

López Miranda, Rafael (1883–1922)

LOURDES MORALES

Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, Ph.D. (Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island), retired in 2017 and studied Hispanic literature in Argentina, Spain, and México. She has taught at various Adventist universities, published various articles in Adventist magazines, and authored several books, including “The Traveler” based on the life of Colporteur Rafael López Miranda, her grandfather. She is married to Reynir Gudmundsson and has a daughter and two granddaughters.

Rafael López Miranda was an early Seventh-day Adventist convert and colporteur who worked in Puerto Rico and Venezuela.

Early Years

Rafael López Miranda was born in 1883 in Santurce, Puerto Rico.¹ His father, José López de Alcalá y Zamora, a native of Málaga, Spain, came from a military family that arrived on the island near the early 19th century. His mother, Amalia Miranda, was from Bayamón, Puerto Rico. The López Mirandas

also had a daughter, Julia, who came to be known for her prodigious memory; during prayer meetings, she would recite full passages from Old Testament books from memory.² The stories that Carmen López de Morales, López’s eldest living child, told about her father begin when he was around nine or ten years old.

Rafael’s father was a shoemaker who earned barely enough to provide for the family. As a child, Rafael would leave early from his home in Puerta de Tierra to go to the beach and collect seashells. He would decorate empty cigar boxes with the shells and sell them as jewelry boxes to the wealthy ladies of Santurce. With this, he contributed to supporting his family.³

Besides income from his jewelry boxes, Rafael made money at San Juan Bay when large ships from the United States arrived on the island. One sunny day, while diving for coins at the bay, Rafael realized that all the other boys had disappeared from the water and were screaming at him from the dock. When he turned around, he



Rafael López Miranda

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saw a shark fin racing toward him. He somehow escaped what would have been certain death. This was not the only time God saved his life. Another time, while he was still ten years old, strolling among the almond and *acerola* cherry trees in a grove in Puerta de Tierra, he felt a strange presence. He immediately looked up and, in the distance, saw a lion from the Grand Pubillones Circus, who had escaped its cage. After several hours of Rafael grasping onto an *acerola* tree while the hungry lion circled it, the circus trainers arrived and took control of the animal. Rafael often cited these two events as proof that God had a special plan for his life.

During Rafael's adolescence, his father, José López de Alcalá y Zamora, unexpectedly died in a shipwreck. After having learned that the United States was about to take over Puerto Rico, José López had decided to return to Spain and send for his family at a later date. Unfortunately, just as the ship approached the port of Málaga, a powerful storm sank the ship in the turbulent waters of the Mediterranean, drowning all the passengers. The news reached the López Miranda house in Puerta de Tierra like a bolt of lightning and completely changed Rafael's life. At barely 15 years old, he was forced to assume the responsibilities of an adult. He found a job in a laundry and cleaning store, where he soon became a supervisor. The increased salary allowed for part of his income to be used to place bets at horse races. It seemed he was blessed with good fortune. With successful bets and winning the lottery, he invested in land and houses and set his mother and sister up in a comfortable home. Everything seemed to contribute to young Rafael's financial success.

Marriage and Conversion

On June 24, 1904, Rafael married Esperanza Cortijo Martínez, and they moved to a large home on Monserrate Street near Puerta de Tierra in Santurce, Puerto Rico. He brought his mother and sister to live with them in a smaller house behind the main house. By now, he had begun his own laundry business, and everything seemed to point to the economic prosperity of the young couple. One year later, Rafaelito was born. Four years later, Carmen was born. Two years later, Manuel, or "Manolín," was born. Rafaelito died at the tender age of five, which left Rafael devastated. He turned to alcohol to assuage his grief and earned the nickname, the "Beast of Santurce," due to his violent outbursts toward his wife and two remaining children.

Rafael converted to Adventism in 1912 thanks to a torn page from a Bible, which he found stuck between some railroad tracks. His eyes fell on the passage, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The next day, a colporteur, or a salesman of religious books, knocked at his door.⁴ This man told Rafael that he was there to tell him that, "For God so loved the world..." and he cited the very words Rafael had read the day before. Rafael was amazed with this "coincidence" and began studying the Word of God with the colporteur and, later, with Pastor William Steels, president of the Puerto Rican Mission. After a few months, Rafael; his wife, Esperanza; their children, Carmen and Manuel; his mother, Amalia; his sister, Julia; his mother-in-law, Carmen; and Esperanza's sisters were all baptized.

