

Prison Memoirs

Mauricio Rosencof and Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro

Translation of an extract from:
Memorias del Calabozo, Editorial Tae, Volume III, pp.112-114

Red Cross

FH: When we got back to our cells after that first miraculous recess, chatting, we were immediately taken to the "island" as a punishment. So that's where we found ourselves once again. One day, the double doors to the "island" opened and in came two men – one with a beard and the other tall and blond. They wore tabards marked with a red cross and the words "International Committee of the Red Cross" in French. The first thing that came out my mouth was, "How did you manage to get here?" – "We'll explain later," they said.

MR: In July 1984, after more than a decade of unsuccessful negotiations, the International Red Cross was finally allowed to see those held hostage by the military dictatorship and interview them. In my cell, I answered their questions and recounted my story, without over-dramatizing or embellishing it, and the blond guy started to cry silently. And this was a man who had visited prisons across the world. They promised to return in three months' time with a gift: a typewriter. They were true to their word and I have kept the typewriter to this day. That's what we're using to write this book.

FH: My first long interview with them was on 13 July, when I had returned to my cell after a spell in the "island". That's when I heard about my wife's illness – they'd visited her in Punta de Rieles Prison. A couple of doctors had come all the way from Switzerland just to tell me about it. I also remember saying that of course we'd had a hard time, but so had our families. I did some calculations to prove my point: the average distance from Montevideo to the prisons where we'd been held all those years was 200 kilometres. Family members visited every 18 days or so. That made 21 visits a year, for 11 years: 223 visits, 400 kilometres there and back. Up to that point, our loved ones had travelled a total of 90,000 kilometres, chasing a regime that despised them, just to bring us little parcels of kisses, clothes and provisions, which more often than not we weren't allowed to have. That's the equivalent of two and a bit times around the world.

MR: And we had walked the same distance or more inside our cells, from corner to corner in a diagonal line: three small steps, about-turn, and then three small steps back – with our children in our thoughts.

FH: They were on our minds just as we were on theirs.

MR: A few days after that Red Cross visit, we were surprised to see from our windows that Pepe Mujica was working away in a flowerbed.

FH: He spent a while there each day.

MR: It was a small, abandoned flowerbed. Pepe pulled up all the weeds, turned the soil over, nurtured the few plants that were still alive, and later began planting flowers: marigolds, also known in Spanish as "marvels".

FH: It was all thanks to the Red Cross. Pepe later told me that he would rather work there among the flowers for the rest of his life than pace around during the absurd recesses they gave us.

MR: Day by day, we saw that as the flowerbed began to blossom, Pepe slowly started to get better.

FH: We could tell by the strength with which he used the hoe.

MR: The other achievement of the Red Cross was convincing our captors to let us have a lawyer...

FH: That's right! And we were even allowed to choose which one.

MR: Oh yes, and one each, although it was hard to believe.

FH: Another success of theirs was getting us some medical attention. I was seen by a military eye doctor. My eyes were slowly giving out; each new pair of glasses would last me less time than the last. The doctor came, examined my eyes and checked my pressure levels, but didn't tell me the reading. He made me read those letters we're all familiar with, stuck up on the farthest wall, prescribed me new glasses and then said: "You know, it would be good if you kept a check on the pressure in your eyes...". That's all he said.

MR: Could he already tell that you had glaucoma?

FH: He must have seen the damage, because the first civilian eye doctor I saw after I was released from prison noticed it during an examination. And he wondered why no-one had ever told me before.

MR: The image we have of aggression is typically that of a guard with a cudgel. But there are other, more subtle acts of aggression, that require a certain level of scientific knowledge on the part of the aggressor. With all their Prussian marches and goose-stepping, it seems Mengele gave a lecture to the Uruguayan army and left a whole school of followers behind...