



TEODORO PETKOFF: THE CRISIS OF THE PROFESSIONAL REVOLUTIONARY

Part I: Years of Insurrection

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In his speech last March to the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Secretary-General Leonid I. Brezhnev spoke with concern of a new kind of political movement developing from within some important Communist Parties of Western Europe and Latin America since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Brezhnev warned that “it is precisely in nationalist tendencies, especially those which acquire an anti-Soviet character, in which bourgeois propaganda and ideology pin their hopes in the struggle against socialism and the Communist movement. They push opportunistic elements in the Communist Parties into a kind of ideological bargain. They seem to say: ‘If you show that you are anti-Soviet, we are disposed to proclaim that you are precisely the true Marxists and that you occupy completely independent positions.’ The march of events shows, certainly, that these people have taken the road of struggle against the Communist Parties in their respective countries. Among such renegades are [Roger] Garaudy in France, [Ernst I Fischer in Austria [Teodoro] Petkoff in Venezuela and the ‘Manifesto’ group in Italy.”

By the time of Brezhnev’s speech, it had become abundantly clear that the Czech intervention had not only provoked intense criticism of Soviet policy from within the Western Communist Parties that had grown big and powerful since World War II. but also provided an occasion for long-postponed debate and division over important internal questions. Immediately after the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, the Austrian Communist Party split when Ernst Fischer, the distinguished theoretician of Marxist aesthetics, led roughly half its members out of the Party in protest against the Soviet action, which in turn provoked heated internal discussions of democratic centralism, freedom of expression, and the relation of the Party to the people and the state. While the Italian Communist Party published an elaborate and impassioned condemnation of the Czech intervention, this was not enough for a large group of younger Communists led by Rossana Rossanda, former secretary to Togliatti, and Luigi Pintor, the previous editor of Unitá who attacked the Party as being too involved in Italy’s parliamentary system to seek revolutionary solutions. They formed their own Manifesto group outside the Party, named after their ideological journal. The French Communist Party issued a pro forma condemnation of the invasion, but without the vigor and detailed argument of the Italian statement nor of the subsequent writings of the Marxist philosopher, Roger Garaudy, who argued for an aggiornamento of the French Party in writings that led to his expulsion. Of all the critiques and reactions occasioned by the crushing of the Dubcek regime, possibly the most penetrating was a little book written while in hiding by the Venezuelan “renegade” Teodoro Petkoff. Originally drafted as a long memorandum to the Central Committee of the Venezuelan Communist Party [PCV] in protest against the Party’s quick endorsement of the Soviet intervention, the book in its final form [published in 1969] has circulated widely in its Spanish original in West European Marxist circles and clandestinely inside Czechoslovakia in a mimeographed translation. Within Venezuela itself, Petkoff and his book Checoeslovaquia: El Socialismo como

Problema were the main focus of a long and wide-ranging discussion inside the PCV on the Party's future and revolutionary role, as well as its relationship to the Soviet Union. The results ended in the formal division of the Party in December 1970. Arguing in his Checoslovaquia for a new kind of Communist Party and socialist state, Petkoff wrote that the Dubcek experiment represented an attempt to rationally organize a socialist society in social and economic conditions far more advanced than the primitive setting of Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. Petkoff added:

The Czechoslovak experience, for having taken place in an advanced society, much closer to the countries of Western Europe than any other socialist country, would have been a point of reference for the Western Communist Parties in facing their quest for power and their polemics against bourgeois forces. The questions of a multiparty system, of democratic life, of the roles of Parliament and local power, of the press and other means of mass communications, of intellectual creation, etc. — to which European peoples are so sensitive — could have been the focus of new and fresh arguments and new experiences in Czechoslovakia, in areas of political action where the deformations of the socialist camp have weighed too heavily upon the development of the Communist Parties in the West. For the two great Western Communist Parties, the Italian and the French, this has more than an academic or rhetorical importance. These are parties for which problems of government are within sight, and the possibility of founding some aspects of their theoretical formulation, their program, their strategy, and their tactics upon the Czech experience held very considerable interest. In the case of the Italian Communist Party, its attitude [toward the Czech invasion] could not be a surprise, since it was the logical crowning of years of practical and theoretical inquiry. Precisely because the Italian Communists beforehand had reached conclusions similar to those of the Czech Party, they “defected” with the Czechs and later, after the invasion, assumed with such nobility and courage the defense of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and its leader, Alexander Dubcek.

The most striking element about the group of younger Communists who left the PCV in December 1970 and formed the Movimiento al Socialismo [MAS] is that they are the closest Latin America has come to producing a coherent body of professional revolutionaries in the classic Leninist sense of the term. Now in their middle and late thirties, most of them have spent the past two decades, or nearly all of their adult lives, in almost continual clandestine and insurreccional activity, interrupted only by brief political truces and by their years in jail. At the time of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Venezuelan Communists were just emerging from these 20 years of revolutionary activity, first successfully against the military dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jimenez [1948-1958] and then against the elected Acción Democrática regimes of Presidents Rómulo Betancourt [1959-1964] and Raul Leoni [1964-1969]. Until the PCV was defeated in its long guerrilla rebellion of the 1960s and wrecked by a leadership and ideological struggle focusing on Petkoff's “anti-Sovietism,” it was one of the strongest and most active Communist Parties in Latin America. Not only had it been the prime mover among Venezuelan political parties to mobilize the working class and marginal populations of Caracas to overthrow the Pérez Jimenez dictatorship, but it mounted the most sustained and active insurreccional movement in Latin America during the 1960s, which lasted longer and was more bitterly fought than Fidel Castro's more widely known guerrilla movement in Cuba's Sierra Maestra a few years before. Following their defeat, the young men who left the PCV with Petkoff to form the MAS began to focus with a refreshing audaciousness and clarity upon problems of revolutionary objectives and procedure.

What follows in this Report on Teodoro Petkoff: The Crisis of the Professional Revolutionary is the product of approximately ten hours of taped interviews — done at irregular intervals between June and December 1971 — that compose a self-portrait of this leader of the Venezuelan guerrilla insurrection of the 1960s and of his political generation in Venezuela. These interviews are replete with original documentary material on the formation of a professional revolutionary and on the inner life of the FALN insurrection of the past decade.

Teodoro Petkoff is both a representative and outstanding example of the kind of Communist formed in Venezuela. In his extraordinary political career, Petkoff at age 39 has already participated in the rebellion that overthrew the Pérez Jimenez dictatorship; formed part of the PCV military leadership that planned and organized the urban and rural guerrilla insurrection; pulled off two sensational escapes from prison, first [in 1963] descending alone by a nylon cord from the seventh story prison ward of the Military Hospital in Caracas, and in 1967 through a tunnel dug from the San Carlos army fortress in downtown Caracas with five other PCV leaders; fought in guerrilla units in Lara and Falcón states in the mountains of western Venezuela; engaged in extensive polemics, jointly with other PCV leaders, in response to Fidel Castro's 1967 attack on the PCV for its withdrawal from the guerrilla struggle, and in 1969 focused upon the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as an occasion for an instructive debate on the future of revolution and on the true nature of socialist society. Drawing on these experiences, Teodoro Petkoff will speak for himself in the pages that follow. This first part of his story will cover the years of insurrection, through 1963. A second Report will follow on the decline of the guerrilla movement in Venezuela, the internal debate and division of the Venezuelan Communist Party, and the formation of the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo). A bibliography on the PCV and the guerrilla insurrection will be included in the second Report.

