

# Adolfo Aguilar Zinser: A Tribute

**Aryeh Neier**

...High on the list of Mexico's misfortunes of course, is the one that Mr. Aguilar Zinser complained about in his letter resigning as Ambassador to the United Nations: that Mexico is often treated by the United States as our country's backyard. On such grounds, former Secretary of State Colin Powell apparently considered it appropriate to interfere in Mexico's affairs to seek Mr. Aguilar Zinser's removal from his post to the United Nations. This was a back-handed tribute to Mr. Aguilar Zinser's central role in blocking a resolution in the Security Council authorizing the war in Iraq. Yet among Mexico's blessings has been that, on a number of occasions, it has been able to enlist individuals with the intellectual distinction, the integrity and the sense of public responsibility of an Octavio Paz or an Adolfo Aguilar Zinser to serve as the country's diplomatic representatives. Though both Octavio Paz and Adolfo Aguilar Zinser resigned from their diplomatic posts in protest, they served their country well in making public their disagreements with their government's policies.

I first met Adolfo Aguilar Zinser about a quarter of a century ago when I traveled to Mexico and to five countries of Central America in connection with the launch of Americas Watch, one of the regional "Watch Committees" that we subsequently renamed Human Rights Watch. Thereafter, my contacts with him in the early 1980s mainly concerned the genocidal counterinsurgency war conducted by the government of Guatemala in that country's highland region. Many of the Mayan Indians who were the inhabitants of that region fled across the border to Mexico where their presence embarrassed both the Mexican and Guatemalan governments. In that period, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser's newspaper columns were virtually alone in Mexico in calling serious attention to the reasons for the flight of the Guatemalan refugees



Photo by Stefan Cohen.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser talks with a friend in a grove on the UC Berkeley campus.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser made a remarkable contribution to Mexico as a scholar, journalist, political figure, diplomat and professor. The University of California, Berkeley community was very much looking forward to his return to campus as a visiting professor for 2005-06. Tragically, he died in an auto accident in Mexico this past summer. In the fall, CLAS organized a program to commemorate both the man and his unique contribution to Mexico and the United States. We are including several excerpts from that program as well as selections from the last talk he gave for the US.-Mexico Futures forum, which took place in Morelia, Mexico in February of 2005.



Photo by Daniela Ramos.

and to the policies of the Mexican government that exacerbated their plight. Though Mr. Aguilar Zinser decided not to publicize the threats and the attacks that he personally experienced during this period because he did not want to make himself an issue in debates over relations between the Guatemalan and Mexican governments, I became aware that it was made abundantly clear to him that his own life was at risk because of the stands that he took.

...

[Mr. Aguilar Zinser's] important role as a member of the Security Council in blocking the effort of the United States to obtain the Council's endorsement for the war in Iraq is, of course, well known. What is perhaps not known so well is how deeply he immersed himself in all the various crises that were on the Council's agenda. I recall on one occasion calling him to discuss developments in Liberia. I had followed events there for more than 20 years, in the process getting to know a number of that small, troubled African country's political figures, journalists and civil society leaders. When I

called Mr. Aguilar Zinser I thought I would have to provide him with a lot of background information. Not so. It quickly became apparent to me in our telephone conversation that he had studied developments in Liberia and probably had a better grasp than I did of the policies that the United Nations should try to pursue there. Developments in Liberia could not be high on the agenda of the Mexican government but, as a member of the Security Council, Mr. Aguilar Zinser exercised his responsibilities according to the standard of intellectual rigor and responsibility that he always imposed on himself.

...

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser's untimely death is a tragedy for his family, for his friends, for Mexico and for all who care about the place of ideas, intellectual acumen and integrity in public life. His presence among us enriched us. His loss impoverishes us all.

**Aryeh Neier is President of the Open Society Institute.**

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David Bonior speaks at the UC Berkeley tribute to Adolfo Aguilar Zinser.

