

A correspondent from Havana

On the way to Havana – during another move – I stopped off in Mexico. I did not want to continue the journey without stopping in the country where we spent some wonderful years. I went to the new centre for foreign correspondents – the old one had been destroyed by an earthquake. We had a long chat and a tequila or two. A few days went by in a shot. My old comrades were still there, but afterwards they were all slowly replaced.

In Havana I was nicely received, there was only a handful of correspondents, maybe a dozen. They were divided into two colonies. The western correspondents had foreign currency, were allowed to pay over the odds in dollars in shops for diplomats, where you could find many things, even meat. Colleagues from the east paid in Cuban pesos, which we called Micky Mouses, in shops for foreign technicians, where everything was cheaper, almost free, but the quality was correspondingly low. I, coming from Yugoslavia, which after his conflict with Tito Fidel did not like, did not belong among the eastern contingent and paid in dollars. From time to time they did try to treat me as an easterner, strumming the political strings and ideological feelings in order to influence my reporting.

Fidel's Havana looked upon the media in the same way as the Eastern European countries under Russian Socialism. As I found out later, it was also the same as in the papal Vatican, then and today. Fidel, after all, was a Jesuit product, as was his brother Raul, although the latter had received less education from the Jesuits than Fidel.

Since I came to Cuba as a correspondent, who would be carefully monitored and supervised for some years, my Cuban comrades dealt with me seriously from the very first day. From the ministry officials I immediately found out that I could not live at the hotel reserved for me by the Yugoslav embassy. They moved me to another hotel with eavesdropping arrangements, and then I moved from one hotel to another for a few months so as not to forge too close connections with hotel employees, so that none of them could reveal anything inappropriate.

So it was the Cuban government that decided where I would live. First they offered me a huge apartment in a building that was being renovated at the time. Fidel had a school friend, called Mr Someillan, who owned two adjacent buildings on Malecón, along the coastal road. The first one was a 33-storey skyscraper, at the top of which, where there was also a swimming pool, lived Mr Someillan, whilst on the fifteenth floor lived the greatest Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. All the other floors, visited by Americans prior the coup, had been empty for a quarter of a century. Next door stood a slightly lower building, but the apartments in it were not much smaller, each one measuring at least 400 square metres.

For a quarter of a century the buildings were empty and then the ruler and his school friend agreed that the state would renovate them both and rent them out, whilst they would share the income, the details of how were not explained. I was offered a splendid apartment in the smaller building, which would cost a month almost as much as the agency was giving me for almost my entire stay of a few years there. In my mind I could already see how I would create a tennis court in the apartment, but I still politely rejected the offer.

For a few more long weeks they looked for another house for me and finally found it, but it needed to be completely renovated since the former owners had gone to Miami soon after the revolution. The work was done relatively quickly and I was able to move in at the end of the summer. The house was pleasant, but did not contain a single piece of furniture. Not even a table or a chair. Anywhere else this would not have been a problem. Except in Cuba or North Korea. In Cuba, furniture stopped being made soon after the bearded men

entered Havana. All that was available was excellent furniture from the eighteenth or nineteenth century that was lying under some overhang, waiting for someone to buy and restore it. The owners of apartments and houses on nice avenues were forcibly moved to poor suburbs and their old furniture did not fit into their new houses, so they kept it out in the open or under a roof, often in rain and sunshine.

I spent most of the time waiting for my new home at the Nacional Hotel, a famous mafia den from the time before Fidel's coup, which was at the time of the rise of tourism in the Nineties modernised and turned into the central revolutionary brothel for modern tourists. In between, during my time, this was one of the few hotels in which a small meal could be had, and it had a swimming pool in the garden to boot. There, my neighbour at the time was the famous liberation theologian, the Brazilian Catholic priest Frei Betto, the first foreigner Fidel was willing to tell his story to.

They spent hours recording and in the evenings, sometimes also the next morning, Betto and I occasionally met in the Nacional. He was full of impressions; often he was barely able to understand everything that the Cuban supreme commander had told him. Betto was most shocked when Fidel told him how the Americans had been paying for his resistance to the Havana regime that was then a symbol of the mafia state of Cuba. And how they had given him some money and paid for the ship full of weapons brought from Costa Rica by Huber Matos. The same Huber Matos who later argued with Fidel and as a punishment spent two decades in jail.

