

## A daughter's testimony: "My father lived and died for his beliefs."

By Maria C. Werlau



**Armando Cañizares Gamboa, Age 28, from Camaguey, Cuba, exiled in Miami, Florida. Member of Brigade 2506, Missing in Action, presumed killed April 21, 1961 at Bay of Pigs, Cuba.**

My father, Armando, had fought in the Sierra Maestra under Che Guevara. He and his two brothers, Francisco and Julio, had joined the Rebel Army to help free Cuba of the Batista dictatorship. Although they were only in their twenties, their commitment to restore democracy was deep.

My father was particularly anti-Communist and, in fact, told as much to Ché Guevara during a conversation they had in the mountains. Later, in his memoir on the anti-Bastista fight, Ché wrote that the Cañizares brothers had returned "to fight as traitors in the invasion."<sup>(1)</sup>

The three brothers left the mountains with a large group that took leave for opposing the cold-blooded assassination of a young member of the Rebel Army. A high-ranking Castro protégé, Lalo Sardiñas, had shot the young recruit, who was of very humble origins, for taking off his boots despite orders to keep them on, even to sleep. Fidel had stepped in to override the legal code of the Rebel Army and the deed had gone unpunished.

After hiding for a few months inside Cuba, my father, his brothers, and a friend left for exile in the United States. While in hiding, he had met my mother. She too was a member of the 26th of July opposition movement, supporting in the fight against the Batista dictatorship within the clandestine urban resistance movement. They married in Miami in November 1958.

On January 1, 1959, at dawn, Batista fled the country and the revolutionary forces assumed power. My parents arrived on one of the first planes to land in Cuba with the leadership of the 26th of July movement in exile. My mother, several weeks pregnant, was carrying me in her womb.

My father took a high-level position at Cuba's Institute for the Stabilization of Sugar (ICEA), a government agency of importance to the economy. Yet, very soon



*My parents wedding, November 17, 1958.*

my parents became very concerned with the turn of events and were particularly appalled at the executions and summary trials immediately initiated by the new Castro government. Realizing Castro had no intentions to restore democracy, my father and his brothers joined the underground opposition that quickly organized against Castro, whose ranks were filling with old-timers from the anti-Batista struggle. Eventually, a former comrade in arms from their days in the Sierra tipped my father off that a case was being prepared against him. In those days, people caught conspiring against the government were quickly executed. So, in May of 1960 we left the country in a hurry, arriving in Miami. I was only eight months old. My mother was six months pregnant with my brother.

In the fall of 1960, a military force of Cuban exiles was organized and trained covertly by the United States to invade Cuba and topple Castro. My mother pled with my father for him not to join. They had two babies and, newly exiled, very little money. But he told her that he had helped put Castro in power and his moral duty –to his children and to Cuba- was to help get him out.

My uncles Julio and Francisco, as well as my aunt's husband, José, joined the Brigade. Four wives and seven small children stayed behind in the United States, praying and waiting. My father left for the training camps in Guatemala on January 18, 1961. We never saw him again. Luckily, my uncles made it back.

The invasion began on April 17, 1961. At the Bay of Pigs, my father and his brother Julio were part of a small group that fought intensely and had managed to avoid capture for four days. Dismayed at the lack of promised air support, they were outnumbered many times over and clobbered by Castro's airplanes, which were to have been disabled. Realizing the invasion was doomed, they were attempting to break through surrounding Castro forces to join the insurgency in the Escambray mountains. Exhausted and hungry, they fell asleep; the man designated to keep guard was also overcome by exhaustion. A group of militiamen shot at them and a gunfire exchange ensued. He and a friend, Manuel Rionda, were badly injured with grenade shrapnel and gunfire. Their captors refused to call in medical attention and forced the rest of their group to leave them. Manuel and my father were never seen again.

My grandparents in Cuba had been confined with thousands of Cubans suspected of counter-revolutionary sentiments as part of the mass raids that

followed the invasion. After their release, when my grandmother learned of my father's likely death and my uncle's imprisonment, she was consumed by grief and suffered a heart attack. Luckily, she survived. My father's death -real or presumed- had fallen on her birthday.

The families in Cuba desperately searched for Manuel and my father. The Cuban government refused to provide information or confirm their deaths despite insistent pleas, including those channeled through the International Red Cross. Manuel's mother was extorted of a considerable sum of money, hard to come by in Cuba in those days. The promised return of both bodies for burial was only a scam by a member of the Cuban military preying on a grieving mother.

While my uncle Julio was held with the rest of the Brigade captives, more suffering was showered on the families of the prisoners. Visits by family members were opportunities for the Castro government to humiliate and abuse them. My grandmother later related how the women would be stripped, searched disrespectfully, and mocked. Among appalling things she witnessed were female prison guards tossing about the breast prosthesis of an elderly woman who had gone to visit her son.

Back in Miami, ample drama and turmoil surrounded our lives. My mother and her parents, with almost no money, had two infants and several traumatized teenagers in their care. Cousins had been sent from Cuba without their parents to escape Communism as part of a Catholic Church sponsored program known as "Peter Pan." Many of my mother's best friends were going through the same situation, their husbands captured, injured or killed. Many didn't even die in combat. They were hunted down after their ammunition was gone or executed on the spot. Nine Brigade members were murdered by asphyxia -their captors had viciously piled over a hundred men into a sealed, unventilated, trailer. Their oven of death had taken eight hours to reach Havana as the men desperately cried for mercy.