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## Victor Lichtinger

I was thinking yesterday night what can I say in a situation like the one I am in this afternoon. Having to talk about one of your best friends, a friend that is like an older brother to you; that introduced you to and taught you politics; that made you laugh so often with his amazing humor and wit; that gave sense to power and morality in its exercise; that disappeared so unexpectedly, leaving so many ideas and plans without a leader, actions so very important in this chaotic Mexico, our beloved country, in so much need of leadership and vision, of commitment and honesty. Adolfo, it is not only that we miss you. The fact is that in our hearts, in our spirits, in our needs, as close allies and friends in politics and in personal life, you left a huge vacuum. I believe firmly that I was privileged to have the chance to be your partner and colleague, your brother.

I doubt I will have the luck of meeting again someone as humane, warm and committed to democracy and justice as you were. I will always remember the long hours we would discuss the well-being of our families, the temper of our wives, the future of our sons and our plans for bringing out the best in Mexico. Political reform, parliamentarism in Mexico; recovering governance; stopping deforestation in the Selva la Candona; the need for a new left, democratic, efficient and honest; the mistake of the war in Iraq; your impressions of poverty in Africa; the long walks in el Tepozteco or in the long corridors in Los Pinos or our shopping on Park Avenue; the feeling of impotence and betrayal in Mexico, where inertia, hypocrisy and ignorance is stronger sometimes, I hope not for long, than resolve for change. Your disappearance from our lives is sad. But don't think, Adolfo, that you did not plant important seeds in fertile soil. You touched us and changed our lives, our consciousness, our minds, our understanding. You gave us laughter and purpose. You gave us joy. Your sons, Adolfo and Nico, have your

spirit, and I know that they also have your energy and your strength. Many will continue your fight in different ways and in different manners, but the principles and values you introduced in many of us will not disappear. Those principles and values will prevail.

*Victor Lichtinger was formerly the Mexican Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.*

## Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas

I met Adolfo personally for the first time in early December 1988, in Washington, where I went to attend several functions with an agenda Adolfo had coordinated. We started a friendship that led us to work together politically, both sharing a will to build a democratic Mexico in which its rich and diverse potentialities would give all Mexicans a life of work, full of achievements. My first impression, what most struck me about Adolfo, was his sharpness in analyzing situations and his inventiveness and creativity in proposing actions.

When he was back in Mexico, a few months after our first meeting in Washington, contact and exchanging ideas with Adolfo became routine. Without becoming a member of any political party and keeping his independence, being myself a member and the president of a party, he collaborated and directly participated in different activities with me, mostly in international events. And, finally, he participated in the 1993-94 presidential campaign. I was the PRD candidate, and Adolfo was part of the campaign team coordinating information. Traveling throughout the country during the campaign months, Adolfo decided to write a book about his own participation in the campaign and the particular views he had for the future of Mexico, for the country he aspired to build.

The book appeared in April 1995. I disagreed with several of its evaluations and conclusions,



Photo courtesy of the Zinser family.

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser (in hat) as a young man with his family.

but I consider that the book reflects Adolfo as he was and as he wanted to be, his struggle and his ideals. [He wrote]: “Politics vilify. In their practice the worst traits of the human condition may appear as we have seen in present times: unlimited ambitions, unbridled passions, treasons, greed, arrogance and an absolute lack of compassion. The only existing antidote against the vilification and bitterness accompanying politics is being at peace with oneself. Being [at peace] is not always to succeed but to avoid treason at any cost and inconsistency with oneself.”

The book concludes making Adolfo’s utopia explicit, evident in his years of public life, in which he kept his independence and loyalty to his truth, in a struggle he conducted almost always alone. In the final lines he wrote: “Politics must inspire hope, must bring happiness and ennoble he who through participation promotes and associates himself to a cause. It’s fundamental to infuse new political inspiration in the country. Filling the existing void means to recover collective determination, to enrapture people with the idea and the possibility of

change. To inspire Mexicans with expectations of a much better country.”

