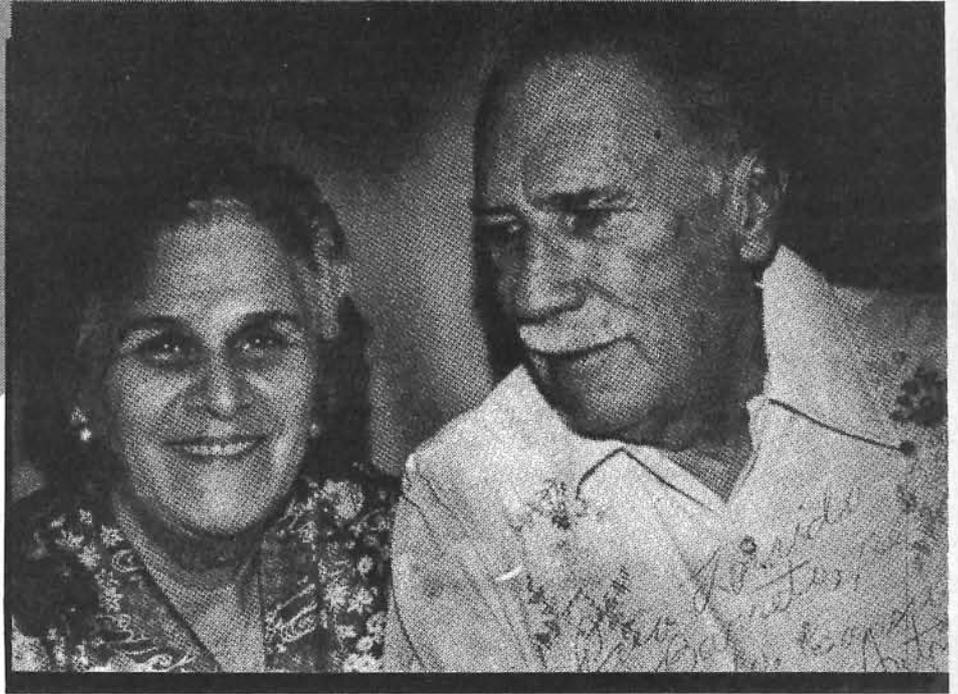


DON JUAN ANTONIO CORRETJER

¡PRESENTE!

1908-1985



Don Juan and Doña Consuelo Lee Tapia de Corretjer.

In the last few years, I have frequently been asked if I believe I would see the independence of my country. Systematically, I answer that I have already seen it. Whoever fights with all he has for the independence of Puerto Rico, lives independence, is free, is sovereign, is independent as all our people will be on the day of victory.

—Juan Antonio Corretjer

The Puerto Rican people have not only lost a revolutionary, the Nicaraguan people have also lost a Sandinista.

—Samuel Santos Lopez
Nicaraguan Minister of Reconstruction

The lines stretched into the street. For two days hundreds of people came to pay their last respects to Juan Antonio Corretjer. From the worker in jeans to the child in shorts to the intellectuals in their suits, he represented the spirit of the people, of nationalism, of Puerto Rican independence.

With the death of Don Juan Antonio Corretjer on January 19, 1985, the world lost one of the great internationalists and revolutionaries of the twentieth century.

Don Juan represented the coming together of the poet and the revolutionary, the ideologue and the armed guerrilla.

He was the voice of the armed clandestine movement, the champion of the Prisoners of War and political prisoners. He endured many hardships, including exile and imprisonment. Yet he always retained his relentless optimism that Latin America would be free and that Puerto Rico would be independent and socialist. He never wavered in his conviction that uncompromising anti-imperialist politics and armed struggle were indispensable in achieving these goals.

On March 3, 1908, Don Juan was born in the small Puerto Rican town of Ciales. Less than ten years earlier, when U.S. soldiers invaded Puerto Rico, they met an insurrection in Ciales of more than 600 campesinos who declared an independent republic. Don Juan's grandfather and uncle participated in the rebellion, which deeply influenced his early political development.

Don Juan wrote his first poem, "Canto a Ciales," at age 12, beginning a life-long practice of transforming his thoughts and feelings for life, politics and patriotism into verse. His poetry eventually became internationally recognized, and he was awarded the distinction of National Poet of Puerto Rico by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.

