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BEHIND BARS

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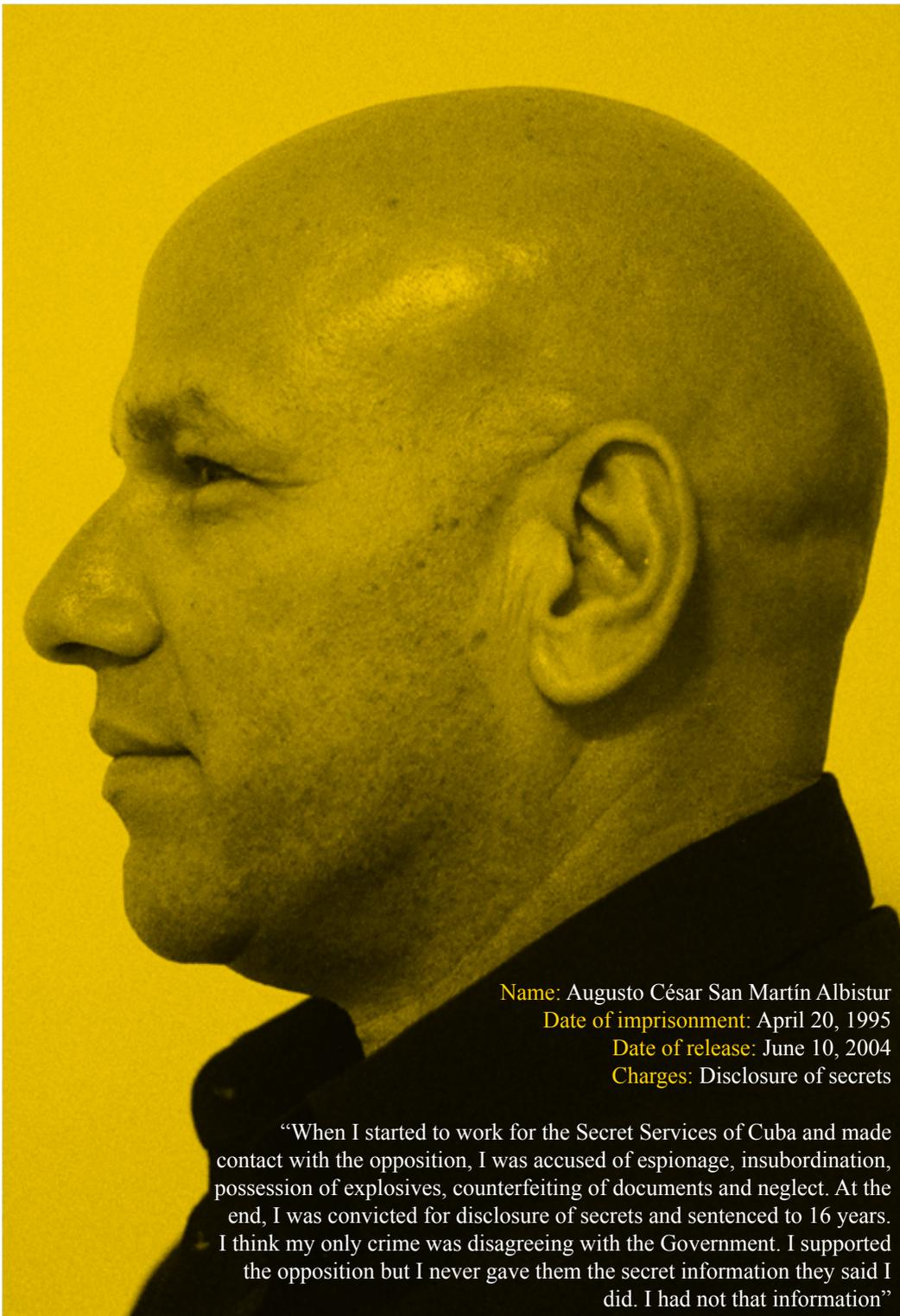
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Name: Augusto César San Martín Albistur
Date of imprisonment: April 20, 1995
Date of release: June 10, 2004
Charges: Disclosure of secrets