Adolfo, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, gallantly gave a transcendent struggle in favor of self-determination, peace in the world and the legality of the United Nations itself, in defense of his own convictions and with full dignity, which brought as a consequence his stark confrontation with the government he was representing.

When the campaign was over, and Adolfo published his book, we took different paths. We met again years later, after his resignation as Mexican ambassador to the United Nations at a celebration in Mexico City. In the sessions of the Security Council, Adolfo firmly defended Resolution 1441, relative to weapons of mass destruction inspections in Iraq, to assure, as he declared, the use of peaceful means to fulfill the purpose uniting all members of the council, that is, immediate and unconditional disarmament of Iraq, and that it be through good diplomacy that a peaceful solution was reached. Regardless of strong pressures from Mexican officials, including from the President himself and

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the Secretary for Foreign Relations, and from representatives of the aggressor countries, Adolfo, without weakening, held his intention to vote against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. During the months after the invasion, still in his post at the United Nations, he insisted on the organization's support of the Iraqi people to recover full exercise of their sovereignty, to keep the territorial integrity of the country and to give assurance that Iraq's natural resources would be used for the benefit of the Iraqi people. This was one of Adolfo Aguilar Zinser's most relevant political struggles. If only by it, he should be recognized and remembered as one of the most distinguished Mexican diplomats who, in the precise moment, regardless of pressures from the most powerful, amply responded to the commitments to Mexico and her Constitution, to peace and the right of peoples' struggling for respect and self-determination. Berkeley is

honored evoking his memory and his deeds. Thank you.

Cuahtémoc Cárdenas is President of the Fundación para la Democracia and was formerly the mayor of Mexico City.

## David Bonior

"Part of life is always saying farewell in this world. Always standing at the edge of loss attempting to retrieve some memory, some human meaning from the silence, something which is precious and gone."

— Adlai Stevenson's eulogy for Eleanor Roosevelt

Adolfo is gone and the world weighs less. His life was, in its own special way, a life force of significant consequence. And what a

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser speaks at Berkeley in the fall of 2001.

