

From  
MY SOUL MADE VISIBLE  
The Life Of Domingo Cambeiro  
With Robert Paxton

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I started to get a little bit restless about what was going on, and I didn't know whether they would let me go out of the country. So with a couple of other friends that I really trusted, we started talking about getting into a movement to overthrow Castro. We had heard through the family network, very hush-hush, that a lot of the people who had gone to the United States were actually trying to get together to invade back Cuba as a counter-revolutionary movement and overthrow the communist regime. Two of my cousins had joined that group in Key West and were in Guatemala with the CIA-affiliated group.

Through the conversations with my friend we would talk about things that were happening and ask each other questions such as, "Would you be willing to do such-and-such" "Yeah" "Okay, well, we'll be touch." Those conversations led to me becoming part of a counter-revolutionary cell. There were four members in each cell, but I only knew one individual of the four, and that individual knew another one, and he knew the other. And there were discussions as to when the invasion would come where we would go to contact the individual; the two that knew each other would contact and then one of us would have gotten instructions where to go to get some weapons to join the invasion.

I understood that this movement was widespread, but the way it was set up you couldn't turn in more than one person if you were caught. The intent was that if you were a militia guy pretending to be part of this movement, you could only turn one guy in. You couldn't turn the whole system, or the whole network of people. And there was probably somebody who knew all the members of maybe one or two cells, so it was kind of a pyramid.

When Bay of Pigs happened, I'll never forget, I was actually at home. The night before, I remember the bombing of the airfields. I knew then that it was coming. We didn't know when, but I knew it was imminent. The next morning my mother went to the store and I was getting ready for the day. Suddenly she rushed back in, crying, "You have to leave right now. You have to go to your brother's place! Your friend just got picked up and I'm sure they're going to come over and get you."

At the store she had met her friend, who happened to be the mother of my one contact in the cell. While they were shopping a family member came running to get the friend, telling her that the militia had just picked up her son. And so my mother came crying and she wanted me to leave the house and go to my brother's home in a town near Havana.

I hadn't told her I was part of the movement, because I didn't want her to suffer. I don't think she had any clue about the depth of my involvement, but she knew I wasn't in favor of Castro, and

she feared for me. That friend had been my only contact, so I didn't know where else to go. I decided not to run. I told her, "I'm not going to run. I'm going to stay here. Don't worry about it."

Almost immediately Jorge Serra and two other guys I didn't know came to our door, dressed in militia uniforms, driving a jeep, and carrying an AK-47. Their orders were to round up every counter-revolutionary or *gusano*, or "worm." Obviously I had applied to get out of the country, and that had branded me. Then, in conversations with friends—you know, you think they're friends—they hear something and make reports and you're sort of tagged. Of course, when I didn't join the militia, that was a clear giveaway. I said to Jorge, "I can't believe you're here." And he said, "Well, okay, get in the car."

They were rounding up suspected "worms" from all over the island, so many people that the jails were not big enough to hold us all; they used theatres to keep people under control until the invasion was past. No one knows what they had planned if they had lost to the invasion. Jorge must have tagged me as a guy who would be really dangerous to the communists, because they didn't take me to the theatre; they took me to the military post and put me in a prison cell with some other dangerous counter-revolutionaries.

Finally a truck pulled up and they loaded us all in this truck. They didn't handcuff or shackle us; they just threw us like cattle in this open-back truck. A guy in the back guarded us with a gun, and then there was the driver and another guy.

I had a good friend named Mario Simone, who also hadn't been in favor of Castro. We were contemporaneous in school and everything else, and I knew his whole family very well because I used to visit their house and we played basketball and volleyball together for years. When the truck got to the avenue that would take us to Havana, Mario's mother was standing on the corner. I happened to be on that side of the truck up at the front, holding onto the rail. She was pro-Castro, and when she saw me she actually started yelling, "I wish that they would kill you" and blah, blah, blah.

I remember it so clearly. When you're twenty-one years old and you see that kind of reaction from a person that you believe to be a very nice person, and a normal lady, the mother of a friend, to be so quickly changed by a happening . . . . It was kind of an interesting thing in life, you know, and you learn from that.

Through all of these events I wasn't scared, or even really concerned, even though I didn't know what was going to happen. I don't know what the others were feeling; everybody was just keeping to himself. At that point you don't trust anybody.

They took us to an old prison in Havana, called La Cabana, which was an early 1800s Spanish fortress. It was a fort built on the bay with prisoner cells. It was built out of stone in a semi-circular form, with double gates in the back and in the front.

When they unloaded us from the truck they took us in a huge room and made us undress and throw all our clothing in a big pile. They gave us old khaki military pants and shirts, from the Batista years. On the shirts they painted a “P” for prisoner. They took my name and all that information and assigned me to a galley. When they took me there, it was overcrowded. I had to sleep on the floor because all of the bunk beds were taken. They weren’t much anyhow; the bunk beds were really just flat, with no mattress or anything.

