



My meeting with El Che

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In 1963 I took a trip to Venezuela. I was a young reporter then working for the Italian magazine *Rinascita*. During an interview with President Bentancourt he spoke about how very worried he was as a social-democrat about the rise of guerrillas in Venezuela. I then set out to find its leader by the name of Teodoro Petkoff, but I could not find him. Nevertheless I was able to talk to some of his sympathisers. From this a report took shape with the peasant farmers that Petkoff wanted to enlist following the Cuban model.

I came to the conclusion that the facts were completely different to what Petkoff thought. And that the guerrillas would not succeed.

From Venezuela I went to Cuba where I talked to several Cubans stating that the revolution would not be repeated in Venezuela, which was not very well received by a few of the interviewed.

I was staying at the Hotel National and one night, while I slept, I woke up to some pretty insistent knocking at the door. It was two in the morning. A militiaman in an olive green uniform told me that Commander Guevara wanted to see me. I dressed up and the militiaman took me to the Ministry of Industry where El Che was Minister. The building was totally blacked out with the exception of the top floor. The first militiaman told another, who was on duty, that El Che was waiting for me and we went to the top floor where a third militiaman took me to Che's office. He opened the door, announced me and invited me in. I walked into the office and I found myself inside a huge room with tropical hardwood panelling and with a great table covered with a good quantity of papers. Che was sitting at the other side of the table.

El Che got up and not beating about the bush asked me; "Why are the Guerrillas going to fail?" He realised I was taken aback so he said to me; "First things first, at this time of the night a cup of coffee will do us both good".

He opened the door and told the militiaman to come back with two cups of coffee. The militiaman quickly came back with two coffees on a tray and walked towards El Che who pointed out; "Guests first kid". The militiaman came up from the left and turned the tray my way. In so doing the machine-gun on his back, hanging on his right, struck the left side of my head. An instinctive reaction made me leap up and hit the tray. Numb and horrified I watched while the two cups of

coffee flew off, bounced on the table and drenched an incredibly large number of the papers. Had I wanted to achieve similar results on purpose I would not have been able to.

I froze and El Che said: “At last a person comes along and with one strike does away with so much of my paperwork” And that was how I grew fond of him.

We talked until four in the morning. For every explanation I offered he seemed unconvinced and asked for further details. He never accepted any of my arguments and I left with the impression that he was an enormously human person but very obstinate.

At the end of the night El Che gave me one of his books, *Guerrilla Warfare*, with a dedication that read; “To Robert Savio as a memento of a long summer’s night and with no intention to indoctrinate. El Che”

Many years went by. In 1973 I did a long documentary about El Che and his death in three episodes of an hour each. I was then the chief correspondent for the RAI, Italian television, in Latin America. The RAI destroyed my work and instead transmitted two 50 minute episodes. It was totally different to what I had done, but nevertheless used my material and name. When I complained about it they dismissed me. My documentary consisted entirely of unique interviews, more than a hundred. Ranging from the only one done by the Secretary of the Communist Party in Bolivia, Mario Monje, to that of Sergeant Mario Terán, who killed El Che at La Higuera, through Sheldon, the American Ranger who trained the counter guerrillas soldiers and La Holladeer, chief of the American Intelligence Service in Bolivia, or that of Salvador Allende. Since then I no longer worked on El Che.

In 1964 I set up IPS and having been dismissed from RAI allowed me to work at the agency full time. Time passed and one day my secretary announced a Venezuelan Member of Parliament who came to visit, whose name unfortunately I am unable to remember. While I was asking her for the reason to his visit, he opened the door and strolled into my office and said: “Listen, what a difficult morning we had with El Che because of you” , as if he were talking about something that had happened the day before.

This is how I found out that when I left Che’s office, around four in the morning, he went to the house where a Venezuelan guerrillas delegation was staying. He woke them up and told them: “I have just met an Italian who gave me a series of reasons why the revolution will fail”. He went on to outline all my points asking them for explanations for each one of them. The Member of Parliament told me: “It was a difficult morning because you were well informed and you had real arguments”.

This is how I learnt that El Che, far from being obstinate as I had thought for so many years, had actually noted all my arguments and had bounced them off the Venezuelan guerrillas. I have no doubt that Che believed in the guerrillas. And that he listened far more than he let on.

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