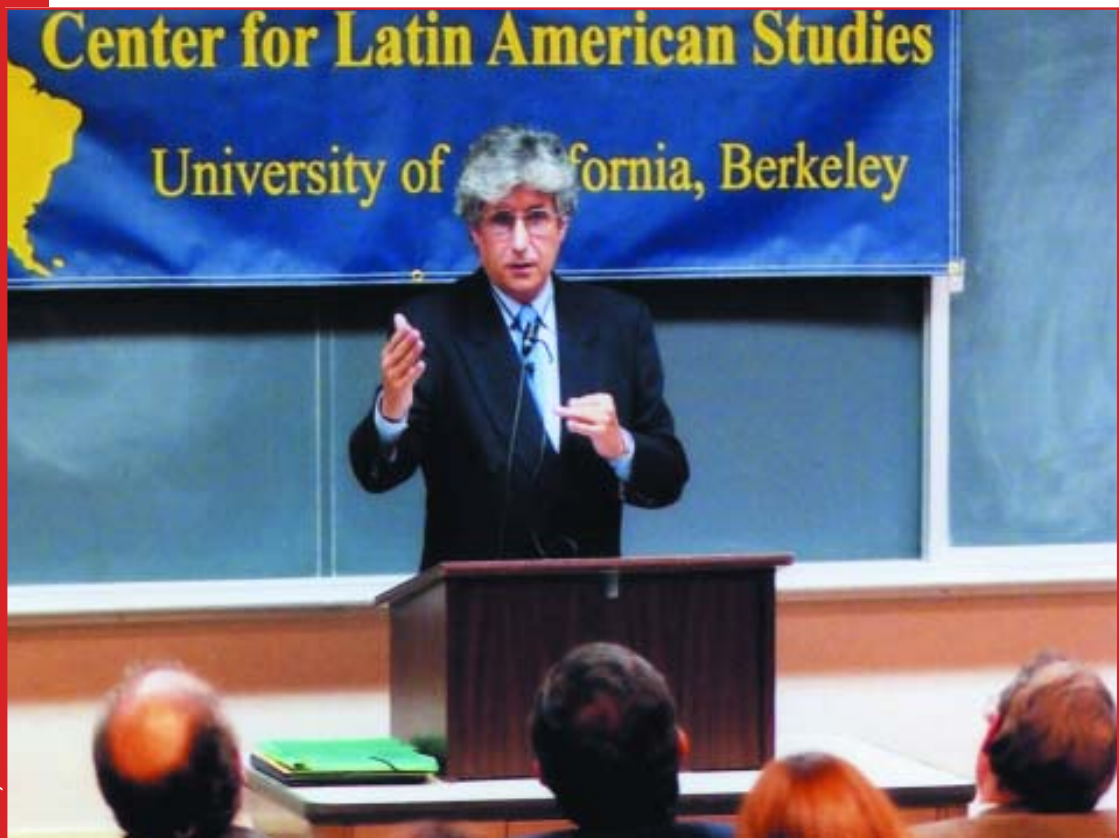


Photo by Stefan Cohen.

magnificent life we have to celebrate.

Adolfo was powerful and playful, witty and wise, critical and caring, an independent and an internationalist, dogged and dapper, scholarly and sociable. But to me beyond all else he was a man of enormous courage. His obituary in *The Economist* said it well. “He became the very model of an intellectual typified by Mexico’s great poet Octavio Paz; not merely observing and commenting from some ivory tower, but fighting in the thick of things.”

When I learned that Adolfo Aguilar Zinser was dead, I was stunned and saddened — the way I felt when I heard of the death of Paul Wellstone. They were in many respects very similar. Both were about the same age; both were academics; both were major reformers in the life of their respective countries and fought for peace and justice beyond their own borders. They were passionate democrats with a small “d.” Adolfo and Paul were as green as one could get in politics because they both understood the interconnectedness of life and practiced it in their own lives. They were raconteurs who enthralled their audiences and made politics fun and full of all the ironies and absurdities that life offers. In essence they were rare men, equal parts action and thought, combining revolutionary virtue and human sensitivity. And while one is tempted to say that they were cut from the same cloth — that would most definitely be wrong. For Paul Wellstone, a onetime feisty college wrestler, had a baggy, rumped, professorial look about him while Adolfo, with his John Lennon glasses, his magnificent mop of gray hair, his finely cut suits and Hermes ties, offered us another kind of portal into his soul.

My first encounter with Adolfo occurred at a conference on the Berkeley campus entitled “Alternatives for the Americas, A Dialogue” which brought together some of the leading political leaders in the U.S. and Latin America — including then Governor Vicente Fox, Jorge Castañeda and Adolfo. A very hot issue at the time was the question of U.S. certification that Mexico was making progress fighting drug trafficking. Then, Senator Zinser was not only forceful but eloquent and indignant about this certification process. He convinced me of how

