

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

By Maria C. Werlau



Armando Cañizares Gamboa, age 28, missing in action April 21, 1961 at Bay of Pigs, Cuba.

My father, Armando, was a native of Camagüey, Cuba. He had fought in the Sierra Maestra under Che Guevara, together with his two brothers, Francisco and Julio. They 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 and constitutional rule was deep. My father was particularly anti-Communist and, in fact, said as much to Che Guevara in a conversation they had in the mountains. Later, Che wrote in his memoir on the fight against Batista that the Cañizares brothers had returned "to fight as traitors in the invasion."¹

The three brothers left the mountains and the rebel fight with a large group in protest over the handling of the cold-blooded assassination of a young member of the Rebel Army. A high-ranking Che 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 Castro and Guevara 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, the three brothers and a friend were able to leave for exile in the United States. While in hiding in Havana, my father

had met my mother. She was from a wealthy family and part of a clandestine cell of the 26th of July movement supporting the fight against the Batista dictatorship within the urban underground resistance. They married in Miami on November 17, 1958.

On January 1, 1959, at dawn, Batista fled the country and the revolutionary forces took 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, carried me in her womb. My father was assigned to a high-level position at Cuba's Institute for the Stabilization of Sugar (ICEA), a government agency of importance to the economy. Yet, my parents were immediately alarmed over the turn of events and particularly appalled with the executions and summary revolutionary trials initiated by the new Castro government.

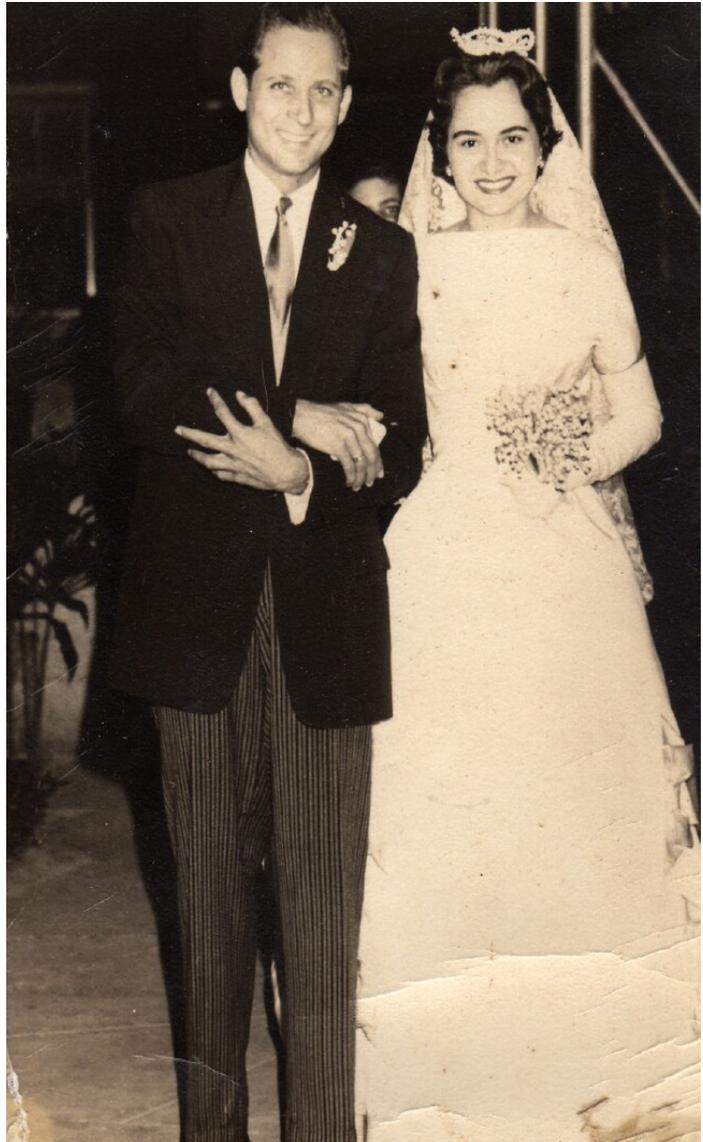
Realizing the Castro-led clan had no intention to restore democracy, my father joined the underground opposition quickly mounting against Castro, whose ranks were filling with old-timers from the anti-Batista struggle. Eventually,

¹ Ernesto Che Guevara, *Pasajes de la Guerra revolucionaria*, México: Ediciones Era, 1969, p.147.

a former comrade-in-arms from the Sierra tipped my father off that a case was being prepared to arrest 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 one week shy of eight months old and my mother was six months pregnant with my brother, who was born that August.

That fall, 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 insisted that having helped put Castro in power, 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, also 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 survived. 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, outnumbered many times over, they were being clobbered by Castro's airplanes that were to have been disabled. Knowing the invasion was doomed, they were attempting to break through surrounding revolutionary forces to join the insurgency in the Escambray mountains. Exhausted and hungry, they fell asleep. A group of militiamen shot at them and a gunfire exchange ensued. My father 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 presumably died of their wounds—at least they were never seen again.



My parents on their wedding day, Nov. 17, 1958.