I

I didn't find out that papa had been a Communist until I was an adolescent, since both my parents were always very reserved people. My mother is a Polish Jew, a doctor, whose family was wiped out by the Nazis during World War II, and my father is a chemical engineer from Bulgaria. They met at the University of Brno in Czechoslovakia, where my father had gone to finish his degree when he fled Bulgaria after the failure of the 1923 insurrection, when some 30,000 people were killed. There were uprisings in several cities of Bulgaria, one of the many revolutionary insurgencies in central and eastern Europe in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution. My father was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and his home town of Pazardyik — roughly 130 kilometers from Sofia, the capital — was one of the centers of the uprising. Years later, my uncle Luben was killed in the Spanish Civil War. When I first visited Bulgaria in 1960 —returning home from a student congress in Switzerland — I discovered that both of my grandparents were also members of the Bulgarian Communist Party. My grandmother was named Raida. She was a schoolteacher and a founder of the Party; she seemed to be a member of some importance, since she was named to one of the popular tribunals that were formed after World War II. My grandfather was still living when I went to Bulgaria, and I met him in that little town of Pazardyik. Grandfather was very old, but still lucid, and was even informed of the Venezuelan situation. He showed me two or three of his medals, the kind of decorations they confer in the socialist countries, a little star and that sort of thing. He had a typical Bulgarian peasant house: square, on a cement foundation, with a small plot of land and a little wooden house where he raised bees. Grandmother had died, so he married or lived with an illiterate Macedonian woman. Grandfather and I communicated through a girl student who translated his Bulgarian into English, which I had learned in high school. It turned out that my brother Luben and I later became quite famous in Bulgaria, almost national heroes, since we were regarded as Bulgarians fighting with the Venezuelan guerrillas. When my brother Luben left the Party in 1967, a little crisis was caused among the Bulgarian Communists, and the next time I went there they asked me: "What shall we do? Shall we inform the Bulgarian people of this?" I told them that it's better not to say anything, that in the final analysis it was a problem of ours in Venezuela.

After the 1923 Bulgarian revolution failed, my father drifted into Vienna, where Bulgarian exiles gathered. He got to know Georgi Dimitrov personally. Papa always considered Dimitrov a great figure of the international Communist movement. But papa then moved on to Czechoslovakia to finish his studies. Those were the romantic years following the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution: Russia needed technicians, and papa was a chemical engineer and a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party. My father had asked to

go to the Soviet Union to work there, but they insisted that he go alone, and that my mother follow later. Since they had just married, my father said they would have to go together or not at all. This is how my parents migrated to Venezuela, almost by accident. Some Bulgarian friends in Venezuela had written them that there were possibilities here, so they arrived in 1927. My mother was the first woman to pass the Medical Board examinations in Venezuela.

My father worked at several kinds of jobs. It was hard to work as a chemical engineer, because the petroleum industry had scarcely begun operations and there was little else in Venezuela for him to do. Shortly after she passed her Venezuelan medical exams in 1929, my mother answered a newspaper advertisement to work as a doctor at the Central de Venezuela, the country's largest sugar mill, in a little town called Bobures south of Lake Maracaibo. The sugar mill needed doctors because of the malaria epidemic that was spreading throughout the Venezuelan interior. When the owners of the sugar mill learned that my father was a chemical engineer, they hired him too. I was born at the sugar mill in 1932; rather, my mother went in one of those small launches across the lake to Maracaibo to give birth, because conditions were so primitive at the sugar mill. Those childhood years on the sugar plantation were very happy. We had a large, airy prefabricated wooden house that was imported from the United States and assembled on the plantation, a house that was very romantic and beautiful and typical of the American South. We were near a river, in open countryside, and our house had an immense patio full of animals. Papa was very happy in those years. He had a large collection of snakes and I had a goat, which a train killed one day. There were many Negroes from Trinidad working as cane-cutters and living in a *rancherío* apart from us. We formed part of the "high society" of that little town. Then in 1940 we moved to Caracas.

My father worked for a time in the Development Ministry in Caracas. He tried to mount a chemical products factory near our house in the outlying *barrio* of Chacao, which was still practically countryside in those days. But World War II began, and the machinery papa had ordered could not be shipped from Sweden. The factory was going to produce ink, chalk, and printer's materials. Since he had bought a small printing press to produce his own labels and stationery, he started a printing shop, *Tipografía Sorocaima*, that became very prosperous during the 1940s and 1950s. Now papa's business barely survives, because he is very sick. He has a pulmonary infection and is 70 years old. He has a small number of clients from 20 years ago just to keep the business going; he cannot climb steps and must walk very slowly. It seems that around the time my brother Mirko was killed by a policeman, in 1957, my father lost much of his vital spirit.

As I said, my parents never displayed much emotion, even in terms of affection. I remember, when I decided to formally enroll in the Communist Youth, I told papa who simply said: "Very good. I think that's very good." That was a big step for me because the Pérez Jimenez dictatorship [1948-1958] was just beginning then, and it was no joke to be in the Communist Youth at that time. Ever since I was 13 or 14 years old, I had read a great deal, especially history. That was one characteristic that distinguished me from my younger brothers and the other boys. I was very moved by such books as Gorky's *Mother* and *Soviet Power* by Hewlitt Johnson, the Red Dean of Canterbury. At the time I was an adolescent, it was very strange to find a boy of 15 involved in politics. The politization of youth in Venezuela is a very recent phenomenon. In our graduating class in the Liceo Andrés Bello, there were only three Communists and another four or five that followed our lead. The other two Communists both became doctors; one is now a prosperous physician who still pays Party dues, but is otherwise inactive; the other is an eminent cardiologist who has remained politically active. The day I made my first visit to the office of the Party newspaper, *Tribuna Popular*, I found a friend of mine from the Liceo working there. I asked, half as a joke, half seriously, if I could work there too. The Party comrades, and especially Gustavo Machado, founder of the PCV [*Partido Comunista de Venezuela*] and editor of *Tribuna Popular*, said that would be fine, and I started working as an *ad honorem* reporter for two or three months. All I asked for was \$2.00 a week to pay my bus fare, but Gustavo insisted upon paying me \$10. Gustavo is a Venezuelan gentleman of the old school, with a gift of goodness toward

people. Through *Tribuna Popular* I made my first contact with the Party leadership, and with big-time politics in Venezuela. There was press censorship at the time, and one of my jobs was to take the page proofs to the censorship office headed by Colonel Benjamin Maldonado [later to become head of Pérez Jinienez's military intelligence] for him to read and return. I got into an argument with Colonel Maldonado, and he sent word to Gustavo asking who was this little obnoxious fellow who had insulted him, who had insulted the government, who had insulted everyone. Maldonado said he was tempted to throw me out the window. A few months later, in 1949, I was allowed to join a Party cell.

After I joined the Communist Party, my father began to discuss politics with me for the first time. He spoke in a way which today appears to me to have been very intelligent, as he was always trying to awaken an antidogmatic awareness in me, especially in things concerning Stalin and the cult of personality, and Soviet economic development. He began to study Party reports with me, or foreign news dispatches, and to point out certain discrepancies. Of course, in that period I argued fiercely with him, since I had just joined the Party and believed devoutly in everything the Party said. But with time I realized that these discussions left their mark upon me. For example, when Stalin denounced Tito in 1948, my father asked me whether I really thought that Tito was an imperialist tool and an agent of British intelligence. Then my father would take the official Soviet history of the Russian Revolution and asked me: Where were the names of Trotsky and Bukharin and the others who made the Revolution? The first time I heard that Soviet history had been adulterated by Stalin was from the lips of my father. Papa must have read a great deal of these documents in his youth. I heard from him for the first time about Lenin's testament, and what Lenin said about Stalin. While studying Soviet documents with my father, it became apparent that in some of these texts there were omissions or falsifications in the versions from the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow. As a result of these discussions with my father, I began to change my attitude toward Stalin and Stalinism, and to question some articles of faith that were dearly embraced by the PCV's Central Committee.

