

Prison Chronicle

Fourteen Months of Agony

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When I arrived at the prison then known as the “Pre” (in Santa Clara, Cuba), in the beginning of April 1991 there was still visible evidence of the brutal beating oppositionist Iván Emilio Espinosa Pérez and I had received. I was in a great deal of pain and had a lot of bruises and contusions from which I thought I’d never recover.

When I got to the “Pre” I was in a state of total rebellion, wearing only “underwear,” which made the beatings I got especially brutal and sick. Via references, I was already well aware of how difficult the situation was for those in Cuba who were considered “unbreakables,”¹ who during those decades of barbarism wrote so many pages about heroism and resistance. This caused me to think: “It may be a different time but the prison henchmen whose objectives were to destroy dignity and principles though torture were the same.”

I was placed in a disgusting and miniscule punishment cell, in total darkness, devoid of hygienic conditions. I was purposely denied water for bathing, which soon caused me to develop ecto-parasitic infec-

tions, fungal conditions, and other skin infirmities that made my life extremely difficult. But the real agony came when my dental pain began. I didn’t remember having seen a dentist since I was six years old. My oral hygiene and condition were satisfactory up to that moment and the thought of not being able to brush my teeth for weeks and weeks; or not being to bathe for lack of water, or even having water but having all my belongings, including soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste taken away never crossed my mind.

Only someone who has suffered a terrible toothache can understand how much I suffered during those terrible days and nights, for many months. “In order to take you to the dentist, first you have to put on your prison clothes” or “we will give you medical attention on the condition you put on your prison clothes” were some of the answers I got from the guards when I’d complain.

The medical station and the stomatological lab were about 50 or 60 meters from my cell (all within the prison). To help the time pass, I started employing different ways of



mitigating my pain. I was not asking for any kind of clemency, just to be given medical attention, simply by virtue of being a human being. My thinking and my reaction irritated them even more, so they increased their torture of me.

Many times I would bang my head against the wall, even on the metallic door, just so I could cause myself a pain greater than that in my mouth, and in that way have a break from the dental pain, which was much worse. No one ever heard me do that. On other occasions, I would start singing or talking to myself. It seemed I was going crazy, “but I had no other choice but to resist. I preferred dying or going crazy to giving in to my torturers.”

Sometimes, usually during daylight hours, when the pain dissipated, I would think upon the human capacity to resist, and I’d ask myself: “Why hasn’t science come up with a cure, something like a vaccination against pain?” These were the silly and vague

meditations of a suffering person who did not go crazy, only God knows why.

On the other hand, my complaints were entirely in vain. To carry out a hunger strike would only serve to increase my suffering. To scream until someone came to either give me attention or beat me to death would be to reveal my desperation. I assumed that my “unbreakable” attitude was my own choice. I could foresee what was ahead for me. I thought to myself, I cannot bow to my adversary; I always want to be able to look at him straight on, right in the eyes, so that he cannot make me look down. The terrible toothaches had also made me forget that I was not allowed to sun myself—another aspect of my terribly humiliating condition.

There were moments when I almost yanked out my own wisdom tooth, with a hook or wire, or even with the very same spoon they gave me and then took away after every lunch and dinner.

There was more than one occasion when I had the wire and hook ready for the operation, but I would desist because I lacked the courage to do it; I was probably overtaken by a unconscious fear of succumbing there, all alone, just bleeding to death (by hemorrhaging), which the authorities would later try to make look like a self-inflicted wound or suicide.

“Come on, Antúnez, we’re coming to get you. You’ll finally get your tooth pulled and it’ll be over.”

No sooner was I out in the corridor than they’d toss a pair of prison shorts and a prison shirt at my feet.

“I won’t go under those conditions.”

Scenes such as these (scenes of real psychological torture) were repeated with inhuman and repeated frequency. All this was made even worse by the daily and abundant leaks that filtered from the cell’s ceiling, which moistened the floor, as well as the books and other belongings—the few they allowed me—during that cruel period in which I “always slept wet.” Now, after all the years, I can’t help wondering how much all those tortures and many other things have contributed to my current deteriorated state of health—particularly relative to respiratory ailments.

When they finally gave in, and they had no other option but to treat me, I was kind of hypnotized. It was as if pain were part of my being.

I arrived at the prison’s medical station one morning during the last months of the year. I was wearing my “unbreakable’s” uniform—a pair of undershorts and an undershirt, both white; they were torn, worn and visibly dirty. Yet for me they represented the purity and the conviction with which I had made my decision. Thus, despite my exaggeratedly thin body and face, and slow gait, I felt

like the best-dressed man in the world. They were waiting for me. I had already won a very important part of the battle, but then I began to doubt that those “henchmen in white gowns” were really going to do the extraction.

