

Interview

'I Grew Up with Extraordinary People'

By **Aleida Guevara March** interview by **Ron Augustin**

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Aleida Guevara March is the daughter of Che Guevara and Aleida March. She is a pediatrician at William Soler Children's Hospital in Havana, and teaches at the Escuela Latina-Americana de Medicina and at a primary school for children with disabilities. As a member of the Cuban Communist Party, she often participates in political debates across the globe. As a pediatrician, she has worked in Angola, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. She has two adult daughters and works closely with the Centro de Estudios Che Guevara, where her mother is the director.

This interview was conducted at the Cuban Embassy in Brussels in late 2016, and translated from the Spanish by Nina and Vladimir Augustin. Reproduced from "Revolutionary Democracy".

Ron Augustin: Following Fidel Castro's ninetieth birthday, Western media have used the past few months to rake up old falsifications of history, such as a fundamental controversy between him and Che, based on your father's criticism of the Soviet Union. You are used to these kinds of distortions, and some of us in the West are as well, but would you comment on these allegations, and did you ever discuss them with Fidel?

Aleida Guevara March: When Fidel and my father met in Mexico, my father joined the expedition to Cuba on the condition that, if the revolution triumphed and he survived the war, he could go his own way. After the victory of the revolution, my father became one of the most important people in the creation of Cuba's socialist society. But years passed by and my father was an asthmatic, sapped by illness, thinking that he might not have much time left to apply and share his guerilla experience. He started to explore possibilities in Argentina, but conditions were not ready, with little support. Then Fidel showed him a request for help by a liberation movement in the Congo. After the assassination of Lumumba, the situation there was critical, with the Belgian army trying to regain control. So there was some pressure on the part of Africa, asking the young Cuban Revolution for help. My father was happy to go there, and a brigade of Cuban volunteers directed by my father headed for the Congo. As soon as my father disappeared from public view, the capitalist world's politicians and media started to spread their speculations, such as a dispute between Fidel and Che, and what have you.

It's a subject I have personally broached with Fidel. I asked him, "Uncle, tell me about the dispute you seemed to have had with my father," and he laughed telling me about one dispute they had when they were in jail in Mexico. Fidel had told everyone not to disclose their political affiliation to the Mexican authorities. And he said to me, "What do you think your father did? He not only told them he was a communist, he also started to discuss Stalin's personality with one of the guards, with the result that they freed us all and kept your father for being a pro-Soviet communist!" And what did Fidel do? He defended my father and refused to leave without him. "What could I do," said Fidel to me, "when I went to fetch him, I realized that your father couldn't lie about his political identity, even if that would cost him his life. No argument could have convinced him of the contrary." That's the kind of disputes they may have had. At the same time, they got on well together, because they shared the same principles, the same ideals.

The African operation lasted eight months. The documents published by us over the years show that my father and Fidel consulted with each other constantly during these difficult months, and that the troops received every possible support from Havana. In October 1965, the Communist Party of

Cuba was officially formed. When the members of its Central Committee were to be announced, it was important to explain to the Cuban people why my father, one of the most important pillars of the revolution, would not be present. So Fidel felt compelled to read out Che's farewell letter. After my father had left the Congo, he stayed in Prague, from where he wanted to prepare things for his Latin American project. He didn't want to return to Cuba because he had already formally taken leave of the Cuban people. In the end, he secretly returned to Cuba because Fidel succeeded in convincing him that Cuba could offer him the best conditions for his preparations. He stayed several months in a secret place in Cuba, where he and the others prepared themselves for the Bolivian undertaking. Fidel was involved at all stages of these preparations.

One thing that has often been raised, is that Che's group in Bolivia was isolated and left to itself. But you cannot compare the development of guerilla *focos* with intervention by a regular army. A guerilla force has to be independent and self-sufficient in order to establish and develop itself. Unfortunately, the relation-ship with the direction of the Bolivian Communist Party deteriorated and communication lines with other units failed. Nevertheless, Che's diary shows that he remained in contact with "Manila," code word for Cuba, as much and as long as possible. His diary and Fidel's preface to it also clearly show the limits of what was realistically possible.

I had this discussion with Fidel not so long ago, when we worked on the prologue to my father's Congo diary and Fidel agreed on publishing the letter in which he had asked my father to come to Cuba for the preparations for Bolivia. Talking about alleged disputes between the two, Fidel suddenly looked at me asking "Why do you laugh?" And I had to say to him, "Uncle, you don't realize, but you're talking about my father in the present tense, as if he would enter that door any moment." In a very serious tone he concurred, "your dad *is* present, you know."

