

# FIRST INTERVIEWS WITH EXILED AIR PIRATES

"Miss, excuse me but this plane is going to Cairo!" Richard Duwayne Witt had begun the most daring act of his 19 years. He remembered, months later, the stewardess's response. "She told me to sit down."

But Witt gave the stewardess a better look at his baby hammerless .22 revolver. That worked. The pilot came back to explain that the plane could not make it to Cairo. They compromised. On September 18, 1970, instead of terminating in Philadelphia, Allegheny Airlines' regular 727 night run from Pittsburgh landed in Havana.

"I had a bomb—really it was a lot of matches and some gasoline," recalled Farland Jesus Grant. "I thought it would blow a hole in the window. But I wouldn't want to hurt innocent people. I said to the stewardess, 'I want to go to Algeria.' And I talked over the mike to

the pilot and all. The pilot came out and said we couldn't get across the Atlantic." On January 22, 1971, instead of stopping in Detroit, the Northwest Airlines 727 jet from Milwaukee landed in Havana.

"I told the pilot: 'Now we change course to Havana, Cuba; I am a Russian spy and don't make any mistake,'" said Hungarian-American Gabor Louis Babler. "And he told me—I pointed a gun on him—'Okay, okay, you have no problem, we go to Havana.' Two interceptors from Key West were coming and I told the pilot to tell the two interceptors if I see them one more minute, I will shoot him and myself. They told on the radio the pilots what was my message and within seconds the two interceptors from Key West, Florida, left." On November 20, 1967, instead of touching down in Bermuda, the chartered Piper Apache from Miami landed in Havana.

American hijackers, in a rueful report from Cuba, tell of the desperate act that changed their lives and how, instead of a hero's welcome, they found

## UNHAPPY LANDINGS

by Martin Schram & John Wallach

It is midafternoon and drizzling slightly as two hijackers and a journalist huddle in a doorway along the Malecon. Before the Revolution this was Havana's grandest thoroughfare, bordered on one side by brightly colored buildings and on the other by the clear, ultra-blue bay. Now the buildings are frayed and peeling; the only thing that does not need repainting is the water itself.

The Malecon is surprisingly empty. A workman walks past and the two hijackers fall silent; a student passes and the pair slouch against the dirty alcove wall, staring at their shoe tops. A policeman approaches—he glances curiously into the alcove, but keeps on walking.

"Oh mother!" Richard Duwayne Witt says softly. "I want to be anywhere in the U.S.—even in jail—as long as I get out of here."

Farland Jesus Grant agrees. "I'm ready to face the music in the United States. Whatever the court decides. I'd rather be in a federal prison than in this place."

They are an unmatched pair. Witt is small and wiry; Grant is tall, at least six feet. Witt speaks rapidly, eager to get his story across; Grant speaks slowly, when he speaks at all.

They are black Americans, aged 19 and 20. They wear faded denim and t-shirts. Their hair is cut in moderate Afros. Grant wears a heavy link chain around his neck and a crown-like medallion dangles from its lowest link. A rolled-up magazine protrudes from the pocket of his blue jeans. It is a Cuban film publication, *Cine Cubano*. Although he cannot read the Spanish magazine, Grant brought it along because something in it made him mad: a photograph of Tarzan.

"Tarzan!" Grant says in disgust. "That's what they think of black people—people running around with bones in their heads." Witt approves of his friend's outburst and sticks his right hand out, palm up. Grant breaks into a grin, slaps his palm on top of Witt's, and says: "Right On!"

Witt and Grant consider themselves

revolutionaries. Black American revolutionaries. They had fled the United States because they felt life there was stacked against them!

No sooner had Witt's plane rolled to a stop than the young hijacker began to realize that his new home would be no paradise. "When the plane arrived (at Havana's Jose Marti public airport) there were these dudes with AK-47's," said Witt. "One dude came on the plane with a gun. So he takes you down the stairs. . . . Then they take you into a room. They make you strip. They check your rectum."

As Witt was telling his story, Grant stood by silently, smiling and nodding. He too had encountered Cuba's traditional welcome for hijackers. First come the soldiers with guns. Next come the government photographs. Then comes the humiliating search designed to discover whether a stark naked hijacker could still be smuggling something into Fidel Castro's Cuba.

The story of American hijackers in Cuba is the story of Witt and Grant, who told of bleak life under armed guard in the light-blue halfway house of hijackers in Havana's suburban Siboney.

