

= Lolita Lebrón =

Lolita Lebrón (November 19 , 1919 ? August 1 , 2010) was a Puerto Rican nationalist who was convicted of attempted murder and other crimes after leading an assault on the United States House of Representatives in 1954 , resulting in the wounding of five members of the United States Congress . She was freed from prison in 1979 after being granted clemency by President Jimmy Carter .

Lebrón was born and raised in Lares , Puerto Rico , where she joined the Liberal Party . In her youth she met Francisco Matos Paoli , a Puerto Rican poet , with whom she had a relationship . In 1941 , Lebrón migrated to New York City , where she joined the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party , gaining influence within the party 's leadership . Within the organization she advocated socialist and feminist ideas .

In 1952 , after the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico was promulgated , the Nationalist Party began a series of revolutionary actions , including the Jayuya Uprising . As part of this initiative , Pedro Albizu Campos ordered her to organize attacks in the United States , focusing on locations that were " the most strategic to the enemy " . She became the leader of a group of nationalists , who attacked the United States House of Representatives in 1954 . She was incarcerated as a result . Lebrón remained imprisoned 25 years , when President Carter issued pardons to the group involved . After their release in 1981 , the nationalists returned to Puerto Rico , where independence movements received them with a celebration . During the following years she continued her involvement in pro @-@ independence activities , including the Navy @-@ Vieques protests . Her life would be subsequently detailed in books and a documentary . On August 1 , 2010 , Lebrón died from complications of a cardiorespiratory infection .

= = Early life = =

Lebrón (birth name : Dolores Lebrón Sotomayor) was one of five siblings born in Lares , Puerto Rico to Gonzalo Lebrón Bernal and Rafaela Soto Luciano , the other four were Aurea , Augusto , Gonzalo Jr. and Julio . Lebrón was raised in Hacienda Pezuelas in Pezuelas , a barrio in Lares . Gonzalo Lebrón worked as the hacienda 's foreman earning a salary of \$ 30 a month and was allowed to live in a " small house " where he was also allowed to plant produce for his family .

In Pezuelas Lebrón began her education in a small community school . Early in her life , Lebrón contracted pneumonia when she accidentally fell into a gutter that was full of water , as a consequence she grew with a frail body and was unable to keep up with the constant activities of her brothers without feeling fatigue . She developed an introverted and contemplative personality , often spending her time admiring nature around the hacienda .

From Pezuelas the family moved to Mirasol , also in Lares , where Gonzalo Lebrón administered an hacienda owned by Emilio Vilellas . There she received a better education , attending a local public school . When Lebrón completed the sixth grade she attended the Segunda Unidad Rural , a middle school located in Bartolo , an adjacent barrio . She concluded her formal public school education in the eighth grade .

Lebrón had uncommonly good looks and when she was a teenager won the first place in the annual " Queen of the Flowers of May " beauty contest held in Lares . Although her father was an atheist , Lebrón was baptized in the Catholic faith when she was fourteen years old along with her other siblings . During the baptism celebration she met Francisco Matos Paoli , who became her first boyfriend . Paoli and Lebrón wrote letters to each other where they exchanged the poetry which they wrote . According to Jossianna Arroyo , Lolita wrote " more mystical poetry , centered on what she called ? visions ? filled with religious symbolism . " Paoli 's family opposed their relationship because they considered Lebrón a jíbara (peasant) . Her father also opposed this relationship and ordered her to stop writing to Paoli . However , they both continued to write to each other until he moved out of the city .

Lebrón eventually moved to San Juan , where she studied sewing and continued her correspondence with Paoli . She felt obligated to return to Lares because her father was severely

affected by tuberculosis . The family was forced to abandon the house in the hacienda , but was later received by Ramón Santiago who provided them with a new house .

Lebrón took upon herself the responsibility of taking care of her father . She would travel to a nearby town to buy medicines for her father which she gave him every seventy minutes . For seven days she didn 't sleep or eat while attending him . Following his death Lebrón began working by weaving clothes .

