

The cover for the Spanish-language edition of Isabel Allende's *A Long Petal of the Sea*.

Image courtesy of Penguin Random House, LLC.

LITERATURE

A Long Petal of the Sea

A Conversation Between Isabel Allende and Adam Hochschild

In the late 1930s, Spain's civil war compelled thousands of refugees to flee their homes in search of a safer life. Isabel Allende's latest book, *A Long Petal of the Sea* (Ballantine Books, 2020), follows a pregnant young widow whose life becomes intertwined with an army doctor who is her deceased love's brother. In order to survive, the two must unite in a marriage neither of them desires.

In the last event that the Center for Latin American Studies hosted publicly prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Isabel Allende spoke with Adam Hochschild about her book and the legacy of the Spanish Civil War in Latin America and around the world. The following excerpts are from this conversation.

Adam Hochschild: Sometimes, when I read a book that moves me, I try to imagine the moment when it began, the moment when there was a pebble tossed in the pond and the ripples went outward. From what you've told me, I'm wondering whether that moment

was when your stepfather told you about greeting people from the *Winnipeg*?

Isabel Allende: I think the moment when I heard the story for the first time was 40 years ago. I was living in exile in Venezuela, and I met a guy who was charming. He had been one of the passengers of the *Winnipeg*. He was much older than me but still very attractive. He was called Victor [Bay]. He told me the story. He had been in the civil war that you described so well in *Spain in Our Hearts*, the Battle of Teruel and all that.

Then he came to Chile on the *Winnipeg*. He spent 30 years in Chile, almost as a Chilean citizen. Then we had the military coup, and he was arrested. He experienced again the same thing he had experienced before: a concentration camp and then exile. He ended up in Venezuela, where I was. He told me the story, and I kept it inside. I think that the moment I thought, "I have to write it," was when the issue of immigration and

Adam Hochschild and Isabel Allende, in conversation on the UC Berkeley campus, February 2020.



Photo by Peg Skorpiński.



From left: David Doran with Marion and Robert Merriman during the Spanish Civil War. Photo courtesy of Tamiment Library & Wagner Labor Archives.

BERKELEY HISTORY

ROBERT HALE MERRIMAN RESIDENCE

Robert Hale Merriman, a UC Berkeley graduate student studying economics during the early 1930s, was among the first Americans to give his life in the fight against fascism. During the Spanish Civil War, Merriman was a commanding officer of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, which consisted of over 3,000 American volunteers—at least ten of them from Berkeley—fighting to preserve the Spanish Republic. He disappeared after a battle in April 1938, presumably killed by General Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces. Merriman was also the inspiration for Robert Jordan, the protagonist of Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. While attending Cal shortly before leaving for Europe, Merriman and his wife Marion lived in this apartment building.



Robert Merriman, photo Tamiment Library, NYU.

Plaque sponsored by UC Berkeley history major Milton Zerman

Berkeley Historical Plaque Project
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2019

In 2019, a plaque honoring Robert Hale Merriman was placed next to his Berkeley residence.

Photo by Beatriz Manz.

refugees became so relevant, so in the air, that it was almost impossible to ignore.

My last three books featured refugees, but in this case, it was a story of refugees, which is different from just mentioning them in passing. This was really the story of a person who is displaced and who is looking for a home. I think the circumstances forced me to write it now and not before.

AH: For people who are not familiar with the story, give us a picture of this shipload of refugees from Spain. What they were fleeing, and how did they happen to come to Chile?

IA: In 1936, a socialist or a leftist coalition of parties was elected in Spain. Immediately, the right wing and the Church decided to topple the government, and on July 18, 1936, the army rebelled with the idea that in 24 hours, they would have control of the country. But the workers, the students, independent people, leftist people who had voted for that government took up arms against the army. The most cruel and horrible civil war lasted three years.

Many Americans, as Adam describes in his book, and volunteers from other countries joined what was called the International Brigades. Young men and women went into Spain illegally, they crossed the Pyrenees, and they entered Spain to fight for the República. Then, in January of 1939, the coldest winter ever, the fascist troops of Franco

surrounded Barcelona. The people were so scared because, in every place they had captured, the repression was so awful. Half a million people walked to the border with France with their grandchildren and their pets and their babies covered with blankets or whatever. The pictures of what they went through are incredibly horrible.