It is also the story of Gabor Louis Babler, who told of midnight terror rides, numbing injections, beatings by guards and discipline by gunfire during the five years he spent in Havana prisons.

It is the story of Hank Baron and Jeff Shorr, hijackers who committed suicide in Cuba. And of John Peabody and others who have attempted to do the same.

The hijackers told the stories of their lives in Cuba in secret meetings in doorways along Havana's potholed streets, in a deserted park after midnight, and at a crowded bus stop outside the old Havana Hilton hotel.

Cuban officials had warned against any attempt to contact the hijackers. But acting through intermediaries, the meetings were arranged. One of them was a midnight session with Babler. At 8 p.m. a reporter left the faded lobby of the Havana Libre hotel, eager to leave himself plenty of time to make the connection. The Prado was filled with shoppers and as he looked over his shoulder, anyone of them could have been following him. Aware of this, he ducked in and out of several alleys finally hiding for 45 minutes inside an abandoned garage.

When he heard nearby church bells strike 12, the reporter walked briskly to the park and waited quietly on a bench. A few minutes later, his contact arrived accompanied by the hijackers. The meeting between an American journalist and American hijackers in Cuba was underway. It was remarkably relaxed and free of tension considering the risks that all of them were taking.

Babler began by describing his arrival.

He too had expected a hero's welcome.

"I was thinking, oh, they'll put the gun back in my pocket, pat my shoulder, and say, 'Come on, we're friends. Let's go see Havana,'" Babler recalled. "When we landed there was—I mean, before we landed I see on an airport (Havana's Suda Libertad military field) 50 or 60 guns pointed at our airplane. Four or five or maybe more jeeps and cars with uniformed soldiers with rifles surrounded the airplane. Immediately they took us separately in two different cars jammed with soldiers—without one word without any welcome, without any handshake. . . . They take me to prison, shut me in a cell, and for three days I don't see nobody."

It is possible for a reporter to find out more about hijackers during one month-long visit to Cuba than all of the agencies of the United States government have been able to learn in years of investigation. Federal Aviation Administration records show that 85 American planes have been hijacked to Cuba since 1961. Beyond that, the files of the FAA and FBI are woefully inadequate. These agencies know the real names of only a fraction of the successful hijackers; if a man hijacked a plane to Cuba under an assumed name and left no fingerprints on the craft when he disembarked, chances are the federal investigators do not know who he is.

Moreover, U.S. officials have been unable to keep track of the whereabouts of American hijackers after their arrival in Cuba. In early years, some hijackers found ways of moving on to other countries where they live today.

But Cuban authorities interviewed in Havana said that there are at least 60 American hijackers in Cuba today. The

hijackers range in age from 17 (a student from Chicago) to 68 (a Mexican-American from the Bronx).

Cuban officials would not discuss how many American hijackers are now in prison; but the hijackers themselves put the figure at no fewer than 20. A Cuban Foreign Ministry official did confirm that "seven or eight" American hijackers are in Cuban mental hospitals.

Still another 20 live in the light blue, two-story dwelling in Siboney that is called "La Casa de los Transitos" ("The Hijackers' House").

Finally, there are a handful of American hijackers whom the Cubans have judged to be deeply motivated. Pro-Castro revolutionaries who arrived in Havana without a criminal past. One of them is living in Havana's most modern hotel, the Havana Libre (formerly the Hilton), and teaching psychology at the University of Havana. Another, a former instructor at the University of California at Berkeley, is the guest of the Cuban government at Havana's once-exclusive Hotel Nacional.

The decision on which of these lives a hijacker will lead is, of course, the Cuban government's. When a hijacker lands, Cuban officials are on the lookout for three things: a CIA plant, criminal record; mental instability. Generally, those in trouble with the law in the U.S. wind up behind bars in Cuba.

Witt and Grant are among the more fortunate members of Havana's hijacker community. They never had to undergo the long prison ordeal.

Grant, though the quieter of the two, was also the black power activist. He said he was a member of the Black Panthers and the United Black Revo-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 54

# UNHAPPY LANDINGS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

lutionary Party in his hometown, Milwaukee, where he also earned a printer's certificate in a vocational school. He had gone to Chicago to work for black power, joining for a time the Prince of Peace Volunteers. He said the group helped clean up black neighborhoods. He had also spent some time with black activist brothers in Detroit and Minneapolis, working hard but never in the forefront. "I never liked to be a leader," he said.

