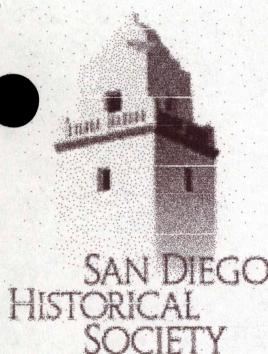
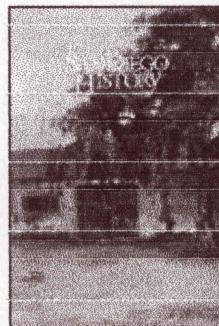


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Luisa Moreno: A Hispanic Civil Rights Leader in San Diego

by Carlos Larralde and Richard Griswold del Castillo

Famous as a political and labor activist in the United States, Luisa Moreno loved San Diego and lived there the last three years that she was in the United States from 1947 and 1950. While she and her husband lived in a small house in Encanto, she had a slogan inscribed over her door. "We are created to serve others. The sad thing is that we die only for ourselves." This was to be a fitting epitaph for Luisa herself, since it was in San Diego that she was undergoing one of the most trying periods in her life and would later live in exile as a result. During this period, the San Diegans who met her found her to be cheerful and outgoing, a model for a perfect lady. But behind that pleasing personality was a strong inner core. She would not allow herself to be intimidated, not even by the United States government.¹

Luisa Moreno was born on August 30, 1907 in Guatemala City. Her upper class father, Ernesto Rodriguez, a serious and bookish man, and her fragile mother, Alicia Lopez Rodriguez, gave the new baby the christened name of Blanca Rosa Lopez Rodriguez. In 1916 young Alicia came to the United States with her parents to attend the College of the Holy Name in Oakland, California. After completing her studies she returned to her homeland. Developing an interest in social issues, she worked at different newspapers and published a volume of poetic verse. Later she came to the United States for a second time in 1928 where she lived until her voluntary deportation in 1950.² During the early years of her career as a labor organizer, because of her family's disagreement with her political position and to avoid embarrassing the family name, she changed her name to Luisa Moreno, in honor of a famous Mexican labor organizer of that era, Luis Moreno.

Luisa Moreno was a small woman, about five feet tall and she had a talent for persuasion. As a forceful speaker, she convinced others by the weight of her logic and her ease in using the right words. Yet in public, when not speaking, this passionate lady was reserved. Her mysterious nature and her silence was such that people yearned to know more about her. Throughout her adult years, Luisa Moreno took care of her appearance and visited a hairdresser whenever she had the opportunity. A long time labor activist and friend, Bert Corona recalled, "Even if you knocked on her door at 8 in the morning, you'd find her well put together . . . She was always

proper and rarely complained."³

Moreno's career as a labor organizer began when she and her first husband, the Guatemalan artist Miguel Angel de Leon, migrated to New York City on August 28, 1928. When she arrived, she was appalled to see how minorities were treated by segregation within the city. During the Great Depression, she supported her infant daughter and unemployed husband by working in a garment factory near Spanish Harlem. According to historian George Sanchez, "Here she had contact with socialist Puerto Rican workers, an experience that radicalized her and pushed her toward professional labor activism."⁴ Toiling for hours over her sewing machine, she experienced first-hand the deplorable working conditions of the Latin sweat shops of that era.

Her first experience with labor activism, however, was during a cafeteria strike in 1930. She found a job in Zelgreen's Cafeteria in New York City and soon was involved with her co-workers in a strike. Together they faced a contingent of police who intended to prevent them from picketing. Luisa, in a fur collar coat, strolled through the cordon of policemen as if she was going to enter the cafeteria. When she was directly in front of the door she pulled a picket sign from under her coat and thrust it in plain view. Two burly policemen grabbed her by the elbows. They lifted her off the sidewalk and hustled her into the entrance way of a nearby building. She came out with her face bleeding and considered herself fortunate that she was not disfigured.⁵

On June 25, 1937, Moreno and her husband were divorced and she now had to raise an infant daughter named Mytyl alone. A few years before Moreno had become a labor union activist. In 1935 the American Delegation of Labor hired her as a professional organizer. Moreno was shaped by the liberal intellectuals and activists of that era and she had a faith in the idealism that molded the new Soviet state. In the 1930s, many liberals loathed Nazism and were disillusioned with capitalism's failures, so evident during the Great Depression. Along with many other labor organizers she believed in Marxist ideology and was attracted to the American Communist party due to the attention it devoted to Latinos and labor issues in factories and in agriculture.⁶

