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ALI LAMEDA:
A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF
A PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE IN THE
DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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- It seeks the *release* of men and women detained anywhere for their beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided they have neither used nor advocated violence. These are termed '*prisoners of conscience*'.
- It advocates *fair and early trials* for all political prisoners and works on behalf of such persons detained without charge or without trial.
- It opposes the *death penalty* and *torture* or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of *all prisoners* without reservation.

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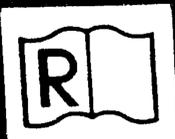
DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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FOREWORD

With this publication Amnesty International hopes to make available to a wide international audience the personal account of a Venezuelan poet of his experience of political imprisonment in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Señor Ali Lameda was adopted in March 1974 by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience and we campaigned widely for his release. He has now provided his own description of the circumstances relating to his initial arrest, a period of one year of detention without trial, an intervening period of house arrest, followed by his second arrest. He was then put on trial, and he describes those proceedings which resulted in his being sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment with forced labour. He served six years of his sentence. The conditions of his imprisonment were such that he says he was fortunate not to have had to serve the remainder of his sentence.

The following account is the personal story of Sr. Lameda. Amnesty International has decided to publish his account in the belief that it is relevant to an understanding of some aspects of political imprisonment in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The work of those organizations which, like Amnesty International, is concerned with human rights has been hampered over the years by the severely restricted flow of information leaving North Korea and the consequent scarcity of information relating to human rights observance and violations in the country. Amnesty International has commented in its Annual Report over a number of years that it had not been able to obtain information relevant to the human rights situation in North Korea. We have also tried to seek permission to send delegates to visit Pyongyang and speak to the government, but have received no response.

Amnesty International is of the view that the experiences of Sr. Lameda and his late friend and colleague, the Frenchman M. Jacques Sedillot, are of significance. M. Sedillot was arrested at the same time as Ali Lameda and suffered the same treatment in prison. They were both released at the same time, but by then the elderly Jacques Sedillot was in such ill-health that he died soon after his release while still in North Korea, before he could return to Paris. These have remained the only two cases of political imprisonment in North Korea known

individually to Amnesty International, and both were the subject of Amnesty International adoption and campaign. As the reader will see, in Sr. Lameda's account, he describes what he had observed of other prisoners.

In publishing Sr. Lameda's autobiographical observations, Amnesty International believes he has tried to record his own experiences and what he was able to observe.

Thomas Hammarberg
Chairman of the International
Executive Committee
Amnesty International



Ali Lameda is a distinguished poet and active member of the Venezuelan Communist Party. Aged 55, he has published many volumes of poetry, and his work is well-known in the Spanish-speaking world.

In 1966, Ali Lameda went to Pyongyang at the invitation of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and took charge of the Spanish section of the Department of Foreign Publications run by the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In that capacity, he met the North Korean Head of State, Kim Il Sung, and government ministers.

In September 1967, he was arrested and interrogated, and was imprisoned for 12 months without trial. Following his release, he was placed under house arrest but shortly afterwards he was arrested again and put on trial. His trial was a parody of justice; he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for allegedly having attempted to sabotage, spy and introduce infiltrators while in North Korea.

He was subjected to brutal treatment during the first time of his arrest but his second period of imprisonment was marked by particularly atrocious ill-treatment. His case was taken up by the Government of Venezuela and by the President of Rumania; Amnesty International adopted him as a prisoner of conscience and campaigned internationally for his release.

Ali Lameda was eventually released in 1974 after having served more than six years in solitary confinement. He has since returned to Venezuela and resumed his work as a poet.

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6 To understand fully my experiences in detention in North Korea, it is necessary first to explain a little why I was in Korea and the prevailing atmosphere in the country from the point of view of a foreigner. This will perhaps explain some of the limitations of my experience and knowledge.

During the time I was working in Korea, at the invitation of the North Korean government, I was almost totally isolated from Korean people generally. I dealt only with certain individuals, who were responsible for my work and worked directly with me. No other personal contact was possible. Apart from the Koreans who worked in the Department of Foreign Publications in Pyongyang who supervised my work, I did not have regular communication with functionaries of the governing North Korean Communist Party.