They arrived at the border, and can you imagine the French received half a million refugees in 24 hours? And we complain about what we have on the border! They didn't know what to do with them, so they placed them in concentration camps that they improvised on the beaches in that part of France. The beaches were closed off with barbed wire and patrolled by Senegalese troops on horseback with whips and rifles. They placed people there with no latrines, no running water, no food, no shelter, nothing. The children started to die. The old people died. And it was such a horrible situation that the poet Pablo Neruda, who loved Spain, wrote a book of poetry called *España en el corazón*, a title that you borrowed for your book.

Neruda convinced the Chilean government to bring some Spanish immigrants to Chile. There was opposition in Chile from the right and the Church because they didn't want these "leftist atheists." [...] They accused them of raping nuns, of coming to take away jobs. The rhetoric is so similar to what we hear today. When I read the newspapers from that time in Chile, it's incredible that we keep repeating the same wording even.

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Spanish Republican forces crossing the Río Ebro in 1938.

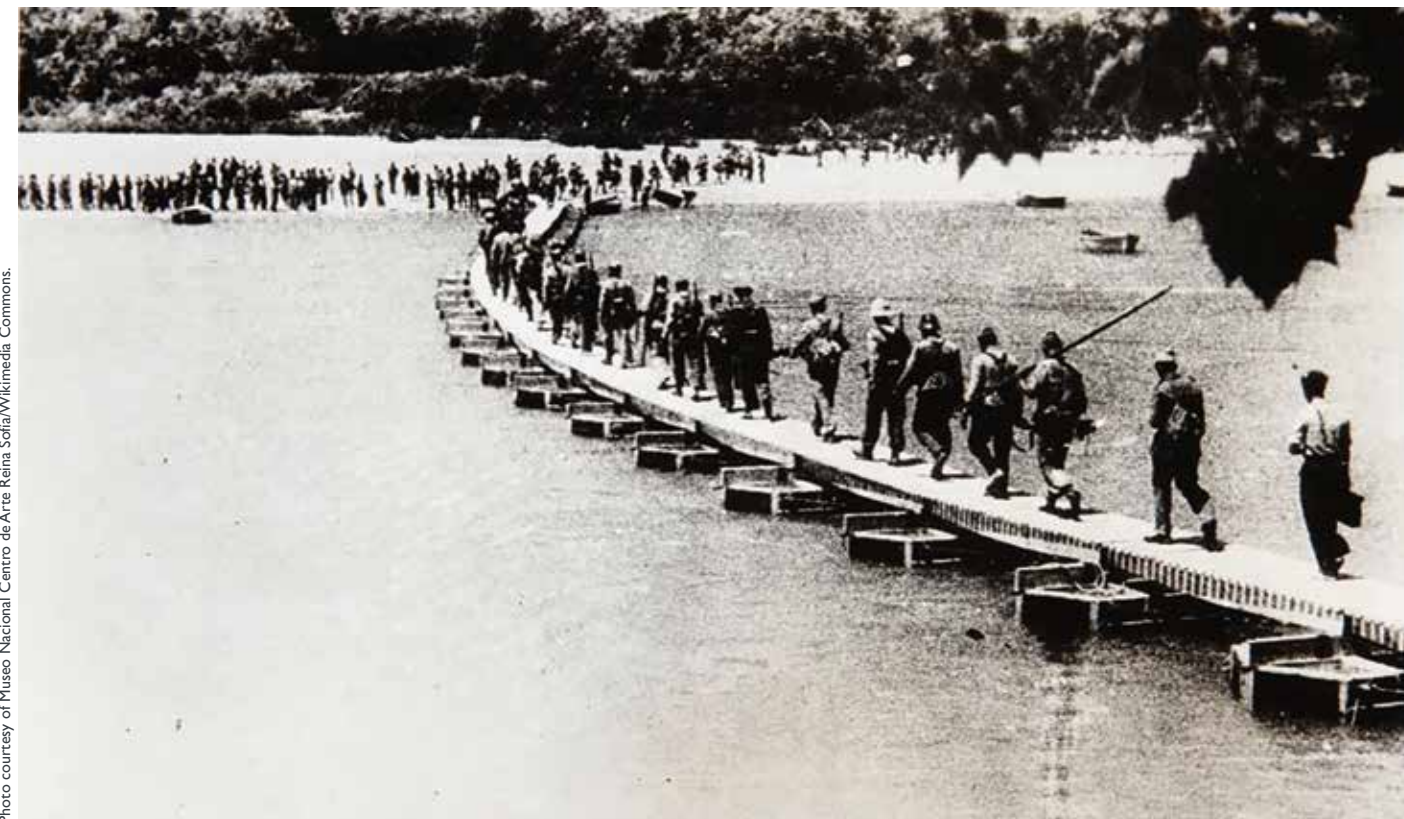


Photo courtesy of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía/Wikimedia Commons.



Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Spanish Civil War refugees in the town of Puigcerdà, Spain, crossing the border into Pyrénées-Orientales, France, in 1936.

“Con el despuntar del día la multitud desesperada se puso en movimiento como una inmensa mancha oscura y lenta. El rumor de que habían cerrado la frontera y más y más gente se aglomeraba frente a los puestos de paso corrió de boca en boca, aumentando el pánico. Llevaban muchas horas sin comer y los niños, los ancianos y los heridos estaban cada vez más debilitados. Cientos de vehículos, desde carretas hasta camiones, yacían abandonados a ambos lados del camino, porque los animales de tiro no podían continuar o por falta de combustible.”

– Isabel Allende, *Largo pétalo del mar*, p. 61.

“With the new day, the desperate mass began to spread out slowly like a huge stain. The rumor that the border had been closed and that more and more people were crowding at the crossings went from mouth to mouth, only increasing the panic. No one had eaten for hours, and the children, old folks, and wounded were growing weaker and weaker. Hundreds of vehicles, from carts to trucks, had been abandoned by the roadside, either because the draft animals couldn’t go on or for lack of fuel.”

– Isabel Allende, *A Long Petal of the Sea*, p. 54.



Photo by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

Spanish refugees, mostly Republicans and members of the International Brigades, at the concentration camp in Argelès-sur-Mer, France, 1939.

“A las treinta y ocho horas sin comer ni dormir, tratando de darle agua de beber a un chico adolescente que se estaba muriendo en sus brazos, algo se le reventó a Victor en el pecho. «Se me rompió el corazón», musitó. En ese momento entendió el significado profundo de esa frase, creyó escuchar un sonido de cristal quebrado y sintió que la esencia de su ser se derramaba e iba quedando vacío, sin memoria del pasado, sin consciencia del presente, sin esperanza para el futuro.”

– *Largo pétalo del mar*, p. 72.

“After thirty-eight hours without eating or sleeping, trying to give water to an adolescent dying in his arms, something gave way in Victor’s chest. *My heart is broken*, he told himself. It was at that moment he understood the profound meaning of that common phrase: he thought he heard the sound of glass breaking and felt that the essence of his being was pouring out until he was empty, with no memory of the past, no awareness of the present, no hope for the future.”

– *A Long Petal of the Sea*, p. 65.