The government massively rounded up civilians as soon as the invasion began. My grandparents in Camagüey had been confined with thousands of Cubans suspected of counterrevolutionary sentiments. After their release, when my grandmother learned of my father's likely death and my uncle Julio's imprisonment, she was so consumed by grief that she suffered a heart attack. Luckily, she survived. My father's presumed death 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 a member of the Castro military preying on a grieving mother.

As my uncle Julio was held captive with many more members of the Brigade, more suffering was showered on their families. Prison visits by family members still on the island 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 the appalling things she witnessed female prison guards tossing about the breast prosthesis of an older woman who had gone to visit her son.

Back in Miami, 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 and/or injured or killed. Many didn’t even die in combat. They were hunted down, like my father, 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. This 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 relief for chronic headaches, likely brought on by stress. As she waited to be seen, she picked up a *Life* magazine with a photo report of the invasion. There, she found a picture she just “knew” was my father, seemingly dead.² When my uncle was released from

prison twenty months later, he confirmed having tied my father’s tag to his pants, just as in the picture, as it had been broken off by the bullets. I learned that this photograph existed when I was seventeen but my mother refused to show it to me. She didn’t even keep it at our house. I went to the library at the local university and found it but didn’t tell her.

Years later, in 1981, a man of Cuban heritage living in Las Vegas took advantage of a chance encounter with one of my best friends to persistently insist that my father and his own cousin were alive in a prison in Cuba. I contacted him immediately. He described my father’s deep green eyes, knew he was from Camagüey, and spoke of him and his two brothers by name. This had a huge effect on me and I frantically tried to confirm it. Because I wouldn’t submit my mother to the emotional turmoil, I called my uncles for help. After an investigation, they learned that the man was a suspected Castro spy living in the United States. We assumed he just wanted to prey on anyone he could find, probably following standard orders. My mother didn’t learn of this incident for years, but this cruel prank could not have been more ill-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 by a drunken driver. My brother was nineteen when he was taken from us. My grief was deep at many levels but one of the things that still hurts most is knowing he had needed a father more than I had —even when I had a great deal!

² *Life* magazine (Spanish edition), May 29, 1961, p. 19.

The loss of my father also marked his parents and siblings forever. I can't even speak about what it did to my mother, it's just too painful. The extended family and many friends also grieved. Time and again, I have witnessed how these losses are like a drop in a pond, reverberating in concentric rings, causing pain to many, many, people at varying levels of intensity depending on their closeness to the person mourned. This is very evident in my work at Cuba Archive when we gather testimony from loved ones of those who've died. While those who've lost their lives have paid the highest price, there are many more victims at many levels.

My paternal grandparents managed to leave Cuba and came to the United States in 1965. Their country's fate was sealed and a system sustained on hatred 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 with the Escambray small farmers' rebellion, by then almost extinguished. Their land had been taken over and confiscated by the Communist state. With nowhere else to go, they had to stay in their house at what used to be their ranch, facing daily humiliations and watching as inept state cadres destroyed their lives' work. I remember vividly when my grandparents arrived at the airport in Miami. 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 for being very strict and 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. Although indeed she was a very strong woman, tears *always* came to her eyes any time my father's name was mentioned.

My uncle Julio, who was with my father at the Bay of Pigs, died in 2017 but never got over my father's death—they adored each other and were always together—and lived with the trauma of their failed effort to free Cuba. One of my earliest memories is seeing him sitting on the front steps of his home in Miami, recently released from a Cuban prison wearing a short-sleeved plaid shirt and watching his small daughter and my brother and I play. I must have been just three years old, but I could already grasp that he was very, very, sad. After the failed invasion, my uncle Francisco had repeatedly risked his life as part of the infiltration teams organized and funded by the Kennedy Administration to support the resistance inside Cuba. He died in 2005. My mother had always treasured a beautiful seashell he brought back for her from one of the trips.

My four grandparents are all long gone and never saw their homeland again. My maternal grandmother, who died in 1998, had the most upbeat 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 Santiago de Cuba, 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 belongings she had managed to take into exile. It now sits on my night table.

My uncle, my mother's only brother and my surrogate father, also never returned to Cuba, 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, among his many projects, was developing a plan for the reconstruction of the island's infrastructure.

My mother never remarried. She and my father had been very much in love. She was passionately committed to seeing Cuba free and worked tirelessly on human rights issues, including as Director of the group Mothers Against Repression (M.A.R.) and co-founder of the Free Society Project/Cuba Archive. She succumbed to cancer in July of 2008 after a year-long battle with the disease. Her love for country and freedom, her commitment to world harmony and justice, her deep faith in God, and her stoicism in the face of profound trials and suffering, constantly inspire me. Yet, it breaks my heart to think of the profound sadness and frustration she endured most of her life over the continued impunity for the totalitarian regime in Cuba, its survival, and the prolonged saga of the Cuban people.

All these good people, whom I so loved, left this world with a heavy heart from not seeing their beloved homeland free and not being able to return. Theirs is the same story of so many Cubans who've endured the deepest of sorrows. Yet, in many ways, as my mother would say, we have been the lucky ones for having escaped to live in freedom; people on the island have it much worse. This shared pain weighs heavier because this long nightmare is not over.



This is the only picture I have with my father.

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

New Jersey, April 2006, updated 2021.

Maria Werlau is Executive Director and co-founder of Cuba Archive.

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