

"50" YEARS AGO -By Tomás Fernández-Travieso

The sun was setting when we emerged from the trial. Luis Fernández-Caubí was the only lawyer that dared to defend our case. The trial took only 20 minutes; it was interrupted several times by the noise of the army tanks leaving La Cabaña fortress (site of the trials) racing towards Playa Girón (the Bay of Pigs): it was April 17, 1961.

Only those sentenced to die before the firing squads were kept in the chapel. The only one that we knew was already there was Carlos Rodríguez Cabo. The prosecutors were demanding a 30 year sentence for his partner in the struggle against Castro, Efrén Rodríguez López. Efrén would stay behind in the ward where we were jailed as they took us to be tried and when he came to say goodbye to us, very upset, he said: "Look, I hate to ask you this but I am sure you won't be coming back here (meaning he was sure we were all destined for the firing squad). Say hello to Carlitos for me when you see him". He could not utter another word as he embraced us crying.

Handcuffed, we crossed the drawbridge. Below, in the pit, a solitary pole stood in front of a wall of sandbags. Virgilio Campanería-Angel and I were handcuffed together. Alberto Tapia Ruano was by himself.

Upon arriving back at the prison, many cell mates greeted us in silence from the courtyard across the moat. We were taken through a galley where the guards were sleeping, until we came to the chapel (interior galley split into four cells with a central corridor).

We kept on walking along a long corridor. Four guards were escorting us. We crossed three barred gates with thick padlocks. On entering the chapel, from one of the cells, Efrén's, strong and determined voice, greeted us: "It seems that they want to "tronar" (shoot) me too. They raised my sentence from 30 years to "paredón" (death by firing squad). Besides, Carlitos was all alone and I could not leave him like that", added Efrén, laughing. We shared the information that we had of the landing at Playa Girón that would aid and support the anti- Castro clandestine movement. Efrén and Carlitos were from Revolutionary Rescue; Virgilio, Alberto and I were from the Revolutionary Student Directory. They put us in a cell illuminated by a fluorescent lamp with two berths without mattresses and a hole in the floor that served as the toilet.

A few moments later, they brought Lázaro Reyes Benítez and Filiberto Rodríguez Ravelo, both from Güines. Filiberto had been nick-named "the Martian" because, since being arrested and brought to La Cabaña, he insisted that he was an alien and that he was in constant contact with the Martians.

A little later on, they brought José Calderín who, along with Lázaro and Filiberto, was taken to another cell. Finally, they brought Carlos Calvo Martínez; like Virgilio and Tapita, he was 21 years old. He was charged with planting the bomb at El Encanto (Cuba's largest and finest store). They placed him in our cell.

We were all there. A guard delivered our sentences. They changed my capital punishment to 30 years of prison "because these people cannot afford to shoot a minor", all of them told me.

I could no longer share their jokes and singing. I became the repository of their memories, their link with life. I would bear witness to their sacrifice.

Hours went by. I do not know how many, time did not exist there. We prayed the rosary, we all had rosaries.

Finally three locks rattled and boot steps resounded in the chapel. Sergeant Moreno called the first name: "Carlos Rodríguez Cabo ". " Present ", he shouted firmly. Two guards with rifles escorted him up to the door of our cell. We embrace each other across the bars. He entrusted his daughter to me, he was leaving her his ring which he gave me as he said: "Courage, good luck to you".

In a few minutes, the sound of the FAL rifles filled the chapel, followed by a single pistol shot. "Sergeant Moreno is the one that gives the coup de grace", they had told me.

The three locks were opened again, this time for Efrén: "Present", he responded .He embraced me through the bars; he was leaving his lighter to his wife.

The FALs sounded close by, followed by the single "coup de grace".

Virgilio was third. In our last hug he said to me: "Tommy, I am going to shout a Viva Cristo Rey, Viva Cuba Libre and Viva el Directorio that are going to rattle their cojones. Alberto (Tapita) clung to me: "I hope that I am next ". We embrace as we listen to Virgilio fulfilling his promise, the FALs sounded, this time there were three pistol shots.

" Alberto Tapia Ruano ", Dark-haired person called. " The Virgencita heard me ", said Tapita happily. He ran out quickly.

Carlos Calvo and I were left alone in our cell.

"Do you think that Tapita counted Virgilio's coup de grace shots?... There were three. Anyhow he is going to see him on the ground, there is no time to remove the bodies in between executions ... ", he said.

The fourth was Filiberto, who, admitting his prank, confessed to me: "Not even the Martians can save me from the thunder (paredón) now ". He left singing the National Anthem. They gave him two coup de grace shots.

" Lázaro Reyes Benítez ". " Present ". He hugged me and was gone. "José Calderín": "Present". The penultimate hug and he went out.

Carlitos Calvo was the last one. I already knew all there was to know about him. Before they opened the cell, he asked me: "Count my last shots so you can tell me up there".

They were eight in La Cabaña, 50 years ago.

TOMÁS FERNÁNDEZ-TRAVIESO, ex-member of the anti-communist Students Revolutionary Directory, was sentenced to 30 years in prison by the Castro regime. When his play "Prometheus Unchained" was smuggled out of prison and published in Miami, his sentence was increased. He served 19 years. His novel "El Silencio del Ayer" (Yesterday's Silence) was published recently. He lives in Miami.