“When I started to work for the Secret Services of Cuba and made contact with the opposition, I was accused of espionage, insubordination, possession of explosives, counterfeiting of documents and neglect. At the end, I was convicted for disclosure of secrets and sentenced to 16 years. I think my only crime was disagreeing with the Government. I supported the opposition but I never gave them the secret information they said I did. I had not that information”

EDITORIAL

BEHIND BARS

Cuba is in fashion. And within the last few months, the existence of political prisoners has shifted from being a thorny issue to being a real nuisance. What else could be more bothersome for a country seeking foreign investments and, on the other hand, for states willing to invest in it than recognizing existence of prisoners of conscience? The most politically correct thing is simply to ignore them – position adopted even by the Cuban Church and made public by cardinal Jaime Ortega who had explicitly denied that there were any political prisoners on the island.

Regardless of the discussions about who should be considered political prisoner and the debates about abusing the term “political prisoner” – thing that could blur its true meaning – the truth is that there always have been and still are people being arrested and imprisoned for publicly manifesting their disapproval of the Government or challenging the ruling power in Cuba.

In this issue you will find stories of political prisoners in Cuba: some of them have been released several years ago, others only a few months ago while some are still in prison. Besides describing the prisoners and their living conditions, we intend to show the reasons which may lead to incarcerating a person in Cuba, the treatment he or she will receive in prison and all the consequences for those undergoing this punishment.

Agnes Koleman

THE PRISONER AND THE LIGHT

Francis Sánchez

A story about Pedro Argüelles, from The 75, who went blind at jail

He preferred to sit on a bench at the back. He never missed the Sunday Mass. He had a habit of narrowing his eyes, but his face was serene and emanated a sense of security based on the truth coming from the inner strength. His humble and energetic appearance was clearly perceptible and couldn't be overlooked by those who knew him and were aware of where he had just come from. Yet, hidden behind the clarity radiating from his ethics was his imprisonment. Not any imprisonment, but one that was twice as hard: imprisonment on political grounds, a trap designed by the regime to catch and isolate people who follow the dictates of their own conscience.

Pedro Argüelles suffered imprisonment as a punishment for his ideas and activism as an independent journalist. He spent in prison an uninterrupted period of 8 years and 28 days (adding up to some 2,948 days and devastating nights, which would be counted as 70,752 hours by prison guards and which he would feel in his flesh, one by one, as 4,245,120 minutes, which would further shatter into the derisive sum of 254,707,200 seconds tattooing in his eyes a hard, empty shadow).

His release wasn't any easier. They wanted to shame him by forcing him to opt for a future they themselves have prepared for him, the very people who picked him up in the street and locked him in a dungeon, telling him that it was for his

own good. A high-ranking member of the clergy called him repeatedly, offering him a "way out" - a solution that Shakespeare once described as "another name for death": going into exile. Pedro kept refusing and one day he even asked the cleric not to call him any more if he wasn't able to offer him real, simple freedom. And so it went on until one afternoon, when most of the other political prisoners arrested during the so-called "Black Spring" had already been expatriated, they put Pedro in a car and dropped him off without a word right in front of his house.

He lived in a sort of a poor and humble bunkhouse - a "home" which one always puts in quotation marks when using it in a sentence; a "home" where you prefer sitting outside on the porch when the heat sets in. When I heard he was back, after so much time we hadn't seen each other, I hesitated for a second whether I should pay him a visit, because I knew that he would be under constant surveillance. But at least I could give him a hug, I thought. We sat side by side at the busy porch of the house, talking as if we just picked up on a conversation we hadn't finished the day before. There was something I had brought him and I hesitated. What would they think (those who were watching us) if they saw me take a piece of paper from my bag and put it in his hands?

On that afternoon I was scheduled to attend, along with my brother, the International Book Fair in Ciego de Ávila, where

there was a presentation of a book with an article of mine about the Special Period. When I came there, I saw the result of the welcome visit I paid to Pedro: the room, which was already full of young audiences, was now crammed with hostile-looking men. We were only able to overcome the tension during the presentation and the readings thanks to the spontaneous reactions of the young people laughing at our stories of how we manage to live and survive.