People who admire my father should have a sense of his humane character, his sensibility as a human being. If he had a funda-mental controversy with Fidel or the Cuban Revolution, how can anyone imagine that he could have left his wife and children in their hands, to be educated and shaped by them? How can anyone believe that there would have been a serious dispute between these two men? It's the most stupid thing I can think of. But it's true that we have to pay attention to the ideological motives behind such distortions, because we live in a world in which we are continuously being bombarded with heaps of crap.

Effectively, in my father's well-known speech in Algiers, the socialist states and particularly the Soviet Union were criticized for not sufficiently supporting the liberation movements at the time. My father explained that each territory which detaches itself from colonialism is a base less for the imperialist system, and that national liberation movements have to be supported no matter whether they fight with a socialist perspective or not, as long as they disconnect from imperialist domination. Fidel confirmed to me that what my father said in that speech perfectly accorded with the Cuban leader-ship's convictions of the time, and that they made no secret of it.

RA: Your mother runs the Centro de Estudios Che Guevara, which is looking after the archives documenting your father's history. With your and your brother's help, she prepared the publication of numerous documents of significant historical importance. Your mother is over eighty years old now. How is she, and can we expect other publications in the near future?

AGM: My mom is still very active. She is at the Center almost every day, driving her own car. Until now we have published sixteen titles in a collaboration with Ocean Sur and Ocean Press, as well as a number of accounts from conferences on the present relevance of certain aspects of Che's life. Several studies are in preparation, and a book on Che's journeys in Africa will be published shortly.

RA: Your parents got to know each other during the guerilla war in the Escambray Mountains. When Che was gone, Fidel became something like a second father for you. Among the other personalities of the Cuban Revolution, with whom you grew up, there were some extraordinary women such as Célia Sanchez, Vilma Espin, Haydée Santamaría, and Melba Hernandez. Can you tell us what impression these women left on you?

AGM: My mother has been the most important person of my childhood. At the triumph of the revolution, she worked at the Federación de las Mujeres de Cuba, and so did Célia, Vilma, Haydée,

and Melba. So, from an early age, I lived with all these women. For me, they were family, and I considered them my aunts.

Célia had a strong character, but in each situation she tried to be fair. We were very close because she didn't have kids of her own and she took great care of my half-sister, whose mother was travelling a lot as a journalist in those days. She looked after her protection, made sure things went well at school, and did everything to bring us closer, me and my big sister. For instance, she took us to a knitting course, just to have the two of us doing things together. I have some dear memories of this period. We were living in the same house as Célia when we heard of my father's death. Célia told me that my mother was waiting for me in her room and gave me a bowl of maize soup for her, my mother's favorite dish. An unforgettable moment, because that's when I had to hear that I didn't have a father anymore, and Célia is very much connected in my mind to this moment in time. That's how I grew up with her.

Vilma considered me as another kid of her own family. For Vilma and Raúl's smallest son I was the big sister. I played with him all the time, we grew up together, we went out together. And aunty Vilma, I always loved her, as much as Haydée, whom I learned to appreciate for her commitment, her determination, and her spontaneity. Haydée came from a humble family, her formal education had been limited, but she managed to acquire an amazing degree of knowledge and culture. She may have been the most fearless person of the time. And with the creation of the Casa de las Américas she was able to bring together all the intellectuals of Latin America. But Haydée carried deep scars from the time after the Moncada attack, when she and her brother Abel had been captured and parts of her tortured brother's body were shown to her. His assassination left an indelible mark on her, even though she remained tough over the years. Until those things caught up with her and she put an end to her life.

With Melba I have been together a while as well, when she was in charge of the organization of the Tricontinental Conference, and until she left the country as the ambassador to Vietnam. She was a gentle, intelligent, active woman, her entire life—extremely committed to the revolutionary process.

I grew up with extraordinary people, really very special women, who say something about the strength of the Cuban people, its tenderness, its kindness, its solidarity. I think I had the privilege to have known people like that, who, that's obvious, leave their mark on you. They teach you and make you want to become a better human being. And they show you how important it is to respect the people and be worthy of the people. These women, I think, these are the most complete Cuban women I have ever known. I have never been asked this question before, and I'm grateful for it, because it is very interesting to know these women. They are the pillars of our revolution, guides for all Cuban women.

RA: The exchange of ambassadors in July 2016 was supposed to be a first step towards the normalization of relations between Cuba and the United States. So far, hardly anything has changed with regard to the blockade against Cuba. What are the perspectives?

