

Juan Mari Bras, Voice for Separate Puerto Rico, Dies at 82

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Juan Mari Bras, a leading advocate for Puerto Rican independence who took his fight to Congress and the United Nations, died Friday at his home in Rio Piedras, a suburb of San Juan. He was 82.

The cause was lung cancer, his daughter Rosa Pesquera said.

"I spent my whole life traveling the world with a U.S. passport to preach independence for Puerto Rico," Mr. Mari Bras said in 1995, two years after he had renounced his American citizenship. "I haven't been able to get it for everyone, but at least I got it for me."

In newspaper articles, books and protest marches, Mr. Mari Bras called for an end to what he considered the economic and cultural colonization of his homeland.

"For more than 60 years he devoted his life, with extraordinary sacrifice, to the cause of independence, as a political leader, a writer and a self-appointed diplomat," said Fernando Martin, president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party. "He was crucial in raising the profile of the colonial case before the United Nations."

There was great personal cost. In 1973, the office of his political party's newspaper was firebombed. Five years later, his home was firebombed. And on March 24, 1976, his son Santiago was shot to death on a rural road, an act that raised suspicions throughout the island that anti-independence forces and perhaps the federal government were behind the killing. The suspect in the killing was found to be mentally incompetent.

Puerto Rico, whose four million residents are American citizens but cannot vote for president, was ceded to the United States by Spain in 1898 after the Spanish-American War.

"I warn you, in the name of thousands of patriots struggling for independence in my country," Mr. Mari Bras said during 1963 Congressional hearings on Puerto Rico's political status, "that the attempt to secure on a permanent basis the chains of our colonial subjugation will only produce such friction and struggle that the situation could very well degenerate into an American Algeria," a reference to the Algerian civil war against France.

But Mr. Mari Bras's campaign did not quite resonate with the island's population. In 1993, in a nonbinding referendum, 48 percent of the voters supported maintaining commonwealth status, 46 percent supported statehood and 4 percent voted for independence.

Born on Dec. 2, 1927, in the city of Mayaguez, Mr. Mari Bras was the only child of Santiago and Mercedes Bras. Young Juan's political yearnings were deep-seated; his parents were "independentistas."

In 1944, while in high school, he founded Puerto Rican Youth for Independence. He was expelled from the University of Puerto Rico in 1948 for protesting the university's refusal to allow a Nationalist Party politician to speak on campus.

Mr. Mari Bras went to the continental United States, where, after completing his bachelor's degree at a college in Florida, he earned his law degree at American University in 1954. After returning to Puerto Rico, he helped found the Movimiento pro Independencia de Puerto Rico.

By 1971, that party had evolved into the Socialist Party of Puerto Rico, subscribing to Communist philosophy and committed to independence. In 1976, the year his son was killed, Mr. Mari Bras was the party's candidate for governor. He was secretary general of the Socialist Party until 1983.

Mr. Mari Bras married four times. Besides his daughter Rosa, he is survived by his wife, Marta; three other daughters, Mariana, Teresa and Mari; a son, Juan; nine grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

He, his son Juan and a grandson were among the more than 2,000 people arrested during demonstrations in 2002 calling for the United States Navy to stop using the island of Vieques for military training, including ship-to-shore shelling. In 2003, the Navy withdrew from Vieques.

In 1994, after Mr. Mari Bras renounced his American citizenship and said he was affirming Puerto Rican citizenship, his action prompted many other "independentistas" to do the same.

As the result of his case, the island government issued its first certificate of Puerto Rican citizenship to Mr. Mari Bras. The document is valid as an ID in Puerto Rico, but not recognized outside the island.

"I freed myself from the indignity of a false citizenship," Mr. Mari Bras said, "that of the country that invaded mine, which continues to keep the only country that I owe allegiance to as a colony."

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