In 1930, Moreno had joined the Communist Party in New York. The Party was active not only in organizing workers but also in community issues: working for school desegregation, opposing segregation in public facilities such as swimming pools and housing, protesting police abuse, obtaining relief aid, and preventing the deportations of Mexicans during the 1930s.⁷ Even actors joined the Communist Party. As Marlon Brando wrote, "During the thirties, several members of the Group Theater . . . joined the Communist party-largely, I suppose, because of an idealistic belief that it offered a progressive approach to ending the Depression and the increasing economic inequity in the country, confronted racial injustice and stood up to fascism."⁸ An additional attraction of the Communist Party to Luisa Moreno was that it took an active part in championing the cause of women workers.⁹

During the early 1930s Luisa Moreno worked in a variety of areas. She unionized Blacks and Latina cigar rollers and other tobacco workers in Florida. While in Tampa, Luisa helped a dwindling cigar workers union that the Ku Klux Klan had been terrorizing. Then she organized cane workers in Louisiana. Through the years she gained valuable experience that she would later use in the fields and packing houses of California and finally among the Latino tuna packing workers in San Diego. By 1934 Moreno joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a newly formed alliance of unions devoted to organizing unskilled workers. She soon was elected as the first woman and the first Latina member of the California CIO Council. A few years later, in 1938, Luisa Moreno became an international representative of UCAPAWA [United Cannery Agricultural Packing, and Allied Workers of America]. That year Donald Henderson, a

Communist, had organized the UCAPAWA-CIO. Throughout her career Moreno insisted that "UCAPAWA was a left union, not a Communist union." In the 1930s UCAPAWA was a major organizing force among Latino field, shed and cannery workers.¹⁰

In 1937, Luisa moved to San Diego to help the fish and cannery workers organize unions in the tuna industry. At that time tuna packing was a major employer of Latinos who mostly lived in Boyle Heights. The canneries, which dominated the south bay water front included the California Packing Corporation, the Marine Products Company, the Old Mission Packing Corporation, the Van Camp Sea Food Company, and Westgate Sea Products. They operated around the clock in sweatshop conditions.

The workers found Luisa to be trustworthy and likeable. Few realized that she was an astute politician. She was never beholden to any political party or business interest. The challenge of the San Diego canneries made her tough-minded and pragmatic about how unions could benefit the common, poorly educated worker, who found her optimistic and "very down-to-earth."¹¹

Like most parts of California, organizing was difficult in San Diego County's fields and factories. Poverty-stricken Anglo Americans had come from other states during the Depression by the thousands and settled there. As labor historian Sam Kushner noted, "The Anglos, many of whom had been brought up to believe in rugged individualism were not as amenable to union organization. Even so, their bitter experiences educated many of them quite rapidly and they, too, were among those who joined in some of the struggles of those days."¹²

In San Diego, Moreno enjoyed the extensive gardens in Balboa Park. It made life pleasant for her. She recalled, "The beauty of the city made me forget the stupidity, ignorance, prejudices and paranoia of the world." Even her nature garden walks had a larger purpose, "to reinforce humility so that I don't have to nurse later a bruised ego."¹³

During the first part of 1938, while still in San Diego, Moreno helped to organize a Hispanic civil rights assembly called *El Congreso de Pueblos que Hablan Español* (the National Spanish-Speaking Congress). This would be the first ever conference that would bring together Mexican American unions, mutual aid associations, political clubs and other organizations. The purpose of the meeting would be to exchange information, establish a network of Mexican American organizations, and to discuss a civil right agenda. After months of planning and some frustration, Moreno working with Josefina Fierro de Bright saw their dreams realized when *El Congreso* met in Los Angeles on April 29, 1939.¹⁴ With her union contracts throughout the nation, Moreno was a key organizer but she strongly believed in sharing responsibility. In her words: "One person can't do anything; it's only with others that things are accomplished."¹⁵ As a result of *El Congreso*'s conference, the House Un-American Committee in Washington, under Congressman Martin Dies, decided to investigate its organizers, including Luisa Moreno. Dies accused the *Congreso* of being affiliated with communists and suspected their anti-agribusiness stance. He accused the *Congreso* organizers as attempting "to separate the Mexicans of the Southwest from the rest of the United States and either form a new republic or return the Southwest to Mexico." He also charged the *Congreso* with fermenting "violent riots and revolutionary activities."¹⁶

