

Face to Face With Huber Matos

Theodore Jacqueney

INTRODUCTION BY VICTORIA JACQUENEY

Huber Matos, Cuba's best-known political prisoner, was released on October 21, 1979, after completing "every minute" of a twenty-year prison sentence. Matos had helped make Fidel Castro's revolution, not only as a military commander in the rebel army, but by persuading the then president of Costa Rica, José Figueres, to send arms to Castro. When Matos asked to resign from Castro's government because he disapproved of its increasingly Marxist direction, he was charged with "slandering the Revolution," an accusation later changed to "treason."



Intense pressure from foreign governments and from international human rights organizations did nothing to shorten his sentence and little to ease the dreadful conditions of his incarceration, but may have made it politically difficult for the Castro government to retain or resentence him, a common occurrence for Cuban political prisoners who refuse to renounce their beliefs. Former President Figueres was among those who worked for Matos's release. On October 22, Huber Matos arrived in

Costa Rica in a Costa Rican Government plane, to be welcomed by his family and an immense crowd of press, well-wishers, and Costa Rican officials, including his old friend "Don Pepe" Figueres.

My husband, Ted Jacqueney, was there, at the invitation of the Matos family. We had met one of the Matos sons through a neighbor in Elizabeth, New Jersey, just before Ted went to Cuba in October, 1976, with a group of Ripon Society members who planned to investigate Cuban-American business relations. Ted planned a different sort of investigation: He clandestinely interviewed former political prisoners and the families of many still in jail. Through these contacts he passed a message into Huber Matos's cell (Matos himself was in a prison hospital at the time) and got back, not only answers, but a smuggled gift: a handmade cigarette holder for a Cuban human rights activist in the United States.

One day the Ripon group visited a polling place for an election then in progress. The Cuban minister of justice arrived, as scheduled, to meet the party there, giving Ted an opportunity to read aloud (to the minister and about two dozen Cuban voters) a polite inquiry about political prisoners. Huber Matos's name topped the list. There was no formal reply. This gesture made, Ted's subsequent interviews were conducted even more clandestinely, and he spent the rest of his visit wondering if he would be joining the half-dozen Americans already in Cuban jails for political offenses against the Castro government. Also making Ted uneasy was the success of Cuban right-wing exiles opposed to U.S.-Cuban trade in blowing up an Air Cubana plane that was to have taken the Ripon group from Kingston to Havana—though fortunately for the Ripon group, and unfortunately for the eighty persons who perished, the bomb exploded in the aircraft ahead of schedule, while the plane was between Bridgetown and Kingston. Ted left Cuba without interference, however, carrying a souvenir requested by other Cuban activist friends: a Havana telephone directory. He also brought back notebooks

filled with the testimony of Cubans who, like Huber Matos, had lost their initial enthusiasm for Castro's revolution as it became increasingly repressive and had become victims of that repression themselves.

On the day the *Washington Post* ran Ted's first article about his trip, an Op-Ed piece which concentrated on Huber Matos, Huber Matos Jr. was seriously wounded near his home in Costa Rica by gunmen who sprayed his car with machine-gun fire, escaping to Panama. By the time Ted's longer articles ("The Yellow Uniforms of Cuba," *Worldview*, January/February, 1977; "Castro's Political Prisoners," *Free Trade Union News*, May, 1977) appeared, we had been warned to be "careful" by Cuban friends and by the FBI, which sent two nice young men to teach us how to check our car for explosive devices.

During the next two years Ted continued to publicize the situation of political prisoners in Cuba, and of Huber Matos in particular, through his writing and through The Democracy International; Mrs. Maria Luisa Matos and



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Huber Junior became active members. When Huber Junior telephoned on the morning of October 20 to ask Ted to be with the family for his father's long-awaited but as yet unconfirmed release, Ted took an afternoon plane to San José. He telephoned me on October 22 to say that Huber Matos had just arrived, exhausted and apparently in terrible pain from beatings during the days just before his release, but "every inch the *commandante*." The next day this astonishing man held a press conference, describing events of the past few days and the past twenty years with remarkable clarity, and reaffirming his commitment to a "truly free Cuba." Ted, who had been living in the Matos family's house, interviewed Huber Matos on October 24—a long-anticipated opportunity to confirm what he had heard about the man himself and about the conditions in Cuban prisons.

