much about Cuban poetry. I was surprised when I learned that independent art was totally different from what I learned in school,” he says.

## Literature led me to question politics

Ariel became friends with other independent Cuban writers and artists and studied at the Onelio Jorge Cardoso Literary Training Center, then he took a postgraduate course called “Cuban Literature of the 21st Century,” organized by the Alejo Carpentier Center and the Institute of Literature and Linguistics. “I was interested in questioning the status quo, I was interested in writing a kind of protest literature, which is what I do. And that of course took me away from everything official. Censorship began and I couldn’t get my work published by any publishing house,” he stresses, explaining the difficulties that independent writers face if they don’t write solely about the Cuban Revolution or communist leaders. At that time Ariel was already following independent cultural and artistic projects, such as Omni Zona Franca, Cabeza de Piñón, Matraca, Raspadura or Demóngeles. In 2016, he was approached by art historian Yanelys Núñez Leyva and artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara from Museo de la Disidencia [the Museum of Dissidence] for an interview, and this was the moment that led Ariel directly to political activism. In 2016 Ariel decided to reactivate the cultural platform Demóngeles and during the same year, he became one of its coordinators.

## Decree Law 349

In 2016, when Fidel Castro passed away, artistic groups of musicians, writers, painters and other intellectuals tried to improve the conditions in which Cuban art was being developed, and the Demóngeles platform participated as well. “We launched a campaign for cultural rights, we marched, we expressed ourselves against the regime through our art,” Ariel describes. However, Cuba’s current president, Miguel Díaz Canel, has managed to maintain power and control over art and culture with Decree 349, a law, which subjects Cuban artists to a special permit to be able to exercise their right to create artistic work. “By Decree 349 anyone can be fined for publishing independent literature and they can go to jail for any form of expression or publication,” Ariel describes. The campaign against Decree 349 was joined by several dissident movements and organizations. “The traditional opposition groups realized that artists are fighting against the regime as well and that they are not going to give in, it was a phenomenal union,” says Ariel with gratitude.



## Independent art is persecuted

At the end of 2018, Ariel started to be persecuted by State Security. “When the Movimiento San Isidro (MSI) became known, we had to face regular attacks by the political police. On the other hand, people were interested in our activities, and in our art, so it was an incredible moment for us,” Ariel boasts. The independent cultural movement took advantage of social networks. “We use social media as our battlefield and the Cuban government does not know how to fight there. But they can put us in jail. They have threatened with putting me in jail for two years simply for not working for the State. Dissident art in Cuba is persecuted as if it were a political party. We are artists, we want democratic art,” he stresses. Ariel was arrested and interrogated also for establishing a publishing house, where with few resources aimed at publishing books of all the young artists who are forced to suffer the censorship of the Cuban regime. Moreover, he was also arrested for demanding an Animal Protection Law in a post on his Facebook wall.

## I am a Cuban who thinks differently

In March 2020, Ariel started another campaign bringing attention to price hikes in Cuba, posting news and denunciations on his Twitter and Facebook accounts. His publications went viral and were shared more than 13,000 times. “I achieved a change in Cuba. No political party is needed, it is the free people who are united. Cuba is already ready for a political change, not all young people, since many of them are currently very afraid, but at the same time Cuba already has people ready to run for a new president,” he stresses. Although his participation in the independent cultural movement has resulted in the rupture of the relationship with his parents, Ariel continues to practice independent art. “I have to fight against the government itself, whether head-on, metaphorically or in a symbolic way. Being a dissident involves a lot of sacrifice,” he laments. Ariel lives in Havana and currently cooperates with the independent news outlets ADN Cuba. In Spain and Argentina, he managed to publish two books of poetry: *Último cumpleaños* [Last Birthday] and *¿Sabes quién son los monstruos?* [Do You Know Who the Monsters Are?] and he is currently finishing his third book.

## The guards against the regime

Ariel’s wishes for Cuba are clear: he longs for a pluralistic Cuba, where the rights of all people are respected, where Cuban children would have the opportunity to develop fully as free individuals and improve their financial situation. “I want it for me, for everyone, even for those who are in favor of the communist regime, because I want a democratic, republican Cuba, that is what we need,” Ariel explains. “We represent the independence, we have to be the guards against the regime,” he sums up.



# Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara (1987)



[#independent artist](#) [#political art](#) [#performance](#)

[#hunger strikes](#) [#San Isidro Movement](#) [#opposition activist](#)

[#LGTBIQ+](#)



2020



*All human being must ask themselves: What is my purpose? What is my path to achieve freedom for Cuba?*

**“I am an artist who realized that the function of art is that it can change society. And a dictatorial regime has to take responsibility,” says Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, a contemporary Cuban artist, performer and human rights activist.**

Luis Manuel was born in December 1987 in Havana. “When I was born, my father was in prison,” Luis Manuel recounts about the beginning of the life of, as he calls himself, the “Negro del Cerrito” [The black man from the Cerro neighborhood in Havana, Cerrito is the affectionate way of referring to this quarter]. His birthplace and the color of his skin did not bode well for a successful life. “My family was very traditional, full of dogmas, stereotypes and homophobia,” he adds. “Growing up, I dreamed of having a life like any man who lives in Western civilization: to have a car, a house, and to be famous,” he says. However, Luis realized that “there was something more beyond his social circles.” From a very young age, he knew that in order to fulfill any kind of dream, he “lacked the intellectual part.” When he was a teenager, he got excited about sports. “However, in sports I lacked creativity,” he says. In the end, it was not sport that would make him famous, but art.



## **This kid, where did he come from?**

“Since he was a child, he has been very sensitive when faced with abuse of others. I used to deform pencils and draw faces, flowers and shapes, but only for entertainment, without knowing what art meant,” he says. And that’s how he discovered his ability to transform objects with his own hands. At the age of 15 or 16 he started to search for the intellectual work that is reflected in art. At that time, his aunt showed one of Luis’ sculptures to an art teacher. “That kid, where did he come from?” asked the professor. ‘From his house in El Cerro,’ my aunt answered. So, he arranged for me to meet with him,” he says.

## **A black kid in a world of posh white people**

Once he entered the world of the art, he left sports for good. “It was quite a transition for a sporty black kid to enter into a posh white world,” he recalls. The racial issue is a core part of his interview. “Being black in Cuban society is a stigma, it’s a mark that you constantly walk around with, and you have to work twice as hard,” explains Luis Manuel, emphasizing the lack of opportunities for black people on the island.

## **The gap between art and work in art**

Many of the Cuban cultural houses are closed, and when they are open, they are fully subject to the official ideology and regulations of the Cuban regime. “There is a huge difference between THE art and working IN art,” Luis Manuel explains when it comes to the issues independent artist face in Cuba. Moreover, the artistic standard is defined by San Alejandro, the National Academy of Visual Arts. “You can have a great drawing, but being from El Cerro you don’t have the right drawing technique. And you’re never going to achieve what the San Alejandro academy likes,” he explains. Moreover, the courses and workshops of art are excessively expensive, costing around \$10 a month, much more than the average Cuban can afford. “There is no cultural outreach to these marginalized neighborhoods,” adds Luis Manuel. Moreover, there are limitations imposed by the regime. At one time, “Fidel Castro decided that there were too many artists in Cuba,” Luis recounts, and he disagrees with this. “I don’t care if you are a bricklayer, I don’t care if you are a farmer; if I want to be an artist and you have to give me options to be an artist,” he says. Moreover, there is the issue of Decree 349, a Cuban law that requires artists to acquire a special permit to be able to practice art. Luis Manuel has never received this permit.

