
BRÍGIDA ÁLVAREZ RODRÍGUEZ

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Biography of Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez

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Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez (1968-1938)

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Fig. 1: Photography of Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez.

Educator, spiritist, and member of the municipal council of Vega Baja, Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez was born on October 8, 1868 in the city of Ponce. Daughter of Salomón Álvarez Domenech and Carmen Rodríguez López, she grew up during a turbulent time for her country.¹ As the nineteenth century came to a close, revolutionary movements for Spanish independence were unleashed throughout the Island.² Kardecian spiritist ideas, which conflicted with the Catholic Church, started to gain followers among the country's intellectual and liberal elite.³ Brígida's father, Salomón Álvarez, was one of those intellectuals who defied the government because of his anticatholic and anticlerical political views.⁴



Fig. 2: Photography of Salomón Álvarez Domenech

¹ Thanks to Dr. Sandra Enríquez Seiders, great-granddaughter of Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez, for granting us access and use of these photographs and other materials.

² Gerardo A. Hernández Aponte, *Lucha, sobrevivencia y estabilización de la Iglesia Católica en Puerto Rico ante la invasión de los Estados Unidos de América (1898-1921)*, Tesis Maestría, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras: Departamento Historia, Facultad Humanidades, 2004, p. 34.

³ Marcela Saldivia-Berglund, "Espiritismo as a Literary Strategy of Gender Representation and Cultural Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rican Fiction" *Identidades*, Proyecto de Estudios de las Mujeres y el Género, Cayey, UPR, Año V, Núm 4, 2006, p. 37.

⁴ Other intellectuals from his generation included: Francisco Aparicio Meléndez, Rodolfo Espinosa, Carlos Doitteau, Emeterio Bacon, Pedro Colberg, Matienzo Cintrón and Federico Degetau González. Fernández García, E. editor. *El Libro de Puerto Rico*. San Juan: El Libro Azul Publishing Co., 1923, p. 894.

Persecuted because of his beliefs and labeled as a crazy person, he decided to move with his family from Ponce to Humacao, and from Humacao to Caguas, until they finally ended up in Vega Baja.⁵ Salomón owned a printing press where he published various freethinking periodicals, including *El Nivel* (*The Level*), *El Peregrino* (*The Pilgrim*), and *La Luz* (*The Light*). Because of this work, he was imprisoned in el Morro, a fortress constructed by the Spanish between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in the bay of San Juan.

Brígida learned about Kardecian Spiritism from her father. According to spiritist doctrine, a



Fig. 3: La Luz, 1892.

person who feels, at least to some degree, the influence of the Spirits is called a *medium*. There are many different types of mediums, including sensitive or impressionable, auditory, speaking, seeing, sleepwalking, healing, and writing or inspired mediums.⁶ Brígida showed signs of being an inspired medium ever since adolescence. In Salomón's periodical *El Peregrino*, published in Humacao on November 3, 1881, the poem "Plegaria de un orgullo" ("A Proud Man's Prayer") appears, clearly written by Brígida:

A Proud Man's Prayer

*I do not know what it is I feel
 My anguish is horrible
 Very serious was my crime,
 And today as my Spirit wanders
 I suffer its fair punishment:
 I ignored the beggar
 And I praised the powerful,
 Now in horrific torment
 I atone for my inequity,
 And my lack of charity.
 I only looked at the present,*

⁵ *El Magisterio*. 27 de enero de 1889, p. 6.

⁶ Kardec, Allan. *El Libro de los Espíritus*. Barcelona: M. Pareja, 1975, p. 127.

*And I forgot about the future:
 That future that terrifies
 Those who commit crimes on Earth:
 That feared future,
 Because of which I have had only
 Pride, joy, and pleasure:
 Because of which far after having
 Sanctified my existence
 To help the poor,
 To wipe away the sad cry
 Of those who cry in pain,
 Without finding comfort
 On that miserable ground,
 I thought only of the material,
 Which is merely an affliction
 That concludes with death,
 And becomes dust.*

*Oh, miserable me! I will never abide
 By the law that I promised
 To follow, only for myself do I live
 Today I weigh more and more!
 And with my profound pain
 I try to return to the world
 To make amends for my mistakes,
 And to enter into the high regions
 Of light and happiness;
 Where misfortune
 Is no longer welcome;
 When my debt is paid off
 I may be allowed to enter;
 Meanwhile, what a cry
 In the darkness I will let out!
 But I will never stop
 Singing humble songs
 To He who created slaves
 From the admirable creation;
 And with all my heart
 I will ask, repentant,
 To ignore my cry.
 With profound pain*

*And full of confusion,
I will lie, begging for forgiveness,
For my deceitful pride.*

A.