= = Political activism = =

Although Lebrón was a member of the Liberal Party from a young age , she didn 't display any interest in politics . However , her posture changed after March 21 , 1937 , when a group of militants from the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party were killed during a peaceful protest which became known as the Ponce massacre . Lebrón who was eighteen years old at the time , developed a nationalistic ideology following this event . During this timeframe , Lebrón had a relationship with a local engineer , following the advice of her family . When she was twenty @-@ one years old she gave birth to her first daughter Gladys , who was left in Rafaela Luciano 's custody after Lebrón was separated from her husband and moved to New York City . After she arrived in New York City , she started to experience problems finding employment , mostly because she did not fully understand English . Lebrón worked as a seamstress in several factories . She was fired from some of her jobs because she was considered a " rebel by her bosses " after she protested against the discrimination which she witnessed against Puerto Rican workers . This influenced her nationalistic views even further and she eventually established contact with members of the Puerto Rican Liberation Movement . She enrolled at George Washington College , where she studied for two years during her free time from work . She married again when she was twenty @-@ two years old and gave birth to her second child , whom she would send to Puerto Rico to live with her mother , a year later . Lebrón decided to divorce her husband because she felt that he was oppressing her . In 1943 , there was a massive migration of Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico to New York , composed mostly of jibaros seeking employment . Lebrón grew increasingly frustrated when she observed how they were forced to live in poverty and under social decadence and she increased her work within nationalist circles . In 1946 , she formally became a member of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party , following the advice of a friend . During this time she developed an admiration for the Party 's president Pedro Albizu Campos , studying and memorizing his biography and ideals . After joining the party , Lebrón inadvertently included some of her own initiatives within the organization 's ideals , these were influenced by socialist and feminist ideals . Seeking more involvement in society and politics for women , new economic systems and social reforms that would protect women and children . Her constant involvement in the party 's affairs earned her several high @-@ ranking positions , among them those of secretary , vice @-@ president , and executive delegate of its delegation in New York .

On May 21 , 1948 , a bill was introduced before the Puerto Rican Senate which would restrain the rights of the independence and nationalist movements in the island . The Senate at the time was controlled by the PPD and presided by Luis Muñoz Marín approved the Bill . The Bill , also known as the " Ley de la Mordaza " (gag Law) , made it illegal to display a Puerto Rican flag , to sing a patriotic tune , to talk of independence , and to fight for the independence of the island . The Bill which resembled the anti @-@ communist Smith Law passed in the United States , was signed and made into law on June 10 , 1948 , by the U.S.-appointed governor of Puerto Rico , Jesús T. Piñero and became known as " Ley 53 " (Law 53) . In accordance to the new law , it would be a crime to print , publish , sale , to exhibit or organize or to help anyone organize any society , group or assembly of people whose intentions are to paralyze or destroy the insular government . Anyone accused and found guilty of disobeying the law could be sentenced to ten years of prison , be fined \$ 10 @,@ 000 (US) or both . According to Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa , a member of the Puerto Rico House of Representatives , the law was repressive and was in violation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution which guarantees Freedom of Speech . He pointed out that the law as such was a violation of the civil rights of the people of Puerto Rico .

On November 1 , 1950 , following a series of uprisings in Puerto Rico which included the Jayuya Uprising and the Utuado Uprising which culminated in a massacre , Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola invaded Harry S. Truman 's residence , carrying a letter written by Albizu Campos and addressed to Truman . A shootout erupted between the duo and the guard stationed there , killing Torresola . Collazo was badly injured but survived and was sentenced to death by an American jury . The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party claimed that their goal was to " draw attention to the fact of Puerto Rico 's continued colonial status " , while the American government and media treated it as an assassination attempt . Following the sentence , Lebrón quickly joined the " Committee for Oscar Collazo 's defense " , participating in numerous public manifestations which eventually led to a presidential pardon . On July 25 , 1952 , the official name of Puerto Rico was changed to Estado Libre Asociado (commonwealth of the United States) as a constitution was promulgated by Luis Muñoz Marín , the islands ' first elected governor . In 1954 , Lebrón received a letter from Albizu Campos , in which he declared his intention to order attacks on " three locations , the most strategic to the enemy " .

= = Assault on the House of Representatives = =

= = = Attack preparations = = =

Albizu Campos had been corresponding with 34 @-@ year @-@ old Lebrón from prison and chose a group of nationalists who included Rafael Cancel Miranda , Irving Flores and Andrés Figueroa Cordero to attack locations in Washington , D.C. Upon receiving the order she communicated it to the leadership of the Nationalist party in New York and , although two members unexpectedly disagreed , the plan continued . Lebrón decided to lead the group , even though Albizu Campos did not order her to directly take part in the assault . She studied the plan , determining the possible weaknesses , concluding that a single attack on the House of Representatives would be more effective . The date for the attack on the House of Representatives was to be March 1 , 1954 . This date was chosen because it coincided with the inauguration of the Conferencia Interamericana (Interamerican Conference) in Caracas . Lebrón intended to call attention to Puerto Rico 's independence cause , particularly among the Latin American countries participating in the conference .