When I came round to see Pedro that morning, he didn't recognize me at first, nor was he able to read the piece of paper I put in his hands. He had to wait for a few days until his glasses were made. Also, he had to get used to reading again. The prison had deprived him of the sight and he was almost blind.

As soon as he was able to, he gave me a call and I was honoured to hear the following words of praise: "After I read your text, I felt that all those years hadn't been useless." I don't think there is anything more satisfactory than helping somebody get back the lost years of his life, over 8 years shattered into seconds, by giving him hope (or certainty) of finally being understood. Pedro was referring to an article I published in my blog *Hombre en las nubes* ("Man in the Clouds") while he was still in prison in which I showed my su-

I don't think there is anything more satisfactory than helping somebody get back the lost years of his life

port for his ethical attitude which made him refuse (self)deportation in exchange for his release.

When walking the streets of his town again, he could see little of it (although he was seen and noticed a great deal). Some people joked about there being nothing much to look at any more, nothing to regret. The Red Cross offered to arrange a surgery abroad if he only agreed to leave the country for some time. Yet, he knew and he told me on several occasions that they would

never allow him to get back if he left, it would be once and for all. On the other hand, he said that he didn't want to undergo a surgery in Cuba for lack of trust – not because he feared that they would definitely hurt him, but because he knew that if the surgery went wrong, he would always harbour doubts. As time went on, the darkness grew and he finally decided to make the trip abroad, accompanied by his family. It was a journey of his own volition, yet, against his will at the same time.

Let there be some light, we have always prayed to the mother of Cubans before and after each of our illegal or permitted processions, carrying lighted candles as a symbol of our wish that our homeland once becomes a "home" for all of us, a "home" without quotation marks.



ARTI VISM



Lia Villares,
CubaRaw

“My 94-year-old aunt keeps asking me: ‘Have they freed the boy with the painted pigs yet?’ and I keep answering in the negative. My aunt just smiles, remembering the performance of El Sexto, and I realize that acts of art live on in people’s minds, which, in fact, may be the best way of recording them.”

Tania Bruguera

Graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado (aka “El Sexto”) has been in prison since December 2014 for having tried to stage a performance with pigs on which he wrote the names of “Fidel” and “Raul”.

In the end, he wasn’t even able to carry out his plan as he was detained when leading the piglets to the Centro Havana district. In any case, many of us still cherish the me-



mory of the pigs running across the Parque Central.

Artist Tania Bruguera was also arrested in December for having organized a performance #YoTambienExijo (“I also demand”) - an open mic event in the Plaza de la Revolución. Although she has been subject to several short detentions since

then, she still dedicates herself to *artivism* in Cuba.

Her last performance consisted of an interrupted public reading of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was held at her home during the Havana Biennial. Everyone was welcome to join in, take the book and read a part of the dreadful

anatomy of totalitarianism as interpreted by Hannah.

Tania still firmly believes in art as a tool capable of changing society.

Danilo keeps drawing his pictures behind the walls of the prison. His wings help him leave the cell and fly free.

Sonia Garro

by Agnes Koleman



Ladies in White

**2 Years, 9 Months
and 20 Days**

Sonia Garro, member of the Ladies in White movement (Damas de Blanco), spent almost three years in prison without having committed any crime. Now she's determined to continue fighting for human rights in Cuba, but she's unwilling to accept money from Miami.

Sonia Garro (Rancho Boyeros, Havana, 1975), finds it surprisingly easy to find her way in Prague, although she has never travelled abroad before. She believes it's owing to her ability to quickly remember important landmarks. In Cuba, she's been often detained by the Police, which first threatened her for a few hours and then took her to some godforsaken place in the suburbs of Havana. "I had to learn to remember the way somehow to be able to get back," she says.