Although it does not seem to be signed with Brígida's name, it mentions that it is about a twelve year old medium, and at the end of the poem the letter A appears. We can assume that Salomón, who was being persecuted for his political views, did not want to put his daughter in danger. However, the A corresponds with his last name. It can also be assumed that Brígida was a healing medium. In a letter to her daughter-in-law, many years later, she writes: "*I celebrate infinitely that your hearing loss has disappeared so soon; but I am not happy that you have not asked me for a new prescription for your stomach.*"⁷



When they finally moved to Vega Baja, Brígida, who at the time was twenty-one years old, met a young man from San Juan who had come to the town as an official to the secretary of the Initial Court. The young man, Fernando Enríquez Carmona, fell in love with Brígida and the following year, in 1890, they got married. This civil union, the first to be celebrated in the country, was news not only in Vega Baja but in all of Puerto Rico. In fact, the parish priest of Vega Baja considered the marriage as merely a cohabitation.⁸ A woman of the future, Brígida did not consider it as such. Upon her father's death, Brígida inherited the printing press, although her husband worked as the administrator.

Fig. 4: Photography of Fernando Enríquez Carmona.

Fernando Enríquez Carmona ended up becoming a very important political leader and public figure. With time, the printing press closed, and in 1917, when the Jones Law was enacted in Puerto Rico and the Chamber of Representatives was created, Fernando Enríquez became the secretary of that body. Absent from his home, the difficult task of raising a family of eleven children fell onto Brígida.

Fernando Enríquez's salary would have allowed his family to live comfortably, but he contributed very little, if anything, to the home. Brígida was never alone, though. Her children

⁷ Sandra A. Enríquez Seiders, *Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez: Una mujer, una historia*, San Juan: Biblioservices, 2da. edición, 2018, p. 85.

⁸ José Manuel García Leduc, *Intolerancia y Heterodoxias en Puerto Rico (Siglo XIX): Protestantes, Masones y Espiritistas-Kardebianos reclaman su espacio social*. San Juan: Isla Negra Editores, 2009, p. 322.

always accompanied her and she had many grandchildren. On April 21, 1932, the newspaper *La Democracia* (*The Democracy*) announced Fernando Enríquez Carmona's death.

Kardecian Spiritism, a philosophy that Brígida embraced, suggests that men and women are equal before God and that they have the same rights. God gave them both the wisdom to know good from bad and the ability to progress in life. It also establishes that the inferiority of the woman stems from man's cruel and unjust power over her. This attitude of masculine superiority, according to Kardec, is the result of social institutions and the abuse of strength in relation to weakness.⁹

There were many women who, influenced by these ideas, initiated the fight for the women's vote, a right that was denied to them. Brígida was no exception. Not only was she a suffragist, but when they finally passed the vote for the lettered woman in Puerto Rico in 1929, she nominated herself to represent the Liberal Party in the municipal council and was elected in 1932.¹⁰



Fig. 5: Brígida in the Vega Baja municipal assembly, 1932.

Sadly, the records from that assembly have disappeared, but I have no doubt that Brígida dedicated herself to ensuring that the children of her town could go to secondary school in Vega Baja. Many students would come to her to ask for help with their homework.

Brígida Álvarez Rodríguez died on May 9, 1938, and when the first secondary school was built in her town in 1945, it was named after her.¹¹

⁹ Kardec, Allan. *Op.Cit.* p. 306.

¹⁰ In the elections of 1932, where only women who knew how to read and write participated, María Luisa Arcelay was elected Representative of the Chamber and 103 women were elected to municipal assemblies. Universal suffrage was passed in Puerto Rico in 1935.

¹¹ Asamblea Municipal: Vega Baja. Resolución núm. 21 Serie 1997-98, 18 de febrero de 1998.



Fig. 6: Brígida Álvarez School, Vega Baja, Puerto Rico.