I was granted many privileges which, by the way, I did not ask for: I lived with my companion* in an apartment at the Pyongyang International Hotel and had the use of a chauffeur and car. We lived altogether in great comfort, but nevertheless we felt stifled. I was never able to approach any Korean on a personal level, for instance to invite him and his family to dine with us or to visit his home myself. I discussed this overwhelming feeling of isolation with other foreigners with whom I came into contact and, without exception, they confirmed my own feelings. However much my sympathy lay with the great work of national construction of the Korean people, I could never communicate

* Ali Lameda's friend, a foreign woman, with whom he lived in Pyongyang at the time.

directly with them and learn more about the workings of Korean society, but constantly felt the barrier which had been erected around me.

Briefly, my work in North Korea involved translation into the Spanish language of certain materials, such as the collected works of Kim Il Sung and the promotion of these texts throughout the Spanish-speaking world. I worked at the Government Department of Foreign Publications, with other foreigners, engaged on similar projects also at the invitation of the North Korean government, with whom I became friendly. One of these colleagues, for example, was Jacques Sedillot, a Frenchman, who was arrested at the same time, in September 1967. But we were tried separately, and, as in my case, Sedillot was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. (For the case of Jacques Sedillot, see Appendix I, pp. 22 - 24. For a brief account of Ali Lameda's personal history, see Appendix II, pp. 26 - 27.)

FIRST ARREST AND DETENTION IN AN INTERNAL SECURITY PRISON

My arrest came as a complete surprise. Only three days earlier, I had been present at a big dinner given by the Director of the Department of Foreign Publications (who was, I believe, later arrested and imprisoned in connection with the charges against me), and I was not aware of any undue tension. Not long previously I had expressed some uncertainty about my work, as did my colleague Sedillot; we both felt that the exaggerated claims that were being made by the North Korean authorities regarding the progress made in their country would be considered too blatant propaganda in the societies we were trying to reach through our translations, but such reservations had been voiced only privately in the Department.

Nine people came to my apartment to arrest me. Two of them were in the uniform of the police, the others were agents of what is called Public Security. I was told I was being arrested as an enemy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, having violated Korean law. Nothing more specific was said to me, and they were not willing to discuss the laws or charges related to my arrest.

I was taken to a prison cell and interrogated by the authorities. It was demanded that I "confess". I was denied food, on occasions taken out of my cell at 12 noon and not allowed to return until midnight, during which time I was continuously interrogated. There were many ways in which they would apply pressure. The usual pattern of the interview would be that I was ordered to "confess". To this I would reply "To what do I have to confess?" I would then be told: "You know what there is to confess. Talk". I would insist: "But if it is you who are accusing me, you tell me". So it went on, always. They sit a man down and try to convince him he has committed crimes, they insult him and demand a "confession".

Hunger was used as a control. No more than 300 grams of food per day was given to each prisoner. The conditions of the prison were appalling. No change of clothes in years, nor of food plates. The place lacked proper sanitary facilities. And then there was the isolation of prisoners. Young prison guards newly assigned to the camp often expressed their amazement at such conditions.

The food provided in the prison was fit only for animals. For months a prisoner is deprived of adequate food. In my opinion, it is preferable to be beaten, as it is possible to grit one's teeth and withstand physical beating. To be continually starving is worse. They didn't beat or torture me like they did the others. However, once the guard gave me a beating and kicked me with his boots, also hitting me on my bare feet which were badly swollen. He kicked and punched me just for not having saluted him or something like that. No, I was not tortured, if by this one means the systematic infliction of pain but, if terrible hunger and continual nastiness come under this definition, then I was.

In fact, beating was also used as a means of persuasion during interrogation. Whilst in my cell, I could hear the cries of other prisoners. You can soon learn to distinguish whether a man is crying from fear, or pain or from madness in such a place. I could not change my clothing at all, and a prisoner is soon covered in dirt, living in those filthy cells. The cells are also damp, and I should say that for eight months during my first period in detention I was sick with fever. I believe at times I lost consciousness.

It is impossible for me to say how many people were at that prison. It could certainly have been more than a thousand. The cells are extremely small, perhaps two meters long by one meter wide, and three meters high. There are no rights for the prisoner, no visits, parcels of cigarettes or food or opportunity to read a book or newspaper, or write. The process of "rehabilitation", as they call it, must start straightaway, the "self-examination" of the crimes that the prisoner has reportedly committed, to purify the self.

Apart from the noise of people crying out and screaming which could be heard at times, I also knew of people who coughed blood. There was very little medical attention; if the doctor did visit it was only to prescribe something for the fever from which all prisoners suffered. I once spoke to such a doctor, who did in fact tell me that he was unhappy with the work he was detailed to do by the Ministry of Security, since his medical practice consisted of dispensing palliatives for fever and diarrhoea. As far as I know, the only medicines used to treat the prisoners were terramicine and edible oil.