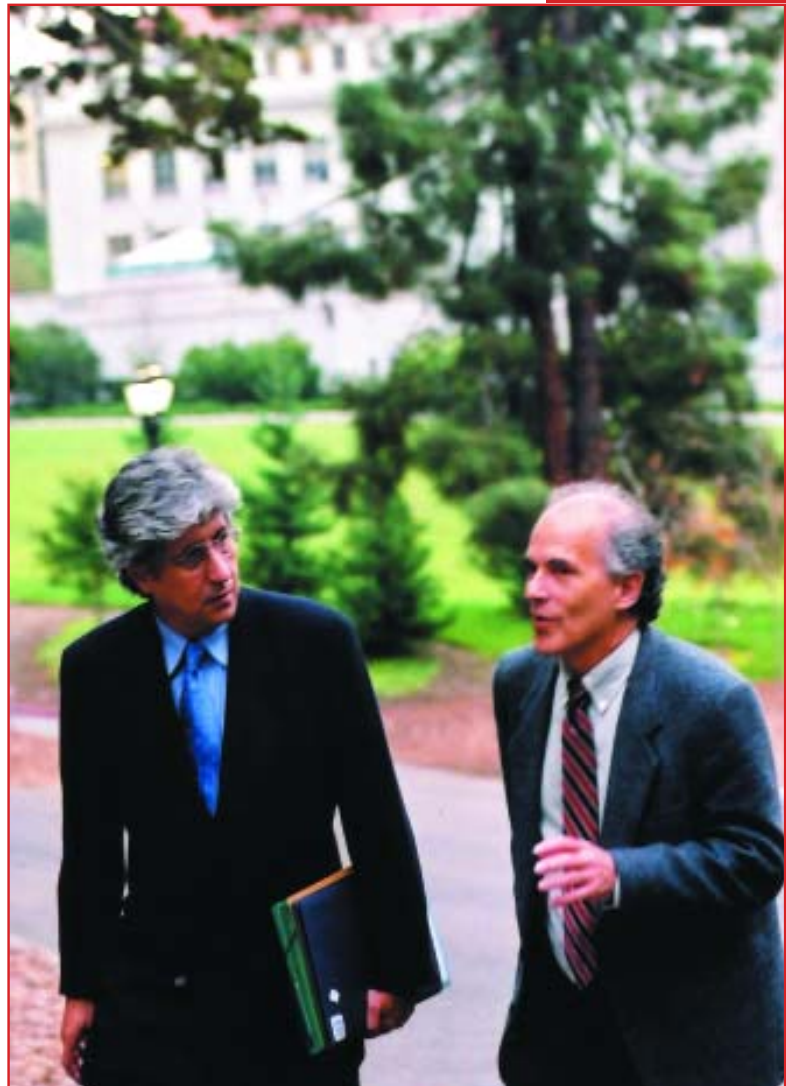


Photo by CLAS staff.

humiliating and degrading it was to his country. He pointed out that the United States was at least half of the problem. It is our demand that drives this evil market. I left that weekend convinced that we needed to suspend our punitive policy and to engage in a partnership of trust — openly and maturely. And I’m pleased to say that we did change our policy.

Regretfully, the U.S. government abandoned any pretext of openness and maturity in our relationship with Mexico at the United Nations. In the course of the debate and vote gathering over the Iraq war resolution, Washington decided to bug the phones of the offices of the other Security Council members. Ambassador Zinser was justifiably outraged. In November 2003, Adolfo described, well, how the U.S. saw it

Adolfo Aguilar Zinser walking on the Berkeley campus with Prof. Harley Shaiken.

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relationship with Mexico — as a “backyard” and as a “casual weekend fling.” That was Adolfo — forthrightly and defiantly confronting the very same people who had no trouble subversively tapping other diplomats’ phones. And the U.S. had the gall to be miffed.

Adolfo could not change our war policy in Iraq — but nobody tried harder or exhibited such extraordinary courage. As a member of congress then, I traveled to Iraq to try to prevent war, so I was one of his biggest cheerleader as he battled for a slice of sanity at the United Nations in what I consider one of Mexico’s finest hours. Again, *The Economist* said it well, “As long as Zinser had been at the UN, no member of the Security Council had thought of Mexico as anyone’s backyard.”

Sometimes it takes courage to risk your standing to see beyond the horizon. With his courage he brought honor to his country, and with his passing the world lost a special treasure. Through his vision and daring he brought democracy to his country even though his journey took him through four political parties to get there.

Our memories of him are so full of life and joy that it is impossible to believe he is gone. We will never forget his great spirit, good values, kindness and warmth. Though his life with us was cut short, he touched many in ways that will resonate for years to come. When I think of him now I am reminded of Shakespeare’s lines:

Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night.

— *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene 2

David Bonior is a professor at Wayne State University and was formerly the Democratic Whip and a member of Congress.