Pending the full investigation, Moreno decided to go to Texas to organize women working in the pecan shelling factories. She arrived with her child, Mytyl, in 1938 and rented a small house in San Antonio. When she visited the barrios she saw the vicious cycle of poverty and hopelessness ravaging the Hispanic community. "I could detect the harshness and cruelty of the system everywhere." There she helped the militant Emma Tenayuca organize the women. Soon

Moreno was arrested for her labor activities but was "released without charges."¹⁷

Following this, Moreno spent three months in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where she saw the harsh life of the farm workers. Naturally, she worked as a union organizer, and made contacts with vegetable, fruit canning, and packing industry workers. Also she helped to organize the field workers who harvested beets, sweet corn, cabbage, spinach, and other vegetables for only fifty cents a day.¹⁸

In September 1939, Moreno moved on to organize sugar beet workers in Colorado and then returned to California. For the next few years she lived in Los Angeles and was involved in historical events that shaped Mexican American history. At first she joined the Anti-Nazi League. It sponsored a labor rally, organized with her help, at the Los Angeles Coliseum and a Quarantine Hitler rally at the Shrine Auditorium.¹⁹

After 1940, Luisa Moreno was the chief organizer of UCAPAWA in Los Angeles and San Diego. She traveled constantly trying to break the discriminatory hiring habits of canneries and factories. In San Diego she was successful in getting non-discrimination pledges from the Royal Packing plant that processed Ortega brand chiles. She also traveled to Los Angeles where she got a pledge from the California Walnut Growers Association. As the general manager of the California Walnut Association, W. T. Webber wrote, "For a period of four years during the middle 1940s. . . [Moreno] held a position of authority in a labor union with which the California Walnut Association had a contract." He noted that he had "a high regard for her character, ability and honesty."²⁰

In San Diego Moreno spent most of her time organizing cannery operatives. With the patience of a saint, Moreno tackled the most routine and boring tasks in order to reform California canneries. She put all her energy into every detail. Finally, after a much effort her dedication paid off and contracts were signed with most of the canneries. This affected thousands of cannery workers, seventy-five percent of whom were women.

Moreno was moved by the sufferings of these women and men when she saw life inside the San Diego canneries with its segregated policies and terrible working conditions. If a female operative cut her finger slightly while paring or canning fruit, she hesitated to bandage it. She was afraid to fall behind because she was being paid the piece rate (so much per box). As a result, the finger became infected and pus oozed out of the wound and contaminated the fruits.²¹

Repeatedly, Moreno declared, "These people are not aliens -- they have contributed their endurance, sacrifices, youth and labor to the Southwest. Indirectly, they have paid more taxes than all the stockholders of California's industrialized agriculture, the sugar beet companies and the largest cotton interests that operate or have operated with the labor of Mexican workers."²² During this period, she coined the motto of UCAPAWA, "An Injury to One is An Injury to All." Years later Dorothy Healey said, "A strong sense of national identity held these workers together, but did not prevent them from making common cause with others, like their Jewish and Russian fellow-workers."²³

While in San Diego, Moreno worked with the activist attorney Carey McWilliams. There were very few labor lawyers in San Diego and Los Angeles. Both were violently anti-labor towns. McWilliams worked to expose abuses done to farm field and factory workers by the agricultural industry. As David F. Selvin noted, "If there had been no Carey McWilliams back in the latter days of the 1930's, we would have had to invent one."²⁴

Moreno, McWilliams and other labor union leaders organized minority and other farm workers in California's lush agricultural valleys. "Their efforts were met with violence from the growers and local police." As a lawyer, McWilliams defended striking citrus workers and wrote articles about their plight and other issues in several publications, especially in the *San Diego Union*.²⁵

To Moreno's amazement, during World War II, San Diego transformed itself into a dynamic military and factory city. "The fear of Japan made San Diego in a few short years the greatest naval port in America."²⁶ Like a nest of ants, thousands of soldiers and sailors moved in and out of the region. Manpower needs were critical. Moreno spoke out against the relocation of the Japanese Americans to camps and saw that a disproportionate number of Chicanos were drafted because they lacked jobs which carried draft-deferral status. Once again thousands of Mexicans poured across the border and took the least skilled, low-paying jobs, for which they competed with other unskilled workers.

