



Neruda *before* Neruda

Susan Reynolds relates how Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, acquired his Czech name

Shortly after the release of Pablo Larraín's recent film *Neruda*, I was startled to hear it confidently stated, in a discussion on Radio Three, that the poet had chosen to rename himself after two of his favourite authors — Paul Verlaine and Jan Neruda. Whatever his views on Verlaine — a figure who receives no mention at all in his *Memorias* (1974) — Neruda would have been the first to correct the mistake relating to his choice of a Czech namesake.

The decision to write under a pseudonym was forced on the future Neruda II at a very early stage in his career. He was born in 1904 in Parral, Chile, a city in Linares Province in the Maule region, 350km south of Santiago, to José del Carmen Reyes Morales, a railway

employee, and Rosa Basoalto, a teacher. Rosa was already suffering from tuberculosis, and died when her son, named Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto, was only a month old.

He grew up in a patchwork family consisting of his father, stepmother, “the guardian angel of my childhood”, his half-brother Rodolfo born to his stepmother nine years earlier, and their half-sister Laura, the daughter of yet another woman.

At the age of six he started school, where, although he was fascinated by the physics laboratory, the library was always closed: “The sons of settlers had no love of book learning”. Despite this, books began to interest him: “Buffalo Bill's adventures and Salgari's voyages carried me far into the world of dreams... I don't like Buffalo Bill, because he kills Indians. But he's such a good cowpuncher! The plains and the cone-shaped tepees of the redskins are so beautiful!”

Alongside his growing taste for books, the young boy developed a deep love of nature, from the iridescent insects and brilliant birds of the Chilean forests to his first encounter with the sea — “the immense snow-crowned swells... the loud pounding of a gigantic heart, the heartbeat of the universe”, which completely overwhelmed him.

Not surprisingly he soon began to express his feelings and impressions in verse: “I go upstairs to my room. I read Salgari. The rain pours down like a waterfall. In less than no time, night and the rain cover the whole world. I am alone, writing poems in my mathematics notebook... How lonely a small

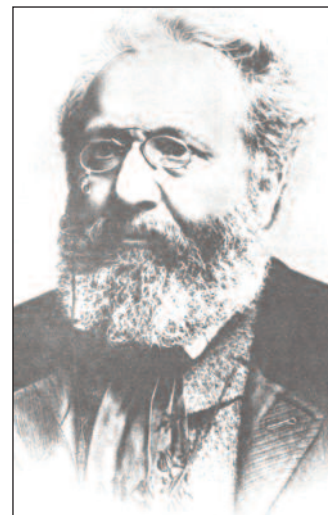
The first Neruda

The young Chilean poet Neftalí Ricardo Reyes chose Neruda as his pen name after reading about the Czech poet Jan Neruda.

In Prague Jan Neruda (1834 - 1891) is a well-known and loved poet, writer and columnist. A son of a small grocer who lived in the Malá strana (Lesser Quarter district of Prague) he never married.

In his homeland he is loved for his poems and appreciated for his sardonic sketches in *Malostranské povídky*, published in 1878. He was a prominent member of a Czech school of writers in the second half of the 19th century who sought to create a Czech literature imbued with their own literal and pragmatic nationalist aims.

He is one of the greats of Czech literature. Neruda's *Malostranské povídky* (*Tales of the Lesser Quarter*) were translated by Ellis Peters and published in London in 1957.





Top left and right: Images from *Neruda* a feature film about the life of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. The motorcyclists are police officers hunting for Neruda, above, in South American cities. Bottom far left: The Chilean poet and Nobel prize winner Pablo Neruda. Bottom left and right: Czech poet Jan Neruda.

boy poet, dressed in black, feels on the vast and terrifying frontier wilderness!"

Even at this age, he was conscious of his identity as a poet, and describes how he came to write his first poem: "Once, far back in my childhood, when I had barely learned to read, I felt an intense emotion and set down a few words, half rhymed but strange to me, different from everyday language. Overcome by a deep anxiety, something I had not experienced before, a kind of anguish and sadness, I wrote them neatly on a piece of paper. It was a poem to my mother, that is, to the one I knew, the angelic stepmother whose gentle shadow watched over my childhood."