The story about being in cahoots with the gringos at the time seemed to me the most baffling part of everything that Fidel told Betto. A few weeks later the Brazilian whispered to me that this most interesting part would not appear in his book. The supreme commander had changed his mind. We will erase that chapter and you should also forget you heard it, Betto hinted, winking. Later, the story of American help for the revolt against the former mafia regime was brought up several times by other people, but it never entered the official history.

I was moved from the Nacional – the money for its construction was thought to have been contributed by Al Capone – to the Capri Hotel, built by Lucky Luciano – before the revolution he had his home there for a while – and then I was moved to the Riviera. They then returned me to the Nacional and on to the Habana Libre, until they finally told me I could move into the house they had renovated for me in Miramar, the most beautiful part of the city. There, officers and functionaries of the previous regime used to have quite pleasant terraced houses, every house had a little garden, a terrace and a series of balconies. The one given to me was situated at the end of the street, a really privileged corner, which meant that the wind blew from the sea or the slopes on the other side. In the tropics, where every breeze helps you breathe, this is very important.

The house was empty except for light fittings, but no lightbulbs and no spying equipment could be seen with the naked eye. You could tell that you were being recorded on the phone, but all you had to do was tell the switchboard supervisor that there was some crackling on the line and the connection was immediately fixed. Probably because the first time this happened I told the technician listening in and recording me to do something since I could hardly hear. After that they immediately reacted to my every complaint and fixed the connection.

At that time, it never occurred to me that the house was full of microphones. I was warned of this a few years later by a colleague, a friend really, Gabriel Molina, a man who together with Gabriel García Márquez founded the Prensa Latina press agency and later also

the new Cuban television station, and concluded his career after four decades of editorial and directorial work at the only newspaper *Granma*.

A few of us, including Gabriel were sitting at my living room table, I said something inappropriate again and my guest pointed to the ceiling and told me to accompany him outside to look at some puppies – one of the Doberman puppies was intended for him. Outside, with the dogs jumping up and squealing with delight, he mentioned in passing that the house was bugged everywhere. On Wednesday, he said, we should meet at the baseball match, the youth team was playing. I told him I really was not interested. Won't you be interested when your son is playing, he insisted. I went to the match with him and amidst the supporters' shouts he in a by-the-way fashion told me that he was the one who had been following me for years and reporting to the authorities. You do know, he said, that in Cuba you cannot and are not allowed to refuse this task. That was when we became real friends. I was not afraid at all that my supervisor would pass on anything that could harm me.

I knew I was being spied on by another colleague who, however, never told me this. Later he visited me in Rome and we used to see each other in Havana when I returned there. Luis Báez, known as Fidel's biographer, the author of twenty-six books about the supreme commander, was one of the participants in the revolutionary process who became Fidel's confidantes. For a number of years, I tried to get him to tell me what I already knew, but I wanted confirmation. Why did Fidel before meeting statesmen talk to you and not his foreign minister, I kept asking Luis, who we at home referred to as *Bajčev Lojze*, so that the eavesdroppers would not know who we were talking about. Some years later he told me that it was because they were a special group that was above the politburo and the central committee. Who are you, I would not give up, even though I had already heard who "they" were. We were educated by the Jesuits, are very close and talk about everything, he said. Luis also came to Rome as if he was a journalist preparing for talks with the prelates, when in fact he had been sent by Fidel to arrange the first visit by the Pope to Cuba.

The teleprinter rattles again

It was not easy starting from the beginning, going back decades, listening to the rattling of the teleprinter and spending an inordinate amount of time for a text to get somewhere. Whilst I was at the hotel, I was relatively close all the time to the head office of the Prensa Latina agency, where I would take my articles to be transferred to the teleprinter tape and forwarded.

But when I moved to the house on Miramar, things became more complicated. First you searched around since there were no newspapers apart from the propaganda bulletin *Granma*. There was no radio news like elsewhere, everything had to be found out directly, "in the field", as those of us who wrote every day described it. I never quite knew what colleagues from Eastern Europe wrote, when they wrote it and for whom and why they wrote anything in the first place.

