**Antonio Ciacciofera: The Italian tourist who returned from Cuba decapitated and without organs**

By Marinellys Tremamunno

ROME, Italy. - It has been 26 years since the mysterious death of Antonio Ciacciofera, an Italian young man from Palermo (Sicily), who went on vacation to Cuba and returned home in a cardboard box and without a single organ in his body. It’s the story of a successful young man, the second of three sons who at the early are of 24 already held an important post in an Italian bank; had no personal or financial problems; and whose only sin was to have chosen the wrong place for vacationing.

“On May 13, 1994, he left Italy on a trip to Cuba. He had been there once before, in November of 1993. On May 16th, there was apparently a traffic accident, and three days later, my brother died.” His older brother, Michele Ciacciofera, still remembers the painful story about his brother. Michele, a successful artist who presently resides in Paris, has not forgotten the injustices that made the loss of Antonio a more difficult ordeal, in spite of the distance and the time that has transpired.

“My brother returned to Italy dead; at first we believed the reconstruction of the events, the version of the traffic accident (in Cuba); but later on, the state of his corpse, the ambiguous and contradictory versions of the accident (as given by the Cuban authorities), all made us think that the car accident hypothesis was not the cause of death,” he said.

That’s how tragedy came to this Italian family that not only saw the loss of Antonio in Cuba, but also of its peace of mind forever, all in the trappings of a dictatorship whose powerful tentacles reached as far away as the European nation, and subjected them to a veritable Hell.

“We were a family, and since my brother’s death, we are no longer a family: my father became ill and passed away; my mother became gravely sick; my ex-wife was six months pregnant when this happened and she lost the baby; and my other brother also became ill. My brother is dead, perhaps we did not deserve that. We certainly did not deserve to have them harass us like they did, to have them threaten my mother with having my other brother and I killed as well. We did not deserve the late evening calls, the attempted break-ins in the middle of the night, the repeated threats that we received during a ten-year period, we did not deserve that. I hope that no Cuban young man ever has to meet the same fate my brother did, that no Cuban family ever has to endure what my brother had to endure,” explained Michele.

A Horror Story

In June 1994, the Ciacciofera family was featured in all Italian news media. “The gory story of Antonio’s death seemed like something straight out of a horror movie: keep in mind that my brother arrived back in Italy without a single organ, none, even his brain had been removed, he had wounds all over his body and as far as the autopsy performed in Havana is concerned, it contradicted the notion that the Cuban health system is considered of high caliber and extremely efficient because that autopsy was butchery. My brother’s body was totally emptied, it was so stripped of every part that it allowed no further analysis,” according to Michele.

How is such cruelty possible? Antonio’s brother continues to ask himself that question years later. He never received an answer: Cuban authorities refused to cooperate and “diplomatic” pressure forced the Palermo judicial office to close the investigation in 1996. In spite of the useless attempts at finding answers by then mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, who even wrote directly to Fidel Castro, the only replies that arrived in Sicily came from the head of the legal department at the Foreign Ministry of Cuba, deputy minister Jose Peraza Chapeau, and from Cuba’s ambassador to Italy, Mario Rodriguez Martinez at the time, with photographs and additional documents that attempted to corroborate the traffic accident theory.

“The documents were so contradictory in and of themselves that they reinforced the judicial office’s idea that the cause of death had not been a traffic accident,” he explained. As a result, the Palermo judicial office filed letters of request to Cuba on several occasions, asking to be allowed to examine the vehicle and to conduct questioning in the island, but the Cuban regime always refused access.

The above-mentioned Cuban officials even “tried to bribe my father twice, offering him money. My father was a good man, we are all good people, we really do not need money. We were hoping for justice, truth and democracy, but it was not possible. We always told these Cuban officials that they could keep their money, that we were not corruptible people,” stated Michele.

The Contradictions

What did the Cuban regime want to hide? Surely it had to be something ghastly. Antonio was identified by his family through strands of hair and teeth X-rays. But, in order to make it comprehensible, Michele Ciacciofera explained some of the contradictions in the reconstruction of the event as explained by Cuba: “My brother, and three other passengers, allegedly were in a traffic accident on the 16th at noon, but the record showed the car was returned to Transautos (the car rental agency where Antonio presumably rented the vehicle he was in) at 1:00 pm. Surprisingly, on the receipt that was received in Italy along with Antonio’s belongings, there was no damage reported to the car.