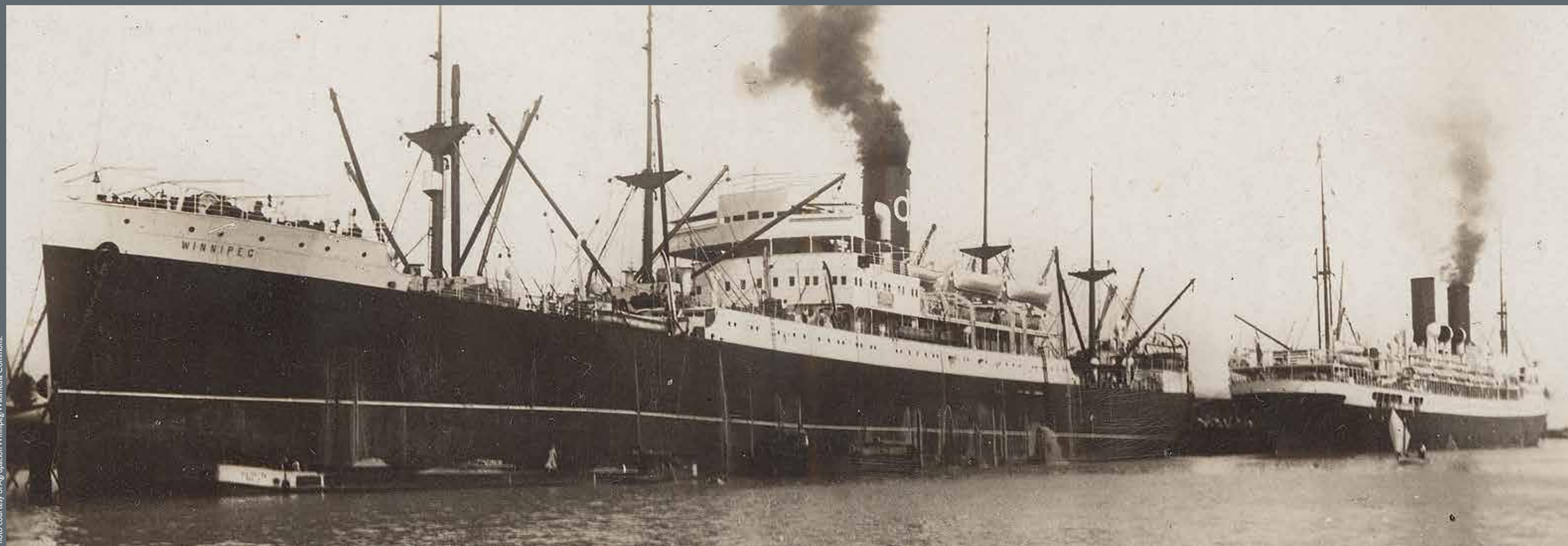


Photo courtesy of Agupación Winnipeg/Wikimedia Commons.

The SS Winnipeg in 1939.

“Al anochecer, con la marea alta, el Winnipeg levó anclas. En la cubierta unos lloraban en silencio y otros entonaban en catalán, con la mano en el pecho, la canción del emigrante:

« *Dolça Catalunya,
pàtria del meu cor,
quan de tu s'allunya
d'enyorança es mor* ».

Tal vez presentían que no volverían nunca a su tierra.”

– *Largo pétalo del mar*, p. 121.

“At nightfall the *Winnipeg* weighed anchor with the high tide. On deck, some were weeping silently; others had their hands on their hearts as they sang the Catalan song of the emigrant:

*Dolça Cataluña,
pàtria del meu cor
quan de tu s'allunya
d'enyorança es mor.*

Perhaps they knew in their hearts they would never return to their homeland.”

– *A Long Petal of the Sea*, p. 115.



“Millares de luces temblorosas del puerto y de las viviendas de los altos cerros de Valparaíso laderas empinadas, llena de perros vagos, pobretona y sucia, una ciudad de comerciantes, marineros y vicios, como casi todos los puertos, pero maravillosa. Desde el barco brillaba como una ciudad mítica salpicada de diamantes. Nadie se acostó esa noche; se quedaron en la cubierta admirando aquel espectáculo mágico y contando las horas. Víctor habría de recordar esa noche como una de las más hermosas de su vida. Por la mañana el Winnipeg atracó por fin en Chile, con un gigantesco retrato del presidente Pedro Aguirre Cerda pintado en un lienzo y una bandera chilena colgados a un costado.”

– *Largo pétalo del mar*, p. 132.

“Thousands of twinkling lights in the port and dwellings on the hills of Valparaiso competed with the stars: it was impossible to tell where the promised land ended and the sky began. Valparaiso was an idiosyncratic city of stairways, elevators, and narrow streets wide enough only for donkeys. Houses hung dizzily from steep hillsides; like almost all ports, it was full of stray dogs, was poor and dirty, a place of traders, sailors, and vices, and yet it was marvelous. From the ship it shone like a mythical, diamond-studded city. Nobody went to sleep that night: they all stayed out on deck admiring the magical spectacle and counting the hours. In the years to come, Victor would always remember that night as one of “most beautiful in his life. The next morning, the *Winnipeg* finally docked in Chile, with the enormous banner of President Pedro Aguirre Cerda and a Chilean flag draped from its side.”

– *A Long Petal of the Sea*, p. 126.

Left: Spanish refugees disembark from the *SS Winnipeg* in Valparaíso.

Photo © Colección Museo Histórico Nacional/ Miguel Rubio Feliz.



Photo courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

Refugees from Aragon, Spain, after arriving in Valparaíso aboard the *SS Winnipeg*.

“Entre la muchedumbre entusiasta del muelle había autoridades del gobierno, representantes de los trabajadores y las colonias catalana y vasca, con quienes había estado en contacto durante los últimos meses para preparar la llegada del *Winnipeg*, artistas, intelectuales, periodistas y políticos. Entre ellos se hallaba un médico de Valparaíso, Salvador Allende, dirigente socialista que al cabo de unos días fue nombrado ministro de Salud y tres décadas más tarde sería presidente de Chile.”