My first Party cell was in Chacao, where I lived, and was made up of workers and artisans in the process of becoming industrial workers. I remember that there was a carpenter, a barber, a worker from the General Tire factory, and a kid who joined when I did, who was a *peon* at the time but now is a very different guy. I used to write short stories in those days, and wrote one about this cell which really left its mark on me. I remember when our cell used to meet in my house. Papa used to get up from his chair rather ceremoniously to shake hands with each of the *compañeros* as they came in, and mother would later serve them coffee and cake. The cell met in my bedroom, and once after they left my mother asked me, with something of the intellectual's arrogance: "Well, what can *they* possibly know about communism?" But they did know, because this kind of worker was formed in the first Communist uprisings of 1936, and developed what might be called part of the working class deviation [*desviación obrerizante*], who possessed a contempt for intellectuals, for other levels of society, and were captivated by the idea of a chemically pure proletarian revolution. The PCV had paid dearly for these deviations. The Communists of Latin America were formed in the crucible of the Third International, in the Marxism of Stalin, that is, Marxism reduced to a few simple formulas, with all philosophy reduced to four dialectical laws. This kind of Marxist, formed in the 1930s and 1940s in Latin America, is a very simple person, theoretically speaking, because he ignores the phenomena that do not fit into his theoretical preconceptions. For example, the marginal man, the marginal population of Latin America's great cities, does not exist for him because this new phenomenon does not fit into the old category of the industrial army of reserve [the unemployed], so he either ignores it or labels it as an invention of Marcuse.

As I said, my first Party cell was very proletarian, and it connected me for the first time to the workers' world and to poor people in general. This cell belonged to the administrative structure of the PCV's El Recreo [East Caracas] Committee. In 1950, a Party conference was held for our zone, and I was elected to the Committee, because I had become very good at selling newspapers, putting up posters, and producing mimeographed newspapers. From 1949 when I began studying medicine at the Central University in Caracas, I continued to be

a member of the Communist Youth and was required to be politically active in the Faculty of Medicine. But my main activity was in the street. Between 1950 and 1952, I was a leader of the El Recreo Committee, and when a regional conference was held in 1952, I was elected to the PCV's Greater Caracas Committee, where I worked until the fall of Perez Jimenez. However, it was in that Committee of El Recreo where the discussions began that at first seemed rather insignificant but later, in retrospect, appeared to be very important in terms of the Party's internal crisis.

The PCV leadership, on July 5, 1951, ordered a street demonstration for the freedom of political prisoners to be held in the downtown section of El Silencio. As a member of the El Recreo Committee, I was one of the principal organizers and participants in the demonstration. I was arrested in Silencio by the Seguridad Nacional [the political police], who beat me up because I had fought with them. But after this, I forced a discussion of this decision of the Party leadership, which I criticized in the most dogmatic and pedantic way, quoting both Lenin and Stalin, with very simple phrases which said that when the people's movement was on the offensive, the Party's tactics should be offensive too. But when the people's movement is in recess or decline, the Party also must switch to the defensive. This is from the schematic and simplistic literature of Stalin, but it is true. In the El Recreo Committee's discussion of the Silencio demonstration, I said I could not understand the Party's policy. I thought it was absurd at this moment, when the military dictatorship had destroyed *Acción Democrática* [Venezuela's big social democratic party of the 1940s and 1950s] and had paralyzed all popular movements, when the Party was outlawed and there was no labor movement and no political activity, to hold demonstrations which would expose us unnecessarily to repression, and get a few cadres thrown in jail uselessly just to make a public show that the Party was still alive. After the Silencio demonstration I was in jail for three months, and when I was released a debate began in the El Recreo Committee that lasted several months, died out for a while, and then was revived when the Party leadership ordered another self-immolation in 1954, when the Pan-American Conference of the O.A.S. Foreign Ministers met in Caracas to take measures against the leftist government of Guatemala and Communist activity in the hemisphere. We proposed to *Acción Democrática* that we demonstrate together against the Pan-American Conference. Indeed, I was assigned to propose this mistaken tactic to *Acción Democrática*, although I was against it, but I had the necessary contacts with their leaders in Caracas. When I proposed the demonstration to AD, they said: "Don't be ridiculous, *chico*. We're not getting involved in this." Another tactical error was when a PCV member was jailed, the Party refused permission for him to sign a little card in which he promised not to engage in any more political activities. This little card meant nothing, but because they refused to sign — unlike the other banned parties — our cadres rotted in jail for months and years. In those days I was an ardent Stalinist, as close-minded and sectarian in this matter as the rest of the Party.

The Venezuelan Communist Party was very strange. Small and battered as it was, it was always an important faction in Venezuelan politics, with roots in the labor unions and in armed movements, and relations with the country's other parties. It was very much different from the Trotskyite and pro-Chinese groups in Latin America, composed of a small circle of intellectuals with no real experience in politics. But neither the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 nor Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin's crimes caused any problem in the PCV, because our Party was so involved in its own problem, the Pérez Jimenez regime, that events in the larger Communist world touched us very slightly. When Khrushchev spoke, Stalin became a monster for the Party, and that was that. However, the Party has tended to become a cult, following the Stalinist principle of not making revolution in other countries so as to defend the Soviet Union. For most Communist Parties, the idea of revolution has become a kind of eschatology, like the Second Coming of Christ. Under these conditions, the Communists began living, not for revolution, but for the Party itself. The Party then becomes an end in itself, the object of all vigils and devotion — an introverted sect. Without revolutionary possibilities, Communists are reduced to being *sindicaleros* [union bureaucrats], who fight hard for the workers, like the grievance chairmen of the unions, but without any linkage between their labor conflicts and revolutionary strategy. The cult of the Party makes it the navel of the universe, and one lives for the Party alone, and all

reality becomes bound within its organizational structure, its statutes, its fund-raising campaigns, its membership drives. For example, you may have seen the PCV's street posters that say: "Pay your dues and attend meetings." That is the quintessence of sectarianism. To whom is this message directed? What do 99 per cent of Venezuelans care about it? This message is directed only to Communists, perhaps about 3,000 persons, and not all of them are interested. Instead of plastering the streets with posters, a mimeographed bulletin could be sent around for members to pay their dues and attend their cell meetings. But, no. The sectarian spirit believes that the Party's internal problems are those of the country, projecting upon the country questions in which it has no interest, since the Party is the axis of its existence, the alpha and omega of the world. A Communist Party can discuss, as we did for two years, whether or not Leninist principles exist, without realizing that Lenin wrote about organization 70 years ago to solve an immediate problem of his, and was not outlining eternal dogmas for all Communist Parties in all parts of the world. Lenin was writing of his own Bolshevik party there, in Czarist Russia, but these writings over party organization became dogmas of faith, which if challenged lead to some incredible discussions. If anyone in the Party says, "*Caramba*, it seems to me that the cell is not necessarily the only form of Party organization for us," an old Communist might say. "This one is a heretic! He is violating the Leninist norms of organization!" As if to say in the Church that the Virgin Mary did not remain a virgin after giving birth. The Party became a Kafkian universe through the Stalinist process that transformed it from an instrument of revolution to an end in itself.

II

My twin brothers were a year younger than myself, and were *morocho*s [identical twins]. The *morocho*s were a unit unto themselves, and as it often happens with twins, were naughty as children, problem-ridden as adolescents, and fighters and brawlers as adults. Since my character was different from theirs, though our relationship as brothers was normal, it was evident that between themselves there was a greater closeness than what they could have with me. I had no influence over them, since I was only a year older. They were very stormy personalities, great fighters, who drank and fought in a very plebeian way, and whose friendships were all with simple, common people. Also, both of them had a physical gift, a heavy fist like Cassius Clay's. They liked to fight because they generally won, and besides this they had a crazy valor. Mirko was killed precisely because of this incredible nerve.

Luben was introverted and quiet, in the sense that he was not a showy person. Mirko was exactly the opposite. He was a *gallo*, a fighting cock. While Luben was a monogamous man — and still is — who married and never had affairs. Mirko was handsome and a woman-chaser besides. The girls liked him and he used this. People always said when they walked down the street together, Mirko talking and Luben quiet: "There goes Luben, thinking up bad tricks for Mirko to do." In fact, both of them did play tricks, but let that be. The two of them were workers in papa's printing shop, and, characteristically, Luben was a typographer while Mirko, the extrovert, was the salesman who called on clients.