In San Diego, housing was in short supply. Rations became a nuisance. Transportation became a problem. The war triggered anxiety and people searched for scapegoats. Known as "Pachucos," eccentric Chicanos youngsters in baggy and extra long pants were prime targets. Moreno testified before the Los Angeles Grand Jury which was investigating the famous Sleepy Lagoon Case -- a sensational trial in the summer of 1942 where nine teenage Mexican Americans were put on trial for murder. In her testimony she predicted that the tensions created by the media's sensationalism would result in violence unless corrective measures were taken.²⁷

Her prophecy turned into a reality. In June of 1943, the Los Angeles Zoot-Suit riots began, sparked by violence between soldiers and sailors on leave and young Chicanos. They took place in the largely Spanish-speaking neighborhood close to the downtown sections of Los Angeles. For a series of evenings, sailors and soldiers organized fleets of taxicabs and roamed the streets looking for teenage Chicanos wearing zoot-suits "with seat pleat and stuff cuff."

Encouraged by police indifference, sensational news stories flourished. Mobs grew larger. During one evening, Zoot-suitors were dragged out of downtown motion picture theaters, their fancy suits torn from their bodies. They were beaten and chased through the streets.²⁸

On the second night of the rioting there was an emergency meeting of several hundred citizens. One of the concerns was to stem the wild rumors that were sweeping through the communities of southern California. Fears of a "Pachuco war" were spread by hysterical and provocative reports that appeared in the press. Moreno pointed to the war stress, racism and paranoia that had caused this media over-reaction. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, printed headlines, such as, "Ten Seized in Drive on Zoot-Suit Gangsters," and "One Slain and Another Knifed in Zoot Fracas."²⁹

Luisa Moreno along with members of El Congreso and other Mexican-American community leaders sprang into action. They mobilized a defense committee on behalf of the youngsters who had been arrested by the police even though they had been attacked by the servicemen.³⁰ The *San Diego Union* also reported on the riots but Moreno was relieved that the newspaper refrained from blatant "yellow journalism." But they too were caught up in the stereotype. The *San Diego Union* reported that groups of servicemen, ranging in size from a dozen to several hundred, roamed San Diego's downtown streets, searching for "zoot-suited hoodlums reported to be infiltrating into San Diego from Los Angeles." About 100 sailors and marines stormed downtown San Diego on G Street below First Avenue to chase several youths wearing "the outlandish zoot-suit garb. The youths made their getaway in the darkness." About 300 other servicemen gathered at Third Avenue and East Street but they were quickly dispersed by city

and military police before any zoot-suiters were discovered. Moreno learned that all of San Diego's police were ordered to search suspicious individuals who "appeared to be members of a Pachuco gang." Anyone found with possible weapons was to be booked on deadly weapons charges.³¹

After years of strikes, pickets, organizing, negotiating and fighting for labor unions throughout the Southwest and moving from town to town, Luisa Moreno finally moved to San Diego permanently to live with her new husband Gray Bemis. A U.S. Navy sailor from Nebraska, Bemis met Luisa during one of her organizing trips to San Diego. After a brief courtship they were married on February 1, 1947 in Yuma, Arizona.³² Soon after they moved into an apartment by the beach in San Diego.

Luisa was attracted to Gray Bemis because of his intelligence and sensibility. It seemed now that she was ready to settle down in one place for the first time in her life. While Bemis worked as a manager for the Consolidated Pipe & Supply Company, she sat with her heavy, black typewriter and wrote a guidebook on how to organize labor unions. She wanted others to avoid her mistakes. Slowly her project turned into an autobiographical narrative of her labor union activities.³³

Determined to be a traditional wife, Moreno withdrew from most of her major labor activities, resigning from the staff of the CIO. She remained, however, an active dues-paying member of the union and gave moral support and was involved in several local projects. Periodically she made Monday trips to Los Angeles to teach a class at the California Labor School with Ramon Welch entitled, "Mexican-Americans and the Fight for Civil Rights." Sometimes she would stay overnight with a friend to help Murray Korngold with a Tuesday class, "How the People Made Our History."³⁴

In 1949, the soft-spoken Bemis built her a small frame house, painted red with white trim at 6426 Medio Drive. It stood on the side of a remote hill overlooking San Diego's harbor and downtown. The location with the view of the sea and the hills evoked a soothing sense of timelessness. In the back yard Luisa cared for an extensive azalea garden. The garden became her sanctuary from years of turmoil and a retreat for her meditations and intellectual pursuits.

