CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **ARMANDO RODRIGUEZ**

INTERVIEWER: **DR. JAMES M. DENHAM**

D: Did that process begin soon after Fidel seized power or did they first round up the people they really wanted to get and then send them there? Did that begin quickly?

R: They began quickly with the important, high-ranking members of the Batista army. But there was a very big process in which they held trials in every city and every town in Cuba and they judged all the people. This was a . . .

D: They had revolutionary committees in every city that would interrogate people that had been identified?

R: Then they would judge them and many of them were executed.

D: That's a typical process. In the French Revolution they did that, in the Russian Revolution they did that. That is a very typical process.

R: Of course, in Cuba, there was a confrontation with different ideas; the people who did not like the executions and also the people who agreed with Fidel. But, Fidel justified that because they were people who killed other Cubans, innocent and so, and they needed to do it for that reason. But, what happened was that, not only in the executions but also in the process of establishing a new government, many very good leaders in the revolution saw within five, six, or eight months of 1959, that the revolution had a lot of communist leaders and they were afraid

were calling him a traitor to the revolution. After that, he and his staff were put before the court and the main idea was that he would be sentenced to death. But, in that situation, my opinion and, in general, that of the Cuban people, both revolutionary and not revolutionary, were against that. Because, at that moment, there were many ideas that there was a problem with the communists taking places in the government in a big way. Then, many Cubans did not agree with that and it was a very difficult situation. At that time, I was pastor in *Manzanillo*, where I was appointed during the annual conference of June, 1959. Hubert Matos's family was from *Manzanillo* and were very good Baptists. One of Hubert Matos's sisters was the wife of a Baptist pastor in *Oriente*. At that time, I learned that the family was having a difficult time and I visited them. His mother was a very, very nice Christian lady and she was an old woman that did not receive many visits. But, when she knew that I, as a pastor, was there, she wanted to spend time with me and I was with her in the room when Fidel was asking to have her son executed. I read the Bible with her, prayed with her, and at the end of my visit, this old, Christian woman said to me the sweetest words. She said to me, "Pastor, I know that maybe my son will be executed, but my prayer to God is that if Fidel executes him, God will use it for the good of the Cuban people." This was a very, very emotional moment for me. But, thanks be to God, many people said that the reaction of the Cuban people helped Hubert Matos to be sentenced to 30 years of jail or some very long jail term. I think that in 1981 or '83, at a time when Fidel agreed to free hundreds of thousands of the political prisoners, Matos was released. In my opinion he is alive and living here in the United States where he came immediately after he was freed. This was a very difficult time in our history but this was the situation.

D: Did you think at the time that this may be a positive for the Methodist Church? What did you think about the revolution and what it would mean for you, the Methodist Church, and the Cuban people?

R: I have a very clear memory of that time because it was a very emotional time. In the first place, when Batista left the country on January 1, 1959, I will say that at least ninety

R: My understanding is this. In the first place, when the Spanish-American War ended in 1898, the American army came to Cuba and took the power until May 20, 1902 when they handed over power to Estrada Palma, the first Cuban president. At that time, all the Cuban people recognized many, many good things that the American government made in Cuba. They worked very hard for the health situation of the Cuban people. They worked very hard for the education of the Cuban children, and they worked in a very, very good way. When I am telling this, this is not my opinion, since I was not born in that time, but everything that I heard from the time was that the Cuban people were very, very appreciate of the actions of the American government. The problem came when the Congress of the United States disclosed the future of Cuba and suggested that Cuba had its own government. There was a Senator, Dr. Platt, that did not agree with that and he put the Platt Amendment in and this was bad for the Cuban people.

D: But even after the Platt Amendment was abrogated, in 1934 I think it was, there was always the American economic control of many, many industries and much of the land. Whenever there would be political upheaval or concern about the government going too far with various things, the Americans would always be there to change it.

R: In my opinion there are two sides to this reality. On one side, most Cubans were in favor of the economic participation of the Americans in Cuba because the American enterprise offered

R:

R: Follow-up for good resolutions and to solve the many, many problems that we had. I would like to add a comment about the way the Evangelical Churches worked and the way that the Catholic Churches worked. In my opinion, we, the Evangelical Churches and leaders, needed to learn a lot from the Catholic Church. Why, because they are specialists in diplomacy and negotiation. For example, every time an important person from the Vatican visited Cuba it was not spontaneous. The leader of the Catholic Church prepared this meeting many months in advance, they spoke with the Cuban revolutionary leaders about the agenda, and they planned their agenda with a specific topic that they would negotiate and discuss. We, the Evangelical Churches, had a visit from the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, we had a visitor from the Council of Bishops here in the United States, and we had some contact with leaders of the revolution, but we did not make any plans in advance. For example, on one occasion, at the beginning of my episcopacy in Cuba, we were totally isolated in Cuba. We did not receive any visitors from outside, any literature from the outside, any counsel from the outside, and then the leader from the General Board of Global Ministry in New York visited Cuba. They had a plan for a group of leaders from different Evangelical Churches to visit Cuba as a group but they did not have permission or visas for the group. A leader of our church in New York, by mistake, Miss Joyce Hill, sent her petition by herself. The American government and Cuban government granted her permission and she came to Cuba for the first time. We had a meeting with our cabinet and leaders and shared with her many things. I asked her if she would like to make a courtesy visit to Dr. Camiado in the office of religious matters in the central committee, and she said, “Oh, o.k.” Dr. Camiado, who was a very cultural person and very wise man, spoke with us and at the end of the visit he ascm