




TREASON!

 José Julián Martí y Pérez was born in Havana on January 28, 1853. His father, Mariano Martí, had come to Cuba as a sergeant in the Spanish army. His mother, Leonor Pérez Martí, had also been born in Spain, so both his parents were peninsulares. His father, who remained loyal to Spain throughout his life, served the government in a variety of military and government positions. A friend later wrote that José's parents "were honest, although possessing little intelligence or education."¹ Martí had seven sisters, but two of them died when very young.

José's father was a stern, no-nonsense civil servant who earned his living from the Spanish government. After his service in the army, he worked as a police officer and, later, as a night watchman in Havana and other cities. When José was four or five years old, his father took the whole family back to Spain, where he hoped to recover from an illness. After two years in Spain, the family returned to Cuba, and José's father again found a job as a guard. Therefore, at a very young age, José became accustomed to frequent travel and changes of address.

In 1862, Martí's father was made a minor government official in Hanábana, a district in western Cuba. He took his young son with him and made him a clerk in his office. José proved to be excellent at this type of work, and his father hoped that he would follow it as a career. But it was while he was in Hanábana that José witnessed firsthand the cruelty of landowners and overseers to the African slaves who worked on the plantations. In a poem written much later, Martí described a scene in which slaves mourn for a man who has been hanged from a tree:

*Un niño lo vio: tembló
De pasión por los que gimen:
¡Y, al pie del muerto, juró
Lavar con su vida el crimen!*²



(A small boy saw it. He trembled
With feeling for the groaning men,
And at the victim's feet he vowed
To cleanse the crime with his life.)

José's mother, who was much gentler and more understanding than his father, wanted the boy to continue his education. His father thought that further schooling was a waste of time and too expensive. His mother got her way, however, when José's godfather agreed to pay for his further education.

Martí was enrolled in the Municipal School for Boys in Havana.

At school, José was noticed by Rafael María de Mendive, a famous teacher, poet, editor, and patriot who believed strongly in the need for Cuban independence. Mendive took an interest in the boy and paid special attention to him. While he taught José to appreciate poetry and literature, he also urged him to become aware of the political and social situation in Cuba. José became almost a member of Mendive's family and spent long hours listening to the literary and political talk among the visitors to the house.

Mendive was also director of St. Paul's School, a branch of the Municipal School for Boys. José attended this school and became one of its star pupils. Mendive encouraged him to write in his





José Martí was born on January 28, 1853, in this house in Havana, Cuba.

free time and to engage in the literary activities of the school.

José was fifteen years old when the Ten Years War broke out. He was firmly on the side of the rebels because of Mendive's influence and also because of his own feelings about Spanish colonialism. He was too young to join any of the rebel forces, so he decided to lend his literary skills to the cause.

José and a friend named Fermín Valdés Domínguez, with the help of Mendive, produced a pamphlet called *El diablò cojuelo* (The Limping Devil). In it, they poked fun at the Spanish captain general of Havana. The general could not have been amused because he had, after all, lifted the ban on the freedom of the press that had been in place since the beginning of the war. A few days later, José published a small newspaper on his own, again aided by Mendive, called *La Patria Libre* (The Free Country). This paper also did not go over well with the authorities. It contained Martí's first drama, a short play called *Abdala*, in which the main character sounds very much like José himself. At one point in the play, Abdala says, "I will be the one to free my anguished country, and the one who will drag the oppressor from the people."³ A few days after the appearance of the newspaper, Mendive was falsely



accused of having been behind a political demonstration against the government. He was found guilty and sent into exile. This was the way the colonial government got rid of people they considered troublemakers.

On October 4, 1869, José and a few of his friends gathered at the home of Fermín Valdés Domínguez. Most of the boys attended St. Paul's, and they liked to meet and talk about their lessons and their teachers and trade stories about their classmates. The weather was hot and sticky, and the windows of Fermín's house were open to the street to catch any breezes coming in from the harbor. The boys' voices and laughter could be heard throughout the neighborhood.