Young Ciacciofera “was decapitated and had fractures everywhere,” according to his brother, who also indicated that the forensic doctor who performed an autopsy in Italy assured everyone that the injuries to the body were incompatible with car accident trauma, “because even in the event that the car overturned, there wouldn’t be sufficient kinetic energy to cause these types of traumas; the likes of these injuries would only occur if the vehicle would have fallen off a cliff,” which had not been the case.

Another key part of the story concerns the passengers who were traveling with Antonio, namely two Spanish women (Ana Lopez Ribas and Ana Cerceda Costales) and a Cuban male hairdresser who now lives in Miami (Tomas Lauzarique Castillo). Michele questions in particular the role of the woman Ana Lopez in all this; according to the reconstructed narrative of the event, she had suffered serious injuries when, in fact, she had not; she also placed a call to Michele for which there is no explanation to this day.

“Ana Lopez allegedly would have suffered a very serious spinal injury, serious enough to bring her close to dying or to losing her ability to walk for the rest of her life. The other two individuals, another Spaniard and a Cuban, suffered no injuries at all. To clarify: the Spanish woman was not in any danger of dying, she walks without any problems, which indicates to me that she had not broken her spinal column, as it was alleged.”

Also, “they told us from Cuba that they had opened a criminal case for highway vehicular homicide because of the way the Spaniard Ana Lopez had been driving the car, at very high speed on a provincial highway and attempting to avoid a bus which later turned out to be a military truck. She would have then hit the side of the road, causing the car to overturn and be destroyed with my brother still in it.” The Ciacciofera family demanded an explanation from Cuba about the alleged criminal case against Ana Lopez, but never received an answer: “most probably because there was never a case filed in the first place, due to the fact that no such traffic accident ever happened.”

Michele pointed out, also, that there were no blood stains in his brother’s clothing because “in Cuba they thought it through to have them washed. However, his shoes were blood stained, but strangely, the blood was not in the shoe upper, but underneath the shoe, in the soles, as if my brother had stepped on his own blood.”

The darkest part of the story involves the inexplicable phone call that Michele received: “The day after my brother died, on the 20th, Ana Lopez, who was actually driving the car, called my home and spoke with me; she said she was in danger in Cuba, that she had sought refuge in the Italian consulate, which seemed strange given that she is a Spanish citizen. She added that she would explain at another time what had really happened to my brother. She told me not to believe the regime’s version, that my brother had been killed by the doctors, probably referring to the illegal removal of his internal organs.”

Justice Never Came

This is a case where it seems unbelievable that Italian justice was relegated to the whims of the Cuban regime; that is what most bothered Michele Ciacciofera: “Italy did not behave like a democratic country. And Cuba behaved like a mafia dictatorship, that is the point,” he added.

Dozens of resolutions and parliamentary interrogatories were generated around this case, with requests for written replies; even the Italian parliament asked that an investigative commission be assembled, a request that never came to fruition. The answer of the government at the time was absolute silence. “The only answers given by the Italian government in 1994 were from deputy minister Enzo Trantino, who tended to second the official Cuban version in spite of the fact that the Judicial Branch’s opinion was the opposite and that it intended to proceed with an investigation. In the following years, Patrizia Toia was careful to issue the same response as Trantino’s, although toward the end of her reply, she admitted that it was impossible to continue with the investigation due to a lack of cooperation from Cuban authorities.”

Twenty-six years after the tragic death of Antonio, Michele has not stopped searching for the truth. “I want to know how my brother died, why he was treated in such a way, and why they obstructed our petitions. I do not understand why Italy allowed that an Italian citizen be treated in that way,” and he warned that the justice system not only should punish the responsible parties, but also that it is important that the public knows these facts so that such a situation cannot happen again. “I ask Italy that sanctions be imposed on countries that exhibit this conduct, because anyone who is complicit with those who commit a crime is at the same level as the criminals,” he concluded.