## **From religion to human suffering**

Despite not having a formal artistic education, Luis Manuel perceives reality as “a world of connections.” In fact, one of his essential personal mottos is “We are all connected”. By these connections he means that “there are many tights, you can pull here, there, and that pushes you forward,” he explains. Luis Manuel’s artistic path was initially influenced by religious art. “For me sculpture had a strong conceptual character. I didn’t want just to master the wood or form



a perfect eye of a figure, but as an artist, through my sculpture, I wanted to communicate a question and an answer. My *ceiba* [a sacred tree of Cuban-African culture] had a whole story to tell, and religion was my question,” he recounts. Later on, he found out information about the violent events, such as Cuba’s military intervention in the Angolan War. “I began to transition within my sculptural work towards human suffering,” he describes. He created sculptures of blacks screaming in pain, figures wrapped in barbed wire, or Angola war veterans that were mutilated, dismembered and on crutches. “They represent the landscape of human psychology,” Luis Manuel describes.

*Being black in Cuban society is a stigma, it’s a mark that you constantly walk around with, and you have to work twice as hard.*

### **Every human being is political**

“Every human being is political,” Luis Manuel disagrees with the idea that art is apolitical. “I have always been political,” he explains. In 2011, he made his first public political manifesto with his exhibition *Los héroes no pesan* [Heroes Do Not Weigh Much], which paid tribute to the veterans of the Angolan War. “People started asking me about Fidel Castro and I started using the word dictatorship,” Luis Manuel recalls. “You have to be honest with yourself, or just be more direct with your message. Don’t be evasive, don’t camouflage your thoughts,” he explains. His themes cover various “political questions”, as he describes them: racism, discrimination, violations of freedom of religion... Let’s remember that it was religion that initially marked Luis Manuel’s art. One day he saw a procession of devotees of a Catholic saint who were deeply immersed in the pain they felt for the suffering of their patron saint. “While looking at them, I discovered the importance of gesture which characterizes sculpture. It was no longer a performance. The gesture was how the sculpture became a part of the social fabric and as a result, to me, had much more of an impact on our daily life. I am interested in this type of work. It knocks on your door, it enters your house, it enters your consciousness, it modifies you. You see a man beating a woman in the middle of the street in Cuba. And that changes your life. And this has much more of force than the representation of art,” analyzes Luis Manuel.

### **A political work that makes people think**

One of his sculptures that received the most attention and controversy was one of Fidel Castro. “In Cuba, unfortunately, we live in a dictatorship, and you always risk to be jailed if you do political work, but it’s only the political work that makes



*I prefer to be honest with myself, and as a Cuban, to share my art with Cubans, rather than to negotiate my art with an institution.*

people think,” he says of the political dimension of his art, which has already cost him more than a dozen arrests. Political art is for him like a blazing bonfire. “It is through these streaks of flame that you decide, as a Cuban artist and as a Cuban citizen, in which reality you want to live. I decided that I will embrace the flame in which I am burning, to the point where you then become an object of politics,” explains Luis Manuel. “I prefer to be honest with myself, and as a Cuban, to share my art with Cubans, rather than to negotiate my art with an institution,” he adds, justifying his decision not to belong to any official cultural entity. “I perceive myself as a flower. But for the regime I am a cactus,” he says, alluding to the voices that claim that Cuba would be a better place “without Alcántara,” as has been expressed to him multiple times both in public and on social networks.

### **Lobsters versus beating**

Luis Manuel is also a strong advocate for LGTBIQ+ rights, which he says are not fully recognized in Cuba despite the propaganda of Mariela Castro's Cenesex. In Luis Manuel's words, 90% of the Cuban population is homophobic. And homosexuals do not identify themselves with the work of Cenesex. “If you are a homosexual who was raped, beaten and repressed all your life, if you are a homosexual who has never tasted the flavor of shrimp or lobster, you cannot bring yourself to identify with people in an institution who eat lobsters on a daily basis,” proclaims Luis Manuel, even mentioning the historical existence of a concentration camp for “different people”; the famous UMAP.

### **There are no different types of dictatorships**

Another theme that resonates notably for him is the belief that creativity is limited in Cuba not only by the regime, but also by the lack of diverse food, and even more so today with the COVID-19 pandemic. “The quality of your nutrition limits





your development as a person. I realized when I left Cuba that my sense of taste has not been fully developed. And that's why you also have limited creativity. You will never be able to paint a flower you have never seen," Luis Manuel explains how, according to his point of view, the nutrition of Cubans makes the development of the nation impossible. "Dictatorships do not come in different types, some hard, some soft," plays with words Luis Manuel, as the Spanish word for dictatorship, *dictadura*, in its literal translation of "a hard dictate" might possibly assume also the existence of a *dicta-blanda*, thus "a soft dictate". "The dictatorship in Cuba forgets that there is about one million people who have their own point of view. And that diversity is what makes evolution happen," he adds.

### **It is no longer THE dictatorship**

According to Luis Manuel, all human being must ask themselves: What is my purpose? What is my path to achieve freedom for Cuba? "Right now, there is a lack of political leadership in Cuba, there is a lack of creativity. We are living in the age of the internet and international travel. This is not the era of communism some 40 years ago. Hegemony is in crisis all over the world. The Cuban dictatorship is no longer THE dictatorship," declared Luis Manuel in this interview in October 2020, that is, a month before he went on his first hunger and thirst strike with his comrades of the San Isidro Movement (MSI) who were demanding the release of rapper Denis Solis and asked for human rights to be respected in Cuba. Since this hunger strike was violently ended by State Security, he has been persecuted, detained and harassed. "We are part of the change. We are all connected," he maintains.

*The dictatorship in Cuba forgets that there is about one million people who have their own point of view. And that diversity is what makes evolution happen.*

# Nelson Gandulla Díaz (1988)

[#doctor](#) [#Cenesex](#) [#Mariela Castro](#) [#LGTBIO+](#)

[#exile in Spain](#) [#lack of medicines](#)

[#regulado](#)



2020



*“In Cuba there is a saying:  
communism breaks your feet, and  
then donates your crutches.”*

**“What helped me was to dismantle the myth of free health and free education, which are myths that the Revolution has created,” says Nelson Gandulla Díaz, a Cuban doctor exiled in Madrid since 2018.**

Nelson was born in February 1988 in Sancti Spíritus, where his grandparents lived and where by chance, his mother gave birth to him, but he grew up in the outskirts of Cienfuegos. Nelson says his childhood was good, and he remembers explicitly events that occurred in the middle of the Special Period around 1992. “Many friends would come to my house to eat because they did not have oil at home, and they had to fry an egg on water. I do remember these very sad days,” Nelson recounts.



## **Sacrifices of his parents**

Besides being a licensed nurse, Nelson's mother had another day job at a co-operative in the countryside. It was such a tiring job, and his mom looked so tired that the medical staff that was supposed to treat 'Nelson's broken elbow thought it was his mother who came in for treatment. "These are the memories that stay with you, and you realize how much parents have to sacrifice to raise their children in a country which is well-known for the difficult conditions of life, so there is no need to hide it...", recalls Nelson.

## **Medical studies**

From a young age, Nelson was very much into his studies. Despite strict entry requirements, he was accepted into medical school to become a general practitioner, and he graduated in 2015. The studies were very rigorous. "Due to my political activities and my civic activism, I was under surveillance, so life was quite difficult for me," Nelson narrates. During his studies, he was already an activist. However, his activism began "on the official regime side." Nelson was linked to Cenesex, the National Center for Sexual Education, founded by Mariela Castro, the daughter of Raúl Castro. Moreover, Nelson is one of the founders of the Youth Network, which gathers LGTBIQ+ people from all over the island.