The death of Mirko happened in this way. There was a time when they both had very good friends in Guarenas, a town about 20 miles from Caracas. They went to Guarenas every night, almost lived there, since all their friends were there. The *morocho*s had several fights with the police in Guarenas. Once there was a great brawl which required seven policemen to make an arrest. When the prefect of Guarenas arrived on the scene, the two of them simply began to leave. The prefect pointed his revolver at Mirko, but Mirko just turned around — that was his incredible nerve! — cursed a few times and walked away, while the prefect emptied his revolver but did not hit him. From that time on the police of Guarenas had a special grudge against the *morocho*s, so much so that people said — and I do not know if this is true — that the prefect had given orders that Mirko should be killed at the first opportunity. Mirko got involved with a girl from Guarenas who was very moral, and so serious that Mirko became serious too. He stopped drinking, went to Guarenas to see his girl, and nothing more.

One Saturday night, on July 11, 1956, Luben was in a bar called El Tamarindo at the entrance to Guarenas, where there was a little bit of drinking, shouting, and fighting. Around 11 P. M. Mirko arrived, completely sober, after visiting his girl, to take Luben home in his car. As the two of them were leaving the bar, a policeman who was there all the time got up, took out his revolver, pointed it at Luben and said: "You can't leave. You're under arrest." Luben was completely drunk, but Mirko, very sober, just said "Bah!" and continued helping Luben toward his car. The policeman followed behind and when the two had gotten into the car, the policeman said: "Don't move the car!" Mirko looked at the policeman and turned the switch. The cop went to the driver's window and repeated: "Don't move the car!" But Mirko shifted the car into first and the policeman emptied his revolver into Mirko's body, crossing him with six bullets. The last bullet pierced Mirko's body and hit Luben, but that was a superficial wound. Mirko did not die at once. They took him to the Guarenas Hospital, and then to the Medical Center in Caracas. Mirko was conscious in the ambulance, and told Luben that he was going to die. I do not know what else happened in that ambulance, since Luben had never spoken of this.

The death of Mirko affected Luben terribly. Of course, it affected me and my parents, especially my mother, but Luben was like a zombie for a long time thereafter. It unhinged him completely. For one thing, he should have been the dead one. Luben was drinking in the bar, and Mirko had only come to take him home, so Luben was left with a terrible feeling of guilt for a long time. Mirko had died for nothing. Then there was the special thing between twins. Luben lived for a long time as if he had lost part of himself, that half of his body was missing. He still worked in papa's printing shop, but he continued to look like a sleepwalker. He went back and forth between the printing shop and the house; he didn't drink; he didn't do anything. Then toward the end of 1957 — that was toward the end of the Pérez dictatorship, when I was involved in the insurrection and was in hiding — Luben began to visit me in my little apartment in the Colinas de Bello Monte where I lived with my first wife and two little girls. He came to outhouse and just sat without saying anything and watched me come and go with mimeographed propaganda and other things. At that time I was *enconchado* (literally, "in a shell," in hiding) completely dedicated to clandestine activity, and never visited my family. One day I came into the apartment with a clandestine radio that we were going to set up in a car, and Luben, who is a skilled mechanic with both cars and machines, said: "Do you want me to help you?" I said, "Of course." So we went downstairs to the car and he installed the radio. Then Luben asked me: "Do you want me to drive the car for you?" Since I had no objection, we went out in the car. Later he went out with a comrade and a radio for clandestine retransmission of propaganda against Perez Jimenez. Another time we needed a car to get some dynamite, and Luben said: "I'll get the car." You know that boys here in a certain period used to steal cars to learn how to drive; they were very good at getting cars this way. Later we needed a car to send orders for a strike to a comrade in the state of Anzoátegui in eastern Venezuela. Luben said, "I'll take the message." He got a big car, a Chrysler, and took the message to Anzoátegui. When he was coming back to Caracas, he did a characteristic thing. There was a curfew, and the chain was up at a police checkpoint at the entrance to Caracas. When Luben approached, the policeman did not lower the chain, so Luben accelerated instead of slowing down and took the chain with him. By that time he was closely connected with me in our clandestine activity.

At the time of the general strike of January 21, 1958, which overthrew the dictatorship, I was deeply involved in organizing the workers in the *barrio* of Los Cortijos for the street agitation, speaking at factory gates, and being chased by the police. On January 21 there was the great people's demonstration in the Plaza of Silencio, and Luben and I went to see what happened. There was fighting in the streets all that day. We had no arms in those times, but we burned buses in the streets, and turned them into barricades. We stopped a fire engine, and when the police came the firemen said nothing, so the police fired a few shots and went away. Perez Jimenez tied in an airplane to the Dominican Republic at 3 A.M. on January 23, 1958, and the legal political life of the PCV began again.

After the fall of Perez Jimenez, I immediately began the organizational work of the Party in the eastern part of Caracas, in Chacao, and Petare. At a political meeting in the plaza of Petare, I spoke in public for the first time in my life. An intense round of rallies, meetings, and conversations began in the *barrios* and in the plazas. Luben was always at the fringe of this activity. Then one day Luben asked me: "Why don't you get me into the Party?" I agreed of course, with pleasure. Luben became very deeply involved, with an immense passion that never subsided. On the contrary, it has been purified with time; Luben has changed greatly since then. Until he joined the Party, if Luben had read one book in his whole life it was a great deal. Neither of the *morochos* had any political concern of any kind until Mirko died and Luben joined the Party; their life had been brawling, drinking, and working. Both of them had dropped out of high school, Luben in the second year and Mirko in the fifth. Anyway, with this immense passion, with a great sense of responsibility toward time, punctuality, and the handling of money, Luben became a key man in the Party in eastern Caracas. Thanks to Luben, we even had a printing press — for a local PCV committee to have a printing press was quite an undertaking — with Luben as our typographer. We had a Heidelberg machine, completely paid for, because in the first six months Luben worked 18 hours daily without a salary. When the armed struggle and guerrilla insurrection began against the Betancourt regime around 1961, Luben plunged into this with all his heart. He was physically well-equipped for the *lucha armada* [armed struggle] because of his strength, his crazy valor, and his incredible temerity. Moreover, Luben was also a very good shot, liked to handle firearms, and has always enjoyed the outdoor life of the forests and mountains, while I am not very fond of the wilderness. Luben is very skillful in the jungle, and can survive with just a few matches. But more importantly he began to read and this transformed his character. He began to polish himself, so today he is a profoundly thoughtful man. Luben was in the mountains as a guerrilla for five or six years of incessant combat where he had many clashes and battles with the army. This epic is still largely unknown even today, because the Interior Ministry had the shrewdness to silence all publicity of the guerrillas, to forbid even the name of the FALN [*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional*] to be in the newspapers. Luben has several bullet wounds in his body and a finger missing from these battles.

III

In 1958 the Party made a very serious error in supporting the provisional junta that replaced Perez Jimenez, and in not pushing for immediate revolutionary transformations. The provisional junta contained representatives of the Venezuelan oligarchy, like Eugenio Mendoza, even though it was the people who had overthrown Perez Jimenez in the streets. We of the PCV had contributed in a very important way to the dictator's fall. It was our clandestine printing press and radios that in a large measure generated the propaganda against the dictatorship, and our underground organization that planned and mobilized the street demonstrations and the general strike which toppled the regime. At the plenary meeting of the PCV Central Committee in April 1958, mine was the only dissenting voice, and after that I did not raise the question again. I argued at the time that, while the overthrow of Pérez Jimenez was a very important achievement, the key levers of government power continued to be in the hands of the oligarchy, that it was obvious that the provisional junta and its Cabinet Ministers were oligarchs and that the state continued being oligarchic and imperialistic. Since the relative freedom and democracy of the time was a conquest of the masses and not a government concession, we should use that democratic opening for a revolutionary formulation to supersede the junta and not to defend it unconditionally. In the elections of December 1958, the PCV obtained 71,000 votes in Caracas, and was the second strongest party in the city. Since the Communist Party had built an important mass following in 1958 with a mistaken policy, imagine what it might have done with a correct policy! If the PCV had acted like a revolutionary agent instead of like firemen to dampen and control social conflicts, one wonders what could have been achieved with the support of the masses in Caracas — the kind of people who could decide any uprising. Just as the Russian Revolution was decided in Petrograd and not in all of Russia, our revolution was to be carried out in Caracas. If we of the PCV had carried out, beginning with the visit of Vice