## Juan Gabriel Valdés

...I met Adolfo 28 years ago, during my exile in Mexico, and we quickly became friends, almost like two old acquaintances who suddenly run into each other after a long separation. The modes of thinking at the continent’s edges were the same: leftist Chileans and Mexicans thinking about our countries and the larger region, enjoying and sharing Mexican and Chilean idioms to narrate our tragedies and to plan out our hopes. That was my first encounter with Adolfo. For years, we ran into each other in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, without ever suspecting that we would be well served by that spontaneous sympathy to build a complicity to defend peace and our countries’ dignity at the United Nations Security Council.

Dear friends, please allow me to speak to you without false modesty or mediocre words. Adolfo is no longer with us, and he does not deserve that I remember our friendship without the greatness it had. I recollect having read that there are times in history when Darkness attains such magnitude that one can find refuge only in First Principles, when one must disregard threats and opportunism, accept all the risks of loneliness. Those who so act know that for a short and tragic moment, politics take on the visage of a miracle, because they find themselves imbued with a strength they were not aware they had. Such was the way Adolfo Aguilar Zinser and I lived those days in the Security Council, when, together, we fought against the approval of the war in Iraq. It is true that we did not speak in those terms then. Adolfo’s weapons were his pure intelligence, which flowed like a distilled fluid, the contagious humor, the deep humaneness of his “considerations,” his sympathy filled with irony towards life.

Most of the time we shared at the Security Council was spent exchanging brief thoughts, phrases on which to put emphasis in our speeches, concepts that we thought should be urgently defended. We worked for 12, 14 hours a day, talking in his apartment’s library. We knew how to gain critical distance from the





Photo by CLAS staff.

day's events, contemplate our own and our adversaries' roles, as if on a grand painting in which comedy and tragedy mixed. Only on that day when those who sought war had to abandon the idea of dragging the Security Council down and forcing it to acquiesce to the conflict could we sit peacefully at The Palm on 2nd and, sharing a giant steak, reminisce over everything we had to go through to get to that moment. "This was," we said, speaking from the heart, "a new relationship between the Fox and the Porcupine, the putting together of all the tricks to serve one end: to persuade those who did not know how to act, to defy the adversaries who feared to declare their opposition, to withstand those who called us reckless, to appease our attackers and to separate ourselves from those who offered us sides to join where we did not belong. After a pause, Adolfo told me, "Once, when I was younger, someone warned me that I got too close to the edge of the abyss. This time around we were closer than ever, Mano. We kicked ass, we pulled through, but we must remain cautious." As usual, none of us knew what would happen next. We only knew that we had managed to prevent the United Nations from being used for an inadmissible and

unacceptable purpose: a premeditated decision to go to war on the base of false arguments. We did it in representation of what we thought was our countries' essential democratic identity: respect for international law, a vocation for peace, and a deep commitment to the United Nations.

I have a record of Adolfo's interventions in the "small room" at the Security Council. I can see him now, starting his speech: "Mr. President, given the debate that has taken place in this Council, Mexico's position is..." Adolfo knew what Mexico's position was, and we will always be in need of that position. A country that could not but speak the truth, that could never betray its principles, that could not tolerate hiding places and schemes, but was always in the clear and open, transparent and unyielding. That was Adolfo Aguilar Zinser. I thank Life for the opportunity to have known him.

**Juan Gabriel Valdés was Chile's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 2000-03. He represented Chile on the Security Council from January until June of 2003. He is currently head of the United Nations Mission in Haiti.**

Speakers at the Alternatives for the Americas Conference in December 1998 (from left): Harley Shaiken, Jaime Estévez, Nancy Pelosi, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, Luis María Aguirre, Amalia García Medina, Jorge Castañeda, David Bonior, Sherrod Brown, Vicente Fox, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Ciro Ferreira Gomes.



