

FOREWORD: *Ernesto Cardenal: A Memoir*

I KNEW ERNESTO CARDENAL as a poet long before he became Minister of Culture in the Sandinista revolution. I also knew he was an early friend of the late American surrealist poet, Philip Lamantia, during his youthful Mexican sojourn.

Ernesto came to San Francisco not too long before the Sandinista uprising, and after a visit to City Lights Bookstore he wanted to find an Army/Navy surplus store. There he bought something like a half-dozen black berets. (The number of berets may have grown in my imagination, like a good fish story, but I should have surmised that a revolution was brewing.)

In the early 1980s Ernesto invited me to tour Nicaragua with him as a guest of the Sandinista regime. One of the highlights of the trip was flying with him in a Soviet-made helicopter from Managua to his hermitage on the island in Solentiname where he had created an art center to teach young uneducated Sandinistas how to paint. A whole new school of naive/primitive painting sprang up from his initiative, and the paintings became highly coveted.

This was in the early days of the Sandinista revolution, and the country was still on a war footing. One day in a military convoy with walkie-talkie communication, we set out for the Southern front, visiting a jungle training camp en route. We arrived at the Costa Rican border to find the still-smoking remains of a Sandinista outpost. (Later I documented all this in *Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre*, with photos by Chris Felver.)

Finally, Ernesto and I gave an open-air poetry reading, plus a little ceremony in which I presented to him a seed from Pasternak's grave given to me by the Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky. I don't know whether Ernesto ever planted this symbol of freedom, but he himself is such a seed.

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