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Love is not imprisoned

The destiny of five men is involved in a cruel absurdity, the vengeance and impotence of those who will not tolerate a strong Cuba. Eight years in prison in the United States cannot counter the truth. With barbed wire between us comes this dialog which brings us closer to one of these heroes of the resistance. Here is Ramón Labañino, in the flesh, sent by mail. Authentic, six feet tall and more than 200 pounds and all the strength of the truth.

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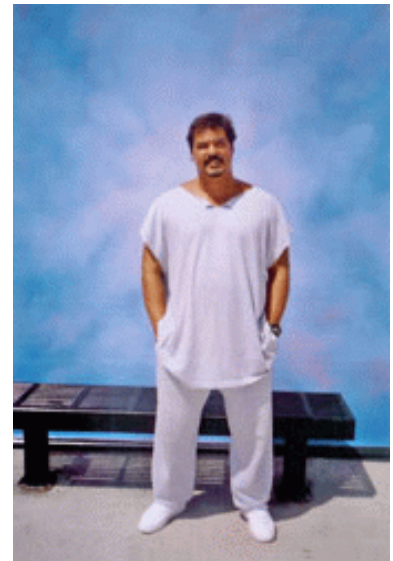
(Translation by Cindy O'Hara)

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A man like **Ramón Labañino Salazar** does not fit in the small space of a cell, nor do any of **his four brothers**. The spirit, the ideas, his individual history take on a dimension that is impossible to capture, let alone imprison. The worst thing for those who decided to confine these heroes on September 12, 1998, is that they have not succeeded in arresting the truth. That day, Ramón Labañino Salazar had achieved a part of his dreams and the first 35 years of his life. After almost a decade of punishment and legal ups and downs, this man conserves intact his desires to live and continue in the struggle.

I came to this certainty after reading these lines sent to **BOHEMIA**, reviewing his letters, conversing with his wife **Elizabeth Palmeiro Casado**, meeting his daughters, and investigating how this young man who completed his studies in economics at the University of Havana with highest honors (Diploma de Oro) has carried out various missions since then.

The answers that I received demonstrate that any place can be ideal for an interview. All that is needed is that the interviewee and the journalist agree to tell what needs to be told. For this reason, the only condition placed by Ramón when he agreed to this dialog with our readers was that the magazine postpones a second part for when he is with us. "I will be in Cuba, and soon," he wrote. And so it will be.



All photos: Courtesy of Elizabeth Palmeiro

THE INTERVIEW

-The news talks about how the regimen of the prison where you are imprisoned is particularly rigorous. How is the life of Ramón behind the barbed wire?

-U. S. P Beaumont is a maximum security prison, and like all its kind in the **United States** it houses the most violent, most dangerous, most aggressive prisoners, and so the system of imprisonment is severely strict, restrictive and intimidating.

"The cells measure approximately five by seven feet, a very small space, where they enclose us from 10:00 at night until 5:45 in the morning. On the weekends and holidays it is until 6:45. Every unit is made up of two floors of 32 cells each, in other words 64 total, for a maximum of 128 'tenants' per unit.

"On every floor there is a steel door that only the guard can open with keys. Behind this door there is a metal detector, after that another door that's opened by a central remote control from one of the five outside towers. Only then can you go out into the central yard, made up of two little

baseball fields, which is all surrounded by tall cells enclosed by huge barbed wire, super-sharp razors that looks like that which you've seen in the **prison at Guantanamo.**



The young student completed his studies in economics with highest honors at the University of Havana

"To access any area: the dining room, the church, the commissary and others, you have to go through other doors with keys, metal detectors and innumerable guards that are checking you every second. All of this is tied together with a huge army of video cameras, located in every imaginable corner, that take note of every activity, every fight, every glance.

"Another security measure are the infamous shakedowns, that consist of the guards checking every cell and throwing out anything they want to. Also, every so often there are urine and breath tests to detect drugs and alcohol.

"As is known, in this prison there are some very dangerous prisoners. Life here is surrounded by anxiety and uncertainty, which

causes acts of violence that occur every day. Because of this, there are very frequent times when the prisoners are shut in their cells, for 24 hours or longer periods of time, during which you are not permitted to bath, or make phone calls, or receive family visits, or legal visits or consular visits. For a large part of last year we were in this regime of *lock down*, as they call these times when we are locked in.

"Moreover, I am subject to a program of check-in every two hours. In other word, between eight in the morning and eight at night I have to leave what I am doing and present myself to the nearest guard.

