

Chile Launches Search for U.S. Suspect in Alleged Neruda Poisoning

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The government of Chile has launched an official search for a United States suspect in connection with the alleged poisoning of celebrated poet Pablo Neruda. The Chilean literary icon, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971, died on September 23, 1973. His death occurred less than two weeks after a coup d'état, led by General Augusto Pinochet, toppled the democratically elected Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, a close friend of Neruda.

The death of the internationally acclaimed poet, who was 69 at the time, was officially attributed to prostate cancer and the effects of acute mental stress over the military *coup*. Earlier this year, however, an official investigation was launched into Neruda's death following [allegations](#) that he had been murdered. The investigation was sparked by a comment made by Neruda's personal driver, Manuel Araya, who said that the poet had been deliberately injected with poison while receiving treatment for cancer at the Clinica Santa Maria in Chilean capital Santiago.

Investigators are still awaiting the completion of a complex autopsy performed on Neruda's remains, which [were exhumed](#) in April. But the Chilean government has already issued a search order for a medical doctor—or someone pretending to be a doctor—who was allegedly on Neruda's bedside on the night of his death. The search was issued based on comments made recently by another medical doctor, Sergio Draper, who supervised Neruda's hospital treatment in September of 1973. Dr. Draper told government investigators that he turned over his shift that night to a "Dr. Price", a young doctor in his late 20s, who was with Neruda in the hours leading to the poet's death.

According to Rodolfo Reyes, a lawyer representing the Neruda estate, Dr. Price's identity remains a mystery. The lawyer [told](#) Chilean newspaper *La Tercera* back in April that Dr. Price is believed to be an American "with blue eyes and very good manners". Some supporters of the view that Neruda was poisoned claim that the physical description of Dr. Price is very close to that of Michael Townley. Townley was an agent of the United States Central Intelligence Agency who was hired by DINA, the secret police of the Chilean dictatorship, to assassinate Orlando Letelier, a Chilean former diplomat who was a vocal opponent of the Pinochet regime.

Townley was arrested following Letelier's 1976 assassinating in Washington, DC. He was convicted to only 62 months in prison, in return for agreeing to collaborate with US government investigators. But there is said to be unconfirmed evidence that Townley, who is currently living under the US federal witness protection program, was in Florida at the

time of Neruda's death in Santiago. Chilean government investigators say there is no entry for a "Dr. Price" in the registry of hospital staff at the Clinica Santa Maria during the time of Neruda's death.

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