

# V. Perera, Santa Cruz author

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UC INSTRUCTOR EXPLORED SUBJECTS INVOLVING MANY CULTURES, RELIGIONS

By **Jessie Seyfer**

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Borders didn't mean much to Victor Perera.

The noted author, who died of a stroke in his Santa Cruz apartment June 14, crossed borders all the time in his life and in his writing. The 69-year-old infused his work with multiple cultures and religions, and mixed history with present-day struggle.

Born in Guatemala City in 1934 and educated in the United States, Mr. Perera was a cultural nomad of sorts, friends said. He once wrote: "To be a wandering Jew teaches you tolerance of other cultures, so that you go from exile to universalism."

Mr. Perera wrote seven books, including the 1995 memoir for which he was best known, called "The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey." The book combined Sephardic Jewish history with stories from his unique Guatemalan-Brooklyn upbringing.

Mr. Perera, the son of a well-to-do department store owner, moved to Brooklyn with his family when he was 12. He went on to earn a master's degree in English literature from the University of Michigan.

In the early 1960s, he began working as a fact-checker for the *New Yorker* magazine. Through the years he wrote essays and reportage there, and contributed to *Harper's* magazine, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Paris Review* and other publications, including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Mercury News*. He also taught writing and journalism at the University of California's Santa Cruz and Berkeley campuses.

A recurring theme in much of Mr. Perera's work was native Latin American groups such as Mayans in Guatemala and Mexican Indians in Chiapas, whom he considered oppressed.

"He was very adaptable and very empathetic to many cultures," said former

## VICTOR H. PERERA

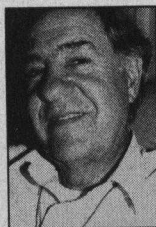
**Born:** April 12, 1934, Guatemala City

**Died:** June 14, 2003, Santa Cruz

**Survived by:** Ex-wife, Padma

Hejmadi of Hawaii; and a nephew, Daniel Perera of San Francisco.

**Services:** Memorials are being planned in Santa Fe, San Francisco and possibly other cities.



JORDAN ELGRABLY — SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

UC-Berkeley Professor Bernard Taper, a friend of Mr. Perera's since their days at the *New Yorker* in the 1960s and later, when both taught at Berkeley's journalism graduate school.

"He always seemed to see himself in the role of the underdog," said journalist and friend Jordan Elgrably. Elgrably and Mr. Perera helped found Ivri-NASAWI, an organization that celebrates Sephardic Jewish culture, in 1996.

"He had a great deal of empathy for those who had less power," Elgrably said. "Even though he came from a privileged background, he always seemed to have a grass-roots connection with people."

Mr. Perera also was passionate about the environment. Before a 1998 stroke left him severely debilitated, he had almost completed a book titled "Of Whales and Men," which dealt with communication between the species.

After his stroke, Mr. Perera regained a good deal of his mobility with the help of caregivers and intense physical therapy, Taper said. He still enjoyed movies and book signings. The last movie he saw was "Winged Migration," a meditation on bird migratory patterns.

"He loved it," Taper said.

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