*I knew Cenesex was not the right organization for me because no one's rights were being defended there.*

## **Cenesex is a scam**

Cenesex turned out to be a scam, not only according to Nelson but also to other people involved in its activities. Although Cenesex organized workshops for the LGTBIQ+ community, in the end, the objectives were never fulfilled. "They 'inflated' the reports, as we say in Cuba, they would write down wrong figures, they would report that such and such activity had been done when it had not been done," Nelson describes. "In the end, we never knew where the [Cenesex] funds were going. For example: we organized a screening of a film with a debut where we planned to serve snacks. However, the event did not take place. We organized a workshop for the police, and supposedly we used certain tools and means, which was not the case; it was never organized. That is, it was a lie. I got fed up with the organization when a wave of arrests took place in 2013, and 2014 and some members of LGTBIQ+ community were arrested in their meeting pla-



ces. Because I was involved in health promotion activity. I was also arrested with other activists in one of these meeting places. First, they forced us to stand on a public road, where public transport and people were passing by; they did this so people would see that we did something improper, something immoral. Later on, they transported us to the First Police Unit of Cienfuegos, where we received a warning for indecent exposure – a fabrication as no one was doing anything immoral when they arrested us. We were only handing out condoms, lubricants, and pamphlets related to LGTBIQ+ community rights.” Nelson and his colleagues filed a complaint against Cenesex but never received a response. “I knew this was not the right organization for me because no one’s rights were being defended there,” Nelson sums up the reasons why he left Cenesex.

## *The one who is going to take Mariela Castro to the court is going to be me.*

### **State Security**

In the second year of his studies at the University, State Security started to follow him. “The first time I realized that State Security was interested in me was when another person, who did not know me, said in a cafeteria that there is was counterrevolutionary and a *gusano* at the university [*gusano* is a derogatory term that refers to Cuban counter-revolutionaries]. When people asked who this person was, the response was: a certain Nelson Gandulla. But they didn’t know that it was me. And that’s when it all started: they bribed the professors so that they would fail me for no reason.

### **Making my life impossible**

They talked to fellow students so that they would make my life impossible and would bully me because of my sexual preferences, my ideology, and so on,” Nelson recalls. He was interrogated by the State Security several times. Still, they always used some kind of excuse, such as passport issues: “They told me that I was an employee of the *imperio* [derogatory term for the U.S.],” Nelson says, and adds that they even threatened him with prison time for insulting Mariela Castro. “The one who is going to take Mariela Castro to the court is going to be me,” Nelson replied at the time, arguing that Mariela had not responded to his formal complaint as required by law.

### **Death threats**

Those bold words directed towards Mariela Castro led to increasing aversion on the part of the political police and State Security towards him, and their thre-





ats gradually increased. “They told me that I could have an accident while leaving a party and that I was going to end up in a garbage dump full of ants and nobody would ever find out that they did it,” Nelson recounts. In the end, Nelson ended up being *regulado*, that is, banned from leaving Cuba. However, one day he managed to depart thanks to an invitation from German friends. From Germany, he moved to Spain, and asked for political asylum. “I never planned to leave Cuba,” Nelson says. However, he was fed up with the regime and scared by the death threats. This situation was impacting his whole family. “My mother, even though she sympathizes with the regime, told me: ‘You have no place here, and you should leave. I prefer you to leave than losing a son,’” recalls Nelson.

## Exile in Spain

The first weeks in exile were very difficult. Nelson remembers that he cried a lot, as he missed home and his family. “People who arrive for the first time in a capitalist country usually go directly to a McDonald’s, but I just looked for a bed, in which I practically spent an entire week. I slept a lot because of the stress I went through,” he recalls. Later on, his medical degree was recognized, and he started to practice medicine. “It is vital for me to contribute, or to express my gratitude to a country that opened its doors and welcomed me. It means a lot to me,” Nelson sums up.

## Cuba’s health system

“It is very true that the health personnel in Cuba are very well trained. But I value a health system not only for the personnel but also as an institution, and for the technology it offers. I believe that Cuba is in very bad shape in this regard. The health institutions do not meet basic requirements, and in some cases do not look like hospitals at all. Much of the diagnostic equipment is obsolete. My last years as a doctor in Cuba were very difficult because I had to practice without having the basic medicines of the National Medicine Program. I did not have forty-nine types of drugs, and I do not mean ibuprofen or paracetamol. I am referring to drugs to treat hypertension, cancer, or diabetes. Sometimes patients would come to the office, and I would tell the nurse: ‘Well, what we have to do here is provide a glass of water with some herbs because we don’t have anything for the patients,’” recalls Nelson.

## The LGTBIQ+ community is the most discriminated community in Cuba

As an activist for human rights and especially for LGTBIQ+ rights, Nelson believes that the LGTBIQ+ community is “the most discriminated community in Cuba.” He says that there is a lack of legislation that would protect the community and would allow equal access to rights, such as higher education, quality health care, or job opportunities. “We are playing along with the dictatorship, and Mariela Castro entertains us with the issue of same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage is an important issue, but I reiterate, it will not guarantee freedom to me, nor protect my rights,” summarizes Nelson.



## A ship that sails in one direction

“I am hopeful that things are going to change. Cubans and Cuban society lack unity because the Cuban government has worked to separate people who think differently,” adds Nelson, highlighting his gratitude for young Cubans who are interested in Cuba’s freedom. “Changes will happen because the population is tired of sailing on a boat that goes in one direction while not moving anywhere. If all Cubans, both in exile and on the island, unite, we will regain the freedom that we lost in 1959,” he concludes.

*Changes will happen because the population is tired of sailing on a boat that goes in one direction while not moving anywhere. If all Cubans, both in exile and on the island, unite, we will regain the freedom that we lost in 1959.*

# Yanelys Núñez Leyva (1989)

[#female opposition activist](#) [#countryside boarding school](#)

[#History of Art](#) [#Havana Times](#) [#Museum of Dissidence in Cuba](#)

[#00 Biennial](#) [#San Isidro Movement](#) [#Decree Law 349](#)



2020



*“Women are still relegated  
a secondary role in the world of art.”*

**“The artist Amaury Pacheco has always said that we will win if they don’t manage to make us sad. I do my best not to let them take away my joy,” says Yanelys Núñez Leyva, founder and active member of independent art projects and campaigns that have recently made headlines in Cuba.**

Yanelys was born in the Havana neighborhood of Nuevo Vedado in 1989, into a family of humble means. She remembers her childhood having shortcomings, but overall, she was happy. Even as a little girl, she noticed social differences between poor and rich children in school, already strongly marked in Cuba.





## Inequality

She finished pre-university courses, which she defines as militaristic, and later enrolled at the University of Havana to study Art History. She had to face social inequalities or “imbalances”, as she calls it. “The majority of my classmates were white women from the upper-middle class (daughters of military men and leaders, who lived in Playa, Miramar), and most of them graduated from the Vocational School, so they had much better academic training than me. There was inequity in all senses. I didn’t even have a computer, and all the course materials were in digital format because there were no updated books,” Yanelys says. “It’s hard to get used to school in those conditions when you see that you have to work three times as hard to get things done and when you have to go to someone’s house to study. I also noticed some teachers wanted to get rid of me so I would not get in their way,” she emphasizes.

