

## I AM WITH YOU IN PRISON, ALEJANDRINA

By Luís Nieves-Falcón

I went from Chicago to Lexington, Kentucky — 7 long hours of travelling miles and miles to meet with Alejandrina Torres. I had not seen her since 1983. She had been dressed in the green hope of the poor people of our homeland who never lose faith. She stood before the judge in the case who was going to sentence her, wrapped in the pride and resoluteness of our cosmic race. There was no fear in her expression when the judge condemned her to serve 35 years in US prisons. Her bravery brought a furtive tear to my eyes. Since then I have been able to speak to her on two occasions, once when I visited her husband, Reverend Torres, "Viejo." \* On occasion she is allowed to make a 15 minute phone call to her husband. I stole 3 precious, sacred minutes from Viejo to join her in the jail.

The visit began at 11 AM, but the lawyer friend who accompanied me and I had reached the town at 9 AM. At 10:30 we arrived at the main building. I gave over my bar card. For the first time it had some value. They photographed me four times! Then I walked through a metal detector; they inspected my brief case full of legal papers and photos from "Golpes de Rejas." They assigned me an escort — a woman named Montanez, who said she came from Spain.

We came to a door of metal and wire, where a camera watched us. The guard pressed a button. The camera began to move. I waited through the long minutes. The camera and I looked at each other. A sharp, dry sound, like a guillotine, violently assaulted my ear drums. Another door confronted me. The camera continued following me. It seemed like it was undressing me. I looked at it directly. Face to face. The woman cop pressed another button. By now the minutes felt like centuries. The camera never took its eye from me. I looked at it steadily, scrutinizingly.

I went down some stairs. Two guards were awaiting us — one black, one white. We entered an elevator that took us down into the bowels of the earth. To a tomb that had been converted into a prison for Alejandrina and her companions. The black guard took us into a room. At the end of the hall through a small window I saw some hands in a constant, ceaseless motion of greeting. We went into a small hall painted an intense yellow by a strong yellow light that failed in its attempt to be a sun. A male and a female guard, both white, brought the prisoners. The male guard remained on guard outside. Watching. Looking through the enormous window that frustrated any possibility of either professional or personal intimacy.

I was nervous, like a young man on his wedding night. I was

\* "Old Man."

wearing a navy blue suit and a yellow tie. Alejandrina was at my side. Pale, thin. She had lost about 40 pounds. Her hair was streaked silver-grey. We laughed and held each other in a long, tight embrace. A patriotic embrace -- a Puerto Rican embrace. We shook hands and started laughing again. Silvia Baraldini looked at me tenderly and we ended up embracing each other. Susan Brown, the northamerican escape artist who had already escaped from several federal prisons shook my hand and we too ended up in another embrace. They were treasures inside these shabby, mean, prison surroundings.

We talked about the necessary legal issues, about the worsening conditions. There were no significant recreational facilities, no kinds of work corresponding to their abilities. They told Alejandrina she would have to work inside the prison doing contract work for the US army. She refused. They put her in the hole -- solitary confinement -- for 4 months.

The diet was poor. Since Alejandrina does not eat red meat the situation was even worse. They were giving her slices of cheese as her only food. Sometimes they did not bring her food, to force her to ask for it. They had already done this 3 times this very month. But she will not submit and has tried to adjust her body to the minimum necessary nourishment. The administration tries to show that she is in good health. But her glasses are broken and they haven't permitted her to get another pair. She can not read, though even if she could, she can not concentrate very long. The nerve-wracking exasperation of idleness. For lack of anything to do she paces her cell incessantly, to stay active and to forget the torments she has suffered in detention, before and after the trial, and during the extended periods of solitary confinement. She thinks of Lolita Lebron. Remembering her image gives her strength and steadfastness. She knows also that there are people outside concerned for her. Let's say it. My God, why does she have to suffer so! Only because she wants independence for Puerto Rico! She has not committed any violent crime. This is her first offense.

We talked about the motion her compañeras had filed before the court demanding that this control unit be shut down. Alejandrina is not a petitioner. She is a prisoner of war and does not believe that she can be judged by the courts of the empire. We told her about the efforts of the people to close the Lexington dungeon and to put her in the general prison population. And about the admiration the people have for her courage.

During the legal discussion Silvia and Susan took the initiative; Alejandrina curled up in her chair, seeming to collapse. She gathered her strength, and, radiating a profound love and feeling for humanity, began to ask me about daily things. Susan left and Silvia made an effort to leave but the look in her beautiful, electric blue eyes told us that she really wanted to stay with us. She has few visits. All her family is in Europe. Her loneliness weighed more than reinforced concrete. She remained with us, and her eyes gave thanks to Alejandrina for her generosity in sharing this visit with her.

We talked about trivial, daily things that suddenly acquired an unexpected splendor. About Puerto Rico. Always about Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico of the future. About my students and the courses I teach. Recently published books. New writers. It was a long intense conversation that seemed to have no end. I showed them photographs from performances of "Golpes de Rejas" — the play that Roberto Ramos Perea wrote about Alejandrina. Their faces looked renewed by new currents of joy. I introduced them to the actors, the author, the boyfriend of the daughter; to Roxana Badillo, the lead. In the audience, Alejandrina recognized some faces among those who attended. She distinguished some of the old nationalists present among the crowd.

We were happy; we all held hands. A loud knock on the door indicated that the visiting time had ended. We looked at each other and wrapped ourselves in an unending embrace. Another. One more. We said good-bye, and we said good-bye again.

No one showed any sadness though the pain grazed our bodies. The prisoners supported us with their bravery through this mournful farewell. They cloaked us with their gentleness.

I move about bewildered, afflicted. I am happy to have had the joy of sharing two hours with two great women. Nevertheless, the contained anger and flood of tears tries to break through the floodgates of my lacerated soul.

I am furious at the injustices that are continuously done to this Puerto Rican patriot. Each minute of her imprisonment is demonically programmed to accelerate her destruction. The empire is wrong if it believes that through its cruel brutality it will be able to destroy Alejandrina as a symbol. Her martyrdom is the clearest demonstration that the struggle continues, because only a homeland courageously liberated will be able to put an end to the brutality in which the illegal colonial regime wallows. Alejandrina represents the modern Puerto Rican woman who is ready to sacrifice everything for national independence. The powerful empire fears the idea of the freedom that she represents. Let us unite our voices in a collective protest to save Alejandrina who is "moonlight and fierce love, a woman who clasps the people to her chest like a live coal."

Long live Alejandrina!