

*Obituary***Taso Zayas Dies in Puerto Rico**

by Brian Ferguson ('88)

Anastacio (Taso) Zayas died at home in Puerto Rico on Good Friday morning, April 5. He was buried on Easter. Don Taso's life story, told in dialogue with Sidney Mintz in *WORKER IN THE CANE: A PUERTO RICAN LIFE HISTORY* (Yale University Press, 1960) is both a tale of dignity prevailing over adversity, and a window into the lived history of U.S. colonialism. Increasingly frail in the years since the death of his wife Eli Villaronga in 1989, Zayas's condition worsened in January. He was sustained until the end by his family, his community, and his faith.

Zayas's wake in Barrio Jauca, Santa Isabel, was attended by well over 350 people. His funeral service at the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ, pastored by his son-in-law Bienve Marrero was equally well attended. Throughout the services, frequent reference was made to Zayas's work with anthropologists, and how it made the life of ordinary jauqueños known far and wide. At the wake, the family placed a copy of *WORKER IN THE CANE* in his casket, alongside the Bible. The Church produced and distributed a text, illustrated with photographs by Jack Delano. The text reveals, among other things, how Zayas and his community felt about their anthropological portrayal. The following translation is published with the blessing of his family.

TASO ZAYAS

The Cathedral Temple of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ of Barrio Jauca, Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico, and its Pastor Rev. Bienve Marrero join in the pain of the ZAYAS-VILLARONGA family facing the separation of our brother ANASTACIO.

TASO was born on May 10, 1908, pure jauqueño, worker in the cane. In 1927, he joined in marriage with a jauqueña, Elizabeth Villaronga, producing twelve children: Victor (deceased), Carmen Iris, Luis (deceased), Moises (deceased), Pablin, Jose Miguel, Blanca Iris, Luis Raul, Liliam, Roberto, Anastacia, and Noel. Youngest child of a humble Jauca family, he was left an orphan at an early age and from 8 years old began to know the satisfaction of work but at the same time the anguish of a cane worker of the epoch. He was a political and union activist until 1948. In 1950 disillusioned with politics and union struggle he embraced the faith of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, where for the first time he found the true peace that only Jesus Christ is able to give. From that date he was faithful to the Lord and to his congregation. He was an active member, an important pillar, for many years Secretary-Treasurer and member of the Board of Deacons of the Church.

The life of Taso is written in autobiographical form in the book *WORKER IN THE CANE* (1960), by Sidney W. Mintz, a Yale University anthropologist, who lived in our community Jauca as the guest of Taso for a while to write the book. The history of Taso has enabled people to become acquainted with Jauca and Santa Isabel throughout many parts of the world. It is the personal history of a worker in the cane, marked by the economic, political and social



Taso Zayas in the mid 1980s (Photo courtesy B. Ferguson)

history of our community, along with outlining the effect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the life of Taso, his family and our barrio Jauca. Using as a basis the history of TASO in 1985 Brian Ferguson completed his thesis "Class Transformations in Puerto Rico" (Department of Anthropology of Columbia University). On December 5 1988 Huracán Classics Collection and the University of Puerto Rico rendered homage to TASO and his wife ELI at the publication of the First Edition of the book *TASO. TRABAJADOR DE LA CAÑA*, by Editorial Huracán.

Taso has been an example for his community and his congregation, as Sidney W. Mintz wrote (April 1959) "Taso's story has no moral. Perhaps it is enough that his life should seem so much better to him now. Or perhaps the reader will see the waste I think I see: the waste of a mind that stands above the others as the violet sprays of the flor de caña tower above the cane. But the story should evoke no pity, for that is a sentiment which degrades the meaning of Taso's life to himself and to those who know and love him." And in October 1987 in a postscript for Editorial Huracán he wrote, "The significance of the life of Taso continues unaltered. For those who decide to see in him some kind of surrender to circumstances nothing that I can say—or that Taso can say—will change their point of view. But for those who understand how complex are the ways in which human beings triumph over the limitations against which they must struggle, the life of Taso will continue to be a source of inspiration."

The life of Taso serves in a world so convoluted to remind us about the need to return to primary values: of respect, of love of God, to our family and to the Land.

The congregation will rest by saying, "Taso, you have gone before us. You are rejoicing in glory with souls who love you and went first." "HASTA LUEGO."