In the late 1920s the young nationalist traveled to New York City where he met Latin American political exiles, poets and Marxists. As a member of the Anti-Imperialist

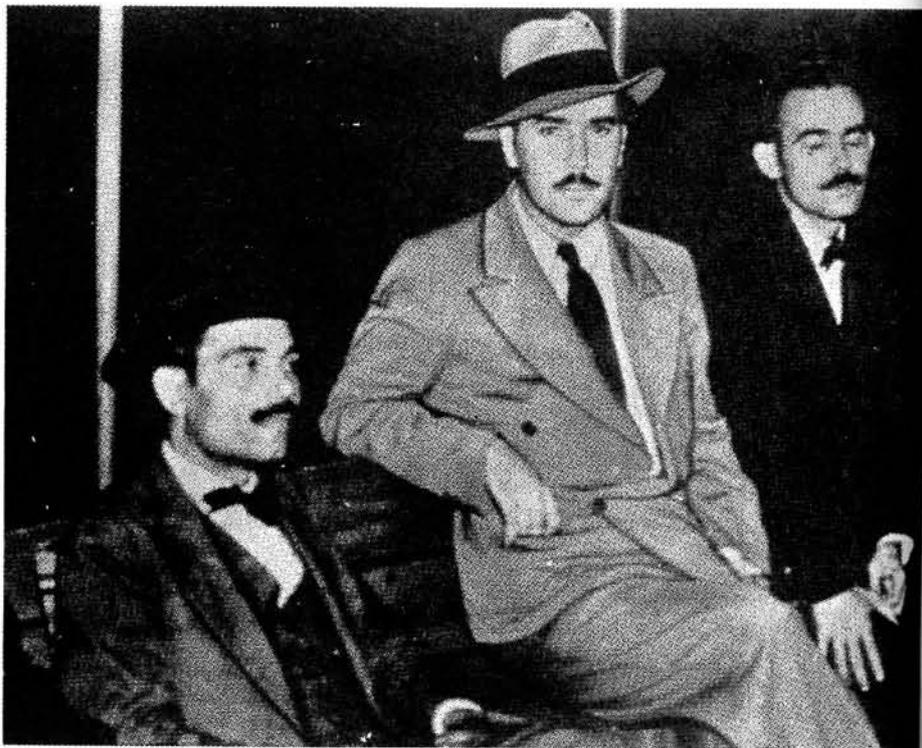


League of the Americas, he took part in protests against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and Haiti. Working with Socrates Sandino, brother of Augusto Cesar Sandino, he helped raise money and arms for the anti-imperialist movement in Nicaragua. For this, he was incarcerated for the first of many times.

Returning to Puerto Rico in 1930, Don Juan joined the Nationalist Party, which was then growing under the militant anti-imperialist leadership of Don Pedro Albizu Campos. Don Juan became an important spokesperson and organizer for the party and was named its Secretary-General. Along with Don Pedro, he played a major role in leading the island-wide sugar cane workers' strike in 1934.

The following year Don Juan went to Cuba during an anti-imperialist revolt against the U.S.-imposed Machado dictatorship. On the radio, he urged Cubans to fight with arms in hand to repel a threatened U.S. invasion. For this inciteful act he was jailed for several months.

In 1935, U.S. colonial authorities assassinated two young Nationalist Party militants at the University of Puerto Rico, initiating several years of intense conflict. As Secretary-General, Don Juan was subpoenaed to turn over all the party's records to a grand jury. He refused and in 1936 was jailed for one year, becoming the first Puerto Rican grand jury resister. The following year, Don Pedro, Don Juan and other Nationalist leaders were charged with seditious conspiracy—conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government in Puerto Rico. A jury of Puerto Ricans found them innocent. But U.S. authorities, ignoring



the law against double jeopardy, formed a new jury comprised mostly of North Americans and tried them again. They were found guilty and sentenced to ten years in federal prison.

Don Pedro, Don Juan and the others were exiled to Atlanta Penitentiary. After serving five years, Don Juan was paroled in June, 1942. For the next five years he lived primarily in New York and Cuba, writing poetry and creating the newspaper *Pueblos Hispanos*. He traveled throughout Latin America and became involved in political movements in Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela.

It was during this period that he formed his life-long marriage with fellow revolutionary and poet Consuelo Lee Tapia. Doña Consuelo was a founding member of the Puerto Rican Communist Party, and together they helped develop a political strategy for their nation that combined the strengths of Marxism and revolutionary Puerto Rican nationalism.

Returning to Puerto Rico at the end of the 1940s, Don Juan openly argued for anti-imperialist politics in a period of intensifying anti-Communist repression. During the Nationalists' Jayuya



bellion in 1950, he was arrested on charges inciting to riot and spent six months in jail. When released, he spent much of the 1950s engaged in political study and discussion. His poetry books rallied the patriotic sentiments of many Puerto Ricans in that dark period.

He continued his international work, particularly mobilizing solidarity with the Cuban revolution against the Batista dictatorship. In 1959 the Cuban government sent a plane to bring him to Cuba to celebrate the victory; there he formed a close friendship with Ché Guevara. From Cuba, Don Juan traveled throughout Latin America, rallying support for the cause of Puerto Rican independence. At that time he had already developed long-term friendships with many of the continent's progressive leaders and intellectuals, including Salvador Allende.