*There was inequity in all senses. I didn’t even have a computer, and all the course materials were in digital format because there were no updated books.*

## Contact with independent art and culture

In 2011 through independent Cuban bloggers, she got to know for the first time a few independent artists. Thanks to them, she began to collaborate with *Havana Times*, a digital magazine run by journalist Circles Robinson. According to Yanelis, she wanted to show the real Cuba without censorship and give space to Cubans to propose their solutions. Through *Havana Times*, Yanelys entered a world she did not know existed. She discovered political opposition, and little by little, she became aware of marginalized independent projects. In 2012 she graduated and began to work for the official magazine *Revolución y Cultura* [Revolution and Culture], and in the small gallery linked to this magazine: Espacio Abierto [Open Space].

## Museum of Dissidence in Cuba

In 2014 she met artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, and entered fully into the world of independent art. They staged performances, and thanks to the Internet access she had at the magazine *Revolución y Cultura* headquarters, they





shared them on social networks. “In 2016 we founded the project, Museum of Dissidence in Cuba. At the time, we were meeting in a discreet way, Cuban dissidents, opposition activists, and the famous figures of the opposition in art, but also of political activism: Ladies in White, UNPACU, etc.,”

### Dissident stigma

Through this project Yanelys and Luis wanted to free the term “dissident” from the stigma it carries in Cuba. “The word dissident means, according to a dictionary, ‘to have a different opinion’. We launched an online archive presenting all past and current opposition activists recognized within the official history, including Martí and Fidel. We noted on the website that Fidel was also a dissident in his youth, and that is OK to be one. Since Fidel was recognized by history, contemporary dissidents should be recognized as well,” she says. Because of her independent activities and the Museum of Dissidence, Yanelys was laid off from her job at *Revista Revolución y Cultura*.

### Finger-counting women artists

Early in her art career, she noticed that women artists were not visible. “For example, all Omni Zona Franca movement members are black, marginalized men. Their women partners are all art professionals, producers, actresses, storytellers, and yet those who are well-known are the men,” says Yanelys. “*Machismo* exists in the world of independent art, the same way it exists in state institutions or working-class neighborhoods,” she adds. Yanelys hoped that the world of art would be more open and aware of these issues, she says. “Women have still relegated a secondary role in the world of art,” she says. “You count on your fingers the number of women who are recognized visual artists, as most of them are men,” she adds, stressing that, despite these difficulties, her activities in the independent art world grew.

*Machismo exists in the world of independent art, the same way it exists in state institutions or working-class neighborhoods.*

### 00 Biennial

Thanks to collaboration with other *artistas* [word play that designates artists who are social/political activists], especially with Amaury Pacheco and Iris Ruíz,



both Yanelys and Luis Manuel organized numerous public activities and performances, which State Security repressed. However, in 2018, when the Cuban government announced that, supposedly for economic reasons, it was not going to organize the Havana Biennial, Yanelys, Luis Manuel, Iris and Amaury decided to organize an alternative biennial, which they called the 00 Biennial. Despite a few obstacles in the form of State Security repression, the 00 Biennial was supported by many artists working for public institutions and was successfully managed and organized. It lasted ten days, and more than 170 Cuban and foreign artists participated.

*The people of the San Isidro came out to defend the artists. They started kicking the police cars and shouted ‘Hey, they are artists, they are not doing anything, why are you taking them away?’*

### **Campaign against Decree Law 349**

After the success of the 00 Biennial, the government approved Decree Law 349, which required state authorization for all independent art events. Yanelys and the group of *artistas* started to fight against the Decree. They developed a very powerful campaign against it, but were harassed even more by State Security. Although, in the end, they managed to get the Minister of Culture, Alpidio Alonso, to say publicly that the Decree was not going to apply to independent art, it was only a partial victory. In addition, the stress Yanelys experienced during the campaign had serious health consequences for her.

### **San Isidro Movement**

After the campaign against Decree 349, the same *artistas* founded the San Isidro Movement (MSI) to continue fighting for the rights of artists in Cuba. “We are the same group that founded the 00 Biennial, we are the organizers and artists who participated in the 00 Biennial, and who joined the campaign against the Decree,” Yanelys describes. The name San Isidro was chosen to pay homage to the neighbors of the San Isidro neighborhood in Havana, who during an art event that the State Security wanted to repress, came out in defense of artists and prevented their arrests.



## Without the permit of 349

“We wanted to organize a rap concert called ‘Without the permit of 349’. They arrested Luis and me at noon, but at 5 PM, when the concert started, State Security tried to arrest Amaury and the rest of the organizers, and the San Isidro neighborhood was full of police. However, the people of the San Isidro came out to defend the artists. They started kicking the police cars and shouted ‘Hey, they are artists, they are not doing anything, why are you taking them away?’” Yanelys recalls.

## Exile

In March 2019, Yanelys, who was exhausted and disappointed after having been involved in solid activism for two years, decided not to return to Cuba from Europe. Today she lives in Madrid and remains closely linked to Cuban activism and the MSI, organizing activities in the diaspora in support of her colleagues and fellow *artistas* who remain in Cuba.

*The word dissident means, according to a dictionary, ‘to have a different opinion’. We launched an online archive presenting all past and current opposition activists recognized within the official history, including Martí and Fidel.*

# Rosa María Payá Acevedo (1989)

[#female opposition activist](#) [#Oswaldo Payá](#) [#Somos+](#)

[#Christian Liberation Movement](#)

[#Varela Project](#)



2017



*I was fortunate to grow up freely in the middle of a country that is a prison for its people.*

**“We experienced direct repression by the State Security of the Cuban Government. Death threats to my father and our family became something common, almost normal for us. When I was six, or seven years old, my mom showed me the facade of our house, which had been vandalized. There were phrases painted with black tar on the facade that said ‘Death to Payá’, or ‘Gusano’ which can be translated as ‘worm’ and it is a derogatory term that the regimes uses to label people who oppose it. These methods were used to make sure that our neighbors would see us as an animals, or worms, whom the Security can crush,” recalls Rosa María Payá Acevedo, daughter of Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas.**

Rosa María was born in 1989 in Havana into a family of dissidents in opposition to the communist dictatorship. Both her parents were engineers: her mother was a hydraulic engineer and her father was an electrical engineer who provided maintenance for hydraulic equipment in Havana. Rosa María started at elementary school like any other Cuban child. “At the age of six they gave me a red pioneer scarf, that’s one of the ways children are integrated from a very young age into the system,” she says. Rosa María’s father, Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, was a member of the opposition, which is why his daughter, along with her two brothers, was an easy target for persistent intimidation and harassment.





## Acts of repudiation

In the neighborhood where Rosa María lived with her family they experience different dynamics with their neighbors, however, their solidarity was the common denominator. “Many neighbors would not have dared to speak out openly against the regime, but they would warn my father when State Security was coming to surround our neighborhood. They would give my father warnings of planned acts of repudiation, or of publications that were meant to discredit him,” Rosa María recalls with gratitude. On the other hand, there were people who out of fear or for economic benefit participated in the acts of repudiation. “In the 1990’s, neighbors would allow themselves to be part of the repressive apparatus, and they would keep an eye on us, vandalize our house, or carry out acts of repudiation,” Rosa narrates. State Security not only persecuted Rosa María’s family, but also the people around her. “Since my siblings and I enrolled in school, the State Security would intimidate our teachers, or the parents of our friends. They wanted to cut off our social contacts,” she says. Their classmates knew that Rosa’s parents were dissidents, some stayed away out of fear, others were frequently visited by state agents. When in 1998 her father initiated the Varela Project, a bill aimed at political reforms in Cuba in favor of greater individual freedoms, Rosa María found out about the death threats to her father and the family. The entire Payá family was harassed by security agents who meticulously monitored their every step.