Grant said he had been arrested about 20 times in the United States—"but only for demonstrations." One such "demonstration" bust, he said, was when he was arrested for trying to blow up a railroad in Milwaukee. But the cops didn't have enough evidence, so they released me."

Grant's disclosure made Witt chuckle. Unlike his companion, Witt said he had never been a member of a black activist organization; but he had pitched in now and then to help groups like the Panthers in his hometown Pittsburgh.

As a teenager, Witt felt school was not exactly his thing. He quit and joined the Marines. (U.S. records show that Witt enlisted in April 1970, and was discharged "due to unsuitability" just two months later in June.) After his discharge, Witt said he had a new appreciation of the value of a high-school diploma. He returned to Gladstone High School near his home. In his spare time, he worked as an auto mechanic.

The two young men talked easily, willingly, about their lives in the United States and their lives in Cuba. But there was one point when they fell silent—when they were asked why they had decided to hijack airplanes.

Witt stubbed his toe into the concrete. Grant looked around, shrugged, and smiled sheepishly. It was an incredible scene. Here were two men who in single harsh acts had unalterably changed the course of their lives. They had—

with careful premeditation—committed air piracy, a decidedly unpopular 20th-century crime. They had endangered dozens of lives. They had branded themselves forever as international criminals. And now, when asked why, they had no answer.

Characteristically, it was Witt who tried to answer the question first. He spoke in vague generalities about being fed up with life in America. He spoke of a desire to try life in black Africa instead.

"I guess it was that tension built up," Witt said. "Tension and adventure."

Grant thought for a minute after Witt had lapsed back into silence. "Tension—and I guess pressure," Grant said at last. "I just snapped. I'm an idiot. I admit it."

The question should not have caught the two young men off guard. They had been asked it before—in fact, just moments after their arrival at Jose Marti airport. Recalled Witt: "The first question they asked me was 'Why did you come here?' I said I wanted to go to Egypt, not Cuba. Then they said things like 'Why did you leave the United States?' and 'Did you rob a bank?' Then they took me to the hijackers' house in Siboney—to sleep—and then I was questioned again in the morning. They started asking me why did I want to go to another country instead of Cuba? They say why not marry here and settle down?—that Cuba is a good country. I brought clothes with me when I came. They took them all. And they took my American dollars and American cigarettes and American chewing gum. They said, 'Don't worry about the money, we'll give you some pesos.' Later they said, 'We can't find your clothes, so we'll give you Cuban clothes.'"

Once the home of a wealthy industrialist, the Casa de los Transitos looks much like any house on the block. It is set well back from the sidewalk; its grass is overgrown; its blue paint peeling. Two Army guards in standard olive fatigues—one with a rifle over his shoulder—have retreated out of the hot sun into the shade of the large front porch.

But life in the house at Siboney lacks the comforts of suburbia. Cubans now live on a limited variety of food, due to strict rationing and the hijackers at Siboney do not care for the shortages in their adopted country. Breakfast they say, is milk and bread. Lunch is fish, rice and sometimes soup. Dinner is about the same only with bread and maybe a piece of cake.

There are some at the Hijackers' House who eat well. Recalled one hijacker: "When I looked in the kitchen, the police—the big revolution aries—were eating steak and some very tasty pudding, they call it flan with chocolate on the top. And I mean they had a whole hide of meat—beef meat—in the refrigerator. Coincidentally, asked one of the other hijackers, 'Did you eat pudding today?' He said, 'I haven't seen pudding for two months. Nor milk, and no meat. Meat and milk arrive every day, more than five gallons of milk—cow milk—comes here every day.'"

The black youths also complained that their Latin hijacker colleagues in the house received favored treatment. "Like when we sit down in the dining room to eat, we can sit down first and the Latins last—but it's always the Latins who get served first. And the Latins get clothes and money from the Cubans that we often can't."

Witt and Grant complained that the Cubans have fought their efforts to maintain a black identity. "Like, man, we'd put up African posters—maybe of Guinea and the Congo—and the Latins would get mad," said Witt. "They would say we should put up Latin posters instead. Like pictures of Che. And we'd say 'Why? We're not Latins.'"

