

Queridos Amantes de la Libertad

(Dear Friends who love Freedom)

Interviews to the commander Huber Matos

and Mario Chanes de Armas

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Author's Notes (Fragment)

Translated from Spanish by John Conley

This has been my great meeting. These are two of the great figures of the so-called Cuban revolution. Two men loyal to an ideal that brought them to the struggle. Two men who did not let themselves be influenced by self-interest and opportunism. Two men who renounced the conquered power when they discovered the deceit, manipulations and deviations, in short, the treason. Many heroes of our history have given clear indications of their indifference to power. Heroes who risked their lives only for the love of liberty. But I know of no cases more unique than these that I present here. It was a delight to speak with them, to discover the valor, the thinking, the lever that moved them in the search for the open republic that Jose Marti wanted. "With all, for the good of all." One of these men, Mario Chanes de Armas, with his long history of struggles and sacrifices would become the longest serving political prisoner in the world. The other commander Huber Matos, would invite stories with his words and actions where he played a leading role. Both were victims of a revolution that was betrayed by the leader. Mario Chanes de Armas spent 30 years and Huber Matos 20 in the terrible jails of Fidel Castro. But they didn't bend the knee, rather they became giants. We can say that they were conscientious slaves of liberty because they wanted it fully, not only for themselves but for everybody. For the manly protest, for the renunciation of privileges achieved, for the capacity of their analysis, discoveries of the unsuspected deceits of the dictator, for their integral humanity that always sustained their motivations and actions, for the political and future vision they demonstrated outside and inside the prison, for the firmness and coherence of their convictions, for the unbreakable will to continue in the struggle until death, I define them as exceptional rebels of their time in this list of significant persons; lovers of liberty that also rebelled. But what are these men doing and how are they thinking 40 years after having alerted the world about the dangers of communism and the real intentions of the self-proclaimed maximum leader of the Cuban revolution?

The Island that Fidel Castro Enslaved

When Christopher Columbus discovered Cuba the 28th of October 1492, it was inhabited by friendly natives. The colonization began in 1511 when Diego Velásquez founded the city Baracoa and other cities, including Santiago de Cuba in 1514 and Havana in 1515. This was a violent time not only because Spain transformed Cuba into a base for their expeditions to Mexico and Florida, but also because of the rebellions and the savage treatment given to the slaves, things which contributed to the rapid extinction of the native. So the colonists imported slaves from Africa. In spite of the pirate attacks and the policy of mercantile restrictions of Spain, the island prospered until it became a place loved for its climate, its geography and its agricultural economy, and so it rapidly became known as the “Pearl of the Antilles.” The struggle for independence began in 1868, but only with the decisive participation of José Martí in the war of 1895, the leading role of two experienced generals (the Cuban Antonio Maceo and the Dominican Máximo Gomez) and the armed intervention of the United States of North-America, did they finally achieve victory in 1898. From 1899 the forces of occupation governed until 1902 when Don Tomas Estrada Palma, the first Cuban president of the republic, was elected. The investments grew. The economy grew. Carlos Manuel de Céspedes (the son) comes to power in 1933 when, because of a general strike, the first dictator in the history of Cuba, Geraldo Machado, a general in the war of independence, fell. Later, a “rebellion of sergeants” led by Fulgencio Batista brought down the Cuban military caste and united the revolutionary anti Machado movement. Batista occupied the leadership of the army. Five presidents were in power for short periods. Among them was Ramon Grace San Martin, who only lasted 100 days. Batista was elected president the same year that the constitution of 1940 was promulgated. He intended to be re-elected in 1944, but Ramon Grace San Martin won the elections. Batista made a military coup on March 10th of 1952 against the constitutional president Carlos Prío who was elected in 1948 and had imposed a dictatorial régime.

The Régime of Fulgencio Batista

Endorsed by the army, Batista suspended the constitution, dissolved the Congress and created a provisional government which promised free elections in the following year. But on the 26th of July Fidel Castro together with a group of young men attacked the Moncada garrison in Santiago de Cuba. The attack failed, and when the political situation was calmed, Batista announced elections for the autumn of 1954. The opponent of Batista, Ramon Grace San Martin, withdrew from

the electoral campaign just before elections, alleging that his party members had been terrorized. Batista was elected without opposition, and on his inauguration the 24th February 1955 as an act of goodwill he re-established the constitution and gave amnesty to the political prisoners including Fidel and his men, who were serving meaningless jail sentences after the failed assault. The government of Batista instituted a planned program of economic development, and with the stabilization of the world price of sugar, established the economy and the political image of the nation. However, Fidel Castro did not abandon his intention of seizing power, and on the 2nd of December 1956 he disembarked on the island with 82 armed men to make his war in the mountains. Some American newspapers like the *New York Times* supported the armed revolution. The United States did not recognize Batista and embargoed the sale of arms to his régime until in January 1959 Batista escaped the country because of the advance of the rebels. Fidel Castro, supported by a violent revolution, arrived and promised liberty and democracy for the people. The Cubans were far from imagining that he would establish a new era of slavery on the island, perhaps the bloodiest.

