



Testimony of OLGA SALANUEVA,

Wife of René González, member of the Cuban Five sentenced to fifteen years.

Given at the International Commission of Inquiry into the case of the Cuban Five on Saturday the 8th of March 2014, 15:30 to 16:50, Session 6: Report on the unfairness of the trial against the Cuban Five – Part II.

Good afternoon,

First of all, I would like to apologize because René should be here with me. He was the witness. I was supposed to be part of the panel discussion.

I never thought once René returned (to Cuba), that we would be separated again. But today we are, since he did not get the visa. As we are one family, here I am, longing to hold his hand.

I will be quite brief because Irmita, as a member of the family, already reported part of our testimony, and so did Horowitz, René's attorney.

This story goes back many years, like the story of the other comrades. It goes back to 1990. Until that time, we were a very happy couple. Two professionals; René - pilot, myself - engineer. We had been married 8 years. We had the opportunity to have a daughter, Irmita. She was 6 years old. You see her now, being almost 30 years old.

One afternoon I was caught by surprise by the unpleasant news that René had taken a plane and left Cuba. In a split second he had become a traitor. For me it was one of the hardest blows I ever received in my life. That was not the man I had married, that was not the man I had made life plans with. I never conceived that idea entirely, but it was a reality. I was in Cuba, at the beginning of the special period, aged 31 years and with a daughter of 6, while René was a traitor. I had to face reality. So I just sat down, wrote a letter and put an end to our relationship.

Years passed by. I had to survive like the rest of our people, bringing up our daughter with the same values which had formed me, and which had formed René. I had to keep the family together, but never tell Irmita that her father had left to the US. I won't repeat how I managed it. Then, step-by-step I had to tell her that we were going there, 6 years later.

As a family we felt complete when we reunited again in December 1996. We resumed our plans. We were no longer so young, that is why there are 14 years between our daughters. Ivette was born in 1998.

René had many plans; he wanted to experience with Ivette all the things he had missed during the childhood of Irmita. But unfortunately for us all what happened was actually the opposite. One day, at 5.30AM, when Ivette was only 4 ½ months of age, armed men broke into our apartment and brought away René. They stayed in the house searching everywhere. They made me get Irmita, who was only 14, out of bed, while armed men on both sides of the bed woke her up.

That was the second big blow in my life. This time I was not in Cuba. When I received the first blow, when I still was in Cuba, despite of being in the special period, even though René was considered by everyone as a traitor, I was never discriminated. They never took me out of my job. I kept on being a Party member. I kept my job as supervisor. My daughter was never discriminated in school.

However, when René was arrested in the US, things were very different. I lost everything. When I say everything, I mean that I even lost my home. Since there is always caring people, I could stay with some friends of René, who had two little girls. I had to sleep in their living room. I had to leave my youngest daughter Ivette, aged only a few months, with René's grandmother, an old lady of 80 who stood up for the love of her grandson and her great-granddaughters, and helped me raise Ivette. But I lived in Miami and Ivette lived in Sarasota - I'm talking about 240 miles separating us... And René was in the hole... René was kept there for 17 months without his daughters being able to see him. Although we lived in the same city, and they didn't need a visa to go to the prison... But Philip¹ remembers well that Ivette and Irmita were not allowed to go up to the hole. They said that it was due to security matters. But later we learned that those being in punishment cells were allowed to go down to the visiting room, to meet their families and their children. This was a procedure directed specifically against René. Only once, as Irmita already told you, he was allowed to see the girls, after Philip had filed several motions.

The trial was due to begin in 2000. But it was postponed until November. It was August. I visited René on his birthday, August 13th, and he told me of a letter that Philip had brought him, where the Prosecution suggested to René to give up his rights to live with his family where he had chosen, in exchange for another right, to defend himself in trial. They suggested to him to become a witness for the prosecution, in exchange for letting me and my daughters remain there, even though I had been legally claimed by the then US citizen René González, like our daughter Irmita, while the youngest child was a US citizen.

¹ Philip Horowitz, defence lawyer of René González.

As René strongly refused and decided to go to trial, three days later I was taken to an Immigration facility. I could have been deported within 24 hours; it is known to be possible. But they decided to keep me there for three months. Three months in which our family was absolutely divided: René in one prison, me in another, Ivette with an old woman, and Irmita in Cuba, because this coincided with her being on holiday.