## Cuba’s Black Spring

At that time, Rosa María did not yet know that the forms of coercion would increase and become much stronger. In 2003, Oswaldo Payá had not yet been charged, but the persecution by Cuban authorities reached its peak with the imprisonment of 75 activists, who were accused and jailed for acts “against the independence or territorial integrity of the State” in Cuba’s so-called Black Spring. Rosa María emphasizes how lucky she was to grow up in a politically active family. “My father would often say ‘You say whatever you want and then I’ll fix it.’ I was luckier in this regard than my friends as their parents would tell them, ‘Please don’t say what you think, please don’t openly criticize the regime so that we don’t get in trouble.’ I was lucky to grow up freely in the middle of a country that is a prison,” Rosa says.

## The death of my father, Oswaldo Payá

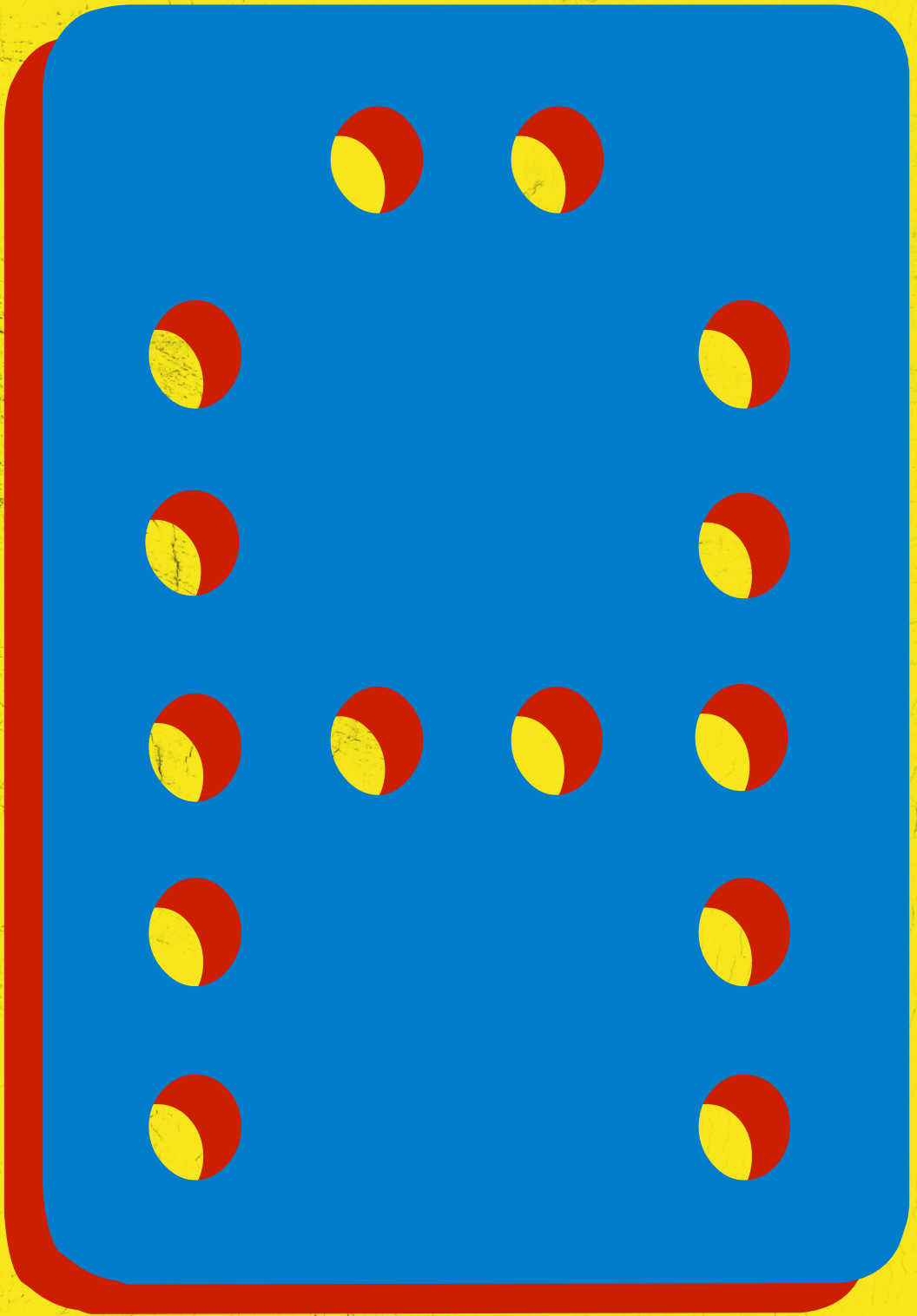
“My father was the founder of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), and together with some friends I worked in the MCL as well assisted the group’s leadership. We were trying to initiate some new approaches, so we created some magazines that later became digital, such as ‘Somos Liberación’ (We are Liberation),” Rosa recounts. She learned about her father’s death right before publishing the first issue of this magazine. “Harold Cepero and my father had been assassinated. Harold was the most important young leader of the movement, he was accompanying my father on a trip around the island. They did not live to see the first issue of the magazine where they had their articles, as it came out



after they were assassinated,” Rosa recounts. “In the article Harold had written a phrase that was premonitory, as it describes the life of Cubans who have a civic notion and are in opposition to the regime: ‘Those who freely think of an alternative Cuba are risking isolation, jail or death,’” Rosa María says about the loss of her father and her good friend Harold, who died in a car accident on April 23, 2012. Rosa emphasizes that, when they passed away, the harassment directed at her father passed on to the rest to the family, also because the family never accepted the government’s version of what happened. “We knew from the beginning that it was not an accident but an assassination. The survivors were sending text messages to us saying that a car had run them off the road and that they were surrounded by soldiers, and were asking for help. We knew it was an attack by the State Security, by the same people who had threatened my father so many times,” Rosa points out. She and her family left Cuba and sought refuge in the U.S. “I am the only one who did not officially leave Cuba. I returned to the island, and I am living there officially because I have decided to continue with the work of my father,” adds Rosa María.

### **Invalidate everyone who does not follow the official line of communism**

Faith is something fundamental in Rosa María’s life. “It is very important for me to go to the Church, which also suffers the manipulations and conditioning of the regime but which is an independent space; to have the opportunity to experience freedom of thought. As the Gospel says: the truth will set us free,” Rosa emphasizes. “It is what I have been doing over the last few years, I have been on a campaign for the right to access the truth, the courts, to reach justice. I will not stop until I find justice and until there is a transition to democracy in my country,” Rosa María insistently declares. “There is a fraudulent transition taking place in Cuba, as the country’s leaders have sold the international community on the idea that they are transformers, that a change is taking place. We need citizen participation and international support to achieve real change in Cuba. It will happen in the next one or two years, I believe that change can come soon,” she says. Rosa María hopes that the international governments will comply for the first time with the historical debt they have with Cuba and will not support the dynastic transition, and that they will support free elections. “In the last 100 years there have been more than 100 million victims of communist regimes. We, the victims of communism, have failed to explain to the world how perverse these regimes are, which insist on invalidating anyone who do not follow the official line, which at the end of the day is to invalidate everyone,” she concludes.





## Epilogue

**Eva Kubátová and Martin Palouš**

Sixty-three years of totalitarianism in Cuba. Sixty-three voices calling in this book for #LIBERTAD, representing just a tiny part of the hundreds of thousands of Cuban voices clamoring for the same. Sixty-three years during which the Cuban government has maintained the Dominoes *trancado*, blocked, as the song *Patria y vida* says in its refrain. The regime has been blocking the Dominoes as if anyone else had a winning tile to put it into the game.