As Moreno remembered, "That house symbolized some of the happiest moments of my life. He was a great husband and my best friend." Later, her daughter Mytyl Giomboske noted, "It was a marriage made in heaven. Not once did they raise their voice at each other or argue. They had a high regard for each other."³⁵ In their small house with huge windows, her husband furnished an office with an old oak file cabinet in one corner. Moreno looked out her office window at a scenic view of San Diego's harbor as she typed her reflections. Bemis even wall-papered the room for her with her favorite design. For her birthday, he bought her a fine Navaho rug and some Pueblo pottery. Ceramics sat on top of her huge cabinet -- her memory bank -- full of letters, reports and other narratives about her activities in labor unions.³⁶

Luisa's husband loved photography and photographed his wife and Moreno's grandchildren. One bedroom was used for a well-equipped photo lab. Both of them loved company and they frequently had a variety of dinner guests. Luisa enjoyed cooking and gardening and hired a Mexican gardener to keep the landscape beautiful.³⁷

Since she loved azaleas, Moreno joined the San Diego Organic Gardening Club. As a perfectionist, she extracted certain azaleas from her garden whose tint of color was not quite

right. To rearrange her garden, she clipped sprigs of new azaleas in bloom and set them in Coke bottles. The bottles were then relocated about in the landscape until Moreno was content with the color and harmony. She was slowly forming a Japanese garden.³⁸

Moreno loved things well done. As she used to say, "If you do something, do it once and do it right."³⁹ Even this precise lady's house reflected her personality. She had numerous books and had a few Pre-Columbian objects and different types of wall masks and colorful Mexican rugs.

After three years of marital bliss in San Diego, her domestic world was shattered by Cold War fears and McCarthyist hysteria. Nation-wide an atmosphere of paranoia about Communist infiltrators prevailed. Because of her Marxist ideas and Guatemala origins, the California Un-American Activities classified Moreno as a dangerous alien.⁴⁰ Moreno was stunned at first and went to see attorney Robert W. Kenny, who had a law office in downtown San Diego. Kenny was a remarkable lawyer who sometimes antagonized other lawyers because of his legal successes. He was eventually appointed to the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. Moreno considered him a courageous man of ethics.⁴¹

In September, 1948, as she awaited confirmation of her citizenship application, Moreno was subpoenaed by the State Senate Committee on Un-American Activities. She attended the hearings of the Committee at the San Diego Civic Center from September 8 through 10, 1948. On September 10, a trim Moreno in a black dress and white gloves took the witness stand and faced Senator Jack B. Tenney's Committee, a statewide precursor to the national McCarthy-led witch hunt of radicals.⁴²

The *San Francisco Chronicle* evaluated Tenney and the committee hearings:

One of the Committee's troubles under Tenney's leadership was that it roamed and rambled into fields of assassination and guilt by association which had subversiveness. Anyone who was in favor of overthrowing the Government, was likely to be hauled up and smeared by inquisition and innuendo. His methods have done more damage to the cause of intelligently combating Communism than almost any other influence in California . . .⁴³

Luisa Moreno remembered her impressions: "While the members were cautious and passive, Tenney was a bully with a scathing tongue. He reduced his victims to tears. By the time he finished with them, they felt depleted."⁴⁴ When Moreno walked into the hearing room, she retained her dignity. She remained calm while suppressing her anger against the bigoted ignorance so apparent in the questioning. As she sat calmly, she felt that Tenney's sessions had become an unscripted soap opera. Moreno was asked directly if she had been a member of the Communist Party. She replied that question was an attempt to "smear" a labor union and she invoked her Constitutional rights.⁴⁵ Then she was found to be a hostile witness. The council persisted with the same question. Moreno's eyes glared. She made it explicitly clear to Richard E. Coombs, Chief Council for the delegation and Jack Tenney that they had no right to ask that question and that she had no intention of answering it.⁴⁶ Like most individuals who were subpoenaed by the committee, she protected herself by invoking the Constitution's Fifth Amendment.

