

## Enrique Oltuski's Life in the Cuban Revolution

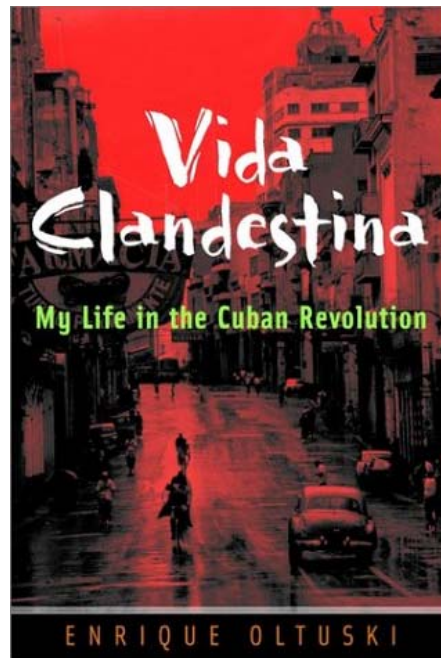
Report by Alison Beatch and Marshall Beck

On October 17, York hosted a high-ranking Minister of the Cuban government and one of the leading figures of the Cuban revolutionary struggle of the 1950's - a man recently denied a visa to the US because considered a "terrorist" by the Bush administration. Enrique Oltuski, speaking the day before his 72nd birthday, came to plug his newly published book: "Vida Clandestina: My Life in the Cuban Revolution." This auto-biography, written in the style of a historical novel, chronicles Oltuski's 'path to the Revolution' and his dangerous 'double-life' as an employee of Shell Oil by day and a leader of the urban underground struggle by night.

Oltuski spoke to the gathering in Founders' Assembly Hall with disarming humility and informality, using passages from his book to launch into reminiscences on his past and its relevance to the present. The son of Jewish-Polish immigrants to Cuba, Enrique grew up in an upwardly-mobile family that ran a prosperous chain of shoe stores. Like most well-positioned Cubans of the time, Oltuski studied in the States, where he also landed a lucrative position that funded what he called his 'playboy lifestyle'. Knowing, however, that his friends in Cuba were engaged in a political struggle against the Batista dictatorship, Oltuski was unhappy in his selfish existence and chose to return home: to a new job, and to a secret life as an underground fighter.

Oltuski conveyed effectively a sense of the youthful idealism that motivated him and his fellow

combatants to risk their lives and renounce their privileges in the hope of building a better society – an aspiration he acknowledged to be a work still in progress. In describing the urban guerrilla movement of Havana – less celebrated than the rural combat that originated in the Eastern mountains – he touched on such details as the publishing of a secret newspaper, the smuggling of ammunition under women's skirts, and of the "executions" by ambush of members of the state security forces who were known to be torturers and killers.



As the struggle gained momentum and Oltuski became the head of the revolutionary 26th of July Movement in Santa Clara, he finally came into contact with the guerillas from the East. He recounted his first encounter with Ernesto "Che" Guevara, with whom he later worked

in government, as the first of many instances of prolonged political debate. His re-telling of their heated arguments on such issues as agrarian reform again captured a sense of that moment of passionate optimism.

While his comments on the present situation in Cuba were unfortunately limited, Oltuski responded to all questions with apparent frankness. Defensive of the revolution's aims and accomplishments, he also recognized it as a project not yet fully realized. Perhaps, indeed, his focus on the past and its promises was intended as a call for the recuperation of that spirit of hope and of commitment to the pursuit of a better future. This certainly seemed to be the case as he told the students present how it was people of just their age and station in life that had led the historic struggle in which he played a part.



Mr. Oltuski's book is published by John Wiley & Sons, Canada Ltd. This event was sponsored by CERLAC and York University Bookstore.

### The CERLAC Bulletin

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