= = = The attack = = =

On the morning of March 1 , Lebrón traveled to Grand Central Terminal , where she rendezvoused with the rest of the group . Once they arrived at the United States Capitol , Rafael Cancel Miranda suggested that the attack should be postponed because it was late and rainy . Lebrón responded , " I am alone " and continued towards the building 's interior . The group followed , considering the attack a coup d 'état , the most important revolutionary act in the history of the Puerto Rican independence movement , the fourth uprising after the Grito de Lares , the Intentona de Yauco and the Jayuya Uprising . The other members of the group seemed serene and optimistic while rushing towards the legislative chamber . (p . 136)

When Lebrón 's group reached the visitor 's gallery above the chamber in the House , they sat while the representatives discussed Mexico 's economy . Shortly thereafter , Lebrón gave the order to the other members , the group quickly recited the Lord 's Prayer ; then Lebrón stood up and shouted " ; Viva Puerto Rico Libre ! " (" Long live a Free Puerto Rico ! ") and unfurled the flag of Puerto Rico . The group opened fire with semi @-@ automatic pistols . Lebrón claimed that she fired her shots at the ceiling , while Figueroa 's pistol jammed . Some 30 shots were fired (mostly by Cancel , according to his account) , wounding five lawmakers ; one representative , Alvin Bentley from Michigan , was seriously wounded in the chest . Upon being arrested , Lebrón yelled " I did not come to kill anyone , I came to die for Puerto Rico ! " .

= = = Trial and imprisonment = = =

Lebrón and her comrades were charged with attempted murder and other crimes . She was imprisoned in the Federal Correctional Institution for Women in Alderson , West Virginia . The trial began on June 4 , 1954 , with judge Alexander Holtzoff presiding over the case , under strict security measures . A jury composed of seven men and five women was assembled , their identities were kept secret from the media .

The prosecution was led by Leo A. Rover , as part of this process 33 witnesses testified . Ruth Mary Reynolds , the " American Nationalist " and the organization which she founded " American League for Puerto Rico 's Independence " came to the defense of Lebrón and the three other Nationalists . Lebrón and the other members of the group were the only defense witnesses , as part of her testimony she reaffirmed that they " came to die for the liberty of her homeland " .

During the early part of their trial she remained calm , complaining through her lawyers alleged disrespect for the flag while it was being produced as evidence . She loudly protested when the defense suggested that the group might have suffered from mental instability while committing the deed . On June 16 , 1954 , the jury found all four defendants guilty . On the morning of July 8 , 1954 , Lebrón learned of her son 's death minutes before the sentence was to be announced . She was quiet at the beginning of the hearing , but at one point , unable to contain herself , she became hysterical . Rover demanded the death penalty , but Holtzoff chose to sentence them to the longest terms of imprisonment possible . In Lebrón 's case this was between sixteen and fifty years , depending on her behavior .

Back at the prison , she went into shock upon receiving official notice of her son 's death and did not speak for three days . On July 13 , 1954 , the four nationalists were taken to New York , where they pleaded not guilty to the charges of " trying to overthrow the government of the United States " . One of the witnesses for the prosecution was Gonzalo Lebrón Jr . , who testified against his sister . On October 26 , 1954 , judge Lawrence E. Walsh found all the defendants guilty of conspiracy and sentenced them to six additional years in prison .

Lebrón has stated that the first two years in prison were the most difficult , having to deal with the deaths of her son and mother . Communication with her siblings was non @-@ existent . Lebrón refused to accept letters from her sister because only letters written in English were permitted in the prison . Communication with the outside world was not allowed then . Later it was granted after several inmates went on a hunger strike that lasted three and a half days . Due to her participation , Lebrón was not allowed to perform work outside of her cell for some time , although she was eventually allowed to work at the infirmary . While in prison , a group of judges offered her parole in exchange for a public apology , which she indignantly rejected .

After completing the first 15 years of the sentence , Lebrón 's social worker told her that she could ask for parole , but she did not display interest in the proposal , never signing the required documentation . Due to this lack of interest , she was mandated to attend a meeting before a penitentiary committee , where she presented a written deposition expressing her position about the parole proposal as well as other subjects including terrorism , politics and the United States ' use of the atomic bomb . Following this the other inmates reacted with skepticism over her intentions to refuse the offer , which made her distance herself from them and focus her attention in studying as well as writing poetry . During this timeframe , Lebrón 's interest in religion grew . Lebrón 's daughter Gladys died in 1977 , while her mother was in prison .