"In the midst of all this I always try to surround myself with healthy, peaceful, educational activities and avoid conflicts. For me, it's simply Beaumont, where I have learned to live, to test myself, and also grow, the same as my four brothers do where they are.

"Our struggle for peace, for a better world is not just a philosophy of life but also a form of living it. I want to leave here as a better human being, and nobody can block that. This is one of the challenges and commitments of the Five."

-How do you channel your energy as a man of action, a friend of practicing sports and also being an intelligent professional?

-My days here are spent struggling in a constant fight against monotony, so I frequently vary my activities and schedule.

"In the morning, after my personal cleanup, I clean and organize my cell and then go to the laundry room, Monday through Friday, to do my work as an orderly, which consists of cleaning off the washing machines and cleaning the room. The rest of the time I occupy with doing something that will make me forget the solitude and isolation.

"I do exercises, I run and also practice some yoga (just in my cell) for strength, flexibility, etc. I have to confess to you that for me physical exercise is essential, to sweat, to relax, to relieve daily stress. Since I was little I've always strongly practiced sports; it's a necessity for me.

"I also look to satisfy my intellectual restlessness. I dedicate a large part of my time to reading and answering letters which, with all love and affection I send to all the brothers and sisters in the world who write to us, although there's never enough to respond to everyone as we would like to. I'll take advantage of this opportunity to express gratitude in the name of the Five for all the letters we have received.



Man of action and friend of sports

"The important thing is to try to maintain a balance between physical and intellectual activity. Both are essential for us and that's what we try to do.

"Also I play chess, another sport which fascinates me and I need to play daily. At eight thirty at night they call us all inside the units until ten, the hour that they lock us in the cells until the following day. At this time I read the correspondence I've received that day, and then I listen to the news until I fall asleep; I go to bed with Cuba, and with her I always get up."



Ramón on el Turquino, the summit of Cuba, in his student days

-What are the people like with whom you share space in the prison? What have you learned since you've been a prisoner?

- I have learned that here you relate to the human being, and not with the crime that he has committed, although for me there are unpardonable crimes, such as rapes, child abuse, murders. Aside from that I have gotten to know sensitive human beings, including honest ones, and with some of them I have shared and learned sports and other skills.

"I want to emphasize that the inmates and the personnel of the prison have treated me with respect; they know I am Cuban."

-Do the prison authorities know about the decisions in the legal process? How do they react to that??

-I believe they know about the decisions that have been made in our case, especially the reversal of the trial verdict by the three judges in Atlanta. Then they asked me when I would go free, and why I was still in prison. Later, how was the case going, and why the delays. I tell them about the maneuvers of the Government, the appeals . . .

-In these years of imprisonment you have been able to see your wife Elizabeth and your daughters Ailí, Laura y Lizbeth in a few visits to the prisons. In the few photographs of these reunions permitted by the prison regime you can't see what's going on in Ramón's mind when he embraces them for the photos, the only time that he's permitted to touch them. How do these visits go? And at the time to say goodbye, knowing that when you will see them again is an uncertain mystery subject to the prison regime and the delayed visas?

-The visits of Eli and my three little ones are the happiest moments I have in all this time of imprisonment. When I am with them nothing exists, nothing matters, just love, tenderness, the happiness of having them. I forget the place where I am and it's like I'm at home or in a park with them, in Cuba. I surrender to all the passion of being a husband and father. The only thought in my mind is to stretch out every second and hold onto it. It's a magic moment; I bare my soul to the four of them and involve myself in every little bit of their lives, of their achievements, of their dreams. I advise them, teach them, encourage them, take care of them, I show them all that I can in this place. And they do the same with me.

"Between Eli and I we create the family framework that we so much miss living every day. We laugh, we sing, we argue, we criticize, we inspire, we analyze goals and dreams, and also we cry. And there have been scoldings too; that's part of my duty as a parent, although afterwards I fill them with praise and encouragement.

"The time for the photos is very special. Then we can walk together and embrace the four of us, just like a



Playing with his daughters, something now prohibited to them

dream come true after I return.

"The partings are the worst, terrible. That last day, that last minute is heartbreaking for all of us. I always save my best smile for that day. I try to distance myself from all that sadness, to move through that difficult passage without pain or tears. So I say to them that it's not the end of a magical visit, but rather the beginning of another period of hopes.