AGM: There is no normalization as long as the blockade and the occupation of Guantánamo persist. There has been no fundamental change of policy on the part of the United States. The U.S. government has admitted that the objective of the blockade, i.e., the destruction of socialism in Cuba, has not been achieved, and that it would be time "to try something else," in order to, as they say, "make the Cuban people more independent from the regime." The blockade didn't fulfil what the U.S. government had in mind, but it caused a lot of damage to the Cuban economy. According to some calculations, the blockade costs us close to ten percent of the GNP every year. As a medical doctor, I am confronted with its consequences every day.

There are important medical instruments and drugs which we have to procure abroad and which are refused to us by the manufacturers because of the blockade. Consequently, we have to buy things, which are already expensive to begin with, through up to five intermediaries, at appalling prices. Because of this, we sometimes do not get them in time either. Thus, we are often obliged to work with inferior products. In my hospital, an eleven-year old girl suffering from hydrocephaly has been in surgery twelve times, because the catheters we could buy were of such a bad quality that we had to change them all the time.

The blockade has forced us to develop alternatives, not only in the medical field. For instance, in agriculture, we use neither fertilizers nor pesticides. For rice planting, small fish are used, which swallow the bacteria and parasites. Despite the blockade, the accelerated literacy method developed in Cuba already pulled ten million adults out of illiteracy across the world. Operación Milagro, the program for the treatment of several eye diseases, has improved or given back the sight of seven million people. About 30,000 Cuban doctors are working in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 84,000 medical staff from these countries have been trained in Cuba. So imagine, how we would live without the blockade, how the level of scientific development we have reached could help humankind.

RA: What about Cuba's pharmaceutical industry?

AGM: Of course, we try as much as possible to manufacture our own medical drugs, but also in this case there are components and raw materials that have to be purchased abroad. Fortunately, a Swiss organization has been helping us buy some of the raw materials required for the production of different medical applications, often in smaller doses than the branded ones. For instance, we produce Ibuprofen in doses of 200 milligrams, not like in the West in doses of up to 800 milligrams. We consider 200 milligrams sufficient in most treatments, and like this we can produce larger quantities not only for Cuba but also for the countries we work with, like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua.

We often have bottlenecks, because some donation hasn't arrived in time or we can't buy the right stuff in an international market, which is difficult to predict. The blockade complicates everything, because eight out of ten recent medical developments are patented in the United States. But, as Fidel stated, "when a child is admitted to hospital or in any other institution in Cuba, the physician has the responsibility to search for the right medicine, even if it means knocking on the door of the White House, or whatever, but the medicine has to be found." In certain cases, this meant a lot of work, but mostly we succeeded, with the help of solidarity movements abroad, thus breaking the blockade a bit.

At the hospital where I work, we had an eight-month old baby with an esophageal varicose vein, i.e., a pathology where the digestive system bleeds and the specific treatment is a U.S.-patented drug. We couldn't find a company willing to sell the drug to us. Fortunately, members of a European solidarity movement were in Cuba and we asked them to get the drug for us. They did, and the baby could be stabilized. They didn't want to be reimbursed, but we refuse such things, because it is not right to depend on solidarity for a problem that is not a financial one but only due to the U.S. blockade. This is why we had to develop our scientific capacities, searching for solutions to problems that others haven't been able to solve as yet.

RA: What is the situation of medical research in Cuba? For instance, you are a paediatrician specialized in allergies, has there been any progress in this domain over the past few years?

AGM: Actually, allergy is one of the areas in which a lot of research has been done in Cuba, because it is connected to immunology. We have a research center for molecular immunology, so those are definitely areas of concern, but at present we are trying to focus more on the most important issues, such as the fight against cancer, diabetes mellitus, and AIDS, as these diseases can be fatal. With regard to allergies, we're doing research mainly directly on the ground, particularly by trying to find ways to reduce the use of pharmaceuticals, by developing vaccines and by looking more at "green" treatments. We have relatively good results with vaccines in controlling allergic eruptions. Allergy is an important research area because in our climate about 14 percent of the children have allergies. In the Caribbean, we have a lot of seaweed and environmental fungus due to humidity, so it's logical that we turn to areas that affect us most, and try to take preventive measures.

We have done some interesting work with pregnant women, where family doctors, when they note a pregnancy, speak with women who have a history of allergy and advise them to avoid certain food types that are known to provoke allergies, to avoid bringing the baby in contact with plush toys and to avoid the accumulation of dust. For asthmatic children, it is crucial that they learn to swim, because that's how they learn to breathe better. The coordination of movements and breathing when swimming develops the pectoral muscles and the chest, which enables them to breathe more easily.

Those are some things we do apart from developing and applying vaccines. Allergy research is very expensive and difficult, and much remains to be done in this area. But in general, the situation is relatively well under control so far.