Prison regimen was always the same: the prisoner sat for 16 hours a day looking at the warders and the prison bars. The cell had bars from the ceiling to the floor, and in the middle was a passage where the guards patrolled. Prisoners must stay awake throughout the day, the official explanation went, since how could a prisoner continually ponder his guilt if he slept?

We were given food rations three times a day: at seven o'clock, one o'clock and then again at seven o'clock. The meal consisted of a piece of dirty bread, weighing about 250 grams, and a bowl of soup, which was water with a few pieces of vegetable in it. The metal dishes the food was served from were always filthy, the same ones the prisoners had been using for years.

RELEASE AND SECOND ARREST

I was held prisoner by the Ministry of the Interior for a year. In the meantime, my companion had remained living in our apartment. When I was released a year later, I was in a terrible physical condition due to the treatment I had received in prison. I was led to believe that, after going through a period of house arrest of two months, I was to be released unconditionally, that I could not leave the country with my companion, but let her set off first. I was allowed to accompany her to the airport, and I returned to the apartment to pack my bags.

Then, at about five or six o'clock in the evening, the police returned. They seized all my belongings in the apartment and told me to make a note of everything I had there, my books and so on. The behaviour of the arresting officers was much more brutal and abrupt than it had been at the time of my first arrest. I asked why I was being arrested a second time, and was given the answer: "You know why". They told me that I had failed to keep my word, and had made certain denunciations, again resorted to propaganda against Korea, resuming my role as an imperialist spy. Presumably, they had installed a microphone in our apartment and recorded my conversation with my companion. What did they expect me to say to her, when I returned from a year's detention in such a bad physical condition, having lost 22 kilograms in weight*, my body covered in sores and suffering haemorrhages. I was a very sick man, and it was obvious to my companion what treatment I had suffered in detention without my having to spell out what I had undergone. My literary work had been confiscated on the orders of the Party Central Committee; it was described as "bourgeois filth", and the authorities wanted me to tell my companion that on my own orders it was to be burnt. It was unbelievable that I should tell her any such thing about my work, my life's work. Certainly, this period when I was re-arrested, after believing I was at last to be released, was one of the worst moments I was forced to endure.

* More than 50 lbs

TRIAL

Again I was interrogated, and this time the conditions, the food ration, were even worse. However, I was not brought to trial before a tribunal, if it is possible to call what happened a trial. The tribunal was under the direction of the Ministry of Internal Security and, apart from members of the tribunal, there was a representative from what they call the High Court who acted as the judge and a prosecutor; I was provided with a so-called defence counsel. The only people present apart from members of the tribunal were two uniformed policemen and a young man who acted as interpreter. The trial lasted for one day, from nine o'clock in the morning till five o'clock in the afternoon. I was suffering from fever and did not eat all day. It was stressed throughout the trial that I had committed a political offence, which was considered far worse than offences by common criminals.

The pattern of my trial followed the interrogations I had undergone. It was demanded that I confess my guilt. The tribunal did not make any specific accusations - there were no formal charges - but the accused has to accuse himself before the tribunal. Thus there was no necessity for the tribunal to produce any evidence. I had no right to defend myself, I could only admit guilt. The basis for the tribunal's condemnations is the confession of the prisoner and the prosecutor told me that I should speak out and confess everything, to rid myself of my crimes. I insisted that I had committed no crimes, that I had only come to Korea as a servant of the government. During the trial, I asked for a lawyer of my choice and that the tribunal should be made open, but such demands were dismissed as bourgeois. When I tried to ask questions, I was abruptly interrupted and told that I had no rights in defending myself. The prosecutor eventually informed me that I had been in Korea to sabotage, spy and introduce infiltrators. To this I could only reply that I had been invited to Korea by the government and that allegations that I was under the control of the CIA were absurd. The prosecutor read a small extract from the Penal Code, which emphasized the gravity of my crime. As a political offender, I had committed a crime against the basis of the Korean state. In summing up, the prosecutor demanded the maximum penalty for the crimes I had committed. The so-called defence counsel, whom I had seen for just half an hour, made

a lengthy eulogy of Kim Il Sung, and in lodging my plea, asked for 20 years' imprisonment. The tribunal retired for just five minutes and then returned to sentence me, to 20 years' imprisonment with forced labour.