Once I was seated in the dental chair, I said to myself: “If this guy changes his mind or says they’ve run out of anesthesia, or that he can’t take the tooth out for some reason, I will definitely grab one of those pincers and take out the tooth myself. In any case—I kept thinking—if I have a hemorrhage, “I’m in the medical office, and they’ll have no choice but to do something.”

The anesthetic didn’t work properly, since I felt a lot of pain when the tooth was coming out. But I said nothing because it was insignificant in comparison to the torture I was being freed from. I felt like a child who had received a present upon returning to my cell.

That afternoon and evening, I was able to sleep in a manner I had not been able to for a long time. I would sometimes wake up with a sensation of pain, but I’d realize that it was partially a pain that I had permanently lodged in my subconscious, and I’d go back to a childlike sleep.

The relief was so great that I hardly detected my daily visitors: the swarms of mosquitoes, roaches, mice, other rodents and insects who were already used to living with me. The endless drops of water that dripped from the ceiling didn’t bother me as much either, nor did the humidity of the floor and walls.

My relief was so surprisingly extreme that I’d even forgotten, nor did I care, that I had been the victim of a prison-ordered, drastic reduction in food intake, ever since my arrival. Extreme and constant hunger had become a second-rate torture, insignificant

when compared to my other terrible pains. I felt the same way about the darkness that kept me from reading or writing, day and night, and about my thirst and my need to bathe. It was as though a damned and recurring “theory of lesser of evils” had taken over my life. I was still isolated from everyone and everything!

But, starting then, they began to employ another kind of psychological pressure with me, based on love of family. It was my sick mother. For that purpose, of course, they used her as bait against my committed stance as an “unbreakable.” They denied me family visits or visits of any other sort.

My mother would come every Thursday, to find out about my situation and bring me a letter or note through the head of the detachment, Fidel el Chino, “a strict collaborator with State Security,” who would tell her that if I’d wear clothing, they’d let her visit me right away. Her letters would be full of innocent pleas and supplications. Their content was extremely moving:

My son! Please put your clothes on, because I need to see you. I’m going to die with a great desire to see you; I am very ill. If you really love me, please, put your clothes on and after we see each other you can take them off again.

Those were some of the many pleadings I would receive every Thursday. I was even arrested on a Thursday!

“Antúnez!” Fidel said to me on a particular Thursday, before giving me the letter. “I feel so bad about your mother!”

“Really? Why is that?” I answer laconically.

“Because she stayed crying out there, and asked me if I could possibly take a picture of you, so she could at least see you in a photograph.”

“Oh...yeah!” I answered, while trying to hide my pain but being strong and, above all, convinced of how much they were manipulating my mother’s feelings. “So, why don’t you take me to see her?”

“And, you want to go?”

“Of course I do! She’s my mother, isn’t she?”

“Well. Start to get ready, then, because I’ll be back for you really soon”

“Ok,” I thought to myself. “Whether it’s true or not, I’ll start getting ready.”

I only had two 1500 ml bottles of water with which to bathe, just enough in comparison to other days when I had less, or none: 3000 ml with which to bathe and brush my teeth! First, I filled the glass with water, so that after the “bath” I could take care of my dental hygiene. When I was done with my ablutions, I put on my uniform (my shorts and undershirt. I noticed that even after washing, they still looked dirty). A permanent prison odor emanated from my skin. My perspiration smelled of urine and feces from a nearby squat toilet that was hardly ever cleaned.

In a little while, I hear keys, and I get up from bed. It was a young officer standing in the cell door who says to me:

“Let’s go! Chino is waiting for you in the ‘sunroom’² to take you to a visit.”

And that’s exactly what happened! When I got there, Fidel el Chino was with three other officers, who looked more humored and happy than usual.

“Antúnez,” he says, “you’re finally going to be able to see your mother! The poor thing is dying to see you. I put her in the visitor’s room. She’s probably waiting for you there!”

I didn’t answer him. I preferred to stay on the defensive.

“Well, Antúnez,” another official said to me, getting closer to me and trying to put his

hand on my shoulder, “[but] first come by here,” he added, pointing to the office, where I could see something bunched up in a nylon bag, on a table. “Go ahead, so you can dress appropriately, because you wouldn’t want to go into the visiting room looking like that, for your mom to see you like that.”

“What to you mean ‘get dressed’?” I said, immediately understanding what was going on.

“Wait, Antúnez,” said the Chino, coming closer. “It’s not what you think. What we’ve brought you is a pair of civilian shorts: all you have to do is wear the prison shirt.”

“We have nothing more to discuss,” was all I said, and I walked back to my cell.

“Wait, Antúnez,” another official, who looked sort of frustrated, said to me. “Listen, man, you’re not going to stop being who you are just by putting on a shirt.”

“I said we have nothing more to talk about.”