Coombs asked her pointedly whether she might not be risking the right to become a full-fledged citizen by refusing to answer his question. "Citizenship," Moreno responded, "means a lot to me, but the Constitution of the United States means more."⁴⁷ Listeners applauded in defiance of the

customary Tenney edict against displays of audience sentiment. One youth was even hustled from the room by officers. "I told Coombs," recalled Moreno "that I had taken an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution when applying for naturalization and that was what I intended to do in the hearing."⁴⁸ More questions followed in a long, exhausting and emotionally draining session. Later she wrote, "During the testimony Sen. Jack Tenney threatened me with sending the transcript to the [U.S.] Immigration and Naturalization Service."⁴⁹ The irritated Coombs and other Tenney committee members agreed that Moreno was insubordinate and had failed to answer their questions. A transcript of her session was forwarded to U.S. immigration authorities.

After a few weeks after the San Diego hearing on September 30, 1948, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a warrant for Moreno's arrest as an alien "affiliated with an organization . . . and teaches the overthrow, by force and violence, of the government . . ."⁵⁰ While she appealed the order the INS asked Moreno to post \$4,000 bail or report to the local office weekly.⁵¹ Her citizenship application was not a dead issue. Historian George Sanchez wrote, "Ironically, Moreno would include herself and the other Latino labor leaders of the period as individuals who really loved America even while the U.S. government was trying to define her and others like her as aliens, outsiders to the American tradition."⁵²

When considering her appeal the INS requested that witnesses appear on Moreno's behalf to testify about her character. Luisa was desperate to find witnesses, but many people were afraid of being smeared as communist sympathizers.⁵³ Finally a few friends came forward on her behalf. In a huge office in downtown Los Angeles, on February 14, 1949, Ignacio L. Lopez, editor of the Spanish language newspaper *La Opinion*, testified about her dedication to labor union and civil rights. But that was not enough.⁵⁴

On March 14, 1949, Moreno traveled to the San Diego office of the INS to be interviewed to determine her immigration status. After the interview, the INS finalized her deportation. During all this, Moreno was offered citizenship by the FBI in exchange for her testifying at the Harry Bridges investigation. Bridges was an Australian-born International Longshoremen Labor Union leader who had been charged with being a communist. Moreno turned down the offer, refusing, in her words, to be "a free woman with a mortgaged soul."⁵⁵ Despite the deportation order, Moreno continued her labor activism while free on bail. She accepted an invitation from Paul Pinsky, director of the 12th Annual Convention of the California CIO Council in 1949. Speaking before this audience, Moreno criticized the "Witch Hunt" conducted by the Tenney Committee.⁵⁶

Strange things are happening in this land. Things that are truly alien to traditions and threaten the very existence of cherished traditions . . . Yes, tragically, the unmistakable signs are before us -- , who really love America. And it is we who must sound the alarm, for the workers and the people to hear and take notice. For it seems that today, as the right to organize and strike was fought for and won, as the new labor agreements were fought for and won, as the fight against discrimination is being fought but far from won, so the fight for the very fundamentals of American democracy must again be fought for and re-established.⁵⁷

Later, Moreno was dismayed when she read that university professors were dismissed for refusing to submit to the Un-American Activities Committee Investigation. Even "distinguished scientists" were being "harassed and persecuted for no more than their opinions and associations." Moreno was upset that the Board of Regents of the University of California in Los Angeles voted to discharge 157 members of the university's staff for failing to make a formal declaration that they were never members of the Communist Party.⁵⁸

Sometime after the hearings Moreno met Zero Mostel in San Diego. He was one of Broadway's great entertainers. Like her, his life was shattered. According to his biographer, "Mostel had been before the Un-American Activities Committee, and jobs for him had evaporated like a morning mist on a hot summer day."⁵⁹ Moreno and Mostel soon became friends and gave each other moral support to survive the oppression. Mostel had some savings and was exploring a career in art but Moreno was not that fortunate. Her life was shattered after the Tenney hearings.⁶⁰ She stayed mostly at home working on her autobiographical book. She pondered over the documentation with several files spread all over her table for quick references. While sitting at a black typewriter, she rewrote her pages, read and sorted papers. One morning, as she prepared in her kitchen a sandwich and coffee for lunch, she looked up and saw her Mexican gardener, Manuel, staring at her through the open window. Later she caught him reading some of her manuscripts by the window. The embarrassed gardener excused himself by saying that he had been looking for her to ask about how she wanted several plants arranged. Luisa questioned him and she discovered that her faithful Manuel, who could speak and read English, had been bribed by the FBI to find things that could incriminate her and to testify against her. The FBI had promised Manuel and his relatives citizenship in exchange. After this confession Luisa told him to say whatever it took to protect himself and his family. She asked him to stay as a gardener and report what he wanted.