IMPRISONMENT

Ten minutes after I had been sentenced, I was brought a bowl of soup, since I had been before the tribunal all day without even drinking a glass of water. I was told that I would be sent to a prison camp, for rehabilitation, where I was to learn an occupation, thus rehabilitating myself through work. At the end of my trial, I asked if I would be allowed to receive letters from my family and friends whilst in detention at the camp, and I was assured that this would be so by members of the tribunal. However, I received absolutely nothing during my terms of imprisonment, in spite of the numerous parcels and letters that were apparently sent by my family and friends in Europe. I appealed to the camp authorities several times during the early period of my detention, that I should be allowed to write to my family to ask for a small amount of money with which to buy some sugar, for example, but my requests were continually refused. They never gave me the chance to learn a trade as they had claimed. They may have decided not to let a foreigner such as myself mix with hundreds of Koreans in the camp or in the workshop.

I was transferred to the concentration camp by van, handcuffed to the bars of the van. The temperature outside was very much below freezing point. Opposite me in the van, sitting on a chair, was the guard, who throughout the journey spent his time loading and unloading his gun in a threatening manner. The roads along which we travelled were dirt tracks. Outside, the howls of wolves could be heard. The journey lasted about three hours, and by the time I arrived at the camp, I was in such a poor condition that the captain who initially received me immediately sent for medicines. I was then pushed into a filthy hole, where I slept on the bare floor, with no blanket or mattress, in freezing temperatures. This was, however, only a temporary cell, where I remained constantly handcuffed for the three weeks that I was there, so that I felt my wrists would break with the strain.

Following this, I was transferred to the main camp, only a couple of kilometres away. This was done at about ten o'clock at night, still in the middle of winter. The cell I was then taken to again had no heating, except for a pipe running through it which became warm for approximately five minutes each night. The windows were iced up and my feet froze. My feet remained in this condition for a month and a half, my toes were swollen with frostbite. I can still feel the effects of this to the present day. Some doctors did eventually come to see me, but by then my toenails had all dropped off and my feet were covered in sores.

I later learned that the name of the camp was Suriwon, after the nearby town, and that I had been put in a punishment cell, which should not really have happened, but since I was a foreigner, and it was the first time a foreigner had ever been held at the camp, there was no isolated cell in which to hold me. As a foreigner, I was not to be allowed to come into contact with the other prisoners who have not been sentenced or for those who have disobeyed camp regulations, wilfully damaging a machine during work or some such offence. The periods these prisoners spent in the punishment cells, however, were comparatively short, since every prisoner in isolation there was not available for work, and no prisoner is permitted to remain idle during detention in this camp.

There were some 6,000 or more people held at the camp, according to information gleaned from the guards or orderlies. Some of the guards and orderlies would communicate with the prisoners. Apparently, the camp was a huge circular place, with an enormous courtyard. One doctor told me that there were about 1,200 people sick in the camp, who were kept in a special part, so with that large number sick, I calculated, using all the information I could gather, that the total number of prisoners would be no lower than 6,000 to 8,000 people. The prisoners were forced to work for 12 hours a day, mechanical work, making jeeps for example, which was, of course, unpaid. There was no agricultural work done at this camp. But outside the camp there were several farms worked by political prisoners, and potatoes, root vegetables, pumpkins and 'ahuyama' were grown there.

According to a man whom I met whilst at this camp, there were as many as 150,000 people detained throughout the whole country. It was possible to piece together little scraps of information that the guards let slip. I calculated that, if in the camp in which I was detained, there were about 6,000 to 8,000 inmates, and that in the whole of North Korea there may be as many as 20 such camps, including places where women prisoners were kept, the total prison and camp population would be in the region of 150,000, comprising both political and criminal prisoners.

The main source of my information was the orderlies, who were themselves prisoners but who, through good behaviour, had won the privilege of becoming an orderly. They still had to work hard, but at least they could move around the camp, serving the meals three times a day. Some of the orderlies had even been in other camps before being transferred to Suriwon, so I could be sure of the existence of other similar camps.