Digging up any information in Cuba was an achievement that could be compared to digging for news in the all too holy Vatican state, where everything is also hidden, from the rare news item to whole mountains of money which – not recorded anywhere – bishoprics from around the world send to the head office in suitcases and bags, the money is then counted by the monks, exchanged for euros and everything is nicely laundered. The Cuban Church does the same, the worthless pesos are exchanged in Rome for one of the hard

currencies. Yugoslav dinars and Slovene tolar were exchanged in the same way. The local church would get hard currency.

I was lucky, I searched for news in my own special way. I was helped by dogs. Because I belonged to the Doberman pedigree club and the Cuban Kennel Club, I socialised with people who had dogs and had to find a way to get food for them, which was not at all simple and still isn't. Some dog lovers were well connected and knew much about what went on behind the scenes. Kennel Clubs included professors, experts, generals and some central committee members. The chairman of the Doberman club was the famous geneticist Augustin Egurrola, who as a favour to Fidel created the famous Ubre Blanca, "white udder" cow, which produced more milk than any North American record-breaking cow, achieving even the world record 120 litres of (useless) milk a day. Augustino is ashamed to this day for doing something so foolish and professionally unacceptable, but then it did help him to travel, import thoroughbred dogs, even get a car which in those days was nothing short of a miracle.

When I managed to dig something up, everything had to be wrapped in cellophane, I had to spread some nonsensical things around which could only have been found in the solitary Cuban newspaper, write everything up as an article and send it off. The easiest thing was to write for radio as I was able to send it by phone when the lines were working, or I wrote five or ten articles at once, recorded them on a tape recorder and sent them with the first person who was travelling to Europe.

Articles for the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug, for the newspaper *Delo* or for anyone else had to be typed up and then transferred to teleprinter tape, encountering censorship more than once on their way home. The first month my articles got nowhere at all since there were evidently no suitable translators, a translator from Slovene and Serbo-Croat was needed. Without translators, censorship is not possible and without censorship articles could not go anywhere. My predecessors in Havana were easier to control since they simply wrote what they found in Granma and even cursory censorship was enough.

Initially, sending articles was even physically strenuous. Particularly for Bojana, who was in charge of transport whilst I wrote the next article. After I typed up an article, Bojana got into the car, drove in the heat around fifteen kilometres to the city centre and found a parking space, which was not easy for policemen could stop you parking wherever they felt like it at that particular moment. Then she had to walk along boiling hot asphalt to Prensa Latina, where a new Calvary began. The lift was small and in it there were two female guards ensuring order, peace and revolution. There were two so they could keep an eye on each other. Each weighed a hundred or even one hundred and fifty kilos and so there was only room for up to two other passengers in the lift. If they had just decided on a snack break, which happened at least three or four times a day, everyone had to wait downstairs for at least half an hour. When Bojana finally reached the front of the queue for the lift, she rode up to the editorial office and handed my article over to a clerk at the counter by the editorial office door. If he did not have to go on a break or somewhere else, the clerk took the article to the duty officer for typing onto the teleprinter tape. Whilst typing, the guy usually did not make too many mistake and the text could still be understood; then he took the perforated tape to the person responsible for sending it. There the tape waited until they took mercy on it and sent it on. First to the Paris Prensa Latina office. There the tape was once more transferred to teleprinter tape and via another connection sent to the Tanjug correspondents' office in Paris, where it was transferred onto yet another tape and sent to

Belgrade for Tanjug or Ljubljana for *Delo*. If we were lucky, the text reached its destination on the same day. But things did not go this smoothly every day.

Bojana's ordeal of having to go to Prensa Latina lasted at least half a year. Then at a conference of the pool of independent agencies, led by the Cubans, there was a reception at which we started talking more openly about telecommunication connections and by the end spoke quite loud and clear. The shouting was mainly done by Bojana who at least once a day had to go to the centre of Havana, in heat or during severe tropical downpours. Whilst she drove to the other end of the city, I wrote the next article and then she once more set off from Miramar to Vedado.

