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History of Detention

The events that I will recount took place in the final months of the war between the Communist Rebels and the Government forces, and the first months of the new Communist regime. From 1953 to 1959 Communist Rebels, under the command of Fidel Castro, were fighting against the government of President Batista for control of Cuba. During this time, the Communist Rebels imprisoned many people in detention camps. I was one of them.

In October 1958, my father and I were abducted from my hometown of La Maya. La Maya is a municipal town belonging to the large city of Santiago de Cuba. My father and I were detained in a detention camp by members of the rebel army at the command of the Commanders Huber Matos and Barba Rojas. Both belonged to the Second Eastern Front that was commanded by Commander Raul Castro Ruiz.

A week later, my father and I, as well as many other people, were detained in different places in the village. I was fifteen years old at the time and the youngest person to be detained. Members of the Communist rebel army, who sported beards, began to intimidate us. They told us that they were going to issue summary judgments against us. They accused us of being collaborators of the Batista regime against whom they were fighting. They told us that the first person they were going to execute was “the boy”. I was that “boy”! Fear and terror seized everyone so that everyone broke down and cried in despair.

The terrible day arrived when they began to formally accuse us. As they had threatened, I was the first person they accused. Even though I was only fifteen years old, I was violently accused of collaborating with the Batista government forces, of burning down the Communist rebels’ houses and of exploiting the poor.

I was sentenced to death by firing squad. They took me to a field and stood me at the edge of a deep ravine. I waited at the edge of the ravine to be shot by the firing squad. They lined up in front of me, pointed their guns at me and fired. I heard the guns discharge and then all I heard was “silence.” I felt dead. I believed that this was what death was. I thought of my mother and I told myself that if I could tell my mother not to cry, that everything would be okay. I do not know how long I was “gone” from this world. When I regained consciousness I realized that I had undergone a “sham” execution. But the terror remained. Sometime later my father and five others went through the same “sham execution” as I had.

After the sham executions we were all abducted and taken to a distant place. We were hidden in a dark room and were guarded by the rebels. We were not allowed to talk to

each other or to anyone else. As far as my mother and other people knew, we had been executed and were dead.

A month later, in November of 1958, we were transferred to the mountains to a camp in Caoba, which belonged to the city of San Luis. The place was known as Laneros. While we were there two other prisoners were brought to the camp. They were a policeman named Guillermo Coba – who was known by the nickname “Tiger”, and a butcher from the town of Judiricion who was known by the nickname “Fat Dog”. Both of them were accused of being Government collaborators and were summarily executed under a large flame tree.

Government airplanes would occasionally fly over the camp. The rebels told us not to look up to get the attention of the pilots. They told us that we would die in prison if we did. They also told us that if we tried to escape they would kill us. We were prisoners of the rebels who were using us as human shields.

On December 7, 1958 the Communist rebels took La Maya. Three weeks later, the Communist rebels took Santiago de Cuba and with that, on January 1, 1959, the Communist revolution of Fidel Castro triumphed. Soon after we prisoners were transferred from the detention camp in Caoba to the prison of Boniato in Santiago de Cuba. On the way to the prison farmers from the countryside and villagers shouted at us and abused us. They shouted, “Shoot them! Shoot them! Shoot them! Shoot them!” Some people even threw stones and hurled insults of every kind at us.

In the prison of Binato our days and nights were filled with fear, terror, insult and threats. Executions were a common occurrence. The rebels, who had gained control of the government, thirsted for revenge against everyone they believed had supported the previous government.

On January 12, 1959, seventy-two prisoners were taken out of the jail cells at gunpoint. They were tortured, humiliated and shackled together like animals. They were herded together, with their wrists tied together, so that they could barely walk. Then they were summarily executed at midnight. By dawn their dead bodies covered the hill of San Juan. I remember the names of the men who were shot that night. They were Rafael Bocana, Picki Chickens (a man who was only known to everyone by this nickname), the Brothers Saavedro and another man who was only known to me by his first name Carlo. This incident was and remains one of the great bloody atrocities of the Communist Castro regime.

On May 1959, about eight months after I was first detained, the jailers called my name and told me that I was free to go. At first I refused because I didn't want to leave my father behind. But my father and the other prisoners convinced me to go. I left them behind with tears running down my cheeks. This was the first time I broke down and

cried because I had to leave my father behind bars and I did not know if I would ever see him again.

When I returned home, I found that our house and property had been plundered and destroyed. We were plunged into poverty. My father remained in prison for many more months.

Fifty-eight years later I am still traumatized by the memory of those hellish days and their horrible aftermath. I cannot think about this time without feeling the terror and the hardship that I experienced. I vividly see the men who were executed and remember all those, including my father and myself, who were unjustly tortured and imprisoned.



This testimony accompanies a story on Francisco at www.kyrm.org.

We at KRM are grateful for Francisco's trust in sharing this firsthand account.