RA: Five years ago, a new economic model was introduced, with the result that around half a million jobs have been privatized so far. Can you say something about the evolution of this “actualization program” and the dangers of lapsing into capitalist labor conditions?

AGM: Since the implosion of the Soviet Union, the Cuban economy has become more vulnerable to economic difficulties in other parts of the world, particularly in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) countries. Despite the development of tourism and import-substitution efforts, there is a serious currency deficit and there are huge disparities between the average buying power and the salaries. So for twenty years already we have been trying to differentiate and increase the salaries based on performance and results. The actualization of the economy, which has been agreed upon five years ago, means the dismantling and reorganization of non-productive workplaces, partly by transforming these into cooperatives, partly by privatization. It’s a move that largely legalizes structures that for the most part already existed and were more or less tolerated, such as hairdressers, carpenters, beauticians, etc., who were privately organized and often employed people with little social and remuneration guarantees.

The program mainly applies to the service sector and hardly touches actual production. And in any case, the conditions of ownership in critical sectors are excluded from these measures. There will never be any privatization in education, health, and defense, because there’s no other way we would be able or willing to conceive these areas. Health is a human right, not a commerce. And education is a necessity, because only an educated people can be a free people. Consequently, the actualization program is a limited program. And I always say that Cuba, the Cuban Revolution, is a large laboratory, because many issues have not been experienced before elsewhere, so we have to try and find solutions to problems as they emerge and as we go along. Currently, that’s what we are doing. The results are constantly evaluated and where necessary adapted or corrected. If, in a couple of years, we realize that we have made mistakes and that it doesn’t function as we planned, we will have to go back and find solutions to the problems we have generated. So it’s a learning process, and right now we are in the middle of it.

RA: At the Communist Party’s seventh congress in April, Raúl Castro said that it would be the last one directed by the historical generation, “who will pass on the banners of the revolution and of socialism to the new sprouts.” Where are the new sprouts in the country’s leadership? Did the congress not also suggest, for instance, that the party needs more younger members?

AGM: The minimum age for admission to the party is around thirty years, and membership depends on the merits of a person in her or his community, who also elects that person. Our party is selective, it is not a mass party. It has to rally some of the best people, because its function is to exert control so that the people’s power doesn’t deviate from the goals it has set. There are efforts to get more women into the party. What interests me more is whether a person really serves, and not whether it’s a man or a woman. I think there is still a lot to be done, particularly with regard to young people, but we have some very capable ones, even if we are not happy with their numbers and recognize that we have to make more efforts in this direction.

RA: Even if one day the blockade against Cuba is lifted, imperialism will not stop trying to surround and destroy every anti-capitalist initiative. On your many travels around the world, you keep insisting that, given the existing balance of forces, only a unified left may tip over things. What can the left in the West do to help Cuba maintain the assets of its revolution?

AGM: What it has been doing so far. Keep standing by Cuba, first of all out of respect, that’s a fundamental issue. Not always judge things one doesn’t live oneself. Trust the revolutionary process and, when you have doubts, please, ask, we will answer, we are not infallible, we keep trying to improve ourselves. What matters right now, is the fight against the blockade. It has to be lifted. But what is also important for us, is that the left in the West attains the necessary popular support for changing their societies. What would help us most would be that the left clears itself a way through the capitalist centers in order for us to change the present reality together. One has to take into

account that without us, without the peoples of the Third World, you will not survive. In the meantime, people have to abandon their egos and unite in search of connections—for true unity. One has to fight every kind of interference between countries. One has to fight the fact that the money of the great powers supports international terrorism. The aggressions against the Syrian people are financed by the West. You cannot allow that! You cannot allow that your territories continue to be used to plot and wage wars! There have been two World Wars, the third one will be the end of humankind. That's why, once the left in the capitalist centers has developed enough strength to change this reality—from that moment onward we can really advance and create “a different world.”

RA: You have a very active life in Cuba, and at the same time you attend many meetings abroad. In the past few months you had to travel three times to Europe alone. How do you manage?

AGM: It's true that I travel a lot in other parts of the world, for my work with the Centro de Estudios Che Guevara and conferences organized by local solidarity movements and ICAP, our Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos. Hence there is some irregularity in the times that I'm staying in the country, which is the reason why I gave up being a municipal leader for the party. Now I'm just a basic party militant. In Cuba, I draw a lot of energy from my work as an allergo-pediatric consultant. It's very rewarding. And every time I come back from an overseas flight, the first thing I do is to go see “my” school, where I work with kids with disabilities. You should see these kids, they are very, very strong. That's how I recharge my batteries.