I remember Philip told us that the press approached him, and without telling lies, he did not tell the whole truth. They asked him if it was true that the FBI had arrested the wife of René González. He wisely said that the FBI did not do that. They were following the news, because there was also an American-born girl involved, and remember we were in 2000. We were in August 2000, and in that same year we had managed to get Elian González from the clutches of those murderers. I suffered all this while in prison, thinking that if they found out at some point that the girl was not in the custody of either parent this would have caused a major problem.

After three months I was deported. I was not allowed to leave the country with my youngest daughter. I was told that the deportation process was against me, not against Ivette González, since Ivette González was a US citizen. A 2-year-old girl... I returned to Cuba, and here I had to wait for Ivette, who was brought back to Cuba by her grandmother, René's mother.

Since then I have lived in Cuba, raising our daughters like Elizabeth (wife of Ramón Labañino), taking care of the household. Our parents getting older, the parents who never appear in any story, but are the parents of the wives, the ones who give us strength, unconditional support... But gradually they lose strength as the years go by, and gradually they also die. We have been left alone, raising our girls, and in my case realizing that I have no opportunity to see René again.

I was denied the visa many times, like Adriana (wife of Gerardo Hernández). In 2002 I visited this country (Great Britain) with Ivette and it was the solidarity movement, it was you brothers and sisters who recommended that I go to Amnesty International. Well, there they welcomed us and up till now they have joined us. First for the claim of the rights of prisoners and visitation rights for the wives and children, and then doing a thorough legal review, which seems made by a defense attorney; it is the recognition of the ongoing injustice from the first day and the violations of legal character that have been present throughout the case.

But the years went by. We realized that Ivette would never meet her dad, because they would not grant me a visa. After 8 years we determined as parents that Irmita could accompany Ivette, and that's when she met him.

The years kept passing by and so did the legal process in parallel. We realized that there was not going to be any justice in the case of René. Justice was not done in his case, as justice was not done in the case of Fernando. René ended his sentence, but he was forced to three years of supervised release, a process which had nothing to do with his situation. This procedure is related to the situation when someone is coming out of prison, and needs to adapt to life in society, to start looking for a job, to help materially and morally the family that is supposed to be living there with him. And this had nothing to do with the situation of René.

René went to a house; he went to a new cell. A place he had to leave by walking, by sneaking out to find some food, which he had to prepare. He was not able to socialize with anybody, because one of the premises when being on parole is that whenever you try to establish some communication or relationship with another person, the first thing you have to tell is that you are a prisoner on supervised release. René would have to start explaining himself, being in the midst of a place where terrorist organizations are located; putting his life in extreme danger.

Unfortunately, as Mirta (mother of Antonio Guerrero) has said, there had to be a disease and the worsening of his brother's health in order to give René permission (to visit Cuba). A matter that is considered within the law; it was not a gift, it was not an act of kindness from the prosecution or the judge, it was a right of the person on parole. He came to see his brother. That was the first the whole family met.

Then, unfortunately, our dear Cándido died (René's father), a lively man despite his age, but maybe his heart failed because of all suffering, and then he died. René came again, and thanks to the excellent strategy drawn by Philip and René, they managed to make the judge approve to eliminate the parole and so René could stay at home.

René came home last year, on April 22nd. April 24th was Ivette's 15th birthday. It was the first time we celebrated a birthday together, the 15 years of our little Ivette.

René returned home after 23 years, from 1990 until 2013. He came after completing his duty, the duty to try to prevent terrorist actions against our people, and the duty of completing his sentence with dignity as a consequence of this mission. But René's mission, like Fernando's mission has not concluded. Neither has our mission concluded. It will only end when we bring Gerardo back home, and this is our urgent call.

Our enemy has proven to do poorly in math. He has tried for many years to divide, to divide and divide. And what he has accomplished is to multiply. He has tried to divide families; he has tried to divide a people. Today by denying a visa to René he is trying to separate him from you but the result is the opposite. We're no longer the single family that received bad news in 1990, we are five families united to all of you that are now beyond being our friends, the solidarity movement with Cuba, thus becoming our family. And since a family never leaves its children, we are confident that we are going to bring them all back home.

Thank you very much.