Sonia had frequently fallen victim to this practice of State Security agents, commonly used to punish Cuban opposition members, before she was arrested on March 12, 2012. "On that morning we organized a protest in the town of Marianao, where I live. I hanged posters all over the neighbourhood and led a group of protesters, demanding respect for human rights. Rapid Response Brigades then came and surrounded my house, but the locals prevented them from entering and arresting me. At one o'clock in the afternoon, they were all gone and everything was quiet, but at three they burst in again, armed with shotguns. I got shot in the leg and I fainted."

Sonia was accused of the crime of assault and taken to Manto Negro, female prison in the west of Cuba. She spent there near-

ly three years, or, to be precise, "2 years, 9 months and 20 days," as the woman proudly and calmly repeats to all those who ask her about her stay in prison, giving an impression that she cut a notch on the gun for every day she spent behind bars. "On December 9,

2014, I was released and the prosecutor made me sign a document which stated that I hadn't committed any crime," says Sonia, adding that "it was the same prosecutor who demanded a 10 year sentence for me."

Sonia says that in 2006, shortly after she had joined the Ladies in White, she was fired from work. She worked as a laboratory technician. "From that moment on, until the day of my arrest, I was under constant pressure exerted by State Security," narrates Sonia. Then she explains how the government mechanisms work when trying to prevent Cubans flirting with the opposition from carrying on with their activities: "In the beginning, they just give you a warning. They reach out to you through people you know, who come to you and give you a friendly advice to stop the 'counter-revolutionary' activities. What follows are nasty threats from strangers and finally, you get the sack." If it's still not enough and the dissident refuses to come to reason, it's time to focus on their closest family members and have them

**"I had to learn to remember
the way somehow to be able to
get back"**

suffer the consequences. “What hurts me most is that my daughter couldn’t get a proper education just for being my daughter. I can withstand things like physical abuse, being in prison, anything else... but not the fact that they have deprived my daughter of her future.”

Sonia’s daughter, Elaine, is 19 now, but looks much younger. She was born prematurely, at

six months and a few days, and almost died. Sonia suffered so much that she decided not to have more children and dedicates herself fully to caring for Elaine. Yet, her daughter’s dependency on her grew significantly when she was expelled from school and became stronger during Sonia’s lengthy imprisonment. After Sonia’s liberation, the two women are almost inseparable.

“Cuban prisoners are not treated like people, but like dogs,” continues Sonia, who spent most of her stay behind bars in solitary confinement, to avoid the risk that she could provoke a riot with other inmates. Like other imprisoned dissidents, she claims she has seen gestures of sympathy from ordinary prisoners, who tend to admire political prisoners and relate to them up to the point of protecting them. Sometimes they even ask them for advice how

to act in certain situations. Sonia also remembers the support provided to her by one of the doctors: “He truly cared about us and it hurt him when he saw that they never provided us with the treatment he had prescribed. You could see that he really

wanted to do many things that weren’t within his power...”

Due to poor hygienic conditions and lack of medical treat-

ment, Sonia’s wounded leg (the result of the shot that hit her during her detention) couldn’t heal well and as a result, she developed diabetes and anaemia. She didn’t receive any medicine even when she was taken to hospital in April 2013, during the famous opening of Cuban jails to the international press. “When I got back to my cell again, I learned from the inmates that they transferred me to the hospital only because they wanted to prevent the journalists from seeing me there,” she says.

Sonia thinks she knows why it was her who was sent to jail and not another of her fellow activists. She remembers how she once did something that really annoyed State Security – in 2011, she staged a protest with 6 other women. They marched to the Jose Marti Anti-Imperialist Platform at the end of the Malecon, a place where public demonstrations in support for the

government are usually held, and Sonia raised a banner in defence of human rights in one of the poles. “State Security then thought I was the leader of the group of protesters and from that moment on, the persecution got more intense. It was after that incident when they started to threaten me that my daughter would not be able to continue studying and that I would be prosecuted. They kept their word, indeed,” she adds. Certainly, it didn’t help her that she kept organizing seminars, mostly dedicated to the issue of racial discrimination in Cuba, which were very popular among her neighbours.