The book #LIBERTAD presents sixty-three singular life-stories, starting with those born in 1930, during the government of the so-called “tropical Mussolini”, Gerardo Machado; passing through the generation of youngsters who fought for the end of the dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista and truly believed the principles of Fidel Castro’s Cuban Revolution; through the disappointment of Castro’s turn toward Communism and willing to fight for their homeland with weapons in their hands; through those whose life motto is the non-violent struggle for freedom; up to those whose pacific battlefield are today’s social media platforms.

The Cuban regime likes to divide its proper nation into those who are *in* Cuba and those who are in exile and thus *out*. But after reading the presented sixty-three voices, there is one common desire of the game ending, or unravelling of the current state of things – a desire for a *Cuba libre*. This voice sounds as a chorus throughout the nation. Cuba and the Cubans have endured almost a century in their continuous fight for a democratic, free and prosperous society, following one of the basic human rights that calls for freedom and dignity.

The game of Dominoes in Cuba is not *trancado*. There is an additional tile to play with - the winning tile being the people’s voice. And the double-two is the year when this voice is to be internationally heard even louder than before.

We wish you a Merry Christmas. We have strong reasons to believe that the time between the birth of Christ, that happened in Bethlehem in the darkness of “Silent Night, Holy Night”, noticed by just by the shepherds from the vicinity, and his revelation to the world, when three Magi came in order to bow down to the new born Baby Jesus, commemorated until today as “Three Kings Day” might offer a unique opportunity for Cubans to reflect anew on their *Cubanidad* and act accordingly.

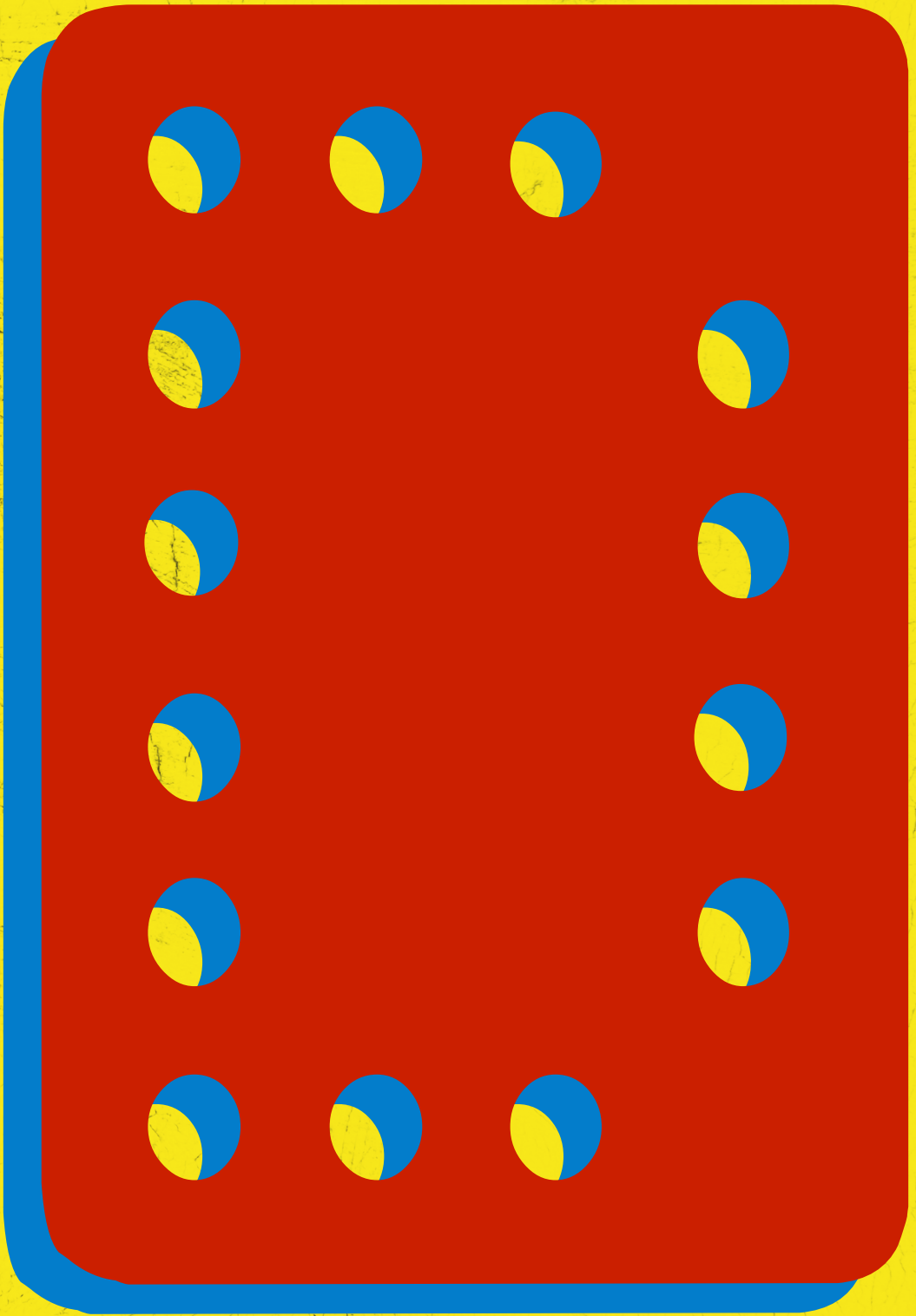
It is the Holiday Season with its twelve days, when the flow of normal time is interrupted. It stops - or rather goes backwards, against its normal direction, so that the lunar and solar calendars can be synchronized again on the twelfth-night (with January first, the first day of New Year exactly at the peak of this



small crazy and “counter-revolutionary circle” in the sense of Copernicus) – when all people of good will on the earth are interconnected, in the mood to celebrate the miraculous encounter between humanity and divinity, the good news that “*the word became flesh and dwelt among us*”. Could it be imaginable that Christmas this year can be perceived by Cubans as a special opportunity; not just for their reflexive meditations, but also for their good neighborly deeds and effective actions?

The events that have taken place in Cuba in 2021 represent, in our view, a key point of departure for that, a sign of hope that if Cubans come together, Cuba can be, indeed a very different place in 2022 – finally capable to bring back the lost spirit of Creole Republic into its political life, listening to the voices assembled here in #LIBERTAD and turning their dreams step by step into reality.







## Glossary

### A

#### **Abdala**

Organization carrying out activities against the Cuban regime. One of the essential activities was to take Abdala to the United Nations in 1971 in protest for ignoring the situation of Cuban political prisoners. It was established in New York in 1968.

#### **Act of repudiation**

Aggression, in which a mob organized by the political police hurls insults, stones, or performs other acts of humiliation, depending on the circumstances, on a person or persons known for their opposition to the regime.

#### **Alpha 66**

Alpha 66 initially emerged in Puerto Rico in 1962 and was operating in Miami a year later. The organization engaged in military activities inside Cuba organized from the U.S.

#### **Angolan War**

The armed conflict began in 1975 and took place in Angola in the Cold War context and the decolonization of the African country. Cuba sent troops to support the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in the so-called Operation Carlota.

### B

#### **Fulgencio Batista**

Fulgencio Batista was a Cuban military officer, ruler, and president of Cuba from 1952-1959. During his administration, the Cuban Revolution triumphed, as he was defeated by Fidel Castro's guerrilla troops.