= = Later years , death and legacy = =

In 1979 President Jimmy Carter pardoned Lolita Lebrón , Irving Flores , and Rafael Cancel Miranda after they had served 25 years in prison . Andrés Figueroa Cordero was released from prison earlier because of a terminal illness . Governor of Puerto Rico Carlos Romero Barceló publicly opposed the pardons granted by Carter , stating that it would encourage terrorism and undermine public safety . Lebrón received a heroine 's welcome by her supporters upon her return to her motherland . Lebrón married Sergio Irizarry Rivera and continued to participate in pro @-@ independence activities . The

couple had met while she was in prison , when the Nationalist Party ordered him to monitor her health . Their marriage took place eight years after they had met . They moved into a small house in Loiza . The house possessed few distinctive traits , mostly composed of religious iconography and a large flag of Puerto Rico in the living room . On September 4 , 2005 , the couple was transported to a hospital , after a fire affected part of their house , causing \$ 14 @, @ 000 in material losses . On May 22 , 2000 , she erroneously filed charges of verbal assault against Nívea Hernández , the mother of then @-@ Puerto Rico Senator Kenneth McClintock who subsequently served as Minority Leader , and later President , of the Senate of Puerto Rico and now serves as Secretary of State , after a discussion ensued between her and an unidentified woman at a pharmacy in San Juan . The case was reported after an employee of the establishment identified the instigator as Hernández , who was recuperating from surgery at the moment and died two months later .

She continued to be active in the independence cause and participated in the protests against the United States Navy 's presence in Vieques . Lebrón appeared as a witness at the " International Tribunal on Violations of Human Rights in Puerto Rico and Vieques " held on November 17 ? 21 , 2000 , on the island of Vieques . According to the local newspaper El Vocero , her audience applauded when Lebrón said at the end of her deposition " I had the honor of leading the act against the U.S. Congress on March 1 , 1954 , when we demanded freedom for Puerto Rico and we told the world that we are an invaded nation , occupied and abused by the United States of America . I feel very proud of having performed that day , of having answered the call of the motherland " . On June 26 , 2001 , Lebrón was among a group of protesters that were arrested for trespassing in the restricted area in Vieques . On July 19 , 2001 , she was sentenced to 60 days of prison on the charge that she was trespassing on Navy property . Lebrón had already served 23 days in jail since her June arrest , leaving her to serve 37 additional days . Less than two years after Lebrón 's Vieques protest , on May 1 , 2003 , the U.S. Navy left Vieques and turned over its facilities to the government of Puerto Rico . Following this , she continued her participation in other pro independence activities . Lebrón was among the political leaders that opposed the Democratic Party 's primary that took place on June 1 , 2008 . The group anticipated a low voter turnout in the event , while declaring that Puerto Rico " deserves sovereignty " . On June 10 , 2008 , Lebrón suffered a fracture in her hip and a wrist after accidentally falling in her house . She underwent corrective surgery at a San Juan hospital . A film inspired by Lebrón 's life is currently in the works , with actress Eva Longoria being involved .

Between 2008 and 2010 , Lebrón was hospitalized multiple times , the first being due to a fall that fractured her hip and an arm , requiring surgery . On September 18 , 2009 , she suffered a notable relapse due to a cardio respiratory affection . Lebrón recovered in a satisfactory manner and issued a press release in appreciation for the public 's support . Complications from this episode of bronchitis , however , persisted throughout 2010 , leading to her death on August 1 , 2010 . Multiple public figures , who support independence or free association for Puerto Rico , immediately lamented Lebrón 's death , praising her activism . Her life was eulogized even in European papers .

= = = Legacy = = =

Among the homages received by Lebrón are paintings , books and a documentary . Mexican artist Octavio Ocampo created a poster of Lebrón , which was exhibited at the Galería de la Raza in San Francisco , California . In Chicago 's Humboldt Park , there is a mural depicting Lebrón among other well known Puerto Ricans . Writer , director and film producer Judith Escalona is planning to make a film about Lebrón 's life . Federico Ribes Tovar published a book titled Lolita la Prisionera .

There is a plaque , located at the monument to the Jayuya Uprising participants in Mayagüez , Puerto Rico , honoring the women of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party . Lebrón 's name is on the first line of the third plate .

Among the books that include the story of Lebrón are The Ladies ' Gallery : A Memoir of Family Secrets by Irene Vilar (Lebrón 's granddaughter) , translated by Gregory Rabassa (formerly published as A Message from God in the Atomic Age) . The author criticizes her grandmother as a distant , gun @-@ toting , larger @-@ than @-@ life figure who cast a veil of pain and secrecy over

her family so vast that Ms. Vilar is still untangling herself from it . It also documents the death of Lebrón 's only daughter (Vilar 's mother) as suicide .