In the end they finally installed everything required and I could start writing at home directly into the teleprinter. Censorship was even more thorough and easier for the authorities. Nonetheless, they were still so clumsy that they warned me of what they considered inappropriate writing even when the text had not yet gone anywhere. Ljubljana and Belgrade had not received it when in Havana I was already receiving a telling off. When I told them that no one other than the censors could have seen the text, they became slightly more careful. Afterwards they told me about the discrepancy between my writing and the revolutionary reality after an article had been published. Often it happened that my text never got anywhere and I was told it had got lost. Through no fault of theirs, they said firmly.

Ruki ruki, bolo bolo

The house I was assigned was in the Miramar quarter in the municipality of Playa, two or three hundred metres from the sea and the beaches. There was a lot of greenery, breezes, everything was clean and nice. During American-mafia rule on Cuba, this part of town had been done up for the well off. The truly rich built palaces right next to the wide and boastful Fifth Avenue, whilst their staff lived in parallel streets. Fifth A, Fifth B, Fifth C, Fifth F, Seventh Avenue and Ninth Avenue are parallel streets on which there had always lived enough influential people so that there was always much more order and security there.

Opposite us lived Gari, a central committee member, a Party trustee for Columbia (he was shot in the leg there, allegedly because in the role of ambassador he controlled the drugs trade for his country), then he watched over Nicaragua, and was later in charge of Venezuela, which means that he was and still is very influential. When we go to Cuba, we always visit him. Sometimes he tells us things, other times not.

A little further along lived Fidel's older brother Ramón, whom we only met at receptions, never in the neighbourhood or on the street. On the other side of Calle 98 lived Norberto Fuentes, Fidel's export good since he was Ernest Hemingway's biographer, whilst his uncle was Gregorio Fuentes, Hemingway's boatman, known around the world as the old man from *The Old Man and The Sea*. Norberto, who ensured we visited his uncle and got our fill of his stories from the decades he spent with Hemingway, later staged a hunger strike so that Fidel finally let him leave the country. Now he lives in Miami in Florida.

A little further down the road lived Ernesto Guevara, the father of the revolutionary Ernesto Guevara, known as El Che, with his new, then still young family. He never got used to the tragic fact that his son ruined his life and forced him to scrape by on Cuba. He was crying when Bojana and I met him on the street as he waited in line for rotten potatoes.

Right round the corner – on the other side of our garden so that we were able to talk from balcony to balcony – in exactly the same house as ours, lived Chango, the Argentinian journalist and writer Alfredo Muñoz-Unsain. A colleague and a good neighbour, finally also a friend, who knew Cuba better than any Cuban. He had begun as an enthusiast, one of millions of Argentinians who admired Che. He helped found Prensa Latina, then for thirty years joined the French agency AFP and ended up such an expert on Castro's Cuba that he spoke about it as one big lie. I visited him, spent a whole morning there, not just a few minutes, when he was still able to tell stories and the truth. He died a few years ago, completely alone. All his ten or more wives had left him, whilst his only son, for whom he had organised Argentinian documents, went to Miami as soon as he was able.

There was also the German correspondent Otto Marquardt, who lived right opposite Chango, around thirty metres from us. He was an East German correspondent, most likely a Stasi member, as he hinted himself in his old age. He arrived in Havana in the early Sixties, at the same time as Chango, and remained East Berlin correspondent until the collapse of his Soviet-German homeland. When he returned to what was by then already the united Germany, he realised that after three decades in Cuba he was unable to adapt to the completely new reality. I talked to him in Berlin during the days when the wall came down; he was confused. He went back to Havana, married for the fourth or fifth time and bought from the Cuban authorities for the third or fourth time the same house he had lived in from 1963 onwards. He died a few years ago. I used to visit him, also when he was very ill. Chango, who was living five metres away, never talked to him. They did not like each other, I don't know why.

Otto's neighbour was Silvio Rodríguez, the most famous Silvio that Cuba possesses. A poet, composer, singer and an icon of the Cuban revolution, its poetry and music, as well as a successful businessman. He has his own publishing company and recording studios. Fidel let him have a private business as a reward for his favours to the revolution, even when this was prohibited by law. The neighbour on Otto's other side was one of the directors of the National Bank, responsible for foreigners. When we visited in recent years we would take vaccines and insecticides for her dogs; she was one of the last breeders of Havanese on the island. We talked a lot each time. She lasted until recently. When others thought the country was doing better she, who really knew the situation from inside, decided to leave. She lives in Miami now.