He took his first composition to his parents: "Still trembling after this first visit from the muse, I held out to them the paper with the lines of verse. My father took it absentmindedly, read it absentmindedly, and returned it to me absentmindedly, saying: 'Where did you copy this from?' Then he went on talking to my mother in a lowered voice about his important and remote affairs."

"That, I seem to remember," Neruda continues, "was how my first poem was born, and that was how I had my first sample of irresponsible literary criticism."

Although the young poet was fortunate in finding a well-stocked public library where he "gobbled up everything, indiscriminately, like an ostrich", and in the encouragement which he received from the headmistress of the Temuco girls' school, the future Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral, who lent him the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, his father's attitude did not improve.

He was implacably opposed to his son's literary ambitions: "When I was 14, my father was always on at me about my literary endeavours. He didn't like the idea of having a son who was a poet." The previous year he had already published his first work, an essay entitled *Entusiasmo y perseverancia* in the local daily newspaper *La Mañana*, signed Neftalí Reyes, the name under which his poems began to appear in local magazines.

His father's continuing opposition compelled him to rechristen himself: "To cover up the publication of my first poems, I looked for a last name that would throw him completely off the scent. I took the Czech name from a magazine, without knowing that it was the name of a great writer loved by a whole nation, the author of elegant

ballads and narrative poems, whose monument stood in Prague's Malá Strana quarter. Many years later, the first thing that I did when I got to Czechoslovakia was to place a flower at the foot of the bearded statue." In 1946 he legally changed his name to Pablo Neruda.

Neruda visited Prague in June 1950, and in November he stayed for some weeks at the château of Dobříš as the guest of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers. By this time he had been a member of the Communist party of Chile since 1945.

He had achieved a successful career as a poet and diplomat, although his support for Stalin (which he later regretted) caused friction with many of his circle, including his fellow poet Octavio Paz. Dobříš, the former residence of the Colloredo-Mannsfeld family to whom it was restored in 1998, was used as a centre for rest and relaxation for distinguished artists, and as a fervent communist as well as a poet whose work had been widely published in Czechoslovakia, he possessed impeccable credentials.

When he turned 50 in July 1954, Jan Drda was among the writers from all over the world who visited Santiago to honour the occasion. Earlier, in Spain and Mexico, Neruda had enjoyed the friendship of the humorist Egon Erwin Kisch: "I greatly admired his wonderful talent, his childlike curiosity, and his dexterity at legerdemain," he wrote, recalling how Kisch would "pull an egg out of his ear or swallow, one by one, as many as seven coins which this very fine, impoverished exile could well use for himself... I kidded him: 'Great Kisch, you may have uncovered the secret of Colonel Redl' — the famous Austrian spy case of 1914 — 'but you will never clear up the mystery of my name.'

"And so it was. He died in Prague, having been accorded every honour his liberated country could give him, but this professional interloper [Kisch] was never able to find out why Neruda called himself Neruda."

Many questions remain to be answered about Pablo Neruda, including allegations that his death in 1973 while undergoing hospital treatment for prostate cancer was due to poisoning on the orders of General Pinochet. However, unlike Kisch, we are now in possession of the secret of the name which one of the greatest poets of the 20th century made his own. ©

■ The feature film *NERUDA* will be available to rent from iTunes from June 26 and on DVD and Blu-ray from July 10.

For mother

Jan Neruda's mother, to whom some of his finest verse is dedicated, appears to have been the most significant female figure in his life. He wrote this poem to his mother.

To my dear mother (Matičce)
Nic nemáš víc, vše dala's mně,
co bůh v Tvé ruce skládal,
a předce bych já nevděčník
vždy víc a více žádal!

Dej ještě bílé vlasy své
na rubáš svému synu,
by ještě v hrobě spočíval
jako by ve Tvém klínu!

You have no more; you gave me all
that God laid in your hand,
ungrateful would I be indeed
more always to demand!

Yet give your white hair to your son,
to make a shroud to wrap
that in the grave he may repose
as if within your lap.

Translated for the BCSA
Review by Susan Reynolds

