

"Doña Leonor Pérez, Mother and Strength"

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On June 19, 1907, Doña Leonor Pérez Cabrera passed away in Havana at the age of 79. She died in the birth home of her first son, Cuba's national hero José Martí, amid extreme poverty and government neglect. However, she was surrounded by the love of her daughter, Amelia.

It is said that she died in her sleep, seated in the rocking chair where she often spent hours in silence, lost in reflection and memory.

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Her love, born of kindness and maternal devotion, was ever-present in Martí's life and embraced by him during his most pivotal moments.

Speaking of Doña Leonor inevitably invokes her profound connection to José Martí, even though she could not fully embrace his political convictions, which he proclaimed from a young age in works such as the poem “October 10” and in publications such as *El Siboney* and *La Patria Libre* in 1869.

At seventeen, imprisoned, shaved bald, and shackled in San Lázaro’s stone quarries, Martí wrote her a letter accompanied by a photo of himself:

"Look at me, Mother, and don't weep for love.

If, slave of my age and my doctrines,

I filled your martyr's heart with thorns.

Think: flowers blossom among the thorns."

Martí's thoughts of her also echoed in his farewell letter, dated March 25, 1895, from Montecristi in the Dominican Republic. He wrote it just before sailing to Cuba with Máximo Gómez to join the Necessary War he had organized. In it, Martí reaffirmed that she was always in his thoughts and addressed the painful tension between them:

"You grieve in the anger of your love over the sacrifice of my life. But why was I born to you with a life that embraces sacrifice? I cannot..." He concluded, making clear that her example had forged his resolve.

Beyond their shared sorrows, their relationship remained deeply tender and authentic—a bond worth honoring.

Leonor was born in the Canary Islands and arrived in Cuba as a young girl with her parents. She later married the Valencian-born Mariano in Havana in 1852. Mariano served as a low-ranking military official of the Spanish Empire there. Their first child was their only son, José Julián, born on January 28, 1853. He was followed by daughters María del Carmen, María del Pilar, Rita Amelia, Antonia Bruna, and Dolores Eustaquia.

In 1857, the family moved to Spain, where they lived until returning to Havana in 1859. Years later, in 1874, when Martí went into exile in Mexico, the family briefly reunited with him before returning to Cuba without their son. Though rare, these shared moments were precious and transformative, despite their conflicts.

After becoming widowed, Leonor lived with Martí in New York from 1877 to 1888.

By the time of her death, three of her daughters had passed away, and several grandchildren had died due to hardships exacerbated by the poverty of the pseudo-republic established in 1901. The first president of this republic was Tomás Estrada Palma, a former exile ally of Martí's who, according to testimonies of the time, betrayed his ideals by governing under foreign influence and neglecting Martí's family.

At least Doña Leonor was able to return to her son's birthplace thanks to a group of patriots who purchased the house and gave it to her.

In an attempt to save face, the U.S. occupiers and the puppet government arranged a respectable—almost pompous—funeral for Doña Leonor at the city's expense in 1907.

Today, the modest house stands as a museum, reminding Cubans—especially schoolchildren—of the birthplace of José Martí. The house was shaped by the virtuous soul of a loving and resilient woman. Her stoic spirit nourished his memory and instilled in him the strength behind his most powerful convictions.

(Source: ACN)

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