Ted Jacqueney came back to the United States on October 26 and died, totally unexpectedly, on October 31. I reconstructed the interview, which was

interpreted by one of the Matos daughters, from his notes and tapes.

In late November, Huber Matos came with his wife, two of his grown children, and a bodyguard to pay a condolence call on me. Well-groomed, well-fleshed, and slightly tanned, he suggested a diplomat or politician with a hint of the military somewhere in his background, rather than a school teacher turned revolutionary who had spent the entire two decades of his middle age as a political prisoner. He walked slowly around our apartment, remarking in Spanish on the view of New York, the photo of Ted with "Big" Minh, the shelf of books on Cuba. He asked me about the Buddhist altar with Ted's picture flanked by candles, fruit, and incense. I explained that the Vietnamese Buddhists who had performed our marriage ceremony in Vietnam and were now in America had asked if they might perform the last rites for Ted and take his ashes to the Buddhist temple in Washington.

"You are Buddhists, then?" Huber Matos asked me. "Yes and no," I told him, "but the Buddhist political leaders Ted knew in Vietnam opposed the former government, which was corrupt and repressive, and also opposed the Communists...." Huber Junior translated my embarrassingly simple description of the Vietnamese Third Force, and his father asked what had happened to our friends when the government of Vietnam changed. "They left, or went to prison, or were put under house arrest. Some of them are now living in the United States and France, and some are now dead." Huber Matos nodded, raising and lowering first his right hand, then his left: "Like us, first Batista, then Castro."

In 1976, he told me, he had come back from the hospital to his cell in La Cabaña Prison to the news that a "*periodista Norte-Americano*" had been looking for him and sending messages from his family. No one was quite sure of the man's name, Matos said, but now he knew it was "our friend Ted."

THEODORE JACQUENEY: Let me start by asking you about something you mentioned in your press conference the day after you left Cuba: being beaten up by guards a few hours before your release. You said they hit and kicked you, threw you around, and screamed insults at you, but why do you think this happened? What were they saying?

HUBER MATOS: Yes, they did all of those things. It was an attempt to intimidate me. They yelled: "We are the machos! We have the power! We have the force and we will do this whenever we feel like it! We are the machos!" I yelled back at them, and later they put tapes over my mouth."

Obviously, if this was an attempt to keep you from speaking out after you left prison and Cuba, it failed.... Tell me, what was your worst experience in prison?

Distinguishing between most difficult moments and maltreatment, I would say the two most difficult moments, aside from beatings and hunger strikes, were the very beginning and the very end, when I was first imprisoned and when the sentence was finally over.

In the beginning, in jail, I thought constantly of the unjust and low accusations of treason. I was convinced that I had always been a very clean and honest and loyal person, and the campaign to label me as an infamous traitor, not only in Cuba but overseas, was made even more difficult because I was totally incommunicado, unable to defend myself.

I was also completely unprepared for the violence that I was subjected to during the last few days. I was expecting to be freed, thinking that I had pulled through. Then—to be surprised by this violent physical attack, to

be thrown on the floor and kicked—I felt that maybe the worst was yet to come, when I was to be set free. I am sure this was an attempt to intimidate me with physical abuse. My reaction was total indignation.

You said, "aside from beatings," so I assume you were beaten in prison at other times as well....