In 1960 Don Juan supported the creation of a new independence formation, the Movimiento Pro-Independencia (MPI). But he withdrew his support when the MPI refused to prohibit its membership from participating in colonial elections. Upholding the revolution-tradition of Puerto Rican patriots Betances and Albizu, Don Juan maintained that electoral participation conceded the legitimacy of the colonial state and that the electoral boycott was an inviolate principle of Puerto Rican nationalism.

In 1962, Don Juan, along with Doña Consuelo and other comrades, formed the Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña (LSP). The LSP is a public communist pro-independence organization, and from its formation until his death Don Juan served as Secretary-General. During the 1960s the LSP organized campaigns against

Above: More than 10,000 attend Don Juan's funeral in the town of Ciales, January 22, 1985. **Left:** Nationalist Party leaders (from left) Don Pedro Albizu Campos, Don Juan and Clemente Soto Velez en route to Atlanta Federal prison in 1937. **Below:** Don Juan and Doña Consuelo. Behind them, Rafael Cancel Miranda.



the U.S. military draft in Puerto Rico, the use of Culebra and Vieques for war exercises, and against the fraudulent colonial plebiscite of 1967.

In his book, *Problems of People's War in Puerto Rico*, Don Juan outlined the political theses that he and the LSP had been developing over the previous decade. He argued that all peaceful avenues to independence had been tried and failed and that the insurrectionist strategy of the Nationalists could not succeed in the face of repression. He decried electoralism and reformism as the most corrosive factors in the independence struggle and attributed them



Two Poets, One Struggle: Don Juan and Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's Minister of Culture, read poetry before 4000 people in San Juan, June 1984.

to the dominance of the movement by the petty bourgeoisie. Don Juan applied the analytical tools of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete reality of Puerto Rico. He concluded that the power of the U.S. empire and the small size of the island made it imperative that the movement develop the capability to strike at the enemy and be protected from retaliation. He called for the formation of armed clandestine organizations to lead the struggle for independence.

When the LSP emerged with this position in the 1960s and early 70s, they drew a chilly reception from most of the movement and a new round of repression from the state. The FBI's infamous COINTELPRO program reached beyond U.S. borders to attack Don Juan and the LSP. In 1968 and 1969, Don Juan, Doña Consuelo and others were charged with conspiracy. In 1970, as they were leaving their home, Don Juan and Doña Consuelo were the targets of an unseen assassin whose shots fortunately missed the mark. Following the failure of this attack, they were jailed for conspiracy in 1971.

Today the situation in Puerto Rico has changed considerably. Five armed clandestine independence organizations on the island and in the U.S. have begun to practice the strategy called for by Don Juan and the LSP. The clandestine groups have won an influential and respected place within the independence movement.

Through such forums as his weekly column in the pro-statehood newspaper *El Nuevo Dia* he awakened thousands of Puerto Ricans to the reality that the clandestine fighters are patriots of the highest order and not the "terrorists" claimed by the U.S. For his pivotal leadership in the struggle and for his contributions to the science of people's war, the Macheteros and other clandestine organizations honored Don Juan with the title of Comandante of the Puerto Rican revolution. The Macheteros sent their flag to his funeral, where it adorned his casket along with the Puerto Rican flag.

Don Juan had a special relationship to the Puerto Rican Prisoners of War, whom he held in the highest esteem. Despite his aversion to traveling to the United States, he visited each of the prisoners and frequently spoke at activities supporting and honoring them. When POW William Morales was captured in Mexico in 1983, Don Juan made several trips there, which helped force the FBI and Mexican government to stop torturing him. Don Juan's presence also rallied political support for William in Mexico which pressured the government not to extradite him to the U.S.

Don Juan's lasting contribution to anti-imperialism was his confidence that the U.S. empire is vulnerable from within. Before the victories in Vietnam, Angola, Zimbabwe and Nicaragua, and before the Irish Republican Army re-emerged in the late 1960s, he saw that popular guerrilla warfare could be effectively waged in the urban climate of Puerto Rico and the United States. The legacy of this vision is that the Puerto Rican nation is again on its feet and that independence activity on all levels is on the upsurge.

What was it about this man that moved so many? What was it that brought more than 10,000 people to crowd the square in Ciales for his funeral? Anyone who had ever been touched by him would understand. We will always remember him. Standing before us, tall, calm, dignified. A man who embodied revolutionary character, courage and determination.

We echo the words of thousands when we say:
Comandante Juan Antonio Corretjer— ¡PRESENTE!