Manuel had also told her that the FBI had interviewed her neighbors and close acquaintances.⁶¹ The FBI agents in San Diego had asked them what kind of automobile she drove and if she was living beyond her means. They inquired if she had ever been drunk or had loud parties with strange-looking visitors. They asked the neighbors if they had ever received her mail by mistake and noticed any foreign magazines. Had they ever seen the *Daily Worker*, a communist newspaper? One agent asked, "Just between us -- this is off the record, of course -- do you have any reason to suspect that she might not be, you know, 100 percent American?"

Frightened by Manuel's information, Moreno decided that her writings had put her former associates in danger. When her husband, Gray, came home from work, they sorted out family photos and burned all their confidential records in the backyard. Photos that depicted union groups perished in the blaze. Boxes of private papers went up in smoke. Years later, Moreno regretted not saving these papers which were really a priceless collection on early labor unions in San Diego.

This was not the first time that Moreno had encounters with the FBI. During her labor activities in San Diego during the 1930s, Moreno was under constant FBI investigation. Her friend Harry Bridges, a radical leader of the San Francisco Longshoremen's Union whom she had met during her organizing days with the CIO, had taught her how to detect their surveillance. She learned from him to have "fun with the FBI." For example, when she checked into a hotel, she rented an adjoining room so that she could see under the connecting floor and listen. She saw two pairs of men's feet moving around the room. Hearing no talk, except whispers, she knew it was FBI agents. Then she turned on the radio full blast and tuned it to a climactic soap opera or a thriller. Bridges told her to check on likely wiretapping sites and if the phone was bugged, blow a horn into it. As Moreno recalled, "I could spot agents in a room or in a hotel lobby. They had a unique habit of holding newspapers in front of them. They held the paper just below their eyes and their eyes peeped over the top of the paper."⁶²

Other counter-strategies were to tear up meaningless envelopes and stationery and drop them in a waste basket in her hotel room. If she had the time, she would make elaborate paper dolls out of old union leaflets and leave them there; she knew that agents patiently reassembled them. In

typing letters she used old carbon paper from a stenographer at a retail store. She knew that it was rushed to the FBI Lab in Washington, where technicians with smudged fingers spent hours trying to decipher them.⁶³

In 1950, after almost a year of waiting for the results of her appeal, Moreno's immigration status took a grotesque turn. Local San Diego canneries, such as the Old Mission Packing Corporation and the San Diego Packing Company, had asked that Moreno and her closest friends in San Diego be questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee, a new witch hunting committee that had been set up by the Congress. The committee questioned her and her friends Donald Henderson, John Tisa and Elizabeth Sausly. Much of the time the committeemen issued publicity-catching pronouncements such as declaring Moreno and her friends as "card-carrying members of the Communist Party" and "agents of Soviet intrigue." When her friend Elizabeth Sausly asked Moreno what to do, Luisa replied, "Stand up for the truth regardless of the consequences."⁶⁴ As the journalist Steve Murdock wrote, "The government's action appears to be linked to a whole series of deportation actions against union leaders on the Pacific coast particularly union leaders in the agricultural and food processing industry."⁶⁵

Back at her San Diego home, Moreno realized she probably would be deported. Her friend Beri Corona noted that she wanted to fight deportation but only "if she had sensed that it would have been a collective struggle rather than just an individual one." But Luisa Moreno and other Latino activists were abandoned by the American left during this difficult period. Corona remembered: "Unfortunately, the efforts by the left -- specifically, the Communist Party -- to defend labor leaders in similar situations extended only to those of European descent and not to Latinos."⁶⁶ Chicano leaders like Josefina Fierro de Bright, Refugio Martinez, and others discovered themselves isolated and defenseless. Some were deported.⁶⁷

Without the support of liberals, her husband Gray, and Ignacio Lopez, an activist and editor from Riverside, and Carey McWilliams set up a defense committee called the Provisional Committee For Luisa Moreno Bemis. As chairman, Lopez set up the committee headquarters in a small office on South Hill Street in Los Angeles and wrote solicitations for donations to the defense fund.⁶⁸