Among all the normal Havana people in our neighbourhood there were many children, who for the first few days after our arrival gave our two children black looks. They considered blond people Russian, what else could they be! The boys ran around our fence, shouting *Ruki ruki, bolo bolo ...* I asked the neighbours what it meant. Initially they were embarrassed to say, a little afraid that I would tell the authorities what the kids were screaming. Finally, a neighbour – the school headmistress – translated that the children were saying their own version of something that Cubans said about all Russians and which could be translated as *you're a Russian, a skittle, a drunk*. Ordinary people hated the Russians, who were their masters and rulers. There was no tourism then, Fidel only allowed it when his house began to crumble after the Soviets left. My son Miha evidently received instructions from his school friend Ricardo and shouted back at the brats: *It was a Russian who ... your mother*. The boys turned to the boy whose skin was a little lighter and shouted: *Oh, you're Russian!!!*

A few years later, after we were already quite settled, our acquaintance Reglita, an assistant to the director in charge of controlling the foreign press at the foreign ministry,

came running to us in tears. Sorry for bursting in like this, I can't go anywhere this moment, I don't know what will happen to me, she said. Then she told us about what her two sons, secondary school students, had done. They had gone to a beach quite near us – her husband was a general and so they socialised with Soviet high military officers that the Cubans always had hidden, you could never see them in the street. Her sons were well prepared for their appearance. When they entered a closed, fenced off bathing area, the boys started dancing and shouting at the top of their voices that the Russians should go home and that Cuba was free. The father calmed them down, his Russian colleagues were laughing, evidently used to things like that. But our acquaintance ran out and came to us in tears. I'll lose my job if the incident is recorded and reported. But nothing happened, the Russians did not report it, she stayed at the ministry and later became an ambassador in Hungary, where I visited her. When a decade ago, i.e. twenty years after leaving, I was recording in Havana my last "International Horizons" for Slovene television, she arranged all the necessary paperwork even though I came without a permit to shoot my programme and could have been extradited straight away.

About "The Gardener" and other stories

"We went out to sea, quite often and he fished. We took Antonio, who was a waiter at the Floridita with us so that he could fix us drinks and something to eat. And we often took Jardinera (The Gardener in English), she was always drunk and most often completely naked. But she was beautiful, truly beautiful. Sometimes Papa and I would drive just as far as Havana and go to the Floridita. No, we never went to the Bodeguita, never got there, it was too far and we were drunk long before. The story about the Bodeguita is only tourist propaganda, they convinced him to write that on a bit of paper that now hangs in the bar. That he had a *daiquiri* in the Floridita and a *mojito* in the Bodeguita. In the Floridita we were served by Antonio, he was the only one who knew how to fix a drink. And we never went to the Bodeguita."

This is an excerpt from a story told by Gregorio Fuentes. He lived to be 104 and at the age of ninety he was still like a young man. When Bojana and I visited him at his home, we were served by a very old lady, who was very nice but also very quiet. A little later Gregorio told us that she was his daughter. We met his wife the same day, sitting bent over in the next room, looking rather absent. She seemed like Gregorio's grandmother.

Norberto Fuentes, Hemingway's biographer, who later went to Miami, but who was in the Eighties our neighbour, arranged for us to visit his uncle Gregorio. We planned to film him when the television crew came from Yugoslavia. This could only be organised by Norberto since at that time he did not like if someone made a hero out of Gregorio, whom Hemingway – El Papa – described so well in his novel *The Old Man and The Sea*. He took his captain as a model and they spent decades wandering the ocean. He hired Gregorio for the first time in 1928, as a sailor, but later he became the captain of Hemingway's boat; they sailed for the last time just before Hemingway left Cuba.

Gregorio was born in the Canaries, he was Spanish, just like Fidel. He spent his youth in the Canaries, was a sailor on Spanish ships going to the Caribbean and South America, moved to Cuba when he was twenty-two, and piloted a boat between Havana and Florida. Hemingway met him and hired him and put him in charge of his motor boat *Pilar*. Finally, after three decades of sea adventures, when El Papa left Cuba, Hemingway left Gregorio the boat and it became his property.