Yes, several times. Let me give you one example. In May, 1973, I was savagely beaten. They broke several of my ribs and they permanently injured my left arm, which later became partially paralyzed, for the rest of my life. They had excuses for all their barbaric acts; in this case the excuse was that they were conducting a search. About ten men surrounded me and suddenly told me to take off my clothes. When they told me to undress, I was prepared for what was going to happen. I said, "Don't use excuses, if you are going to beat me, get on with it." Some of them threatened me with iron pipes used in construction, but the first blows were struck with fists, feet, and knees, and then I was on the ground. The guards commonly carry those iron rods around, but I don't remember being beaten with them at other times. This was the most severe beating, and it was also the last before I was released.

And what about hunger strikes?

I led six hunger strikes, two short, two very long, two in between. The purpose was to demand respect, because my clothes were taken away, or protesting the fact that I was incommunicado, and the general maltreatment of the jailers, and also to demand medical care. The shortest hunger strike lasted three days; the longest 165 days. In that case, I went thirty days without eating anything at all, only drinking water, and for 135 days I was force-

fed, intravenously and through the nose. The water they used was tainted and it gave me diarrhea.

So, hunger strikes are really a form of protest among Cuban political prisoners.

Yes, for political prisoners subjected to intolerable mistreatment, that was the best form of protesting such things as clothes being taken away, or not being given any medical assistance. I didn't always win. Not all hunger strikes got positive results. Sometimes we lost those battles, but sometimes there was success, as with the one for medical attention. The longest, 165 days, protesting the fact that I was incommunicado and naked, that one I won. You never lose completely in a hunger strike, because you are demonstrating that you cannot be forced to tolerate these abuses.

I have heard that you were kept naked, but *why* was this done?

I was kept for thirteen months wearing only undershorts. The jail authorities asked to take away the prison uniforms, yellow uniforms [given to political prisoners for many years in an effort to identify them with Batista, for this was the color worn by Batista's guards—*TJ*], saying there was a new government regulation. They brought us instead the blue uniforms of common criminals. The intent of changing the uniforms was to keep us in a state of repression, and we refused to wear them.

Does that change of uniforms signify a change in the pattern or nature of political imprisonment?

Yes, in the last few years they have been modifying the legal instruments, gradually, so that offenses that used to be called "political" are now considered "common"—for example, sabotage or damage to the economy. People who were caught trying to escape from the island by boat were at one time considered political prisoners, but now, after the integration of the legal system, they are considered common criminals. However, one crime still considered a political offense is trying to get into a foreign embassy. The penalty for having a plan to do that is ten years.

Let us go back to your prison experience. Could you describe your cell in La Cabaña.

I was in two very bad cells in La Cabaña. One room, called Gallery 23, was a gallery for punishment. It was partially underground. Windows were covered, first with wood and later with cement blocks. The door, instead of being made of bars, was solid steel. The cell was near a kerosene stove, so smoke and soot were continually settling into the cell. It was kept in total darkness, and there were insects of every kind, colonies of them, crawling on the walls, infesting the mattresses. I was three years in that cell, two different times. It was very, very damp and extremely hot.

And the food, when you were not on a hunger strike?

Food became a matter of the highest importance. In general, we always got the worst type of food, sometimes edible, sometimes completely inedible: cooked cornmeal, macaroni with salt but without sauce, pea soup,

fish soup which was totally unfit to eat. Sometimes, in the best times, toward the end, there were eggs.

Why did Fidel Castro subject you to this, when you had fought together for the revolutionary cause?

Fidel's wish had been to kill me at the time of the trial, but he didn't dare do it at that time, for political reasons. So he hoped that the treatment would slowly kill me—that I would die of that truly unjust treatment and the tremendous harm it does to a prisoner's psyche. I was not the only one subjected to this beastly treatment: other prisoners were, and they still are.

Why did you refuse the rehabilitation plan, which offers better treatment?

The rehabilitation plan has its advantages, but it is still a compromise with the jailers. To the extent that a *plantado* [a political prisoner who, like Matos, refuses to cooperate or to accept rehabilitation—*TJ*] accepts the plan, he must renounce the political beliefs that are important to him. Politically, he dies.

What about Castro's promise to release all political prisoners soon?