#### **Bay of Pigs**

The Bay of Pigs invasion took place in 1961, with landings at Playa Girón [the Girón Beach]. It was a military operation in which Cuban exile troops, supported by the U.S. government, attempted to invade Cuba to form a provisional government to replace Fidel Castro and seek the support of the Organization of American States and the recognition of the international community.



## **Bay of Pigs: Kennedy's policy**

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy canceled the airstrikes that were to neutralize Castro aviation at the last minute. He did so because the U.S. could not be seen as the driving force behind the invasion. This would damage its international image and give the Soviet Union, which was then establishing itself as Castro's key partner, an excuse to respond and provoke an unprecedented nuclear conflict.

## **Black Spring**

Cuba's Black Spring is the name given to the series of imprisonments of critics of Fidel Castro's government that took place between March 17 and 19 2003. This group is often referred to as the Group of 75, prisoners of conscience convicted in the Black Spring of 2003.

## **Pedro Luis Boitel**

Political prisoner (1931 - 1972) whose death was the result of a hunger strike after 12 years in prison.

## **Leonid Brezhnev**

The political leader of the Soviet Union between 1964-1982.

## **Brigade 2506**

Assault Brigade 2506, an army of 1400 young men who failed in their attempt to invade Cuba, as it was crushed at Playa Girón [the Girón Beach] by Fidel Castro's forces. They were trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to carry out an invasion of Cuba in 1961 and overthrow the newly installed mandate of Fidel Castro. They disembarked in the early morning of April 17, 1961, and by the afternoon of the 19th of April, they had already been defeated by the Castro army.

# C

## **La Cabaña**

The full name San Carlos de La Cabaña Fortress, located in the bay of Havana, was a prison where executions were committed at the beginning of the Revolution and later became a concentration camp for prisoners. Ernesto "Che" Guevara was in charge of applying what they called "quick revolutionary justice."

## **Alejo Carpentier y Valmont**

Cuban writer (1904-1980) who had a notable influence on Latin American literature during its heyday. He is considered one of the most influential writers of the 20th century in the Spanish language and one of the architects of Latin American literary renovation.



## **Raúl Castro**

Raúl Modesto Castro Ruz is the brother of Fidel Castro. He was one of the revolutionary leaders and president of Cuba's Council of State and Council of Ministers. Therefore, president of Cuba from February 24, 2008, to April 18, 2018, although he held the position on an interim basis since July 31, 2006. From April 2011 to April 2021, he also served as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Cuba, replacing his brother Fidel.

## **Cenesex**

The National Center for Sex Education is a Cuban public institution dedicated to education and research on human sexuality. It was officially founded in 1988, and it originates from the National Working Group on Sex Education. This institution is known for its defense of the rights of the LGBTBIQ+ community in Cuba. Since 2008 the director is Mariela Castro, the daughter of Raúl Castro.

## **Ernesto “Che” Guevara**

He was one of the ideologists and commanders of the Cuban Revolution. Ernesto “Che” Guevara participated in the organization of the Cuban State from the armed uprising until 1965. He held several high positions in the government, especially in the economic area. He was president of the National Bank, director of the Department of Industrialization of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA), and Minister of Industry. In the diplomatic area, he was in charge of several international missions.

## **Christian Liberation Movement**

Founded in Havana on September 8, 1988 by Oswaldo Paya, Ramón Antúnez, Dagoberto Capote Mesa, Fernando Avedo and Santiago Cárdenas. Soon its influence spread throughout the national territory. The vision of the movement is to strive for peaceful and democratic change in Cuba and respect for human dignity.

## **Counterrevolutionary**

In Cuba, a counterrevolutionary is a person who is not in agreement with the dogmas of Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution, that is, an opponent of Castroism. The word counterrevolutionary as used by the regime has negative connotations.

## **Crime of receiving**

The “crime of receiving” consists of acquiring a good that has been obtained illegally. This is very common in a country like Cuba, where most goods are not traded legally due to scarcity. For this reason, this crime is commonly used by the government to criminalize the opposition.



## **Cuba Decide**

Citizen's initiative led by Rosa María Payá inside and outside Cuba to change the Cuban government through a peaceful process of transition to democracy and the rule of law.

## **Cuban Center of Spain**

Association of Cubans in Madrid that had its heyday in the 60s and 70s. Today it is inactive.

## **Cuban Observatory for Human Rights**

It was founded in 2010 in Madrid as a non-profit organization. Its main objectives are the transformation of Cuba into a state governed by the rule of law with political pluralism and free elections.

## **Cuban Revolution**

The Cuban Revolution triumphed in the 1950s and led to the defeat of the government of Fulgencio Batista and the beginning of the government of Fidel Castro on January 1, 1959.

## **Cubanet**

Founded in 1994 in Miami, Cubanet is a non-profit digital media outlet dedicated to promoting the alternative press in Cuba and reporting on day-to-day life on the island.

# **D**

## **Decree Law 370**

Decree Law 370 of the Council of State establishes a broad control by the Cuban government over the Internet. This control is exercised through Article 68 which establishes fines for publishing information on personal social networks. The fine can amount to 3 thousand pesos (about four times the national average salary), and confiscation of the equipment and equipment used to connect to the Internet.

## **Diario de Cuba**

Along with 14ymedio, Cubanet, ADN Cuba, and Radio Martí, among others, Diario de Cuba is an independent news media not controlled by the Cuban government, which is why it is frequently blocked by the Cuban regime and cannot be read on the island.





## E

### **Eastern Democratic Alliance**

Civic opposition platform in Cuba, founded in 2004, to unify the civic movements defending human rights in eastern Cuba.

### **Escambray Mountains**

The mountainous area in Cuba where one of the most important anti-Castro guerrilla movements was established.

## F

### **Juan Carlos Flores**

An influential figure of Cuban culture thanks to his books and experimental poetry. He often used in his poetry repetitions and minimalist resources.

## G

### **G-2**

Intelligence Directorate (Dirección de Inteligencia, DI, or G-2), formerly known as General Directorate of Intelligence (Dirección General de Inteligencia, DGI). The Department of Information G-2 MINFAR was established on June 6, 1961. The Council of Ministers of the Revolutionary Government enacted Law 940, which constituted the Ministry of the Interior. The designation of G-2 MINFAR passed to MININT (Ministry of Interior), with the name of Department of State Security (Departamento de Seguridad del Estado, DSE), until today.

### **Glasnost**

Glasnost or Glásnost, from the Russian “openness,” refers to the policy carried out alongside Perestroika in the Soviet Union by President Mikhail Gorbachev between 1985-1991. While Perestroika focused on the economic restructuring of the USSR, Glasnost focused on the liberalization of the political system.

### **Granma**

On November 30, 1956, an armed uprising took place in Santiago de Cuba to support the disembarkation of Fidel Castro’s yacht Granma, which was coming from Mexico with an expedition to mount an armed insurrection against the Batista dictatorship. Today, Granma is the name of the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Cuba.



## **Guantánamo Combinado**

Guantánamo Provincial Prison, known as “El Combinado” is a penitentiary center that houses Cuban inmates from different regions of the island, often political prisoners, who are subject to inhumane treatment, lack of medical attention, terrible food, and corruption.

## **I**

### **Indicator of pre-delinquent social dangerousness**

This indicator was established in Law 62 of the Cuban Penal Code and has been frequently used against opposition activists and other citizens critical of the government to get them off the streets.

### **Inmate Council**

The Inmates’ Council is used as an additional form of control within the penitentiary centers since it is formed by the inmates themselves. These Councils oppress the inmates, specifically the opponents of the Cuban regime.