President Nixon in April 1958 and the street demonstrations it provoked, a new policy of agitating and aggravating the disappointments and contradictions generated by the provisional junta instead of always propping it up, things might have been very different. With the presence of Eugenio Mendoza and the rest of the oligarchy in the government, there were more than enough political and social motives for mobilizing the masses against the government, although the provisional junta enjoyed considerable popular support. The PCV should have constantly pointed out the real nature and contradictions of the junta. On September 7, 1958, there was a bloody uprising of the military police at the Miraflores Palace [the presidential office complex], and the revolt was crushed when a large crowd of civilians took the police barracks by assault. At that time an historian named Germán Carrera Damas, who belonged to the PCV, wrote an article about the people's assault on the police barracks at Miraflores which indicated that the people had seized one of the bastions of power. Though it was a general account of newspaper analysis, it carried this symbolic phrase. Several high government officials telephoned Party headquarters to protest the article, because they felt that popular sentiment was at a boiling point. Yet the Party leadership was incapable of seeing this. At the PCV plenary meeting in April 1958, my arguments for a more aggressive Party policy were buried under denunciations that I was bookish and sectarian. One Party leader picked up a copy of *Tribuna Popular* and showed that it was filled with government ads, so how could this be an oligarchic, imperialistic government?

In 1958, the PCV lost the opportunity to develop a revolutionary policy for the conquest of power, but two years later it reversed itself and began preparing for the *lucha armada*. One of the key men in this discussion was Guillermo Garcia Ponce. Apart from what might be said about his autocratic character and his impermeability to new ideas (though this should not be exaggerated), Guillermo is a man of audacity and great political grasp. Instead of yielding to the reflexes of the traditional Latin American Communists, Guillermo showed valor in the development of a revolutionary policy. Certain personal disagreements with some comrades of the old Party leadership made him assume recently some extreme positions, like his dogged defense of the Soviet Union, in which he himself may not have fully believed in the weeks before the division of the PCV. For example, I have often heard Guillermo say things that could fully explain his presence in the MAS, instead of leading the group that pressured for our departure from the PCV. During the *lucha armada* he expressed his admiration of the Chinese and Mao Tse-Tung, to the degree that when he ran *Tribuna Popular* he refused to print attacks against the Chinese. When we worked together on the old *Tribuna Popular*, he used to say over drinks: "You guys know that I'm pro-Chinese, but if the defense and the strategic interests of the world revolution dictate that Soviet tanks go into China, I will be on those tanks." This is because he is a very pragmatic man, although he has been mistaken at times, too.

As I said, the PCV was a strange Party. Despite these internal discussions and discrepancies, we could carry out the *lucha armada*, and during the insurrection we could intensely debate strategy and tactics among ourselves. The PCV did not have a Stalinist stamp — few of the Party leaders had ever even been to the Soviet Union — and there was a great deal of tolerance of internal discussion. I remember that at a Central Committee meeting in December 1962, I expressed the opinion that the bloody naval insurrections in Cartipano and Puerto Cabello were irresponsible adventures, and the *lucha armada* was being implemented with grave excesses of militarism, anarchism, and terrorism. Yet I do not think that disagreement ever affected our personal relations. Although I sometimes disagreed with and criticized Party policy, nobody thought of censoring me, because the PCV had the internal liberty to hold and discuss different opinions, as long as these disagreements were not made public. This made the PCV very different from the Argentine and French Communist Parties.

The *lucha armada* as such started toward the end of 1961. At the time I was a deputy to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Miranda, a substitute deputy for the PCV to its National Congress, and even attended some sessions of Congress, especially when the government tried to strip me of my parliamentary immunity and make me stand trial. During

1960 and 1961, when I nearly was at the point of graduating from the Economics Faculty, the Communist Youth asked me to stand as their candidate for the Presidency of the Economics Faculty. We won the election, and that was the first victory of the Communist Youth over the youth of Acción Democrática, the country's most powerful youth movement. These were the years of hope and expansion when the university fought very openly against the Betancourt regime. In 1960 we staged a massive street march from the Central University to the capitol, with thousands and thousands of persons. As I spoke in front of the Congress building, a band of Acción Democrática thugs attacked the demonstration and started a series of street brawls, a customary event in those years, that spread throughout Caracas. These insurrectional outbreaks were really very spontaneous. In return our boys burned the truck which carried the armed attackers, beginning the October 1960 street fighting that lasted four or five days. In November another series of street riots began, but they were still combats with stones and Molotov cocktails against the police, because at that point we had no arms. As a result of these street uprisings, the government tried to strip Gustavo Machado, Domingo Alberto Rangel and myself of our parliamentary immunity. The Congressional Committee studied the matter and decided there were no grounds to try Machado and Rangel, but there was evidence against me. It seems that before the events of October 1961, in what was known as the Battle of the University, when the Simón Bolívar Battalion of the army took over the university in response to armed student resistance, the government wiretapped some telephone conversations in which I gave certain instructions about the transfer of arms. With this evidence and after a long parliamentary debate, I lost my immunity, but no detention order was issued against me. At that time a transportation strike began in the Andean state of Táchira which caused uprisings throughout Venezuela and within a few days paralyzed the whole country. On the first day of riots in Caracas there were some 18 dead. That was the only moment in which we were close to setting off a much greater insurrectional process. The only thing missing was the participation of a part of the army in the revolt.

This section of the armed forces existed and was ready to join in the revolt, but subsequently it lost strength through the wasted naval uprisings in Canipano and Puerto Cabello and in isolated arrests. But by January 1962, the strength of the left in the armed forces was largely intact in La Guaira, Caúpano, Puerto Cabello, and Caracas, and we were above all in good shape because of the kind of units commanded by leftist officers. We had groups in Caracas, the marine infantry in La Guaira, and the bases of Carúpano and Puerto Cabello. If at that moment (January 1962) a military revolt would have occurred, the fate of the country might have been different. Then these units could have revolted, but they did not. We did everything we could to induce these military bases to revolt in January 1962. Just when the street fighting began, the marine infantry battalion in La Guaira was to have revolted, according to a previously established plan. By that time I was part of the Party's military command. Four of us from this command drove down to the port of La Guaira to convince the officers to carry out the revolt we had discussed so many times, but they said that for various reasons it was not possible yet. At the end of that week, we did a crazy, desperate thing. We tried to get the La Guaira base to revolt over the commander's head, by trying to get the lieutenants to rebel. We sent a few hundred of our boys down from Caracas to wait for arms near the base once the revolt began. But that didn't work. The guards at the base noticed some strange activity in the street outside, so they arrested 200 of our men as they waited for the uprising. The episode was never reported. It was important because it was the right moment for a military insurrection, in the middle of a revolutionary strike which was paralyzing the country. The rebellion of La Guaira would have spread through the armed forces. A few months later the Carúpano and Puerto Cabello revolts occurred, but they were ill-timed and too late. In the midst of these events a judge issued the order for my arrest that was pending since my parliamentary immunity was removed, so in January 1962, I went underground. I was the only PCV leader living clandestinely, because the Party was still legal. In April 1962 Douglas Bravo and I went to the mountains of Falcón to organize Venezuela's first rural guerrilla group.

IV

The rural guerrillas in Venezuela were an extension of the urban insurrection. Because the guerrillas were begun by students and a few workers from Caracas, these 'guerrilla *focos*' were able to attract large numbers of peasants. Although I no longer believe that the rural guerrillas are a viable form of revolutionary struggle in our country, which is so heavily urbanized, it is worth noting that in the state of Lara at one time we had some 300 armed *guerrilleros* and in Falcón there were 150 men under Douglas Bravo. Between 80 and 90 per cent of these men were *campesinos*. I got to know the guerrillas of the states of Lara and Trujillo very well. In Trujillo, where my brother Luben was fighting, the guerrillas were composed mainly of peasants from the mountains of Boconó, and in Lara as well the guerrillas were mainly peasants and only the organizers came from the city. In Lara and Trujillo especially, peasant support for the guerrillas was considerable in terms of logistics, transport, and hiding places.