Women were also held at the camp. One day, when I had been in the punishment cell, in isolation, I observed by chance a group of about 200 women arriving at the camp. Later, I discovered that some of them were imprisoned for theft, for example, and one of them, I was told, was imprisoned because of her habit of smoking cigarettes. Apparently she was the wife of an employee of the Ministry of Commerce, about 33 years old or so, and had two daughters. The woman had had to keep the fact that she smoked secretly even from her husband, and would smoke only in the toilet of their apartment. It was whilst at the office where she worked that she was accused, by a colleague, of smoking, since the colleague could smell stale cigarette smoke about her person. The woman was summoned by the party cell to which she belonged and was, what they call "sent down to production", which meant being sent to work in either the iron or mining industry. She spent two years doing this harsh labour, separated from her husband and family. However, she had continued to smoke cigarettes there and was one day discovered doing so. Again, she was summoned before her party cell and this time was sentenced to a term of imprisonment in the concentration camp, to rid her of the vice of smoking cigarettes. For a woman to smoke in Korea is a crime which merits this type of sentence;

only the old women are exempted from this. Women may be given access to education in Korea, but there is widespread discrimination against them in Korean society. In the camp, though, the women must also work, at making mattresses. This was just an example of the type of prisoner who could be found at the camp.

Sometimes conditions in the camp were made even worse. During my third year of imprisonment, the food ration, meagre as it was, was suddenly decreased and in addition the work targets set for the prisoners were raised. This sort of treatment reduced grown men to weeping over the food they were given.

There was no rest day from the work prisoners are compelled to undertake. The only days prisoners are allowed to remain idle are the so-called "free" days, which include the first day of January and May, and probably also Liberation Day and the Leader's Day. Otherwise the prisoners face a 12-hour working day.

A periodical was produced at the camp, which was aimed at assisting the prisoners in rehabilitation. It was entitled *Marching Forward* and gave news of the great deeds being performed by Kim Il Sung, to spur on the prisoners to greater efforts. In fact, it was possible for a prisoner to have his sentence reduced through maintaining good work performance. Thus a prisoner might serve only 12 years out of a 15-year sentence. But my experience, of serving only seven years out of 20 would not happen to a Korean prisoner. In this I was privileged. 9

APPENDIX I: JACQUES SEDILLOT

(This description of the late M. Sedillot is by Sr. Lameda.)

The North Koreans had met him in Algiers in the early 1960s. A magnificent man, truly internationalist, honest and courageous. A linguist like myself. He was reserved and never indulged in gossip. He had taken part in several of the most important struggles of the 20th century: he went to fight in Spain and became a Colonel in the Republican Army. Years later he went to Algiers. And when he was already more than 60 years old he accepted the invitation of the North Koreans to go to their country to work as Head of the French section of the Department of Foreign Publications, which was virtually a foreign ministry of information and propaganda. Sedillot did regarding French the equivalent of my work in Spanish. We became very good colleagues and comrades.

It was grotesque for it to be said that he was a spy, an "agent of French imperialism", as was claimed during his trial. He had been invited by the North Koreans to work with and for them. And one day he was requested to go to France to make enquiries on the effects of North Korea propaganda and also to recruit some additional French translators for the team in Pyongyang. The outcome of the enquiries was not very positive and Sedillot reported this to the North Korean government. The opinion of the French people was that this propaganda revealed nothing which is very understandable, given that they are used to persuasive propaganda and are such a lucid people. When such people encounter propaganda which says that, at 14, Kim Il Sung was the leader of the Communist Party, had launched a revolution and directed an army - a child leading a communist party revolution in a country without a communist party, beating the Japanese army, and so on, it seems very hard to believe. Commenting ironically, the French said they had heard about Sandino, but not a word about Kim Il Sung in the 1920s. Otherwise, they would have sent him some assistance. Sedillot transmitted this information which is what everybody says when they read those publications. But Sedillot had not been speaking ill of Korea and we always maintained that whatever questions we raised inside the country, we would not repeat them outside as, in the end, we were with the Koreans, and we left these faults at home, so to speak.

Sedillot got together a team, but, as it turned out, the team was not accepted. I want to stress that a member of the Party Bureau himself stressed to us the urgent need for French and Spanish translators and workers, to help in the Department of Foreign Publications. However, while Sedillot was already in Paris, one of the Party officials had an argument with me about who had given the orders. He told me to tell Sedillot in Paris not to bring these people. I replied that the order came from themselves, but he asked who had said they needed cultural workers. I answered that it was a member of their own political bureau and that was why we were there; they had given the man this task and he would not have gone to France if they had not paid his fare. They had paid for it all. I had a copy of the document with which Sedillot went to France, firstly to contact French cultural groups to diffuse the Korean programmes there and, what is more important, Sedillot produced a very good programme himself, as the French had agreed to publish not just books about Korea, but also gramophone records. Sedillot also spoke with the French Communist Party who gave him access to all of their publishing work, cultural enterprises and records. From North Korea's point of view, he achieved more than enough. He produced a very good report. When he showed it to me, I told him what a good report it was, a first-class piece of work, but, as regards Kim Il Sung, he should, I suggested, obliterate that or they would question him about it. But he defended it, saying that he had taken an opinion poll in France, he had questioned between 200 and 300 people, and the report was a fair result of the poll. The Koreans should accordingly reflect and say "We should change our technique and introduce another form of propaganda, because there they are not accepting this propaganda".