Cuban efforts to help Witt and Grant adjust to life in Cuba also failed to impress the black hijackers. "They said they are going to put us in a Spanish school to learn Spanish," said Grant. "So I said I'd rather learn to talk Swahili or Arabic. And they got pissed off. But even in the U.S. now they're teaching African history."

While residents of the Hijackers' House are sometimes permitted to travel about the city on their own during the daytime, Witt and Grant often found this freedom hazardous. Things would happen to them. Like getting arrested.

"I was arrested about 12 or 13 times here," said Grant. "For nonsense stuff—things like wearing an Afro. Another time my shoes were hurting my feet and so I took a razor and cut them [the shoes]. And I was arrested for that. I've been held overnight in jail often. And they find out who you are and let you go back to the house. One time I had an Afro haircut and was wearing a dashiki and they thought I was Cuban trying to go back to Africa, and so they arrested me."

Witt said he'd been picked up by Cuban police 15 or 20 times. "Every week we get arrested for one thing or another," he said.

Cuban officials have periodically cracked down throughout the island on youthful tendencies to adopt the long hair and mod dress patterns of their Western neighbors. But to Witt and Grant the harassment arrests for wearing Afros and dashikis meant racism.

Said Witt, "After what I saw in Cuba, the States looks like a dream world. Prejudice? In the U.S. it's there but everyone knows it. Cuba has it too, but they don't admit it. They call us monkeys because we have Afros. They told me either cut the Afro or go to jail. They want me to dress like the masses of people."

Witt and Grant also complained that the Cubans would not let them work at any meaningful jobs for which they are trained. Witt said his request to work as an auto mechanic was turned down. And Grant added: "I have

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



# UNHAPPY LANDINGS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 54

printer's certificate in the United States. They want to give me a job digging a ditch. What kind of job is digging a ditch? Oh, you can learn a lot digging a ditch."

Hijackers in prison are never told what charges have been levelled against them, nor how long they will remain incarcerated. There are several classes of prisons and jails in the Havana area. There is (Castillo del Principe) prison near Havana Libre hotel, where a number of hijackers are kept. There is La Cabana, home of political prisoners, on the waterfront near the former tourist landmark, Morro Castle. There is the G-2 Department of State Security Jail—some call it "Hados" (inevitable doom)—where political prisoners and hijackers are sometimes kept during periods of interrogation. There is the immigration prison at Picota Andres Lucia Costa—also a domicile for hijackers. And there are lesser jails such as those of the airport police and precinct stations.

All of these received a clean bill of health from the International Red Cross, during the last inspection tour made by its representatives in 1970. But Red Cross officials in Washington say that their team never reached a spot hijackers consider a particularly uncomfortable part of Havana's prison system. It is "the pit"—solitary confinement cells below Principe prison.

Gabor Louis Babler has done time in "the pit". Babler said he spent four and a half years in Cuba's prisons—much of it in solitary confinement. "That was the worst part," Babler recalls. "I believe the physical punishment I can take

more easily than that punishment of solitary confinement over here. If I forgot I am in prison and start to whistle or something like that, they come over and say I cannot do that. I ask books, they don't have any. I ask newspapers; they don't have any."

It is midnight in a Havana park and Babler is leaning back against a wooden bench, telling his story as he stares across the street at the Principe prison that used to be his home. He is 38 years old, slight, with curly blond hair, a broken-English accent, and a Cessna tattooed on his hairy chest. He is a Hungarian-American.

The park is busy this night. A number of neighborhood residents are enjoying a favorite Cuban pastime—a stroll in the cool night air. Babler lowered his voice whenever anyone passed by. When he spoke, he spoke into a paper bag which camouflaged a small cassette recorder and microphone.

Q: So your first night in Havana you spent in prison?

A: First night, and the first two years I spent in—well, six months in a security prison, eight months in the regular (Principe) prison of Havana—that is consecutively. Seven months in Islands of Pines hard labor, back again to the prison of Havana, security prison for five months, three months in a ship, back again to Havana with the same ship, and I was two years and almost two months in a police jail.

Q: Could you describe the first month, the first few weeks in Cuba?

A: Well the first few weeks were horrible because they always said "next day" or "a couple of weeks". This "couple of weeks" became "couple of months" and I get nervous. I get more and more helpless. And when I find out in the prison there's other Americans who've been there eight months, nine months, a year,

a year and a half, I really get scared. And I said well, I asked for it.