The guerrillas in Falcón were organized in the theater of an old hillbilly feud between the Bravo and Hernandez clans in those mountains. Douglas Bravo was wrongly considered a kind of coward, because Douglas' father was murdered by a member of the Hernandez clan, and in the best mountain tradition he should have killed a Hernandez in revenge. Douglas was interested in other things, in politics, so he left for Caracas for another kind of life. He later recovered his prestige in Falcón when he became a *guerrillero*. In the sierra of Falcón we were able to build our guerrilla base with the help of an old landowning family who had its own entourage of serfs, squatters, and retainers. Our first point of arrival was a mountainous zone north of Pueblo Nuevo, a town of the Bravo clan, near one of their *haciendas* called Los Evangelios. We were able to use the Bravos' *campesinos*, who work the land. In Falcón, we established the guerrillas on the basis of this kind of family-political relationships. For example, there was one man whom they killed recently in a typical Falcón feud. He was a kind of professional killer, who was very brave and a good shot, who joined the guerrillas and later left and underwent an incredible conversion. He became an evangelist, a pastor of souls, a super-peaceful man who was shot in the back recently in one of those old revenges. He had joined the guerrillas because he was a friend of the Bravos, and because of the traditional rebelliousness of the sierra.

Douglas Bravo and I had organized the PCV's first embryonic armed groups in Caracas in the final stage of the struggle against Pérez Jimenez. However, we had a very romantic and foolish notion of guerrilla warfare, a Cuban vision of quick and easy victory, and in this sense the construction of the first guerrilla nuclei was very bad. In the years before the *lucha armada* we sent many boys into the countryside to train themselves by living like *campesinos*, but this did not yield very good results. It was no coincidence that the only guerrilla group that survived the first assaults by the army was that of Falcón, because there we had a very strict policy in selecting personnel. Once we sent back a whole detachment of 25 boys who had come from Caracas to join the guerrillas, because we saw in their faces that they were no good for fighting. Other guerrilla groups had a policy of accepting anyone who came along. They found out that the real thing was very different from their fantasies of the Cuban Revolution. They did not know that the Venezuelan jungle was brutal. The guerrillas had the crazy notion that the army would not come up into the mountains where we were. We found out that the army went as far as the guerrillas went and farther, too. The first guerrilla bands were liquidated by the army with little effort. In those first months, when we had a nucleus of about 20 men in Falcón, we were completely unconnected to the *campesinos* of the zone. We stayed in the mountains and kept ourselves hidden in fear that the *campesinos* would see us. The only peasants we dealt with were the *peons* from the Bravo *haciendas*. But our tactics changed after our first failure in 1962.

In 1961, another comrade and I had been in Falcón to make contact with Domingo Urbina, who had escaped from the Model Prison in Caracas while serving time for participating in the murder of Provisional President Carlos Delgado Chalbaud in 1950. In jail Urbina shifted toward a leftist ideology and when he escaped he let us know that he was a revolutionary. We went to look for him, and found him hiding in a cave in the mountains

of Falcón, and he agreed to join our insurrection. The Urbinas are a traditional Falcón family. Although Domingo Urbina left the countryside a few months after joining the guerrillas, he had stupendous family relations throughout the zone, which was a great advantage. Since the Falcón guerrillas were led by men from the zone, they were able to create a strong network of logistical support of people who were motivated, at least initially, by kinship rather than politics. Apart from Douglas Bravo and Domingo Urbina, there was a third comrade, a PCV lawyer from Caracas named Hipólito Acosta, whose family has a small *hacienda* near the town of Curimagua in the sierra of Falcón. Then there was Captain Elías Manuit, who was stationed at the army base in Táchira when the Carúpano revolt occurred. He was a young, emotional, romantic man, a composer of songs and poems, yet very tough. At the time of the Carrúpano uprising, he deserted his army post in Táchira and walked into the Party headquarters in Caracas carrying two machine guns, saying, “I resigned from the army. I want to go to a guerrilla camp. You never told me anything about this revolt!” There was no way of talking him out of this, so they sent him to Falcón, and he arrived while I was still there. I was in Falcón for only three months, since it was just the beginning of guerrilla operations, and the army had destroyed all the guerrilla *focos* — in the states of Falcón, Lara, Yaracuy, and Merida — the only survivors of our group were seven combatants in Falcón. With these seven men we rebuilt the guerrillas much more carefully and systematically. After the period in Falcón with Douglas Bravo, I returned to Caracas.

From the middle of 1962 until I was captured on March 19, 1963, I formed part of the PCV military section. While the rural guerrillas fought more or less along the same lines as rural guerrillas in other parts of the world, the urban commando operations carried out by the FALN in Caracas contained elements of extreme originality, unlike anything done before in Venezuela or the rest of Latin America. These commando actions had attracted so much attention internationally that some of our comrades, while traveling abroad, were pressed by the Vietnamese revolutionaries into dictating in great detail explanations of how we planned and executed such operations as the kidnapping of the Argentine-Spanish soccer star De Stéfano, the hijacking of the steamer Anzoátegui, the stealing and our voluntary return of an entire exhibition of French impressionist paintings in Caracas, and the kidnapping of the United States military attaché. The first political hijacking of airplanes was carried out here in Venezuela in November 1961, when our boys made the plane fly over Caracas to drop leaflets. It flew low over the city a few times, causing a great sensation, entering the narrow valley from the west and skimming the rooftops of apartment buildings, then it flew back from the east to repeat the same trick. Because we didn’t want to identify ourselves too closely with the Cubans in the public’s eyes, the plan landed in Curaçao. However, we didn’t expect the Dutch authorities there to hand our people over to the Venezuelan government, who put them in jail for five years. After that, the MIR hijacked a plane in Ciudad Bolívar and took it to Trinidad. This kind of spectacular action initially gave the FALN the kind of popularity enjoyed now by the Tupamaros in Uruguay. They were actions conceived for their political impact, that caused no bloodshed but made the government and police look ridiculous. In the years that followed the Tupamaros developed this type of action with a high degree of skill and inventiveness, while we regressed into operations that were politically counterproductive for their excesses of terrorism.

In those years there were no texts or manuals on how to conduct an urban guerrilla insurrection. We were all very romantic about this, and I remember that many of us read Leon Uris’s *Exodus* and became very enthusiastic about the kind of commando actions described in the book. Apart from this, the only kind of books we read were the same ones available to the Venezuelan military: United States Army texts on repression, operations against snipers, etc. We had a relatively small vanguard to carry out these audacious, spectacular actions. The FALN had slightly more than 500 men divided into five brigades — three controlled by the PCV and two by the MIR — each of which had a logistical support organization of between 300 and 400 persons. The 100-man brigades in turn were divided into platoons of five or six men called UTC *II Unidad Tc!ctica de Combate*. At first they were called *Unidad Tdctica de Cooperacki’n* because they were conceived as support units for the rural guerrillas, as we first thought the rural guerrillas were the most important battlefield for us, since we were intoxicated with the propaganda and the triumph of the

Cuban Revolution. But events themselves transformed the city into the main fighting front. Caracas was like an echo chamber, and a firecracker exploding on a downtown street corner had more political impact than a pitched battle between the guerrillas and the army in the mountains of Fal5n. This is speaking in strictly military terms, without taking into account the demographic composition of Venezuela, which had been transformed from a country with 65 per cent rural population in 1936 to roughly 77 per cent urban population today. Therefore, the knots of political tension and social contradiction are in the cities and not the countryside. Thus, a small vanguard of .500 men could sustain itself for two years in Caracas because it found substantial support in the city's population.