At the time of Sedillot's trip to France, some rows were going at the top of the Party and the government hierarchy. Park Hun Chol, a military hero and one of the top party and government men, fell in disgrace. When Sedillot returned, Park Hun Chol had fallen from power and was in prison, and all this signified a very important change in Korean politics which, among other things, was reflected in the exaggerated exaltation of the personality of Kim Il Sung, who was already accorded great importance. This was in part connected with the Chinese cultural revolution. When the Chinese began their lunatic exaltation in Peking, raising up a great man who had no need of it, the North Koreans also further elevated their

leader and there was a political change. To aggravate things further, the seven-year economic plan failed during those days and it had to be extended for another three years. This was a great blow to Korean pride as they had been announcing vigorously that it was being fulfilled, and then to have to retract because it was not fulfilled. Apparently, Park Hun Chol was accused in connection with the failure of the plan. It was in this atmosphere that Jacques Sedillot and I came to grief. One evening an enormous dinner was offered for us at our place of work. Three days later we were arrested. Jacques Sedillot was accused of spying for French imperialism and of coming to North Korea to sabotage the country, under the orders of French imperialism, of being an infiltrator. He had no opportunity to defend himself, he was forcefully asked to admit guilt. He did not. He took an inflexible attitude throughout the trial. After his release in 1975 he was very ill. His intention to return to France, where his mother was dying, remained unfulfilled. His mother died, and this was followed by his death on 6 January 1976 in Pyongyang.)

APPENDIX II: ALI LAMEDA

(an autobiographical description of Sr. Lameda)

Ali Lameda was born on 12 June 1924 in Carora, in the inland state of Lara, Venezuela. His teacher and friend, Chio Zubillaga, a Venezuelan, strongly influenced his intellectual and political education, which led him to Marxism. On finishing his bachillerato, he went to Columbia to study medicine. He returned to Venezuela several years later and devoted himself entirely to literature and militancy in the Venezuelan Communist Party. Later he travelled to Czechoslovakia where he stayed for five years. By then, he had already written *Evocación a Rusia* (Evocation to Russia), one of his most important poems. He learnt Czech and was responsible for the first Spanish translation of the Czechoslovakian authors Volker, Nezval, Neuman and Svatopluk. He also translated the French poets Rimbaud, Valéry, Mallarmé and Baudelaire into Spanish.

In the 1950s, he wrote *El Corazón de Venezuela* (The Heart of Venezuela) with more than 500 pages on the nature and history of his country, originally inspired by the chronicles of the geographer Codazzi and the scientist and explorer Humboldt. Years later, in Korea, he wrote *Los Juncos Resplandecidos* (The Glittering Reeds), a work in honour of the Vietnamese people and about their war. He also wrote a lot on Korea itself. As a poet, he declared himself against "facilismo" and superficiality; he does not believe in "the Muses" but in creation as the fruit of work. On leaving the prison camp and Korea in 1974, he told a journalist "They killed everything except my memory". By this, Lameda meant the 400 poems and more than 300 sonnets which he had composed mentally - without pen or paper - during his seven years' imprisonment, and which a South American magazine described as "a gigantic creative effort in a world of horror and misery".

Ali Lameda first contacted the North Koreans in Berlin around 1965. (The idea he had formed of North Korea was that of a very important citadel of socialism, one of the vanguards of world revolution, which was making rapid

progress in fundamental reforms in its own society.) In the diplomatic and cultural circles of East Berlin, Lameda was known as a writer and distinguished member of one of the South American communist parties. At that time, the North Koreans were seeking people to collaborate with them on foreign policy vis à vis different regions of the world, and they were recruiting for proficient translators and editors in French as well as Spanish. Lameda was invited to go and work in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. He arrived there in mid-1966 and took charge of the Spanish section of the Department of Foreign Publications which was under direct control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His work involved all aspects of information and propaganda for the Spanish-speaking world. He knew personally the North Korean Head of State, Kim Il Sung, and government ministers, particularly Park Hun Chol. On 23 September 1967, a dinner was held in his honour in the Department of Foreign Publications.