Today Gabor Louis Babler is free, married to a Cuban girl and living in a rundown private home that has been converted to apartments and is crowded with tenants. After almost five years of incarceration, Babler had been released two months ago.

When he was freed, Babler was given a tiny, two-room apartment just down the street from Principe prison. No sooner had he taken up residence with his bride than his in-laws moved in—mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and two canaries.

The walls are faded pink; they are adorned with a cardboard reproduction of Christ's Last Supper and a yellowed newspaper photo of Che Guevara fastened with tape. Paper roses in a plastic vase sit atop the Bulgarian TV set.

In the bedroom, the Bablers sleep on a double cot that rests on the bare tile floor. There is a small dresser decorated with photos of the wedding, a doll in a wedding dress, and a stuffed brown baby bear.

Once out of prison, he had been given a job washing buses at a depot; but just a couple of days before the interview he was fired. "They kicked me out of that company because they're afraid I will go up too fast, too high, and they don't want me to go up at all," Babler claimed.

It is understandable that Babler is treated harshly by the communist Cubans. He had been one of the leaders of the 1956 anticommunist uprising in his native Hungary. He was the man who single-handedly freed Roman Catholic Cardinal Mindszenty from a Budapest prison cell and escorted him to safety in the American embassy.

In 1956 Babler said he was also just a squeeze of a trigger away from killing Janos

Kadar, Hungary's Communist Party chief. After the Freedom Fighters had seized the Parliament Building in Budapest. "I take up my gun and point it at him, and Janos Kadar go on his knees and said 'Please don't shoot me. I wanted only to stop the blood on the streets.' I said 'Well, I don't shoot you, because I don't think your Communist Party will ever stand up on its feet here in Hungary.' I was sure of our victory and I just left him."

After his escape from Hungary to the United States in 1956, Babler and his encounter with Kadar became front-page news. He was arrested in Washington while leading a demonstration against the Soviet embassy. Charges against him were finally dropped after intervention on his behalf by Senators Joseph McCarthy and Barry Goldwater. He became an American citizen and worked for several years as a chauffeur in exclusive Georgetown. Eventually he worked his way out to California. There, one weekend, he decided to do as many Californians do and "go down to have a fun in Tijuana, Mexico". Only, he forgot his naturalization papers.

A U.S. Customs agent told him he could not return to the United States without his papers, that he would have to wait clearance from Washington. Babler decided to cut through the red tape. He explained, "I thought if I can jump the border of Hungary and Austria, where is all the Russian guards and tanks and minefields, I can jump a border in the United States where there is no guard, no minefield, no nothing."

Babler wound up in the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, serving one-to-25 years for kidnapping a federal official (the customs agent), five years for stealing the agent's car, one-to-25 years for kidnapping a California woman (he needed a ride after

crashing the agent's car).

Why did Babler come to Cuba? Probably because he is the sort of man who would feel persecuted wherever he was. He had the disposition and dreams of a revolutionary but no revolution to fight in. He liked to think of himself as the man who started the Hungarian anti-communist uprising. Because of that, he felt that he should be important—a "somebody"—even in communist Cuba. He was an idealist who no longer knew what ideals he was fighting for.

The notion of hijacking a plane to Cuba was planted in him while he was in jail in the United States. "I met some Puerto Rican revolutionaries who knew that I was an ex-Hungarian Freedom Fighter. They said, 'Your place is in Cuba. They will train you right away and send you someplace in Latin America.'" Once again, Babler would be an important person fighting for an important cause. The glory of the dream swept aside the reality that should have been apparent, an anti-communist fighter and Cuba's communist Revolution make for a mighty poor marriage. It was not until he had arrived in Cuba that Babler began to realize his dilemma. Soon the very cheers and slogans of the Cuban Revolution only made him appreciate what he had left behind.

During the interview, he recalled the good old days—the time he served at Leavenworth.

Q: How would you compare conditions in a Cuban prison with the conditions in an American prison?

A: I—I need to laugh. I need to laugh.... In the United States the prisoners need to be on a diet not to get fat. Here you need to lay down and not move your finger so you can get up when you need to go someplace. Because the

food is only enough to keep you alive. Not enough—it's too much to die but not enough to move—Let's put it this way. I lived in prison better in the United States than over here as free. In the Leavenworth, Kansas, prison, there is every day milk, different types of Kellogg's—what's his name?

