

# MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

## FERNANDO ALEGRÍA

(1918 – 2005)

Fernando Alegría, the professor, scholar, novelist, poet, and lover of life's pleasures – from good books to good wines, captivating and educational journeys, discussions about literature and the debates surrounding writers and books, the transfer of knowledge to young students –, this 87-year-old man (whose energy made him appear much younger) passed away October 29, 2005 in Walnut Creek. He is survived by four children: Carmen, Isabel, Daniel, and Andrés. His wife Carmen Letona Melendez had passed away eleven years earlier.

Fernando Alegría was born on September 26, 1918 in Santiago, Chile. His mother (Julia Alfaro Olivares) and father (Santiago Alegría Toro) were, like him, Chilean – a nationality of which Fernando was always proud because of its cultural connotations, particularly its joy in music (Fernando Alegría played the guitar and sang remarkably well), and the constant presence of the clean air that blows between the Cordillera of the Andes and the Pacific Ocean. Along with these characteristics is added Chile's democratic tradition, which lasted until 1973 when a military junta headed by General Augusto Pinochet led a coup d'état and bombed the Casa de Gobierno – which led to the suicide of President Allende, of whom Alegría had been a friend and political supporter.

In academic matters, Alegría's career led him to become one of the most inspiring professors that the Stanford University Department of Spanish and Portuguese has ever had. While still living in Chile he had studied to become a professor of Spanish in the Instituto Nacional, and as a professor of philosophy in the Instituto Pedagógico in the Universidad de Chile. Being an intellectually restless man, he soon moved to the United States and in 1941 he obtained his M.A. from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Six years later he earned a PhD. from the University of California at Berkeley. He was always attracted to the teaching of Chilean and Hispano-American literature and he taught these subjects at the University of California at Berkeley from 1964 to 1967, leaving Berkeley in 1967 to begin teaching at Stanford. Here he occupied the Sadie Dernham Patek chair until his retirement in 1988. He was also chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. He was a member of the Board of Trustees at the Western Institute for Social Research (WISR) beginning in 1975.

During the government of Salvador Allende in Chile, Alegría was named cultural attaché, a post he held until the beginning of the dictatorship and throughout which time he continued to teach.

Fernando Alegría was a writer valued greatly for his novels and his poetry. Much of this appreciation is maintained in the archive of his papers, which can be found in the Special Collections of the Stanford Libraries. Among these works, as the description of the collection denotes, can be found his "correspondence with virtually every prominent literary figure in Latin America during the mid-to-late Twentieth Century, including Pablo Neruda, Salvador Allende, Augusto Roa Bastos, Jaime Alazraki, Isabel Allende, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Nicanor Parra, and many others. Also includes correspondence with North American authors such as Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as Linus Pauling. The collection also contains numerous manuscripts by Alegría and other Latin American authors, including Raul Barrientos, Jorge Bernales, Alejo Carpentier, Joaquim-Francisco Coelho, Roque Dalton,

Humberto Diaz-Casanueva, Juan Armando Epple, Mario Antonio Espinosa, Ricardo Israel, Reynaldo Jimenez, Luis Merino, and Pablo Neruda.”

Alegría’s literary work also contains two novelized biographies of people he greatly admired: Recabarren (1938) and Lautaro (1943), along with novels and collections of short stories published in Chile and other countries and translated into various languages. These works include: *La maraton del Palomo* (1968), *Camaleon* (1950), *Caballo de copas* (*My Horse Gonzalez*, 1957); *Mañana los guerreros* (*The Maypole Warriors*, 1964); *Amerika, Amerikka, Amerikkka, manifiestos de Vietnam* (*The Funhouse*, 1970); *El paso de los gansos* (*The Chilean Spring*, 1975); *Allende, mi vecino el presidente* (*Allende: A Novel*, 1989, published in English by Stanford University Press); *La rebelión de los placeres*, 1990; and *Vila Chile, M...* (1965) among others.

His novels especially resonate greatly with life. The one that garnered him the most fame, *Caballo de copas* (*My Horse Gonzalez*), confirms in its narrative Alegría’s own affinity for horseback riding along with the well-known fact that along with another professor from his department he actually bought a horse and entered it in numerous races. Finally however, as his partner in the venture finally confessed, they had to sell the horse because it was more trouble to maintain than the scarce earnings from the races warranted. Horses and soccer were two of Alegría’s greatest loves, as well as the guitar he would often play and the songs he would sing with his friends.

A gifted orator, Alegría was an intellectual capable of improvising when he spoke of literature. This he was able to do thanks to his solid humanist background and a deep and detailed knowledge of literary history. His understanding led him to write several books, which include a *Nueva historia de la novela hispanoamericana* (1986). His skill with words and his clever puns, along with the charisma with which he won over his audiences, occasionally allowed him to “read” long conference papers using only blank pages. His friend Professor Jorge Ruffinelli, a colleague in the Spanish and Portuguese Department, and co-editor along with Alegría of the book *Paradise Lost or Gained: The Literature of Hispanic Exile* (1991) remembers that on one occasion “Alegría gathered a few papers, including some pages from my just-delivered academic lecture, and went up to the podium and began to ‘read.’ He gestured with his hands as if he were reading from a prepared text, when in fact he was just improvising and inventing. Once he finished, he took his seat next to me and no one ever knew what happened.”

Perhaps the best synthesis of Fernando Alegría was expressed by the Political Science professor Terry L. Karl when Alegría passed away: “a talented man of beautiful words and passionate attachment to Chile and to justice.”

He was also a great inspiration to his students who after graduating and while teaching in different parts of the world would continue to write to him and call him on the telephone in search of his advice. For his colleagues Alegría was always a source of joy. There was never a faculty meeting in which Fernando Alegría, no matter how serious the matter of business, would not insert some humorous note, which helped immensely to humanize the often-tense academic meetings.

Although no longer physically with us, the visual image and the voice of Fernando Alegría will survive him on diverse communicative stages. They are to be found in the various interviews conserved in the Stanford Libraries; one excellent video interview from 1973, analyzing the Chilean coup d’etat, can be easily located on the Internet through YouTube.

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Another interview can be found in a 60 minute documentary made in 1994 entitled *Viva Chile M...* directed by Uwe Blesching and co-produced by Marcia Campos, a close friend of Alegría. Both allow a glimpse of the human and intellectual warmth, which characterized the life of this remarkable writer and professor.

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