"The pain of not knowing when we will see each other again is offset by the certainty that our love is invincible. I dream every day with this love that unites us; this keeps me and my spirits alive.

One day we will recover the tenderness and affection that is denied us today."



The shelter of these powerful arms only holds tenderness

-Your daughters are growing up and becoming women without their father close by. What do you hope for them? How do you want them to see you?

-I hope that my daughters can be everything that they can be. I want them to always study a lot, that they graduate from the university in the specialty that they prefer. That they fulfill themselves in every sense, as human beings, as women. They live in a country where dreams have no limits, and I know that they will realize theirs. I want that they will forever be Cuban and revolutionaries.

"I would like that they see me as a father who, although he is far from them, has not abandoned them. Everything I did was for love, to save the dreams and the safety of the Cuban people, to try to be faithful to my duties as a human being and as a revolutionary. I want them to always know how much I love them."

-I have spoken many hours with Elizabeth and I've seen how her face lights up when she speaks about you. How do you manage to continue nourishing the love that unites you? How do you resolve the challenge that this separation imposes on you? In your opinion, how is she assuming, in the name of both of you, the tasks of teacher and guide for the lives of Laura and Lizbeth?

-Love has many aspects. It's not just nourished by physical presence, by sex; although both are very important, they are not indispensable. The spiritual aspect, the intimate one, the sweetest, the profoundest, these usually can't be destroyed.

"The big advantage that Eli and I have is that we have lived and intensely enjoyed ourselves as lovers, as faithful friends, as eternal compañeros every second that we have shared together. In the present circumstances, we utilize all resources, from letters, phone calls and visits, to poetry, painting and the communication between our spirits.

"With this strength that the conviction of love gives us, I know that I will return to her arms to continue being that which we have always been: as one.

"Elizabeth is a special woman and an extraordinary human being. She has overcome all the trials. In addition to being a faithful and loving wife, she has been a compañera of battle in this cause that we defend. Her role as father and mother of our daughters has filled her with impeccable virtue.

"I always knew that it would be difficult to find a partner who could endure the ups and downs of my missions, of my life. But when I got to know Eli, my doubts were resolved and I understood that I had found that person. Facts have



Their father always absent on their birthdays

proved that true. I have for her only love, eternal gratitude and infinite tenderness.”



The last Mother’s Day they spent together. Beside Ramón is his mother Nereida – who died a week later – and his aunt Nello

-It’s know that you couldn’t even tell your mother about the work you were doing outside of Cuba. How difficult was it to keep quiet, especially when you knew that you would not see her again?

-Look, my beloved mother **Nereida** always dreamed that I would be a military man or a doctor. She would have been enchanted if I had chosen one of these two careers. I once thought when I completed 12th grade that I should ask to go into medicine to please her. Nevertheless, from a very young age I honored her dream, even though I could never tell her.

"In 1998 during an urgent trip to Cuba due to the delicate state of her health, I was intending to tell her the truth, that I wasn't in Europe nor head of a corporation, as everyone thought. But I never did it, to avoid putting at risk the important tasks I was carrying out. That's why I wrote, dedicated to her, the poems *Deuda* (Debt) and *Carta para una madre ausente* (Letter to an absent mother)."

-The Five usually and often speak in the name of all of you. How do you agree? Do you communicate with each other?

-Do you believe in extra sensory perception? Well something like that happens with the Five. We don't need to speak, to communicate with each other, to know what each one of us is thinking. I believe this is because we were all educated with the same ideals, the same reasoning, the same dreams. I am sure any worthy Cuban would do the same. We are the fruits of a people, of a generation that doesn't give in or abandon independence, national sovereignty, socialism.

-What virtue to you most admire in each of your four compañeros in the struggle? What are the keys elements in which you five have put your hopes of achieving your return?

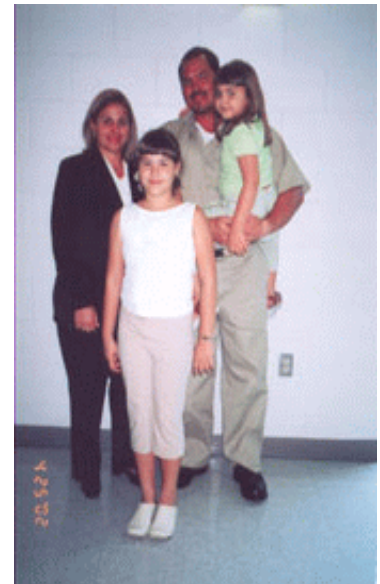
-My brothers have many virtues that I admire. In particular I stress for **Gerardo** his eternal humor; in **Tony**, his sensitivity and nobility; in **René**, his exquisite culture, and in our **Fernando**, his virility and determination.