He was imprisoned on 27 September 1967, and interrogated and maltreated in the buildings belonging to the Ministry of the Interior where he remained in detention for 12 months. He was then put under house arrest. Days later, his home was again broken into and partially wrecked, his literary work of many years confiscated, and he was taken to the Ministry of the Interior. Several days later, he was taken to court - his trial lasted about nine hours - and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. He was then moved to the concentration and work camp of Suriwon. For a long time his case was not known outside Korea. In the early 1970s, his case was investigated by Amnesty International which led to the organization adopting him as a prisoner of conscience and to an international campaign for his release. His case had been prominently featured by Amnesty International, which he thinks hastened his release. During these years, the Government of Venezuela had also been very active, working for his release through diplomatic channels. Then, according to Ali Lameda, the President of Rumania took an interest in his case and interceded directly on his behalf. Ali Lameda was released and left North Korea in May 1974. After medical treatment in Eastern Europe, his physical condition had improved sufficiently for him to be able to travel home to Venezuela and resume his work as a poet.

ALI LAMEDA: SELECTED POEMS

Editor's note: Ali Lameda had already published several volumes of poems before he went to North Korea in 1966. These included several books of poetry: *Polvo del Tiempo*, *Evocación a Rusia*, *El Corazón de Venezuela*. Despite denial of writing materials, he composed poems during his two periods of imprisonment in North Korea, which he committed to memory. These are now available in two volumes. In addition, Ali Lameda wrote more poems after his release, which were published in a collected volume in 1978. Examples of his poems from this volume are given.

The poems have been translated from Spanish by Tom Jones, an American poet and lawyer, who is a member of the United States section of Amnesty International. His book of poems, *No Prisoners*, was published in 1976, and his book of translations into English of the work of the Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez was published in 1972.

EL PAJARO Y LA MUERTE

Después que pasó el furioso
alud, la horrible marea,
apenas quedó en la aldea
un pájaro precioso
de plumaje granatado,
que sobre las ruinas canta
con tanto pesar y tanta
tristeza que ya da goce.
Sólo la muerte conoce
la clave de su garganta.

Los Juncos Resplandecidos

BIRD AND DEATH (El Pájaro y la Muerte)

After the furious passage
of the avalanche, of the horrible tide,
there was left in the village barely
a single precious bird
of reddest scarlet plumage,
that sings over the ruins
with so much sorrow and so much
grief that it even gives joy.
Only death knows
the key to its throat.

Los Juncos Resplandecidos

(Ed. - This poem is from a collection of more than 200 short poems, concentrating on the theme of the war in Vietnam, which Ali Lameda composed and committed to memory, since he was denied writing materials, during his first period of imprisonment. These poems were put on paper in the short period of his release and sent out of North Korea, and were eventually published in his collected work *Los Juncos Resplandecidos* (The Glittering Reeds), published in Caracas in July 1969.)

LA PIEDAD

*Me doy pausa por ver lo que alborozaa,
pues tras el sueño de oro animan densas
brujas de sed, bocas de mugre inmensas.
Un túmulo en el pecho nos solloza.*

*La vida, ya en abstracto, en su carroza
qué bien; mas, entre vómitos y ofensas
triunfa la vida real, y fluye a expensas
de su excremento y su marchita broza.*

*Por ser así, padezco lunas, hambres,
cruels cristos de pus, sexo y enjambres.
Y porque sentí el hondo escalofrío.*

*de la piedad, tras recibir el beso
de Judas y el verdugo, doy en hueso
la explicación de este infortunio mío.*

Sonetos del Viajero Enlutado

PIETA (La Piedad)

*It gives me pause to see what exhilarates
because behind the dream of gold move thick
witches of thirst, immense mouths of filth.
A tomb in the breast sobs us.*

*Life, in the abstract, in its great coach
how nice; but among vomiting and outrage
the real life triumphs, it flows at the expense
of its excrement and withered rot.*

*To be as I am, I suffer moons, hungers,
cruel christs of pus, sex and swarmings.
And because I felt the deep shivering*

*of piety, after receiving the kiss
of Judas and the torturer, I give in bone
the explanations of this my misfortune.*

Sonetos del Viajero Enlutado

(Ed. - In the second long period of imprisonment, Ali Lameda persevered in the writing of poetry, again by composing and committing his poems to memory. Unlike the poems in *Los Juncos Resplandecidos*, the poems of this second period of imprisonment are somewhat long, typically of four stanzas, and are thematically wide-ranging, examining his beliefs and his experiences. These poems he put on paper following his release in 1974, and were published in a collected work, *Sonetos del Viajero Enlutado* (Sonnets of a Traveller in Mourning), published in Caracas in April 1975.)