The first day they brought food and it was horrible. At home most of us were accustomed to white rice. What they brought us, though, I guess had everything in it. We had to serve ourselves from a big pot, and then there were watery black beans and stale bread. It was all just terrible. I was hungry, though, so I ate it. In my childhood I didn’t eat well, and even with all the rationing of food I still was very picky. But that experience in the communist prison taught me. At home, even though we were lacking and trying to ration and preserve some of the food, it was good food. But this was crap. I remember when I got back home, I told my mother, if I ever, ever tell you that I don’t want to eat that, just take the plate and break it over my head. Yes, because I mean you do not know what you have until you can’t have it.

We had open galley during the day; you could go visit somebody in another galley. But if by the time they closed the galley you were not in the right one, you would be sent to the hole, which was a small cell with no light and a hole in the ground for your necessities.

One day I was sitting in the courtyard, meditating. I was thinking, “You know, here I am in this condition, and I don’t even have a rosary.” And I looked down, and staring up at me was a picture of Christ. In those days there was a manufacturer of those little church candles that packed the candles in a gray cardboard box. On the front of the box there was a picture in blue of Christ’s face, with the crown of thorns. I’ll never forget that moment, seeing him look up at me. This piece of cardboard was torn and wet, because they had just sprayed the courtyard clean, but it was kind of like a message to me. It made me feel that there was hope, that God was watching over me. I was just thinking about it and then it just appeared. I kept that picture for years.

In my galley we had an old man that tried every night to kill himself by hanging. He tried several times in the bathroom, using his pants or shirt or whatever he could find. We had a vigil—every time he went to the bathroom we would follow him and make sure that he wouldn’t kill himself.

About the third or fourth day that we were there, a little plane flew over us towards Havana, throwing propaganda papers and pamphlets. We couldn't see anything, but we could hear the guns from this fortress trying to shoot down the plane.

In the back of our cell there were two sets of bars: one set, a space, and then another one. In that space there was a light bulb. We couldn't reach it, but we were trying to throw things at it and shut it off, because we wanted to at least be dark. The guards heard about the commotion going on in our cell, and they came running over. A militia guy brought a 50-caliber gun and put it right in the front of our galley door, shouting obscenities, and yelling that if anyone tried to do something or move he was going to shoot all of us. Everybody kind of rode to the back, and kind of laid tight together until everything ceased and we were kind of a little back to normal.

A lot of the other prisoners had much larger accusations than I did. I didn't know anybody in there. It could be that purposely they separated us so that we weren't with other prisoners from our own towns, but I didn't know. But somehow we learned to open up a bit to each other.

There was a young guy, about my age, and we learned that we both liked to play chess, so we made ourselves a game board and pieces out of cardboard and played. There was a big ship docked in the bay that had been sabotaged and blown up by the counter-revolutionaries during the invasion, and this kid was accused of being a participant in that.

These galleys were on both sides of a center area, like a courtyard, and at the end of the courtyard was the outside fortress wall. We couldn't see all the way down, but we could tell that it was a big wall, surrounded by an empty moat. So if by any chance you had a way to get out the back side, there was a big ditch. The courtyard echoed, and every little sound carried to us.

Most nights, in the middle of the night, we heard a truck drive up into the courtyard. The militia would come to the galleys and call out certain prisoners by name. About the eleventh night they called out my chess friend, and he came up to the front and they took him away with maybe two other people that I didn't know. We heard the truck drive out of the courtyard, and for a while the sound disappeared as the truck drove around the outside of the fortress and down the hill. Then all of a sudden we could hear it again down below. We heard the truck stop and the men ordered out of the truck and lined up against the wall. Because it was very quiet we could hear the captain's words clearly as he said, "Prepare Arms," and then, "Shoot." They executed them by firing squad.

First they lined the prisoners up against the wall and shot them from a distance, and then someone came close. They would do one at a time, though, or probably two or three at a time, but the whole thing was repeated maybe two, three times a night. We couldn't tell how many

executions there were because we couldn't see down there. We never knew whether they're shooting someone twice or giving the "coup de grace," which was the last shot in the head.

I was in that prison for fifteen days, and that happened thirteen out of the fifteen days. The one that touched me the most was the guy that I played chess with. He was taken and shot in front of the wall. I could hear all of the orders, and then the firing, and I would kind of tense up waiting for it to happen and then it happens and you relax. But then all of a sudden you tense up again because you know they're going to give them the "coup-de-grace." Those things leave a mark on you.

By the fifteenth day Castro's forces had taken care of the invasion and they needed to release all these people, so they set up a little trial. We were called by names and we would go in front of this made-up tribunal. When my name was called, I went into a room and there were three militia guys. They began asking me questions about what I was going to do now, did I know that they won, and everything else. I tried to answer very non-committal one way or another because I didn't know what it was leading to. Then they signed a paper and said, "Okay you can go."

I was taken to the room that had everybody's clothing in one big pile and told, "Find your clothing in there and so you can go." Do you think for a minute I was going to look for my pants and my shirt? I took the first pair of pants, with was many inches too big, and the first shirt, and got out of there.