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The Kind Hearted Executioner

Oswaldo Bayer

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Next Monday the 9th, 100 years will have passed since an event that shook Buenos Aires. A young 18 year-old Russian threw a bomb at none other than the all-powerful chief of police of Buenos Aires, Colonel Ramón L. Falcón. The bomb-thrower was an anarchist named Simón Radowitzky, and with this action he hoped to avenge his comrades that were murdered on the 1st of May of that same year, in the repression headed by Falcón against the workers' demonstration commemorating the 5 anarchists condemned to death in the United States because of their struggle for the 8 hour workday. A young man, barely out of adolescence, born in Russia, and "moreover Jewish", as the reports from our newspapers pointed out, dared to act against the man who seemed to be the most powerful in the entire country.

Colonel Falcón had been General Roca's best officer in the so-called Desert Campaign (which was really the extermination of the native peoples of Argentina). Moreover, he achieved fame in conservative Argentina as the repressor of the tenement strikes led by immigrant women that refused to pay the landlords' constant rent increases. Colonel Falcón demonstrated the manliness that got him his Colonel's title by entering, club swinging, into

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those overcrowded miserable dwellings, where 140 residents lived per tenement, with only one pathetic excuse for a toilet. Just like his boss Roca had done on May 1st 1904, Falcón attacked the 70,000 workers that filled the Plaza Lorea. The reports will later say that 36 puddles of blood remained afterward. It was a ferocious, but completely cowardly attack, because without prior warning, the Colonel ordered the police to open fire on the crowd of workers. But the anarchists weren't men to shrivel up and remain silent. From that moment on they said that the tyrant had to pay with his life for that act of cowardice. Thusly, this young Russian Simón volunteered to not let this crime of the powerful go unpunished. He threw the bomb near the end of a ceremony in the Recoleta cemetery and both the colonel and his secretary died because of the explosive. The newspapers shed many a tear upon giving the news, especially *La Nación*: one of the system's pillars had died.

The story continued with Simón's fate: they arrested him; put him on trial and condemned him to death, even though he always maintained that he was a minor (there was no death penalty for those under age or women). He demonstrated this with a birth certificate from Russia and was sentenced to life in prison. An escape plan prepared by his anarchist comrades failed and he was transferred to Ushuaia, Argentina's Siberia, where every prisoner unavoidably died. Moreover, when the anniversary of his assassination of Falcón came around, they sentenced him to a week in an open-air dungeon with no heating. But Simón the Russian was becoming the soul of the prison. He was always at the front of any protest when another prisoner was punished or the prisoners were in general treated unjustly. During his entire sentence he was a true "delegate," defender of these common (and political) prisoners. For this reason he was forced to endure a treatment of terror. But the "angel of Ushuaia," as he was known, didn't let his arm be twisted by the reprisals of the prison guards. Those that read *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, which describes the suffering in the prisons of Siberia, wouldn't suspect that in Argen-

tine territory there was a place that was exactly the same, built by Roca, where very few left alive or returned to society with their normal mental faculties intact.

Anarchists throughout the country always remembered Simón and fought for his freedom in great demonstrations. They undertook an operation as only the anarchists knew how to prepare and were able to free him; he left on a tiny sailboat to Chile, but close to Punta Arenas, Chilean guards surprised him and turned him in once again to the Argentine authorities. Their revenge was tremendous: Simón was locked up for more than two years in an isolated cell without sunlight and given only a half ration of food. But in working class and political circles Simón gained more popularity every day. The streets of Buenos Aires and other cities were painted with graffiti slogans of “Freedom for Simón” and his portrait appeared in editions of all the libertarian publications.

Meanwhile, they collected money in the factories and sent it to him. Simón didn’t use it for himself, but shared it with sick prisoners and bought books for the prison’s scanty library. Requests for the prisoner’s reprieve rained down on President Yrigoyen, who finally granted it on April 13, 1930. Simón had endured 21 years in prison, but the reaction from the military and the press against the president’s decision was widespread, so the prisoner had to be brought by a navy boat to the Río de la Plata where he was transferred to the ferry boat that goes from Buenos Aires to Montevideo and thus he was expelled from the country into Uruguay.

Here, on the other shore, he was received by workers’ demonstrations and welcomed as a great comrade. Upon gaining his freedom, Simón remembered his prisoner friends in Ushuaia and will say: “The separation from my comrades in misfortune was very painful”. Days later he began work as a mechanic and later he offered his services as a messenger between the anarchists of Uruguay and Brazil, until the end of democracy in Brazil and the beginning of the Terra dictatorship which ordered his arrest. The anarchist was confined to the Isla de Flores. Here the conditions

were dreadful; he has to sleep in a basement. He remained in these conditions for more than three years until his anarchist comrades secured his freedom. But upon arriving to Montevideo he was arrested once again and taken to prison. When freed again, he decided to leave for Spain: the Civil War had broken out with the uprising of Franco's military against the Republic. There, Simón was part of the groups that fought against the military uprising. But he didn't use weapons; he transported food to the troops on the frontlines, primarily for the soldiers that were in the trenches. Once the people were defeated, Simón was one of the many that fled to France as refugees and from there he boarded a ship bound for Mexico.

In Mexico he worked in a factory making children's toys. Thusly he spent the last 16 years of his life: working, giving talks and attending meetings given by his anarchist comrades. He maintained until the end that only libertarian socialism could make the great human revolution, until eternal peace and equality amongst people reigned.

In Argentina, the powerful have always tried to ignore this figure that seems like an escapee from a Dostoevsky novel. He had raised his hand to eliminate a tyrant and later on in life behaved as a man of extreme kindness and solidarity with those that suffer. In the seventies I published a study on this human being entitled: "Simón Radowitzky: Martyr or Assassin?" in the magazine *Todo es Historia*, directed by Félix Luna, who passed away a few hours ago. I'll always be thankful to him for this gesture, to allow me to publish investigations about libertarian heroes and their actions in our country during the first few decades of the last century.