Back home from prison now, Sonia tries to pick up her life where she had left it off. She wants to continue organizing conferences and protests, even if there have been some rapid changes in her country recently. The question is, in which direction is the country heading now. Claudio Fuentes, Cuban photographer, who has spent the last few months

trying to portray the Ladies in White in their public activities as well as in their privacy, points out that the hardest thing in the lives of these women is not the abuse by State Security, but the every-day struggle to make a living. Some of them live in conditions very close to poverty and Sonia’s case is not different. She and

her daughter are only able to survive by selling home-made sweets. “I think I’ll keep earning the bread this way, because I don’t want to accept money from Miami,” says Sonia. “Organizations in Miami that give you money want you to say and do what they want, and I want to do and say what I think and what I believe in. It’s easy for them to tell people what to do, from a comfortable position like theirs,” she adds.

Sonia is more than sure that she will continue as a member of the Ladies in White movement and she also wants to resume her activist efforts within the island: “Of course I will still be in trouble - anyone who acts against the Cuban government gets into trouble,” she says. Yet, she refuses to go to exile and says that she will not stop fighting until there is not a single political prisoner in Cuban prisons and until

human rights are respected again. And what if this becomes real one day? “Well, in this case I will get back to

my job as a lab technician, that’s a career I studied for.” One last thing, is she not scared? “Of course I am,” she admits. “If anyone in Cuba tells you that they are not scared, they lie.”

If it’s still not enough and the dissident refuses to come to reason, it’s time to focus on their closest family members

“Of course I am scared, if anyone in Cuba tells you that they are not scared, they lie.”

HARASSMENT

Augusto César San Martín Albistur

When it comes to punishing
dissidents, the Cuban
government finds mere
imprisonment not entirely
satisfactory

There is a designed plan to break the will of imprisoned political prisoners, which is based on the maxim that every day spent behind bars must hurt. Officers in charge of destroying the integrity of political prisoners call the plan “harassment”. When carrying it out, they make the most of the conditions in Cuban prisons, using hunger, stifling and fear as a means of turning common prisoners to collaborators of prison authorities.

In all prisons across the island, the harassment plan is implemented according to an established routine. In every prison ward there are one or two political prisoners mingled in the crowd of common prisoners and their isolation is the very factor that creates favourable conditions for turning their stay in prison into martyrdom.

In the 1990s, for instance, the now deceased dissident Sebastián Arcos Bergnes, Vice-President of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, was subjected to harassment in the prison of Ariza in Cienfuegos. The last attack he suffered there was when common prisoners stole his belongings by order of the Political Police, which is, by the way, a common practice in the Ariza prison, popularly known as “El tiburón blanco” (“The White Shark”) for its ability to eat people alive.

The “harassment plan” includes also beatings, received, for example, by Reinaldo Arévalo Padrón, a freelance journalist from Cienfuegos, who was sentenced to

six years in prison for showing contempt for Fidel Castro and the dismissed Vice-President Carlos Lage Dávila. When in prison, officer René Orlando fruitlessly tried to set common prisoners against him and when he failed, he gave a direct order to his collaborators to give Arévalo Padrón a beating. He himself was one of the attackers, along with cpt. Hermes. When they were finished, they put the beaten journalist in a punishment cell.

In a letter from the prison, Arévalo Padrón described the events as follows:

“Rene was the first to hit me. He pushed me with my back against the wall and then he gave me three blows in the stomach and slapped me. When I fell down on the floor, he kicked me twice, once in my right ankle and then in the left side of my back. Yet, the blows that most hurt me were those given by cpt. Hermes, who beat me with a stick in the head, neck and face, in the abdomen and the left kidney, while crying out loud: ‘You anti-communist, you motherfucker, I’ll kick your teeth in!’”

The aim of the plan of martyring the opponents of the regime who end up behind bars for fighting for a cause is to inflict spiritual harm on them. This might explain why most Cuban political prisoners agree on one thing: No one can ever walk free from such prison. The day of the release - the end of the martyrdom, only marks the beginning of a trauma from which they will never ever recover.

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del totalitarismo

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Hannah Arendt



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