# Adolfo Aguilar Zinser 1949-2005

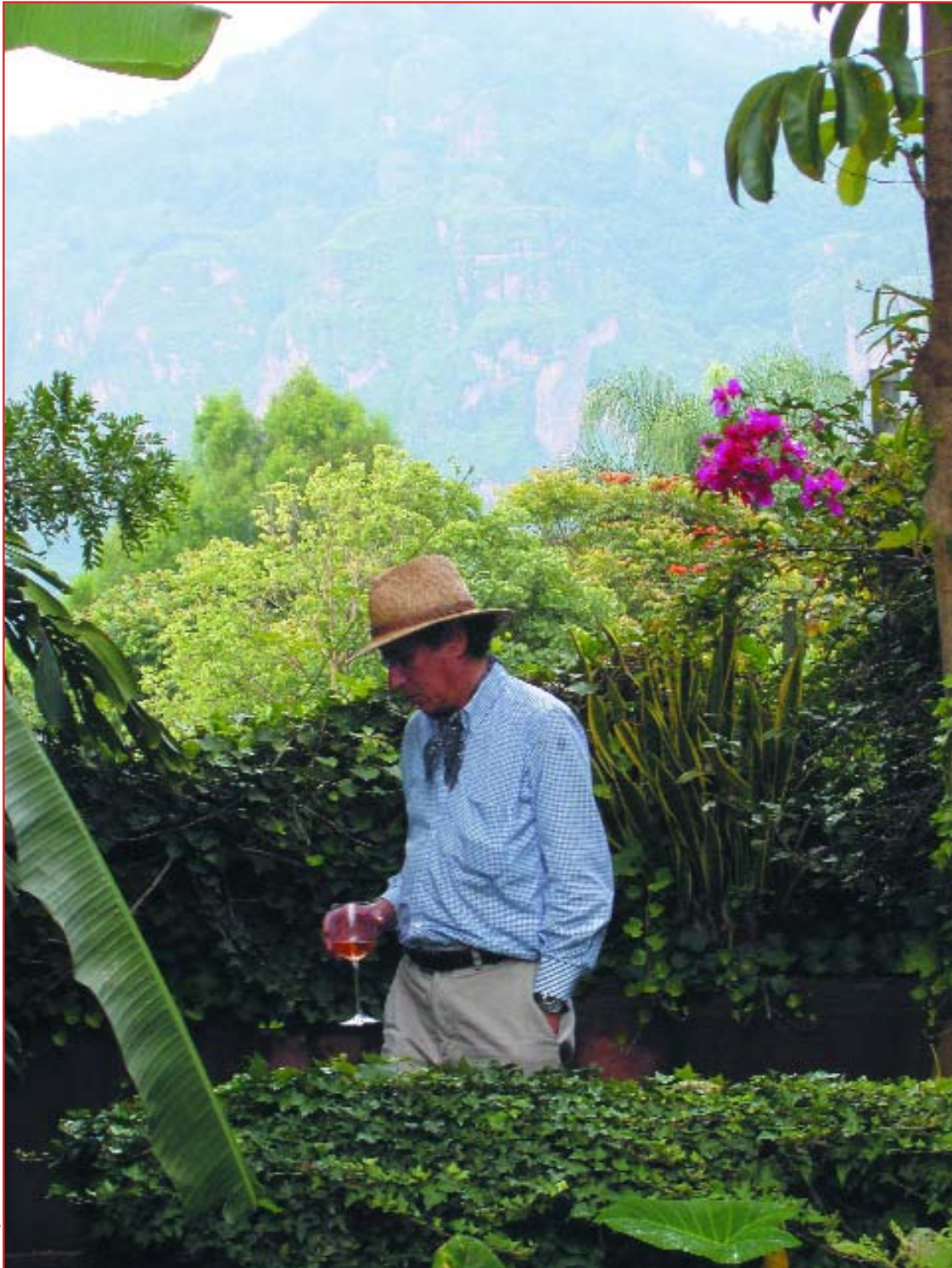


Photo by Beatriz Manz.

At home in Tepoztlán, 2005.