## **K**

### **Key West**

Key West is a city located on the island of Key West in Monroe County in the U.S. state of Florida. It is one of the most important destinations for Cuban migrants in the United States.

## **L**

### **Ladies in White**

Peaceful opposition movement of women and relatives of Cuban political prisoners. The Ladies usually demonstrate against the regime in public streets and parks, dressed in white, as a symbol of peace.

## **M**

### **Gerardo Machado**

Gerardo Machado was a Cuban general and president of Cuba. His reelection in 1929 caused protests and unrest on the Cuban political scene.



## **Maleconazo**

“Maleconazo” is a series of anti-government demonstrations that took place in Cuba on August 5, 1994. These protests are considered the most prominent from the beginning of the Cuban Revolution until the present.

## **Maríel Exodus**

One of Cuba’s great migration crises that took place in April 1980 when Cuba opened the port of Maríel near Havana, and hundreds of thousands of Cubans took the opportunity to leave Cuba.

## **José Martí**

Born José Julián Martí Pérez, was a Cuban writer and politician. He is known as the father of Cuban independence and is called “the apostle of Cuba”.

## **Huber Matos**

Huber Matos Benítez (1918-2014) was one of the commanders closest to Fidel Castro during the Revolution that overthrew Fulgencio Batista. In 1959 Matos resigned as commander in Camagüey province. On October 21, 1959, Fidel Castro ordered Matos to be arrested. He was tried for sedition and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

## **Missile Crisis**

Also known as the October Crisis, it is a conflict between the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Cuba in October 1962 after the U.S. discovered Soviet medium-range nuclear missile bases on the Cuban island.

## **Moncada Barracks**

On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro led 135 fighters in an attempt to take the Moncada Military Barracks in Santiago de Cuba. This action against General Batista’s regime failed due to a premature shootout. Castro was sentenced to prison; however, he was pardoned after public pressure, and later on, he founded the 26th of July Movement.

## **El Morro**

The full name La claraboya del Morro [The Morro skylight], is a castle located in the bay of Havana that served as a prison in the early years of the Revolution. The writer Reinaldo Arenas was imprisoned in El Morro and left testimony in his novel *Antes que anochezca* [Before Night Falls].

## **26th of July Movement**

*Movimiento 26 de Julio*, or 26<sup>th</sup> July Movement, was a Cuban political and military organization created in 1955 by a group of revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro.



## O

### **Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez**

Major General of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (1930-1989) who, as a result of accusations of drug trafficking, was sentenced along with other high-ranking officers, including Tony de La Guardia, Jorge Medina, and Pascual Martínez, to capital punishment for high treason.

### **Omni Zona Franca [Omni Free Zone]**

A unique blend of music, poetry, rap, visual arts, graffiti, video, and public art that was born after the merger of the Omni and Zona Franca projects. The controversy of Omni Zona Franca in Cuba began when the movement would occupy public spaces such as garbage dumps, basements, buildings and bus stops. These types of actions were repeated until they began to have difficulties with the authorities. This led to the closure of the Zona Franca premises in the Fayad Jamís Gallery, a countercultural center of art and literature linked to the Ministry of Culture, which they had been using for about 11 years until they were there expelled through the deployment of rapid response brigades.

### **Operation Peter Pan**

Also known as Operation Peter Pan, was a maneuver to help more than 14,000 Cuban children leave Cuba and move to the U.S. It was organized between December 1960 and October 1962 and was coordinated by the U.S. Government, the Catholic Church, and Cubans exiles.

## P

### **Patriotic Union of Cuba**

Also known by its acronym UNPACU, it is considered the largest Cuban opposition group and brings together a large number of dissidents. Created in 2011 by José Daniel Ferrer García, it advocates a peaceful but firm struggle against restrictions on civil liberties in Cuba.

### **Oswaldo Payá**

Leader and founder of the Christian Liberation Movement who, together with other activists, created the Varela Project, in which they called for political and social change in Cuba. He was nominated five times for the Nobel Peace Prize and died in 2012, in a car accident, under suspicious circumstances.

### **Perestroika**

The reformist policy pursued by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union after he came to power (in 1985). It was characterized by an opening towards the Wes-



tern bloc countries, a certain liberalization of the economic system, and information transparency.

### **Peruvian Embassy**

In 1980 the Peruvian Embassy in Havana was flooded by many Cubans who wanted to leave the island. It is considered the largest peaceful invasion of a diplomatic headquarters ever recorded in history, during which more than 10,000 Cubans were taken in. This event resulted in the Mariel Exodus.

### **Pre-university Institutes in the Countryside (or Schools in the Countryside)**

The Pre-university Institutes in the Countryside (*Institutos Preuniversitarios en el Campo, IPUEC*) were part of the Schools in Countryside program launched in Cuba in the 1970s, which was intended to allow students to combine their studies with work in the countryside.

## **R**

### **Regulados**

People who are *regulados* [“regulated” or denied travel out of Cuba] are denied by the Cuban government to have a passport, so they cannot leave the country.

### **Revolutionary Recovery Movement**

Founded in the 1960s, its members faced long prison sentences, as well as firing squads.

## **S**

### **Sakharov Prize**

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named after Soviet scientist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, was established in 1988 by the European Parliament as a means of honoring individuals or organizations that have dedicated their lives or actions to the defense of human rights and individual freedoms.

### **San Isidro Movement**

The social movement of a political nature created by a group of artists opposed to the Cuban regime.

### **Sierra Maestra**

A mountain range in the southeastern region of Cuba. In the 1950s, it was well known internationally for being the location of the Cuban Revolutionary guerrillas.





## **Special Period**

The period of a severe and long-term economic crisis in Cuba in the 1990s, caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and its economic support of Cuba.

## **U**

### **Urban Reform Law**

A law enacted on October 14, 1960, converting to owner those living in any property by eliminating all existing mortgage liens on urban real estate and prohibited the establishment of such liens in the future.

## **V**

### **Varela Project**

The Varela Project was a bill devised and led by Cuban political activist Oswaldo Payá in 1998, advocating political reforms in Cuba in favor of greater individual freedoms. The project's name was chosen in honor of Félix Varela, an early 19th-century Cuban religious leader.

### **Villa Marista**

A prison in Havana was the place where political prisoners were held. Originally, it was a Catholic school for boys of the Marist Brothers.

## **Z**

### **Orlando Zapata Tamayo**

Orlando Zapata Tamayo (1967-2010) was a Cuban human rights activist. He died after an 85-day hunger strike.

**#LIBERTAD**

**CUBA BETWEEN ITS PAST AND ITS FUTURE**

**Eva Kubátová, Martin Palouš**

This book was published in electronic format in December 2021 by [Post Bellum](#), a non-profit organization based in the Czech Republic.

The creation of this book was supported by the TRANSITION program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

The testimonies presented in this publication are the result of the documentary work of the [Memory of the Cuban Nation project](#) and were collected between 2017-2021.

Graphic design: Barbora Klimszová, KLIMSZ

Editing: Eva Kubátová and the team of editors of the Memory of the Cuban Nation project

English translation and proofreading: Scott Hudson and the team of translators and proofreaders of the Memory of the Cuban Nation project

Introduction, conclusion, and consultations: Martin Palouš and the team of the International Platform for Human Rights in Cuba and its collaborators.

Photographs were taken by the Post Bellum team within the framework of the Memory of the Cuban Nation project in Cuba, Miami, and Madrid between 2017-2021.

ISBN 978-80-908390-1-4

© Post Bellum, z.ú., 2021

**memory  
of nations**