Cubans Describe Invasion, Prison; Urge US Support

By CHARLES DEMITZ

“We were well-armed. Castro was better armed.” The wry summation of the Cuban invasion attempt came from Dr. Toni Pinara at Hanszen's College Night last Thursday.

Dr. Pinara, a member of the ill-starred invasion brigade and a former professor of political science at Cuba's Central University, was only one of four guest speakers at Hanszen.

SHARING THE platform with him were Robert Verano, a 20-year-old veteran of the invasion, and only recently released from prison along with Dr. Pinara; Gerald Smith, a refugee now with a local oil company; and I. H. Mercier, Mr. Verona's brother-in-law.

Mercier took the floor first, outlining the facts as he knew them concerning the air cover supposedly promised the invaders. He pointed out that, although the aspiring counter-revolutionaries were never specifically promised air support, they were repeatedly assured, “Don't worry about the air; the heavens will be yours.” The rest of the evening was devoted to answering the audience's questions covering the general realm of Cuban affairs.

AFTER TOUCHING briefly on the invasion itself, Verona, nephew of a Cuban Prime Minister before Batista's coup, described his imprisonment.

“We were all loaded into trucks and taken to the prison; two men died on the way because there was not enough air. Because we had no medical care in the prison, one man died. They did not give us much food, and it was always the same, every day for eighteen months.”

He told of the mass trial of the prisoners: “At three o'clock

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in the morning before the trial, the guards took us out of the room one by one and tried to get us to make a confession. None of us did. At the trial, all the prisoners stood up and began singing the national anthem. The guards could not stop us.

When Pinara spoke to the prisoners’ encounter with Castro: “When he came to the door of the room we were all in, he stopped and asked us if he could come in. It was his prison, but he asked if he could come in. He told us not to be afraid that we would have to pay for our ransom within two months. He said he knew this because—Verona smiled—‘he had friends in Washington.’”

Pinara, Smith interpreting, described the effects of Communist infiltration in Cuba. “In crowded conditions for the massive efforts Castro is making to win over the children and teenagers. He estimated that 90% of the Cuban people oppose Castro, but because of the 20,000 ‘Russian occupation troops,’ efforts at resistance are hamstrung.”

**SMITH AND Verona concurred immediately.** “The president of the University of Havana is the former head of the Cuban Communist Party.” “I saw five or six churches. All of them were board rooms.”

Pinara considered the overthrow of Castro impracticable without invasion. “Guerrillas cannot win against the Russian troops. When we were in Castro, they must be army against army,” Smith implied that the overthrow of Castro’s regime is required: “In the U.S. now there are 200,000 Cuban refugees—and 196 different action groups, each one with a different plan.”

Describing a scene that had moved him deeply, Verona said quietly: “We were all wearing yellow T-shirts—when they asked us the color we had chosen for the brigade. Just before they moved us to the coast and released us, they made us put on civilian clothes.”

**WHEN THEY saw us marching to the trucks, the people did not cry out.** The trucks were at one of the marchers pulled away a yellow handkerchief from his pocket, and then they knew we were the brigade. They began shouting and calling to us as we marched. When I think of when I was a prisoner, I remember always the crowd of people calling to us . . .

En route to the ship, the trucks of prisoners passed through an airport installation. Pinara painted a grim picture. “There were at least 200 Russians standing there, and the prisoners were trail.”

“As we went by,” Verona drawled with irony, “One of the Russian pilots yelled, ‘Mercenaries, go home!’”