These commando actions had to be very carefully prepared, and each brigade maintained a program file of pending actions to be carried out. One of the most notable of these was the capture of the United States military mission's headquarters in the rich country club area. If you remember, the international press circulated a photograph later of an American colonel in his underwear, and we had also pulled down the United States flag and raised the Venezuelan flag in front of his house. This action was planned slowly and in great detail. Our commandos regularly went to the house as mango-pickers to check out the schedule of police protection, and our girls flirted with the Venezuelan military policemen outside the building. On several occasions the military police let our men enter the house to use the bathroom. When we raided the place, one commando came in dressed as a Venezuelan army lieutenant. The military police saluted before he said: "Stick up your hands." When our people entered the building, all the American officers were together at supper, which made things very easy.

However, another form of urban combat was much more important than the commando actions; the battles of the people from the poor *barrios* of Caracas against the police. In Caracas the *lucha armada* enjoyed considerable support from these poor masses who lived in the hillside *barrios* with names like: Lidice, Gato Negro [Black Cat], Manicomio [Insane Asylum] to the great government housing projects called Pro-Patria and the 23 de Enero, with their 15-story blocks of workers' flats. A city like Caracas has an excellent topography for urban combat. Its poor *barrios* are full of hills, and their streets and alleys are extremely complicated. The armed urban action developed a fairly common pattern. A small command of the FALN either arrived in the *barrio* or was organized there. It put up barricades and began fighting the police. However, this was not an isolated action but one which effectively incorporated the *barrio* population. Though perhaps a banal example, at times some 50 or 60 persons would stand in line on the roof of the 23 de Enero housing project, waiting their turn to fire a rifle [one shot each] at the army barracks that stood across the road. The army would respond by spraying these apartment blocks with machine gun fire, so for safety people slept on the floor of their apartments. You can still see the bullet marks in the apartment buildings. When the Pérez Jimenez dictatorship fell, these had just been completed and were ready for occupancy. The buildings were invaded and the apartments seized by the *rancho* shack dwellers from the surrounding hills. The PCV did very effective political work among these people, and they were very hostile to the Betancourt regime. The sniping and Street fighting continued around these apartment blocks until, in October 1960, the army had to occupy the housing projects and search the buildings house by house.

Another example of this kind of street action is when we captured a truck from CADA [the Rockefeller supermarket chain I and took it to a Poor *barrio* In the middle of the *barrio* we opened the truck and with a megaphone announced to the Whole *barrio* that the truck had been expropriated by the FALN, and all its groceries would be distributed free to the people. Of course someone called the police, while the truck was being sacked in a matter of minutes, and just as the people were finishing with the truck the police came and the combat began. In the *barrios* of Lidice, for example, this kind of skirmishing with the police could last for three days. The guerrillas, without many arms or men, held skirmishes of extreme mobility, not of positions. They would take a position briefly on one street corner, and then would switch suddenly to another, which is precisely the principle of guerrilla warfare. In this way a single man who fired his weapon, then moved swiftly and fired from another point could paralyze an entire *barrio*. The idea was not for him to win battles with the

police, but to form part of the insurrectional complex of the city. In this the participation of the masses was absolutely essential, and it came in this way: when our combatants were withdrawing from the police, they found all doors open. A housewife would appear at her door and say, "Take a glass of water." Or "I'll keep your weapons." Or "Hide in here." Or "You can escape that way." Usually, the urban guerrillas would escape from the police, but their arms would remain hidden inside the *barrio*. The motives for the popular support we had in those years were very complex, but they were based upon an immense hatred for Betancourt and *Acción Democrática*. The whole city had voted overwhelmingly against them in the 1958 elections. Then there was an instinctive rejection of the police. These were much stronger motives than anything consciously revolutionary, just a vague sympathy for the FALN as people with an image of great valor and physical courage who were fighting the government.

This kind of popular euphoria was typical of insurrectional periods, but by 1964 and 1965 we began to find that our urban combat groups were provoking rejection instead of solidarity from the population. While before many would stand in line to fire a rifle, now they were hostile to these urban combats because of the police reaction they generated. After the guerrilla combatants fled the *barrio*, the police would come and crack down on everyone. Sometimes *Lídice* was closed for three or four days while the police made a house-to-house search for arms. After the elections of 1963, when the insurrection was nearly defeated, this sensation of political defeat was reflected in the masses where there had been enthusiasm and collaboration before. The general strike we called for November 19, 1963, ten days before the elections, was the swan song of the FALN. We announced a strike to block the general elections, and we were able to paralyze the city. We paralyzed the city in an absurd way, with bullets. That day nobody moved in Caracas. Régis Debray was in Venezuela at the time, and he said that not even in Algeria had he seen anything like it. There were snipers throughout the city. There was no traffic, no one worked, and afterwards there were 34 people dead in fighting throughout the city. One leftist politician said that the elections were ruined, but what was actually ruined was the FALN. We had no munitions left for Election Day, so our promise to stop the elections could not be fulfilled.

The 1963 elections intensified the debate within the Party over how the *lucha armada* was being conducted. In 1962 and 1963 I made a number of criticisms that the military leadership of the *lucha armada* had placed itself above our general political interests and had become independent of the Party leadership. It acted on its own and militarized the Party, in the sense that it was impossible to carry out political discussion and evaluation. It had created the so-called FALN style of a report in three minutes and no discussion. A revolutionary cause after all cannot be run like an army. The militarization of the revolutionary organization generated a contempt for political considerations. In a war being fought under such unfavorable political conditions, one cannot carry out operations, which might damage the revolution in the eyes of the people. Absurd deformities in our actions awakened hatred in the population toward us. For example, the fire in the Good Year tire factory, in the middle of a densely populated zone, terrified the people with the burning of highly combustible material and gave an impression of great irresponsibility. The military leadership of the FALN didn't understand that a struggle like this is above all political, and in this the Tupamaros of Uruguay have shown great lucidity. They have adapted their military action to the political conditions of Uruguay and the peculiarities of the Uruguayan people. For this reason, the Tupamaros have killed very few people, because in Uruguay there is no tradition of violence, while in Venezuela too much blood was spilled because the terrorist conception of the *lucha armada* prevailed. During the period some policemen were killed in cold blood. I wrote and fought against the murders, saying that only cowards act in this way. Certainly, the police were hated, but when a man is shot in the back people react against you out of their sense of fairness. The government used the killings as a very effective propaganda vein, by presenting the death of every policeman as a cold-blooded murder and in this way the government created a black legend about the guerrillas.

This kind of error was due to the nebulous political vision of the FALN leadership, and its lack of clarity in seeking a synchronization between military action and the political

objective being pursued. The leaders always answered these criticisms by insisting that “war is war and it is impossible to have a clinically pure war.” But they didn’t understand that this was not a civil war like in Vietnam, but a series of more or less isolated armed actions designed to contribute to revolutionary policy, to discredit the government, to show the government’s impotence while developing an image of the revolution’s strength. It was necessary to adjust our military actions to the political situation in Venezuela at the time, when the dictatorship of Pérez Jimenez had just been overthrown and a new democratic regime installed which still inspired considerable hope in many people. However, in dealing with this problem the FALN’s politico-military leadership showed an incredible mediocrity. With a vague idea of overthrowing Betancourt, we pursued urban commando operations and street combats, supported the rural guerrillas, and tried to stimulate military uprisings. The whole movement, intoxicated by the revolutionary victory in Cuba, expected quick and easy victory here. When we began to speak of prolonged warfare it was already too late; it was already 1964, and the attempt to stop the 1963 elections had failed and our popular support had declined badly.