“Antúnez, do it for your mother and, if you want, just keep the T-shirt on in the room. Listen, all you’re going to do is walk a few meters with that shirt on.”

Upon returning to my cell, I fervently reproached myself. How could I have been so naïve as to not realize it was a game? From then on, I refused to receive those letters and notes from my mother and let her know through third parties that she should please not go there anymore, not allow herself to be manipulated in that manner, because that only hurt us both. With encouragement, I clarified for her that if I were going to break down and give in, she’d be the first one to know. I emphasized to her that I would let her know personally, in a handwritten letter in my own hand.

The poor thing, with her limited education and information and, most of all, her lack of political savvy, could not understand

the reason behind my stance with the authorities. That situation pained and tortured me terribly, but I could not give in to force, impositions or blackmail. On the other hand, I thought, she will understand the reason for my actions, the fairness of my ideas and the meaning behind so much sacrifice. I conjectured in my heart of hearts, to make myself strong and encourage myself, who or what group of people was the one responsible for my mother’s suffering?

Me? No way. In the first place, my imprisonment is unjust and, in the second, I’m not the one refusing to see her. It is they who try to impose on me humiliating and unacceptable conditions. Would it have been smart and dignified to put on that shirt? No! I am a political prisoner and a soldier for liberty and human rights! After all, I was born on a 10th of October and I feel the blood of those blacks who supported Céspedes at La Demajagua sugar mill coursing through my veins.³

Besides, she is my mother and I adore her like no one else in this world. But she is not the only one who has suffered and still suffers. How many other mothers have been consumed by more than thirty years of tyranny?

I was struggling against myself. This was a very necessary psychological defense mechanism, so necessary when one is isolated, and apart from everyone. When it isn’t the breath of a nearby or distant friend, it is a letter from a loved one. One’s access to communication and news is blocked. Thus, I was deprived of so many things a human being needs to survive.

God and my faith in my own ideological and moral convictions were my only solace. They weren’t everything but they were essential to my ability to resist and dignify that Calvary, that is what I tried to do while it lasted. Martí had once said: “He who suffers

for God and his country will have true glory in this or other worlds!” This kind of thinking helped me to mitigate my suffering.

Around that time, I had scribbled some graffiti on the wall that said: “What does not kill me makes me stronger,” a famous phrase from the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche. At first, they tried to erase it through beatings and the like. When they weren’t successful, they hung my body and scraped the wall with it, with me almost unconscious.

On numerous occasions, I had to spend the night exposed to the elements, even in the dead of winter, handcuffed to the bars of the sunroom because I refused to stand up for the morning line up or in the presence of some “provocative” official they’d bring to see me once in a while.

During gruesome, long months of my resistance, I was brutally beaten by a limitless number of guards, Denis Barrios, Pozo, the Jiménez brothers, Machado, Orelvys and Sosa being the cruelest of them all. This last one almost killed me when my head nearly hit a wall he thrust me into in punishment for protesting not having taken a bath in who knows how many weeks, and gone almost three days without drinking water, due to a false accusation on his part. I was also asking for medical attention because of sleeping on a wet surface all the time, which caused me nocturnal fevers.

Towards the end of March 1992, I got a surprise. My brothers at the “Alambradas de Manacas”⁴ prison had managed to break through the fence somehow, and got a note to me. Because they were very worried about my situation, they let me know that the authorities had put all the province’s prisoners in that prison, in areas away from the common prisoners.

They were referring to Cubicle 9, which until then had been for security cases. They also told me it was important to save my life and take care of my health in that Calvary. Their note asked me to consider my basic demand. There already was an area for political prisoners, even if it was not my doing that made the authorities create it.

Even though I understood everything they were telling me, I let them know verbally, via the same person who brought me the note, that if I got to Manacas, I would do the same thing I had done here, stay in shorts and underwear, even though they told me not to worry about clothes, because most of them wore civilian clothes.

In effect, it is under those conditions and circumstances, and as a committed “unbreakable” (a position I did not change until I got out of prison), that I arrived at the sadly infamous “Alambradas de Manacas” prison, on April 13, 1992. Once there, I was reunited with many brothers and met others.

There were 21 of us, and we were a solid, great family in Cubicle 9. But that wonderful existence was ephemeral; it lasted only till September, when the province’s forces of repression dissolved our unit and spread us out among the common prison population. There will be new and difficult battles....

From Placetas, Cuba

Notes

- 1- Prisoners who did and do not accept the conditions set by prisons, including wearing common prison garb.
- 2- A location to which prisoners are taken to spend time in the sun.
- 3- On October 10, 1868, plantation owner Carlos Manuel de Céspedes started the first War of Independence against Spain. He set his slaves free on that occasion; they joined him in the struggle.
- 4- A Cuban prison in the island’s central region.