

Jose Antonio Echeverria:

A legacy



By

Glenda M. Almela

Throughout the 1950's, the newly established nation of Cuba was masked by poverty, political turmoil and the unhappiness of its citizens. The island's president, Fulgencio Batista had come to power through foreign aid. Filled with false promises of prosperity and independence, he soon provoked political action from Cuba's most promising figures, its youth. It was within this bleak period that emerged what would be known as one of the most celebrated heroes in Cuban history. Jose Antonio Echeverria had been only 24 years old when he decided to raise arms to free his nation. Carrying the passion and boldness of someone twice his age, he surrendered his life in an act of genuine heroism. For his courage, he became a synonym of democracy and charisma, an inspiration of liberty amongst the island's rebels. What shaped Jose Antonio's fervor for patriotism can be traced to his early life as a charismatic student leader, the unconditional love of his family and the perseverance of his colleagues.

Jose Antonio Echeverria Bianchi was born on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1932 in the beautiful city of Cardenas, Matanzas otherwise known as *The Pearl in the North*. During the year of his birth, the Republic was faced with cruel brutality under the Machado regiment; it wasn't unusual to hear the sound of gunshots and bombings erupting from alleys and battlegrounds. Regardless of the hostility surrounding the nation, Jose Antonio benefited from a happy childhood. His father Antonio Echeverria Gonzales was a businessman who had inherited the family business from Jose Antonio's grandparents. His mother Concepcion "Concha" Bianchi-Trista raised her children in a Catholic upbringing filled with constant doting and support. Anyone who came into contact with the Echeverria-Bianchi family would proclaim them to be the prime example of integrity and admiration. Perhaps it was this ambiance that influenced Jose Antonio into becoming an idealist; he

had grown up with tales of his maternal grandfather fighting for Cuban independence during the Spanish War. These accounts will stick with him through his own battles for the revolutionary cause, and will shape him into the leader, he is known for today.

By the time Jose Antonio had attended primary school in the Champagnat Catholic School, the foreign crisis surrounding the island did not cease. The effects of the great Depression and of Machado's ghastly second presidential term were felt all throughout the nation. On September 4<sup>th</sup> 1933, a sergeant of working class background by the name of Fulgencio Batista gained political power with the help of student revolutionaries. He would manipulate political platforms through corruption and puppet regimes for the next 26 years. In the meantime, unemployment and poverty rose all around the island. Cuba was still dependent on a sugar monoculture as American influence continued to antagonize the island's quest for independence. Between 1933 and 1940, Cuban exports to the United States rose 84%, while favorable tariffs led to the Island rejecting the Cuban industry for U.S products. This caused a decline amongst Cuban owned businesses and industries. The elites seemed to become more powerful, whereas 60% of the population composed of middle and lower classes were dispossessed of their houses and lands and forced into urban areas with terrible living conditions. It was this jurisdiction that led to a new string of animosity within the Island's Universities. Student revolts threaten the new fascist government, ironically the same ideals that helped place Batista in power, would be the ones threatening his authority.

At the tender age of 18, Jose Antonio or Manzanita, as his colleagues endearingly nicknamed him due to the rosy complexion of his cheeks, had already managed to enroll in the University of Havana's School of Architecture. Previously he had developed an

insatiable love for sports which included swimming, basketball and rowing. In his high school years, he was academically gifted and possessed leadership qualities worthy of admiration. It was no surprise that the student body had chosen him to partake in various roles including that of Commencement speaker. These traits will follow him to university, where he was appointed as a delegate of the Student Council. It was also around this time that Jose Antonio dwelled into Politics. The issues surrounding the country began to instill in him a passion for Nationalism and an unequivocal thirst for liberty and democracy. In the upcoming months of the year 1952, he joined his fellow students in protests against the newly established rule of Batista, who after an unconstitutional rise to power had declared himself a dictator enforcing military oppression in an already disheartened Cuba. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1952, Jose Antonio journeyed with his fellow students to a baseball stadium located in el *Cerro* to protest Batista's dictatorship. What followed were multiple protests, in which Jose Antonio was beaten, persecuted and consequently arrested along with fellow colleagues. However, his patriotism and hope for a better nation will not be diminished; only reinforced.

Furthermore, the students begin to see in him a leader, someone who represented their ideals and beliefs but most importantly someone who understood their plight as well as that of their nation. And so in the year of 1954, he assumes the presidency of the FEU- the University Student Federation- and inspires in his colleagues a militant desire for revolution, denouncing mainstream politicians:

“Students and young people are alone on this path. Submission and inertia by the nation's so-called political class have put a weight on our shoulders which, nonetheless isn't at all overwhelming. We have faith that the unity of the students and young people with the working classes, peasants and professionals will forge the revolutionary ideals that constitute the essence of nationhood”

It was his words of charisma and the eagerness of a rebel cause that led him and thousands of students to become militant activists and deplore the authoritarian regiment. By the year 1955, during his re-election as president, Jose Antonio joined forces with various students from Latin America and consequently with young revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro. Much to Castro's indignation, Jose Antonio had managed to do what he in his power could not do during his July 26<sup>th</sup> movement. He had managed to unite a coalition of students and revolutionary leaders with the same goal: to strike Batista inside the presidential palace and end this bloody war once and for all. Armed with his perseverance and the ardent presence of a leader, Manzanita stood next to men far beyond his years, yet he managed to invoke in them, the same drive and determination coursing through his veins. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1957 at 3:27 in the afternoon, the young FEU president armed only with a light machine gun took over the *Radio Reloj* control room of Cuba's main radio station. His goal was to announce the deposition of Batista's death and urge the nation of Cuba to join arms in the perilous battle for independence:

"Nation of Cuba! At this time dictator Fulgencio Batista has been brought to justice at the hand of the revolutionaries. In his own burrow, the Presidential Palace, Cuba has gone to punish his injustices. And us, The Directory of Revolutionaries, whom in the name of the Nation, were the ones who shot the final bullet to this corrupt regiment. Nation of Cuba if you are listening..."

However, Jose Antonio wasn't aware that the attempt to kill Batista had failed due to impromptu miscalculations, and thus no one had been able to hear his valiant broadcast. As he headed for the safety of the University of Havana, his car collided with a police vehicle forming an altercation. Instead of running, he performed a final act of courage and faced their bullets head on as can only be described as the utmost

significance of democracy and intrepidity. He was shot multiple times, and was killed almost instantly near his beloved University of Havana.

However, his death will only ignite a new revolutionary path for democracy, one that still remains intact to this day. Jose Antonio's acts of sovereignty and patriotism will continue to characterize Cuba's continuous plight for independence. His actions have inspired young Cuban students such as me, to fight for our ideals and to never surrender in the face of injustice. He has shown that age is only but a number, that anyone can stand up for the unity of a nation if their convictions are interlaced with passion and love for their fellow neighbor. It is these aspirations and beliefs that have led me to pursue a career in politics and that will inspire my generation to exceed the limitations of generations past. For that, I commend heroes like Jose Antonio whose actions will be present as the worldwide definition of democracy.

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