"We defend a totally just and noble cause; we haven't just used our intelligence. We haven't ever injured anyone or anything, on the contrary we have tried to save the lives of innocent human beings, fighting against terrorism and preventing wars.

"We count on the support of our people and many brothers and sisters in the world, which is essential in this battle. If we obtained two important victories (the overturning of the trial by the three judges in Atlanta, and the declaration of the United Nations Group on Arbitrary Detentions that our arrests are illegal and arbitrary), true justice could come at any time. This is the essence of our optimism and our conviction that final victory and the beautiful return to our country and liberty will come."

-How do you feel about Cuba? In what do you have the most confidence, and what worries you the most? Do you see any threats to the Cuban Revolution?

-I feel Cuba in my soul, in my skin, in every moment. Without her we would not exist. I have confidence in our people, in the Revolution, in our humane socialism, which we should take care of



Their first visit in the prison was in April 2002, after four years without seeing each other

carefully against real threats and the ambition of the empire. This is why we should be prepared and ready for any contingency. Also we have to maximize our vigilance within the country so that weak minds, lovers of the second rate and treason, don't prevail.

"**Fidel** lives and will always live because he lives in the people, in their ideas and their way of making the Revolution. But it won't be maintained by spontaneous generation, but by fighting for it and caring for it. We will make in Cuba a society that is each day better, more advanced, just and humane, with the efforts of everyone.

"Cuba represents the dream of many people in the world. We cannot commit the grave error of failing humanity."

-What figures or personalities inspire you to resist day after day?

-The history of our country is our inspiration. But since you ask me to single someone out – it's very difficult to do, I would have to say many names –, I tell you that I think of Marti, of Maceo, of Mariana, of Che, of Celia, of Fidel . . ."

-Have you had any weak moments or moments of doubt? If you have, how did you overcome them? If not, why not?

-When one defends a just cause like the right to life of a people, of humanity, there is no space for weakness or doubt. You know that this is the way forward and how to act, what to do in every moment and in the face of every trial. You are accompanied by truth and love of life.



Photos, the only time that embraces are allowed. With his father Holmes, and his daughters Aili, the oldest – from his first marriage – and Laura and Lizbeth

-What do you think of the people of the United States? In particular, I'd like to know your evaluation of the work of the people in solidarity with the case, with whom you maintain ties through letters from the prison.

-The people of the United States are very hard workers, warm, friendly and happy. I have excellent memories of these people, of the people and their lives. The affection that I receive from some of

them I will keep with me always. Very special is the solidarity of all the compañeras and compañeros who facing all the adversities of these times, support us with bravery, determination, in the defense of Cuba and our liberty. They represent the best, the most pure of the North American people..

"Solidarity is so important that I think that the solution to our case will have to rest with it, and the national and international pressure that will obligate that justice be well applied, the laws and the Constitution of this country. We obtained two victories in 2005, a year that set decisive standards. For this reason, I see the return to our land nearer every day. The light goes forward."

-What do you think of your attorney, how has the relationship between you been, in spite of all the violations there have been in the process?

-When the trial started, the prosecution limited the contacts between my attorney, **William Norris** and me, so the process was difficult. Now we are very far apart, he's in Miami and I'm in Texas; communication is difficult. Basically its been through letters, official documents, at the end of the year, etc.

"In spite of the obstacles, the relations between us are good, cordial, respectful, and warm. We have succeeded in his understanding well the essence of the case, and I can tell you that he sees me as a patriot who defends his country, just as he would."

-If you could go into a time machine and go back in your life, what things would you do exactly the same, and which ones differently?

-I would do everything exactly the same.

-Have you imagined you return to Cuba? What would you want to do as soon as you got back?

-I have imagined, dreamed, analyzed, painted the return to Cuba, the Five have even made jokes about it among ourselves. But nothing will be as extraordinary as living it. I only know that it will be spectacular, the most beautiful and happiest day of our lives. We have thousands of plans. I would like to be able to embrace every Cuban and then go to the place where my mother rests to take flowers and put these words in her eternal rest: Mother, I fulfilled your dream. I love you eternally, your Ramoncito.