Fidel did not like it when Gregorio, slightly drunk, talked to strangers and told them angrily that El Caballo, The Horse, i.e. Fidel, had taken *Pilar*, given to Gregorio by Hemingway, and put it in a museum. He gave Gregorio another boat, a copy, but it was not the real thing and was no good for the sea, Gregorio told me.

Gregorio lived in Cojímar, which was quite near Havana, but in Cuba, where there was no real public transport, it seemed quite far. He lived only a few hundred metres away from Terazza, the only inn in the little fishing town which today has twenty thousand inhabitants. That is where the story of *The Old Man and The Sea* takes place. Gregorio was Hemingway's model. Gregorio seemed like a committed Cuban, but at the start of this century he again got himself Spanish citizenship. Spain handed out passports, initially also pensions for direct successors of Spaniards or Spaniards who had settled in Cuba.

Norberto had given us good instructions before sending us to his uncle. Take him a bottle of genuine old rum, which he had nowhere to buy and not enough money for. And a box of cigars which Cubans could only see on television. And take him for a good lunch, which he cannot afford, and he will gladly talk to you, said the nephew. I'll let him know you're coming.

It was great. Gregorio drank several glasses of rum before eating and a lot of beer afterwards and then some more rum, and all this loosened his tongue and opened his soul. He also told us why he stayed so young when he was older than the writer who had long been dead. This is how it goes, he said. You always have to drink good rum, smoke good cigars and, above all, you must always have young girls. He repeated about the girls three times. They always have to be young and then you stay young.

We also filmed Gregorio for a programme I made for Novi Sad television, which was at that time one of the best in the Balkans. They sent me a crew that many a feature film director would have envied. I had a real director, who had an assistant, the cameraman was excellent and they even had a producer, who could do anything. But because he could not speak Spanish, all his knowledge was no good. So Bojana did all the work instead of him.

Gregorio, who had piloted Hemingway around on the sea and spent decades visiting Havana drinking joints with him, also arranged our meeting with Antonio, the barman who had accompanied them. They went to fetch him from his home, he was also well over eighty. They brought him to the Floridita, he opened a cordoned off section of the room for me and let me sit on the chair that once belonged only to Hemingway. Now that they play at tourism, they have the writer's statue there and they have turned it into a proper little Hemingway corner. Antonio served me the exact drink he had made for the writer. I wanted to try *daiquiri*, I said even though I never really liked it.

El Papa never drank *daiquiri*, said Antonio and then went on to explain that he is not the Antonio who accompanied Hemingway and Gregorio from the very beginning. The first Antonio had died in 1932, then he came and stayed on *Pilar* to the end. On every journey I always fixed cocktails for them and their female guests. Jardinera was not the only one hanging around with them, Antonio and Gregorio told me. And who was Jardinera, I wanted to know. Jardinera was an exceptionally beautiful woman, he said. She was called Ava, the Americans called her Gardner, Ava Gardner ... For us, she was Jardinera ... She was very beautiful, always drunk and usually completely naked. The lady who played in the film *For Whom The Bell Tolls* also rode with us, said the captain and the barman. It was Ingrid Bergman, but the two old men could not remember such a difficult name.

So what did El Papa drink, I asked, if he didn't like *daiquiri*. He drank *papa doble*, I concocted it specially for him, it was without sugar, just a little lime and double rum, a whole

100 millilitres of rum. They make *daiquiri* for tourists, a cocktail with sugar and fruit additives, as sweet as hell, and there's also crushed ice in *daiquiri*. El Papa demanded his ice crushed, I crushed it with a skewer.

He made me a *papa doble*, just like he used to make for his boss. It was terribly strong, but tasted quite good as it was not sweet and syrupy like *daiquiri*. And how many of these did El Papa drink, I wanted to know. Seven, eight, he said. What, all at once, I was shocked. No, he drank one after another, I fixed each one separately. One after another, in an hour or two. He drank a bottle of rum before lunch, I thought, that's why he and Gregorio never made it to the Bodeguita, only a few hundred metres further on.