




# TRANSLATORS' RINCÓN de TRADUCTORES CORNER



Miguel Hernández' Speech to his Companions in the Ocaña Jail  
*by Miguel Hernández*

*translated by*  
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## Introduction

**Miguel Hernández' speech to his companions in the Ocaña Jail** was inspired by a meal his friends prepared for him on his release from twenty-five days of solitary confinement. Known as the People's Poet, Miguel Hernández fought on the side of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Committed from the beginning of the conflict to defend the democratically elected government, he composed many poems for the soldiers while fighting alongside them in the trenches. Upon the defeat of the Spanish Republic by Franco's forces, Hernández was arrested and jailed as a political prisoner. Miguel Hernández died in prison in 1942 of untreated tuberculosis. This speech was delivered one year and three months before his death. While its tone contrasts with the intimate tone of the poems he composed in prison—the *Cancionero y romancero de ausencias*, a poetic diary of the poet's struggle with loss and injustice—its theme affirms the same principles. As in the *Cancionero*, in his prison speech Hernández decries man's inhumanity to man, yet he rises above his hatred to plead for positive, fraternal cooperation among Spaniards. Likewise, in the *Cancionero*, the poet expresses the triumph of love over hate and intimates his belief that future generations will build a better, more productive, and peaceful Spain. This speech has appeared in its entirety in only one publication in Spanish, the memoirs of his widow, Josefina Manresa, in *Recuerdos de la Viuda de Miguel Hernández*, Ediciones de la Torre, Madrid, 1980. The publisher has given permission for the online publication of this English translation of the speech, as well as of extracts of a letter from the poet to his wife, which are included in the footnotes. An excerpt of the speech was published in José Luis Ferris' biography, *Miguel Hernández: pasiones, cárcel y muerte de un poeta*, Ediciones Temas de Hoy, Madrid, 2002. Ferris' book was translated into English by Grant Moss and published by Edwin Mellon in 2018. The entire speech has never been translated into English.

### About the translator

Constance Marina holds a PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures from Harvard University. She has taught at Boston College and Regis College and worked as a professional legal interpreter and translator. Currently, she is preparing an English translation of Miguel Hernández' *Cancionero y romancero de ausencias* or *Songs and Ballads of Absence*.

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## MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ' SPEECH TO HIS COMPANIONS IN THE OCAÑA JAIL<sup>1</sup>

December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1940

As you know, comrades in suffering, fatigue, and longing, the word “homage” has the taint of a public statue and bourgeois vanity. I don’t think any of us has tried to pay homage to anyone of us here today, as we gather with mouthwatering satisfaction to eat a family meal.<sup>2</sup> This gathering is about something else. And I don’t want this meal to give rise to words foreign to our revolutionary way of being. This meal is a just reward for the many meritorious deeds performed by one of us during the twenty-five days that he spent by himself, with the patience of the dead, like a specter, over there, in the hereafter of this prison.<sup>3</sup> The hunger that I’ve brought from that ghostly afterlife to this other real life as a prisoner: the hunger that I’ve brought and that never leaves me ever, well deserves an offering the size of a cow. But I must say that, as a poet, I’ve noticed the absence of bay leaves in the seasoning. Apart from that, the absence of laurel<sup>4</sup> doesn’t matter since for my temples I’ll always prefer some noble grey hair. Let’s agree then, that today, I’ve been

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Miguel was admitted into the Ocaña Adult Reformatory on November 28, 1940. This was the eleventh jail in which he’d been held and according to prison rules all prisoners transferred from one jail to another had to pass through a period of solitary confinement before joining the rest of the prison population. This and the other footnotes to the speech were composed by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: In the letter to his wife Josefina, dated January 1, 1941, Miguel wrote, “when I got out of the cell, the friends who were waiting for me greeted me with a meal that was more like a huge banquet, and in addition to turrón, ham, cakes, cheese and fruit, there were small cigars and English cigarettes, and café mocha. In a few days you’ll receive the complete menu and you’ll see the names of those friends I was with, people I knew from before the war and also during it.”

<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: In this same letter to his wife Josefina, cited above, Miguel wrote, “There’s been no other reason for my being out of touch but the transfer. It’s what they call in prison-speak, the *period*, like a certain mishap in women. I have spent twenty-five days completely alone, in a cell that was not very warm to say the least, without being able to speak with anyone....”

<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: “Laurel” in Spanish is both the tree and the leaf that is used as a condiment, in English a “bay leaf.” A crown of laurel is a sign of victory, and in Greek mythology Apollo is represented wearing a laurel wreath on his head.



given a pretext to affirm, over a sound and nutritious meal, our need to collaborate fraternally in all aspects and in every dimension and deprivation of our lives. Today when our people are experiencing, those able to experience it, the most delicate and difficult trial of their existence, which is also the most instructive and challenging test of their mettle, I want to toast with you. Let's toast for the happiness of our people: for that which most closely approximates collective happiness. As you know, it's essential that we toast. And we have neither wine nor glasses. But now, at this very instant, we can raise our fists, mentally, clandestinely, and bump them against each other. There is no glass that can hold the only drink that fits into a fist without breaking: hatred. The overwhelming hatred that we feel for these walls that represent so much injustice: the hatred that spills from our fists over these walls, and that will spill. The hatred with its energetic life force that illuminates the face, and the stare, and the horizons of the worker.

But we will take utmost care that our hatred not be driven by instinct and unbridled passion. That primal hatred leads only to the jungle. And our hatred is not the tiger that destroys: it is the hammer that builds. Let us toast then.