Some individuals helped. Prominent figures joined the committee like Beatrice Griffin, author of *American Me*, and Joseph W. Aidin, a well-known Los Angeles lawyer. Later the committee opened another office at Encanto in San Diego, to raise money for legal expenses and to promote a Spanish language leaflet.⁶⁹ McWilliams, for his part, lobbied on Moreno's behalf. He wrote, "Are we to do nothing and say nothing while this fine human being who would make such an admirable citizen, is ignominiously deported from her friends, from her husband, her daughter and her granddaughter? For myself I can only say that I count it a privilege to support Luisa's case in every way at my disposal."⁷⁰

Moreno felt that her fate was wrapped up in her union activism: "They can never deport the people that I've worked with and with those things that were accomplished for the benefit of hundreds of thousand of workers -- things that can never be destroyed."⁷¹ She considered racism a factor as well when she wrote on March 16, 1950, "We are right back in the pages of that revealing book on the 'Asiatic and the Alien . . .' No Constitution for us, who are neither citizens nor persons, but a freakish creation called 'aliens.'⁷²"

Luisa Moreno was one of several militant Hispanic leaders who had never become citizens. Instead they took an American identity through their participation in unions and political

organization, primarily in San Diego and Los Angeles. Now, in historian Sanchez's words, they "faced deportation for the political activities they had engaged in under the rubric of a newfound ethnic Americanism."⁷³

Almost every week the San Diego newspapers accused her of being a subversive. For the *San Diego Evening Tribune* she was a woman who was part of a "subversive organization [who] is living quietly as a housewife in San Diego." When Moreno and her husband began receiving violent threats they moved to 1818 6th Street, San Diego. When the threats continued they decided to make out a will. She was now even forbidden by the INS to keep a copy of her deportation proceedings transcript. Depressed over her predicament that financially drained her, on November 15, 1950, she received another bill from her attorney, Robert Kenny, for "professional services."⁷⁴

Hope again faded. She was arrested and detained in the Terminal Island Federal Prison in the Los Angeles harbor. She remained there for a few days. While seeing the majestic harbor from a prison window, she remained calm and realized that her friends could not help her anymore. She retained her protective glaze of discipline and never complained. Her husband Gray became her tower of strength during these desperate critical moments. Mytyl went to visit her at Terminal Island, which would be the last time she would see her mother for a long time.

Finally Moreno was released and given only days to gather her possessions and leave the country. Luisa and Gray drove a Studebaker to El Paso. On November 30, 1950, they went into Mexico through Ciudad Juarez.⁷⁵ The terms of her exit were listed as "voluntary departure under warrant of deportation" on the grounds that she had once been a member of the Communist party.⁷⁶ She never again stepped foot on United States soil. In fact, if she were to return without permission, she would be guilty of a felony, fined and imprisoned.⁷⁷

Proud of his accomplishment, Jack Tenney spoke to a public gathering in San Diego and characterized Luisa Moreno as a "Parasitic Menace."⁷⁸ When the local Hispanic community heard about Moreno's deportation, they were grief-stricken. They respected this determined lady who had devoted her life to helping them and other disadvantaged groups throughout the country. They knew her extensive tradition of farm and factory labor organizing. The *San Diego Tribune* printed error-filled articles about her and even the local radio stations perpetuated myths about her. As Moreno recalled, "One of the radio stories talked of a 'powerful labor leader living as a quiet housewife in San Diego.' Well, that's quite a discovery! What they will do to garnish their chatter!" It irritated Moreno to no end since there was even confusion about the elementary facts of her life.⁷⁹

Moreno and her husband stayed in Mexico for almost a year. They were enchanted with Oaxaca and its Pre-Columbian ruins, Monte Alban and Mitla. They later moved to Guatemala and friends from the Guatemala Confederation of Labor welcomed them. On February 8, 1951, Moreno and Bemis registered as residents of the country. She was classified as a domestic. They opened a hardware business and became involved in activities associated with the progressive Jacobo Arbenz government until it was overthrown by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1954.⁸⁰ Later Moreno returned to Mexico. Cheerful about starting a new life in Mexico City, she promised herself never to get involved with labor organizations and politics again. In August 1956, Moreno and Bemis rented a place in Ixtapalapa, near Mexico City. There they operated a poultry farm. Carey McWilliams warned them "that it was an illusion to think that one could make a living from it."⁸¹

Shortly after, Bemis became ill from emphysema, aggravated by smoking. Luisa took him to