EL EXTRAÑO ABISMO

*Hoy, saliendo del pecho de mí mismo,
vi arriba mi mañana ya difunta,
vivo mi ayer, y así de punta a punta
juntóse todo en un extraño abismo.*

*Lepra suntuosa, ondeante paroxismo
la vida viene y va con su pregunta
fría y brutal, y así nos descoyunta,
se vuelve así gangrena y espejismo.*

*Hoy vi en mi harapo vestidura de oro,
y un momento vibré feliz, sonoro,
pues comprendí, del cielo a mi garganta,*

*por qué en el tiempo de áspera ceniza
cuando mi corazón se encoleriza
se me hace rosa el pensamiento y canta.*

Sonetos del Viajero Enlutado

THE STRANGE ABYSS (El Extraño Abismo)

*Today, taking leave of my own breast,
I saw beyond my already dead tomorrow,
I live my yesterday, and thus from end to end
all came together in one strange abyss.*

*Sumptuous leprosy, undulating paroxysm
life comes and goes with its cold,
brutal question, and so it dislocates us,
and so return gangrene and mirage.*

*Today I saw in my rags a suit of gold,
and one moment trembled in happiness, sonorous,
then I understood, from the sky to my throat,*

*why in the time of harsh ashes
when my heart strains with rage
my thoughts form a rose and sings.*

Sonetos del Viajero Enlutado

EL CANTO Y SU TRAVESIA

Llano atroz y pampa fría
dormidos en la resaca
De travesía por ellos
puse mi canción en llamas

El canto de flecha y rosas
que aquí te doy, compañero,
trae de un vasto sendero,
de muchas leguas lluviosas
y praderas arcillosas
lo que a pleno mediodía
dieron a su fantasía,
bajo una sola envoltura
sin fin de espacio y verdura,
llano atroz y pampa fría.

Uno y otro en brillo justo
de sus iluminaciones
le abrieron gratas regiones
al verso, y yo a todo gusto
goceé viendo su robusto
desborde que no se aplaca,
su palmera real, su vaca,
surcos de oro, sesteaderos,
y el alma de sus luceros
dormidos en la resaca.

Pampa de abierta y dadora
campánula estremecida,
llano siempre de partida,
mi corazón rememora
su mañana embrujadora,
su tropel de finos cuellos
y entre aromas y destellos
lo que al fin tuve y no tuve
cuando en mi sueño yo anduve
de travesía por ellos.

Desde el alba de aparejo
rubio y cárdeno lingote
vi este llano como un brote
de la pampa con su espejo;
vi allí casi de reflejo
ríos de ardientes escamas,
insólitos panoramas,
y para sentir más mío
su verdoso escalofrío
puse mi canción en llamas.

THE SONG AND ITS CROSSING
(El Canto y su Travesía)

*Atrocious plain and cold pampa
asleep in the undertow
In making this crossing
I put my song in flames.*

*The song of arrow and roses
that I give you here, my companion,
carries from a vast path
of long, rain-soaked distances
and prairies of clay
all that was given its fantasy
at full midday,
under a sole covering
of limitless space and green,
atrocious plain and cold pampa.*

*One after another in the clear brightness
of its illuminations
free regions were opened
to verse, and I with full pleasure
enjoyed seeing its healthy
smelling overflow
its splendid palmtree, its cow,
furrows of gold, corrals
and the soul of its morning stars
asleep in the undertow.*

*Pampa of open and giving
trembling wallflower,
plain forever of departure,
my heart remembers
its bewitching morning,
its confusion of fine throats
and among aromas and sparkles
what finally I had and had not
when I walked in my dream
in making this crossing.*

*From the dawn of preparation
blond and livid bloom
I saw this plain as a new shoot
of the pampa with its mirror;
I saw there almost reflected
rivers of bitterness burning,
unheard of panoramas,
and in order to feel more in me
its verdant shivering
I put my songs in flames.*

Galerón y Vidalita

(Ed. - After he was released and allowed to leave North Korea, Ali Lameda returned to Venezuela. In 1978, the Concejo Municipal del Distrito Federal (Municipal Council of the Federal District) of Caracas published a collection of his new poems, *Galerón y Vidalita*, which includes the above poem.)