A group of Spanish *voluntarios* happened to pass by the house. The voluntarios were not regular soldiers but a sort of militia that served the Spanish army in Cuba. They patrolled the inner city and watched out for any civilian troublemakers. The boys spotted the group and began to make jokes about their appearance. They were only making fun of the way the voluntarios tried to act like regular soldiers, but some of the voluntarios did not take the teasing well. Many scowls and threatening looks were directed at the house. Eventually, the voluntarios went on their way, and the boys returned to their talk.



José and Fermín had learned recently that a former student of Mendive's had joined the Spanish voluntarios. The two boys had written an angry letter to the student, criticizing him for his action, which went against everything their master had taught them. After they cooled down, the boys had decided not to send or publish the letter, but neither had thought to destroy it.

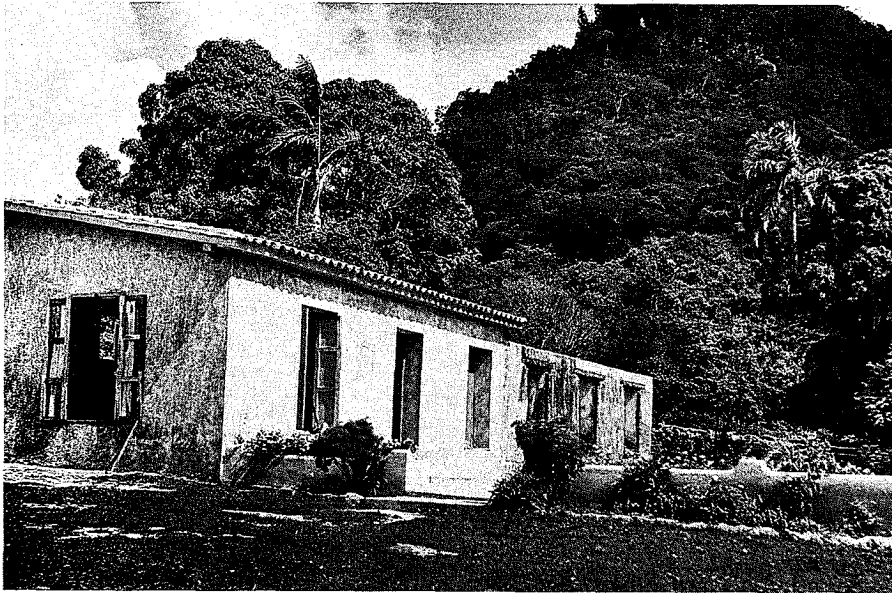
Now there was suddenly a loud banging on the door and shouted demands to open up. It was the voluntarios, who had returned from their patrol. They brushed past the boys and began searching every corner of the house. It was not long before one of them reappeared, waving the letter José and Fermín had written.

All of the boys present were taken into custody, and José and Fermín were arrested and jailed. The charge? Disloyalty—or treason!

It was four and a half months before the boys were brought to trial. In the meantime, they were locked up in an overcrowded jail with hardened criminals. In early March of 1870, they were finally brought before a military court.

Both boys were already assumed guilty, but each attempted to take all the blame for writing the letter. The court asked each boy to state his case. José was by far the better speaker, and he argued his position so strongly that the court was





José Martí was kept in this building on the Isle of Pines in custody for one year before his exile to Spain. Almost every building or place connected with Martí is now a national shrine.

convinced that he was the more dangerous of the two. Fermín was sentenced to six months in prison; José was sentenced to six years!

José was not much over seventeen years of age when he was sent to do hard labor in Havana's stone quarry. He was put in chains and forced to break rocks under the boiling sun. At one point, he was struck with a chain by a guard. The resulting injury caused him to walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Fortunately, José's father



had friends and connections in the army and in the stone quarry itself. Through their influence, José was released from the stone quarry after six months. His health was ruined, but his spirit survived. He was now more convinced than ever of the injustice of the Spanish colonial system and the need for Cuban independence.

José was put in the custody of the warden of the stone quarry, who had an estate on the Isle of Pines. On this island off the southern coast of Cuba, José recovered from his ordeal. In December of 1870, he returned to Havana. The court told José that they had decided to be lenient with him, but he was to be deported to Spain. The authorities had decided to get rid of another troublemaker, just as they had with Mendive.

On January 15, 1871, José left for Spain. He was to spend most of the rest of his life in exile.