Q: Cornflakes?

A: Cornflakes. You can choose from 20 different types what you want. You can go to college. You can go to school. I don't know at that time how to appreciate that. Now I know it.

Q: Did other prisoners ever shout from their cells anything about the food?

A: Yes, they told me "Gabor!" "What you want, Johnny?"—he was Number 13 cell. He said, "You know what I want? My last wish is give me a good chocolate cake or apple pie, and they can shoot me." I said, "Johnny, I don't think you will get chocolate cake or apple pie, but I think you will get some"—there is a food named croquette—"for tonight." He said, "Oh, that dog shit!" Because we called that croquette dog shit, and it looks like it, and I believe if fried the dog shit would taste like it. This is comical, but this is also sorry truth, very sorry truth.

Hijackers imprisoned in Havana do not have much opportunity for socializing. But there is one man they come to know. His name is "Pepe". Chief of the national immigration prison at the Picota Andres Lucia Costa section near the city docks.

Pepe runs the hijackers' lives. They need his permission for everything from getting an aspirin to getting a rare three-hour pass to leave the prison.

Pepe wins no popularity prize from the hijackers. His exploits were mentioned by

several hijackers. Among them were Steven Pera and Charles Allen ("Lonnie") Schwander, who had been accused of trying to poison Chicago's water supply before flying south; they spoke only briefly with a journalist who spotted them outside the Havana Libre.

Babler got to know Pepe well.

Q: Were you ever physically mistreated?

A: Yes, in the Picota Immigration Police—by Pepe, the boss over there. Once time I needed the work of a dentist. Pepe told me that a dentist is not in his office, and I find out from a friend that a dentist was in his office. "Why you told me that a dentist was not there when he was there?" I asked Pepe. And he said, "Because I don't want to let you out, and what you want to do about it? . . . You can write a letter to Fidel. I don't care." And he said, "Go back to your place or I beat you up." I said, "No. I don't believe you beat me up." And he said, "No?" And he picked up some chair and he beat me with the chair and when he throw me in the cell he shoot in that cell with a gun. But he did not just with me, he did it with John Marques, different men, every man who was in Picota he did something against personally, physically or mentally.

Q: This happens to all the hijackers?

A: It's what happens to all. One time he get into a fight with one Negro, name of [Raymond] Johnson and he throwed him in a cell, hit him with a big—like a baseball bat—locked that cell up . . . That Johnson, the Negro, told him "You are not a revolutionary, you are a dirty opportunist." Pepe . . . he shoot in the cell with his pistol. Every time he get into some argument with us, what is daily, he pick up his gun and point at us. He humiliated me. One time when I [first] went to the Picota prison, Pepe told me that Johnson is a homosexual. So I started treating Johnson as a real homosexual, because the police told me. Later I find out after a fight with him that he's not a homosexual.

Q: How do you treat someone 'like a homosexual'?

A: Well, I treated him like a sissy. And, you know, he said, "Why you talk to me like that?" I said, "Well, I talk with you like that because I believe you like that way of talking." And he said, "You think I am queer or something?" And I said, "No. I don't think so, I know so!" And that is when the fight is coming off. And after I told him how I found out, he had a fight with Pepe. Pepe shooted at him in the cell. He throwed him in the isolation cell. Pepe's bringing me in front of him. And he said, "I told you that he's a queer?" And I said, "Yes, you told me that he's a homosexual." And he throwed me in the next cell.

Q: Pepe shot at you or at Johnson?

A: At Johnson.

Q: Why?

A: Because Johnson spit at him.

Q: Spit at him?

A: Spit at him, because police called him "You black monkey." He was crying in his anger because he come from the United States to Cuba because of American discrimination. He come to Cuba and a revolutionary uniformed person tell him "You black monkey." That is why he spit at him. I think he had a right.

Babler remembers—or almost remembers—the most frightening thing he says happened to him while in custody in Cuba. "I lost six days of my life—that is, May 4 to May 10 [1970]," said Babler. He had been kicking at the door—"making a little disruption"—because he wanted to complain to an investigating lieutenant. As Babler pieces it together, guards entered his cell at the security prison. "Okay, turn against the wall, we're coming in to take you out,"

Babler recalls them saying. Babler turned against the wall. The guards shone what he thinks was a flashlight against the wall.