– *Largo pétalo del mar*, p. 134.

“Among the excited crowd on the quayside were members of the government; representatives of the workers and the Catalan and Basque communities with whom he had been in contact in recent months to prepare for the arrival of the *Winnipeg*; artists, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians. Also present was a doctor from Valparaiso, Salvador Allende, a Socialist Party leader who a few days later would be named health minister.”

– *A Long Petal of the Sea*, p. 127.

Neruda was sent to Paris with no money but with the authorization to bring the refugees. He was told — and there's a document that says so — to bring skilled workers who can teach Chileans their craft, don't bring the people with ideas. Of course, Neruda paid no attention. He chose about a thousand skilled workers, and the rest were all intellectuals, artists, professionals, his friends, and people like that.

They came to Chile on the *Winnipeg*, a cargo ship that he had fitted out [to transport passengers], and he selected the crew, also. He sent them to Chile, and in Chile, they were received with open arms. There is a scene that I tried to describe because when I read it — and I read a lot about it — I would cry every single time. These people had gone through three years of horror, concentration camps for months, and the terror of the Second World War that was just about to happen. They arrived after crossing two oceans and the Panama Canal. And they get to this country they can't even place on the map. They have never even heard of Chile. When they arrive and the ship docks, they see an immense crowd, waving flags, singing the songs of the República, with Chilean food, with wine, welcoming them. Immediately, they were received, they had jobs, they had places to stay, they had friends. My family was one of the families that opened their doors to them.

AH: Didn't you say your stepfather was on the dock...

IA: What happened, which is a nice story also, is that the ship first stopped in Arica, but it didn't get close to the port because it was not authorized. It would dock in Valparaíso, which is much further south, but Arica is the port nearest to the beginning of Chile's territorial waters. The ship stopped there, and they sent over a boat with two junior civil servants — one from Immigration and one from the Foreign Office — to give them visas. They had to interview each person on the ship.

These civil servants were just kids, a couple of very young guys. They came from conservative families. They didn't like the idea of these communists coming to the country. But when they talked with each one, and they saw who they were, and they saw the children and the women, they changed their minds. The passports they would give them were stamped with the place where they had to go according to their skills. For example, the fisherman to the south, the miners to the north.

One of those two junior guys later became my stepfather. He told me that he would stamp the passport with the visa from the Foreign Office. And he would say, "Don't pay any attention to this, you can be anywhere you want. This is a free country. You can move around. Don't pay any attention to the guys from Immigration. They're

crazy. Don't pay any attention." I heard that story from my stepfather many, many years later.

AH: Can you talk about why displacement and migration run through so many of your books?

IA: Because I am a displaced person, a very privileged one. First, I was born in Peru, and my father abandoned my mother, so we went to Chile when I was three, and I was raised in the house of my grandfather. Then my mother married the man who was the junior official that received the *Winnipeg*. He was a diplomat. We traveled all the time, all my youth, my childhood, and adolescence, saying goodbye to places and people and schools. When I finally established myself in Chile, had kids, I thought I would never leave.

We had the military coup, and I went into exile. Then, when we still had the dictatorship in Chile, and I couldn't return, I came on a book tour in the United States, fell in love with a guy, and became an immigrant in the United States. Well, I moved into his house without an invitation, with the idea that I would get him out of my system in a week. We were married for 28 years.

He married against his will, by the way — I needed a visa. I needed to bring my children. I said, "Look, if you want to be with me, a visa." He said, "Well, I've been married twice before, I'm not good at this, I am not made for marriage." I said, "I totally understand." He said, "I would have to think it over." I said, "Yeah, I understand. You have until tomorrow at noon." At 11:45 a.m., he said, "Okay." And that was that.



Isabel Allende and her stepfather.
Photo courtesy of Isabel Allende.

Isabel Allende is one of the most widely read authors in the world. *A Long Petal of the Sea* was published in English by Ballantine Books (2020) and in Spanish as *Largo pétalo del mar* by Vintage Español (2019).

Adam Hochschild is an author, historian, and lecturer at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. His book *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2016.



On the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the *Winnipeg* in Valparaíso, descendants of the Spanish refugees placed plaques in their memory.
Photo by Alberto Valdés/EFE.