V

After leaving the Falcón guerrillas to report to the Central Committee in July 1962, I stayed underground in Caracas until March 19, 1963, when they arrested me in the suburb of Baruta. One of my legs was in a cast due to a cut tendon, and we had left our hiding place without arms. After Argimiro Gabaldón the guerrilla chieftain in Lara — my wife and I drove away from the soda fountain where we made a contacts a DIGEPOL car stopped us and two policemen got out with their revolvers drawn. I said to Argimiro, “this is what happens when we go unarmed.” They arrested us without knowing who we were, only because we were together, and took us to DIGEPOL headquarters. I arrived first, since I was taken in the police car and Argimiro and my wife went behind in our car. But Argimiro escaped on the way. He nodded to my wife, she suddenly stepped on the brakes, and Argimiro opened his door and rolled down a ravine and escaped. The police fired a few shots, but missed him. Meanwhile, when I had arrived at the DIGEPOL headquarters with a false identity card and my hair dyed, they began preparing a file under the name on the false identity card until about 20 minutes later when one of the other DIGEPOL agents arrived, foaming at the mouth, and announced that Argimiro had escaped. Then another one looked at me carefully and said, “This guy is Teodoro Petkoff!” After that DIGEPOL agents began to come in from several doors. There was a great rush in the room, and the cop who arrested me began to jump up and down and shout: “Now I get a promotion! Now I get a promotion!”

They held me at DIGEPOL headquarters for 40 days, and then they transferred me to the San Carlos army barracks. I began to think of escaping, because that year no time could be wasted. The revolution in those days was a kind of personal adventure, with an air of romanticism about it. We lived the *lucha armada* very intensely and to be in jail was a terrible thing, so the problem was to get out immediately and return to action. San Carlos was an escape-proof fortress, and always had been, so my chance to escape was, practically speaking, how I could get myself into the Military Hospital. Now getting into the Military Hospital was very difficult, since they would only transfer me there for a very serious illness. So I conceived a plan. The prison ward of the Military Hospital was on the seventh floor, which is the only floor of the hospital that has guards and prison bars, since sick Political prisoners are kept there. Little by little I sent to the prison ward of the Military Hospital 40 meters of nylon cord, screw drivers, files, and a drill. A friend of mine was a patient there, the son of the governor of Falcón, who was later killed as a guerrilla. My wife carried these things to him in a pack strapped to her belly, to make her look pregnant. She entered the hospital with nylon cord and tools and left with a pillow strapped to herself. She made two trips there before I was taken to the Military Hospital, because everything had to be prepared in advance. I knew they would let me stay in the hospital for only a day or two at the most.

To force my transfer to the Military Hospital, I faked a gastric ulcer. I started going to the doctor and telling him about stomach pains. I said I had had an ulcer for the past five years. I began faking pains, and on August 27 — the day they brought us the electoral rolls for us to register as voters — I threw myself to the ground coming from the visitors' room to the prison patio, complaining of a great agony in the stomach. The sergeant came over and asked: "What's wrong?" I said my stomach hurts here. We entered the prison cell and I drank a pint of blood that my wife had given me on one of her intimate visits. She had carried a carton with a pint of blood under her clothes. When I drank the blood, I expected I would vomit immediately, but I couldn't. I tried hard to vomit but nothing happened. So I told a comrade to put his finger in my mouth, and finally a mouthful of blood burst forth spectacularly and I tossed about in the bed howling with pain. Vomiting blood is a very impressive thing, and when I started to scream, the other prisoners — except for two or three comrades — began to bang on the prison bars and scream, "This man is dying! He's dying!" The guard came, and then the sergeant. They saw me agonizing on my cot; they brought the stretcher, and carried me to the infirmary in the army barracks. The doctor began to examine me and then said, "Nothing's wrong with this man. He's faking. Let's give him some novocaine to take away his pain if it really exists." I said to myself that if I don't vomit now the whole plan will go to hell. There was nobody to put his finger in my mouth, so through my own will power and concentration

— I don't know how else — I threw up blood and pieces of food. I tried to fall on the doctor, and of course he jumped back terrified. The doctor immediately picked up the telephone and called the ambulance. They put me back into the stretcher again, while I, of course, faked agony as if my life depended on it. They carried me to the ambulance and, when they wanted to handcuff me, the doctor protested: "How can you put handcuffs on a dying man?" The subcommandant of the army barracks personally drove the ambulance.

They took me to the Military Hospital at 6 P. M. I thought that by 7 P. M. I would be in the prison ward on the seventh floor, and by 8 P. M. I would escape, since at 9 P. M. guards were posted each night in the hospital gardens. The nylon cord and the files were already there, but when I arrived at 6 P. M. a fight began between the hospital doctors and the commandant of San Carlos, who wanted them to give me a few pills and send me back to jail. I waited downstairs in the emergency ward, while every few minutes the telephone rang, and every time the phone rang I faked my agonies, and tried to vomit. This fight between the doctors and the commandant lasted until midnight, when the doctors told the commandant that they would sign a formal statement that he, not they, would be responsible for what happened to me if I were returned to the hospital. So the commandant finally gave in, and said I could stay in the hospital two days. Then I had an incredible stroke of luck. The doctor who had advised me on how to fake a hemorrhage had told me that it was the hematocrit index — the relationship between blood and water — that proves whether a hemorrhage has actually occurred, and blood has been lost. My doctor-friend told me to drink water, but he gave me the wrong advice. I drank lots of water, but what I should have done is drink none at all, so my index was normal. However, when they gave me my blood test, they never bothered to read the results.

I was brought up to the prison ward at midnight, and it was impossible to carry out my escape plan that night because the hospital was surrounded by armed guards. Strangely enough, the next morning armed guards were posted all over the hospital, on every floor, in each corridor, and at every elevator entrance, with one soldier posted in the yard under the window from which I was going to descend with my nylon cord. All that day I watched him, but the soldier didn't move. I used the time, however, to look over the hospital grounds carefully. The hospital is surrounded by a fence with two gates, and a small forest of bushes and trees near the fence. My initial plan was to climb down from the seventh floor, make a dash for the trees, jump the fence, and lose myself in the surrounding *barrio*. But I saw that I could easily lose myself in that little forest, so I decided to leave by the main gate.

All that day and night I couldn't move, because the soldier stayed under my window. However, on the following morning all the other guards were there, but my soldier had

disappeared. This was to be my last day in the hospital, and the following morning they were going to take me back to jail. I had smuggled into the hospital a small vial of neobiogen, and injected myself with it to give me a little fever, to fake and stall a bit more. At 6 P. M. on the second day I began to cut the window bars. To camouflage the noise I opened all the water faucets, and my comrades played all their radios very loudly. I wore out the three files I had brought, but it turned out that another comrade had one that we borrowed. Well, cutting with these files for two hours we could only cut the upper part of one of the bars, which we pulled until we bent it open, and cut the wire screening, so we could open the window.

At 8 P.M. the nurse came in to take my temperature. I had a bit of a fever, and she commented that my pulse was very fast. Of course my heart was beating like mad because of the tension of the escape. When she went away I went to the bathroom to dress myself and shave. I had a very thick beard, and cut myself badly because I had no scissors to cut my beard before shaving. I threw some alcohol over my face and then some talcum powder, because I was bleeding badly from the cuts. Then I crawled out the window and began descending by the nylon cord from cornice to cornice. I remember that on the sixth floor there were some army officers at the windowsill. When they saw my feet dangling down in front of them, I suppose they were very surprised. When I descended in front of their window we looked at each other. So I put one finger over my mouth and said: "Sh!" They nodded, yes. Then I continued to descend by the nylon cord. Years later a comrade told me, "When you escaped there were some army officers who saw you, and one of them is a relative of mine." Afterwards, of course, they didn't say that they saw me escape. Nobody likes to be an informer, and I guess it seemed unchivalrous to them to tell on a prisoner trying to escape. Anyway, I climbed down to the ground floor and walked along a passageway until I got lost. I went up to a military policeman and said, "*Buenas noches*. Look, *chico*, get me out of here because I'm lost." The military policeman took me to the main gate, and I went out into the street where my wife was waiting in a car. It took me 12 minutes to climb down and reach the main gate, and I arrived at our hiding place a few minutes later. Not until 11 P.M. did the hospital authorities discover my escape, and only then because we called the newspapers and the newspapers called the hospital several times to check the story.

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