The promises of Fidel Castro are usually attached to dirty tricks. He had announced plans for release of 3,600, but in this 3,600 are some who should have been released a long time ago, and others whom no one knows. That is, we don't know their names or just why they are in prison; they aren't known to be political prisoners. The political prisoners keep track of one another—we *know* who we are. The list of political prisoners Fidel Castro uses is full of fraudulent prisoners.

According to Castro, he had released thousands, but the majority of the *plantados* are still in jail. It is even possible that everyone on his list was supposedly freed, and yet most of the *plantados* are still in prison.

I know it is impossible to know exactly how many political prisoners there are in Cuba now, but could you give an estimate?

I think that the acknowledged political prisoners are more than 1,000, including at least 500 *plantados*—these are people we know exist. I don't wish to have disagreements with people still in jail nor with those recently released, but I know of two people Fidel released as political prisoners who were definitely not political prisoners at all. That is how he is able to keep most of the true political prisoners in jail. Castro promised to release the people who have been in prison the longest, but the people who have been released have mostly been in for only a few years, while many in jail for fifteen years or more are still there.

One political prisoner who is still in jail is Silvino Rodrigues Barrientos, who directs a Catholic movement in prison. He is very firm in his convictions, and he is in a very difficult position because the government considers him to be the closest person to me. I think of him as my brother, and I fear for his life. The G-2 [secret police] openly says that of all the people they took into Boniato prison, that man is the one they would most like to crush. Rodrigues is about forty years old now, and he

completed a twelve-year sentence in 1976, only to be retried and sentenced to nine more years. Both times the charge against him was counterrevolutionary activity, conspiring against the power of the state. Actually, he was not doing anything overt, he was part of an underground group of people who got together to talk about what they had fought for in the Revolution. Rodrigues fought against Batista as a lieutenant in the revolutionary army, became a banker, and then lost his job because he didn't totally agree with the Revolution. Then he started meeting with other dissidents. Some of the members of the group were distributing pamphlets. The charge of counterrevolutionary activity grew out of that.

An example of Rodrigues's resistance, his refusal to be intimidated: Once the guards were going through cells confiscating religious objects, and he refused to give up the little crucifix around his neck. He said they would have to kill him first. He was beaten severely for that.

The second time, he was charged with leading a conspiracy against the government within the prison itself. He was accused of this and sentenced, without proof, to nine more years. His wife and their four children had to leave the country, for the safety of the children.

I am afraid that now that I am out of prison and out of Cuba, Rodrigues may be in even more danger. Because he is not very well known, he is vulnerable.

Mr. Matos, what was the basis of your opposition to Castro? What were you seeking for Cuba?

That is a very dangerous question....I differed from Fidel Castro because the original objective of our Revolution was "Freedom or Death." Once Castro had power, he began to kill freedom.

We fought the Revolution with the commitment of complete freedom for our country, true independence, and national sovereignty for the Cuban people. It was clear in 1959 that the direction Castro was giving the Revolution would not lead to independence and sovereignty. As I said, the revolutionary motto was "Liberty or Death," and my view was that liberty encompasses *everything* that we call political freedom: the right to think and to express your opinion without having to adjust to a *padron*, the possibility of pluralism, and everything else that is generally accepted to be the universal rights of mankind. Liberty, freedom, that came first; we wanted a democratic revolution. If we had had a truly democratic revolution, the direction of the government would have had to be democratic too, without everything being left to one man, with no one being free to question his decisions.

What do you think of the dictatorships of the Right in Latin America, like Chile today or Nicaragua under Somoza?

As a matter of principle, I cannot identify with *any* government that uses force, either right-wing or left-wing.

Have you any message from other Cuban prisoners, or from others in Cuba, for people in the democracies?

The message I have from the prisoners is that they ask the world to please help them to get out of Castro's jails, where they wait in hope that, with the help of the good people of the world, they will obtain the freedom they want and need. I have no message *from* the Cuban people—I have a message *for* them. My message is that I have not forgotten them; I will never forget Cuba and my people. [VVV]