"I saw different paintings—red, blue, gold, and silver paintings. I think this is some kind of psycho painting. When you want to see red, you see red. When you want to see a snake, you see a snake on the wall. . . . They give me an injection. . . . When I waked up I was in a dark cell. They took me out of there. They put a black hood over my head, they put their foot over my head and shoulder. They put me in a car. A car left the security prison. . . . On the highway, they take the hood off my head and they tell me, 'Okay, now you can sit up.' And I find one of my investigating officials in the front seat—a big Negro man. And that is why I was afraid—because all of them was Negro. That is give me some bad feeling. They was all Negro, and big guys."

Babler figures this was just an effort to scare him. His memory is hazy. He thinks he was unconscious for several days. What he does know is that he was in his security prison cell on May 4—when the guards came—and on May 10 he had been transferred to Principe prison.

Q: Did you ever contemplate suicide when you were in prison?

A: Yes, I was thinking very seriously to kill myself. But I want to see what will happen with me and all this—all this situation. I like to see the end of it.

Q: Did you ever ask to be shot?

A: I written down on paper in the security prison. I told them that if they think I am a CIA, I sign any paper that I am a CIA agent, "Just shoot me, please shoot me." And they said, "No, we don't shoot you. We don't shoot in this country innocent people."

Babler's frustrations continue, even as a "free" man in Cuba. Says Babler "I told them many many times. I even told them about two weeks ago, when they take me out of my job. I said, 'Listen, if you don't want me to work, if you don't want give me an apartment or a little room, don't want to give me a chance to start a new life, you don't let me out of here, then why don't you shoot me? Shoot me or give my freedom.'"

Suicide. For some it seemed the only way out. There have been several attempts. One hijacker is known to have succeeded: **Hank Baron**, aged 17, from Indianapolis. On July 29, 1969, Baron arrived in Havana by hijacking Eastern Airlines' 727 jet out of Chicago. On February 8, 1971 he jumped to his death from the top floor of the stately Hotel Nacional.

Babler knew Baron well. When Babler first entered the Principe prison, he remembers calling down the corridor to find out if there were other Americans on the floor. "And they told me their names. 'I am Larry.' 'I am Barry.' 'My name is Johnson. I hijacked an airplane from Cleveland.' Another one hijacked an airplane from Chicago. There was a young kid from Indianapolis. He hijacked an airplane. His name was Hank." Hank apparently slipped into despair. Babler spoke to him two weeks before he died.

"He was very, very unhappy. He said that he cannot work and he wrote letters to his mother and father. His father is some television producer in Chicago. He said that he don't get reply and he don't know why—he's sure that his father love him, his mother love him. But probably the letter don't go out. He's very worrying because he tried to be a revolutionary. But this revolution is entirely different from what he believed the revolution should be. He talked with me about one and a half, two hours. He explained to me that he has difficulty eating the food that they give him in Siboney. He cannot visit some of his friends. He is restricted because that friends they said

to ship Jeff's body home. Mickey Shorr assumes his son committed suicide. But he has no way of knowing for sure.

John Peabody, another American hijacker, also tried to commit suicide. He made his attempt while in prison. "Johnny . . . six or seven times he jumped out of a top bunk with his head down to the cement," Babler said. "Every time they take him out to the hospital. But he don't died. I think he has too hard head. He's still alive. He married and he live in a little room about two yards wide and three and a half yards long. Is in that his wife and himself."

— In September 1972, another hijacker—a 30-year-old black American with a nervous disorder—jumped off a six-story building in downtown Havana after an argument with his wife. He also survived, but remains paralyzed from the neck down, according to the surgeon who operated on him. The hijacker was then transferred to spend his post-operative recovery period in the same prison cell where he had begun his life in Cuba.

At least two other hijackers who had been set free are now back in Cuban prisons. Both Witt and Grant told of colleagues who were so dissatisfied with life in Cuba that they tried reverse hijackings. The pair tried to hijack Cuban planes back to the United States, but they were captured and returned to prison. Witt and Grant identified one of the hijackers as Walter Hines of Chicago, who they said hijacked a plane in February 1971 on a Chicago-California run. The other they knew only as "Eddie from Detroit".