The Régime of Fidel Castro

The beginning marked the road. The initial bloodbath that the new régime promoted was extreme. In the first weeks alone the military tribunals condemned more than 550 members of the old régime to death by firing squad. The civilized world was alarmed but already the hate had overwhelmed a process where the accused didn't receive even the minimal guarantees of protection. In spite of this, Fidel was endorsed by the majority, and his government proceeded to eliminate any public demonstration of opposition and not only violated the constitution, but also dissolved the political structures while he was promising free elections within 2 years. Unlike Batista, Fidel never kept his promise and never gave amnesty to his prisoners. Fidel was in charge of the longest serving political prisoner in the world - Mario Chanes de Armas - who spent 30 years in prison. He also has a long list of opponents to his régime who suffered long sentences. Among those are commander Huber Matos with 20 years, Ernesto Dias Rodriguez with 22 years, Eusebio Penolver with 28 years, Angel de Fana with 20 years, José L. Pujals Mederos with 27 years, Armando Valladores with 22.... These were men who rebelled upon seeing the treason of their ideals which was taking the Cuban revolution in the direction of Soviet communism. The expropriation of the land, the banks and the industries brought the breaking of relations with the United States in January 1961. This same year Fidel declared his alliance with the Soviet bloc after having insistently refused to say that his government had any type of communist orientation. The United States responded with an economic embargo and the support of an invasion of Cuban exiles at Playa Giron. The communist line of Castro's régime was clearly defined before the

invasion, and Cuba began to play a significant role in the so-called Cold War when a year later the Soviets began to introduce offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. In October 1962 President Kennedy demanded the removal of the missiles and ordered a preventative naval blockade. After tense negotiations, the Soviets retreated. The irresponsible authorization by Fidel to use the island as a base put the world closer than ever to a world war and the island was at the point of being erased from the face of the earth. Fidel Castro looked for other entertainment: the export of the revolution to the Latin-American countries. He trained and supported the guerrillas. Only after the death of the guerrilla Ché Guevara in Bolivia did he diminish his intention of having the revolution in other countries. In February of 1962 the A.E.O. formally expelled Cuba from the council and by September all 24 countries of Latin America, with the exception of Mexico, broke their diplomatic relations with Cuba. From '61 until '80 the economy of Cuba was very dependent on the economic and military aid of the Soviets and in exchange Fidel defended the imperialist ambitions of the Soviet Union in its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and also by sending troops to Angola and other countries in order to defend the formation of pro-Soviet régimes. More than 300,000 Cubans have served in Angola and more than 3000 lost their lives in long and useless wars.

The Collapse of Communism

At the end of the '80s Cuba and the Soviet Union distanced themselves. The Soviets became more liberal and when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 communism collapsed. Cuba lost her subsidy, her supply of petroleum and her principal market for sugar. However Castro maintained political control of the nation. The repressive structures that were developed against the people permitted him to adopt emergency measures and demand more sacrifices. Those that had made the strongest resistance against him in the first years had abandoned the country. More than 250,000 Cubans went into exile between 1965 and 1973. However the repression increased. The defections grew when in 1980 it produced the massive exodus of the Mariel where more than 125,000 Cubans travelled in boats towards Florida. This fact demonstrated a significant level of discontent which contradicted the idea that the people sympathized with Fidel Castro in spite of the economic problems and that he still enjoyed popularity. In 1994 another exodus arose. This year became a crucial year for the régime. It was the moment it was most close to collapse because it was the year that significant events occurred. The repressions increased in correspondence to the growth of the crisis. But the opposition to the regime also increased. This time through peaceful, open and brave struggle and every year they gained more strength and sympathy in the national and international conscience. There are two events in this new stage of the anti-Castro resistance that need to be

mentioned. One of these occurred the 13th of July 1994 when the regime ordered the sinking of the Remolcador on the 13th of March. In agreement with the information provided to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights the following occurred: "...that at approximately 3 AM 12 Cubans intended to escape the island for the United States in a tugboat belonging to the Agency of Maritime Services of the Ministry of Transport and according to witnesses who survived the disaster two boats of the coast guard of the same agency started to pursue them and after 45 minutes two more boats appeared and started to attack the tugboat with water cannons. One of these boats blocked it in the front and the other crashed it from the stern while the other two attacked with water hoses from both sides. The begging of the women and children were worth nothing and the mothers watched helplessly as their children were torn from their arms and thrown into the sea because of the water pressure and the collisions until the tugboat sank." Forty-one perished, among them 23 children. And this was mostly because of the water cannons and the inundation of the engine room where many had taken refuge. The survivors testified that the attackers were dressed in civilian clothing and did nothing to help them. The tragedy of March 13 profoundly affected the hearts of the Cubans. The other significant event occurred the 24th of February, 1996 when the Cuban air force destroyed two civil airplanes that were operated by four members of a group of Cuban exiles known as "Brothers to the Rescue". The tensions between Cuba and the United States grew. According to the Cuban authorities the airplanes violated the airspace in order to throw anti-government pamphlets. But international organizations could demonstrate that they were flying in international airspace. With this abusive action Fidel Castro provoked the passing of the Helms-Burton law which made the North American embargo worse. Unlike what some think Fidel Castro wants the embargo and with this action he demonstrated it. The arbitrary destruction of the airplanes occurred in the moments in which the embargo law was in the hands of the president of the United States in order to be approved or vetoed. In reality such an embargo doesn't exist because the foreign agencies using different tricks continue investing in the island. The only real embargo that Cuba is suffering is the embargo imposed by Fidel Castro against all the liberties of the Cubans.