A few weeks after the invasion, my mother was at a doctor's office in Miami seeking treatment for chronic headaches, likely brought on by stress. She picked up a Life magazine with a photo report of the invasion. There, she found a picture she took to be of my father, seemingly dead. When my uncle was released from prison, he confirmed that he had tied my father's ID tag

to his pants, as it had been broken off by the bullets, as seen in the picture. I learned of the existence of this photograph when I was seventeen. My mother refused to show it to me. She didn't even keep it at our house. I went to the library at university and found it.



*Life magazine (Spanish edition), May 29, 1961, p. 19.*

Years later, in 1981, I received information from a very persistent man living in Las Vegas that my father and his cousin were alive in a prison in Cuba. He described my father physically, referred to his deep green eyes, knew he was from Camaguey, and spoke of his two brothers by name. Because I wouldn't submit my mother to the emotional turmoil, I called my uncles for help. After investigating, they found out the man was a suspected Castro spy living in the United States. We assumed he just wanted to prey on whoever he could find. My mother didn't learn of this incident for years, but this cruelty could not have been better timed. Just a few months earlier, my family had suffered a devastating loss -my beloved only brother, Armando Cañizares III, had been killed in a car accident.

My mother never remarried. She and my father had been very much in love. She remained passionately committed to seeing Cuba free and worked tirelessly on human rights issues, including participating actively in the Cuba Archive project and in the group Mothers Against Repression (M.A.R.). She succumbed to cancer in July of 2008. This was a devastating loss for me, but she left a great trail of love that is always with me. Her love of others, of her country, and of freedom, her commitment to global harmony and justice, her deep faith in God, and her stoicism in the face of profound trials and suffering, constantly inspire me.

My brother was nineteen when he was so unexpectedly taken from us. In my deep grief, what probably hurt most was knowing he had needed a father more than I had -and I had a great deal. The loss of my father marked his parents and siblings forever. The extended family and friends also grieved. I have seen how the effect of these losses is like that of a drop on a pond, reverberating as in concentric rings, causing pain to many, many, people at varying levels of intensity depending on their closeness. I see this all the time in my work with loved ones of those who've died. In other words, the highest price is paid by those who've lost their lives, but there are many more victims, at all sorts of levels.

My grandparents managed to leave Cuba and came to the United States in 1965. Their country's fate was sealed -a system sustained on hatred and by an iron fist now seemed irreversible. They had suffered the loss of their son, the separation from all their children and grandchildren, and the defeat of the best attempts to liberate Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and through the rebellion in the mountains, mostly in the Escambray. Their land had been taken as part of the confiscation of private property by the Communist state. With nowhere else to go, they had to remain in their house at the ranch, facing daily humiliations and watching as inept state cadres destroyed their life's work.

I remember vividly when my grandparents arrived at the airport. I was six years old. It was a big day, my brother, my cousins, and I were very excited -we had never met them. We even got to miss school! My grandmother had a reputation of being very strong of character; the thought of being in her presence scared me. Yet, since our very first meeting, we bonded. She would often tell me that looking at me was like seeing my father. Indeed, she was very strong, but tears would always come to her eyes each time my father's name was mentioned.

My uncle Julio, who was with my father at the Bay of Pigs, has never really gotten over his death and the trauma of their failed effort to make Cuba free, ...still, after all these years. They adored each other and were always together. One of my earliest memories is seeing him sitting on the front steps of his home in Miami, recently released from a Cuban prison, watching his small daughter and my brother and I play. I must have been just three years old, but I could grasp that he was a very, very, sad, man.

My other uncle, Francisco, died last year. After the invasion, he had risked his life repeatedly as part of the infiltration teams organized and funded by the Kennedy Administration to support the resistance inside Cuba. We still have a beautiful seashell he brought back from one of the trips.



*My father, holding me, one month old.*

My four grandparents are all now gone, they never saw their homeland again. My maternal grandmother had the most positive personality imaginable. She endured her many sorrows in private, never complained about anything, and was fun and funny until the very last day of her 91 years. Yet, the last words she uttered, as she lay dying, were pining for her native city, which she had last seen 37 years before: "Ahhh, the streets of Santiago..." In her hand, she held on tightly to the miniature silver statue of the Virgen de la Caridad, the patron virgin of Cuba, one of the few things she had brought with her to exile. My uncle on mother's side also never returned, sadly succumbing to cancer much too young in 1999. We always talked about Cuba. An engineer with the noblest of characters, he had a deep love for his country and was developing a plan for the reconstruction of the island's infrastructure.

All these good people, who I loved so, left this world with a heavy heart for not being able to return to their beloved homeland and see it free. Theirs is the story of so many Cubans who've endured the deepest of sorrows. The shared pain weighs heavier because this long nightmare is not over. And, in many ways, we have been the lucky ones -people on the island have it much worse.

One day, Cuba will be free and the Cuban people will finally forge their destiny, in peace, and with hope in their future. Meanwhile, the dream lives on. It is our duty to make it come true.

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(1) Ernesto Che Guevara, Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria, 3ra edición, México, Editorial Era, S.A., 1969, pp. 146-147.

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*The author: Maria Werlau is Executive Director and founder of Cuba Archive. She now resides in Miami, Florida and San Juan, Puerto Rico.*



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