Cuba itself has never had much of a problem with hijackers. This is hardly surprising. "We now have revolutionary crews on board that would rather crash the plane than let it be hijacked," explained Denis Camacho, director of the University of Havana Law School, who was reassigned to the Cuban Foreign Ministry to work on hijacking. In fact, Cuban pilots are under standing orders, if hijacked, to crash the plane—regardless of the cost to human life. The choice is simple—if the pilots bring their planes back to Cuba, Castro has decreed they will be shot. As an added deterrent, two Cuban troops armed with submachine guns travel in the cockpit on all domestic flights. They're not needed on international flights because only official or officially-approved Cubans are permitted to leave the country.

Cubans seeking political asylum thus have turned increasingly to hijacking boats rather than gamble on an airplane pilot's revolutionary fervor. "There has never been a necessity to do this extreme thing," Camacho said of the orders to crash a hijacked plane. "You know why? Because the hijackers don't have enough courage to die for the things they believe in."

Few of the American hijackers were genuinely seeking political asylum in Cuba. They are teenagers frustrated with the monotony or the discipline of their lives, hardened criminals seeking a final way out of the sentences that hang over them, black power activists with dreams of a truly egalitarian society where discrimination, poverty and prejudice are a thing of the past, unbalanced psychiatric cases who never think of the lives they are endangering or of their own doomed fate, misguided idealists and men desperate to grab front-page headlines. They were men who felt trapped in the United States and wanted out. Now the lives they left do not seem so bad.

"Ninety-five percent will go home [if they are permitted]," said Babler. They will go home because they made a mistake."

Q Do you think there is an answer to the hijacking problem?

A: . . . To stop the hijacking? Let go back all the hijackers from Cuba who wish to go back. And when they go back and talk with people and talk with press there will not be one person who wish to hijack airplane any more. Only need to be a mentally idiot who will hijack airplane in the future.

Q Do you have a message for anyone in the United States who might be thinking of hijacking a plane to Cuba?

A Well, you poor suckers don't believe me? I know a black brother of yours—[Raymond] Johnson and Barry and "Cleveland", you know him in Cleveland, Ohio, you know him by "Cleveland"—Larry and Barry—you must remember them—Larry and Barry, who hijacked a plane in '70. They was black power movement men. And now they wish to be back—not in Ohio where there is not too much discrimination—but back in Mississippi or Alabama or Georgia, because they have a different idea of discrimination now. So that is what that black brother thought. If you are not black—I am a white man, and I have the same experience. You know what we say—we hijackers over here, one to the other, "You asked for it, when you hijacked the airplane, you asked for it." But I don't believe, you believe me, you American people and especially you fanatic revolutionary people. Well, come over here and find out. But remember, I say that you will say the same thing that we say over here—"Well, Johnson, you asked for it", and Johnson tell me 1000 times, "Well, Gabor, you asked for it," when I was complaining to him, "Oh, Goddamit, why I did it? Why I come to Cuba?" and Johnson told me many times, "Well, you asked for it, you bum."

Q

were not revolutionary people and "Don't visit them anymore." Sometimes he need to close his mouth when he want to say something, because he know that if he tell official what he really feel, he will go back to the security prison. What he is, he is—not afraid, that word is not enough for Hank. Hank was never in prison in his life, and he's only 17 years old. All his life he lived good, the good American life, and he comed to Cuba because he had that sensitive feeling for humanity.

"I told him, 'Hank, your place is not here in Cuba. Your place is with the Peace Corps, because you are a very good man. You like to help humanity.' He said, 'But I love Che Guevara.' I said, 'Well, maybe Che Guevara had different ideas than other revolutionaries in Cuba.' He said, 'Now I know that for sure—that Che Guevara and these people are two entirely different ideas.'"

Q Was there a funeral for him?

A "I don't know. I was in custody at the time. You know, at the time, nobody can go out of Immigration with a pass. They told us that. "Oh, we are expecting some visitors from Immigration Nacional." A few days later, we found out what was the reason. Hank was made suicide.

Then there is the case of 19-year-old Jeff Shorr of Detroit. In 1967, young Shorr hijacked an Eastern Airlines jetliner en route from Miami to New York. Young Shorr got off in Havana. Eventually, his father, Mickey Shorr, owner of a stereo/audio store, was contacted by the State Department. The Cuban government had passed word through the Swiss ambassador that Jeff had died in prison. That was all they said. Since then, the senior Shorr says the Cubans have refused to let him come to Cuba and have refused