The Successful Colporteur

Rafael quickly learned the ins and outs of colportage. He achieved great success in his sales, both financially and spiritually. Pastor William Steele immediately saw the leadership potential in Rafael, whose talents could advance the Adventist work in Puerto Rico. He invited Rafael to serve as director of publications, a position he held from 1915-1917. The value Pastor Steele gave Rafael is evident in the fact that he included Rafael in the Mission's Advisory Committee, aside from his responsibilities training colporteurs.⁵ His reading of the Bible and other religious books he sold made him a skillful teacher of the Word of God. Concerning his uncanny talent to explain Bible passages, a young man once heard his aunt say about Rafael: "There is a man here who explains the Bible so well that he is like the Lord Himself, descended from heaven."⁶

When he finished visiting most of the towns on the east side of the island, Rafael made plans to move his family to the west. By the time they moved to Aguadilla, Samuel and Efraín had been born (in 1913 and 1916). Around this time, Miss Jessie C. Butler came to live with the López family and help Esperanza, who was about to give birth. Esther was born in 1918, while her father traveled through all the west side of the island, selling Bibles and religious books and witnessing the poverty in which *Boriquén* (Puerto Rico's indigenous name) had sunk. Sometimes, he brought abandoned children and orphans to Esperanza to provide them with food and shelter until a stable home could be found.

By 1917, still working at the Puerto Rican Mission but anxious to extend his sphere of influence, Rafael meets Mrs. Lucía Fuentes, a Dominican lady who longed for Rafael to sell his books on her island. By 1919, Rafael's name ceases to appear in the General Conference yearbooks; he traveled to the Dominican Republic to work fulltime as a literature evangelist. He met Jaime Phipps and his fiancée, Mercedes, who had both moved to Puerto Rico for their wedding. So great was the love between Rafael and this young couple that Rafael traveled to San Juan to bestow good wishes on the Phipps and leave them a memento of their great friendship: his own Bible dedicated "to my children."⁷ The couple learned of the gospel through Rafael and, after their baptism and wedding in Puerto Rico, returned to their country to work with Rafael, who was now accompanied by Bernardo Hernández.

Rafael's experiences during his first missionary venture in a foreign country confirmed his faith in the work that the Lord had called him to do. He wrote about one of those experiences in a letter to his wife in which he told of how an angel of the Lord saved him from certain death by quicksand. In the Dominican Republic, he drew scenes of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation on large sheets and canvasses, and his converts treasured these drawings like precious jewelry.

When Rafael returned to Puerto Rico, he attended a colporteurs meeting in which an urgent call to start work in Venezuela was made. Deeply moved by this call and convinced that the Lord was calling him to this far-off land, he decided to move his family there. Another colporteur who also responded to the call, Angel Ojeda, worked with Rafael in Venezuela for some time.⁸

Upon arriving to Venezuela in 1919, he realized that the work had barely begun with two pastors, William E. Baxter and G. D. Raff, the latter of whom had worked with Rafael at the Puerto Rican Mission. The nascent Adventist church met on Sabbaths at Pastor Baxter's spacious home with his wife, Margaret, and their two children, Elizabeth and William. Due to the strong resistance of certain leaders of the country's official religion, the small group of believers had stones thrown at their windows and shouts of *Viva la Virgen* ("Long Live the Virgin [Mary]") while they tried to worship.⁹

In spite of Catholicism's dominance in Venezuela's religious and political life, inroads were made through the light of the Gospel. The Puerto Rican Mission had sent Rafael, Bernardo Hernández, and Angel Ojeda with two American colporteurs, who were beginning to reach the soul of the Venezuelan people hungry for the truth. Rafael launched the Adventist work in the interior of the country. Very few Protestants had penetrated the southern jungles of that country precisely because of the official church's bitter persecution.

His Last Years

The city of Camaguán was the center of Rafael López's most fruitful work. This city was a commercial center for heron feathers, skins of livestock and capybara (a large rodent commonly found in South America), and saltwater fish. Here, he met a well-known businessman named Julio García. The businessman was so impressed by the missionary that they established a deep and sincere friendship. García opened the way for López to know other businessmen who also wished to study the Word of God, including Antonio Lamas, who soon accepted the Gospel.¹⁰ García and a man named Francisco Meléndez accepted the Sabbath truth in June 1920 "from the mouth of Rafael López Miranda, the noted Adventist colporteur who was slain in the [Venezuelan] Andes."¹¹ In 1921, Pastor W. E. Baxter and Pastor D. D. Fitch, the director of the Venezuelan Mission and an evangelist, visited them, and Brother Francisco Cabrera, a Bible Mission worker, prepared them for baptism. As a result of this effort, 22 people were baptized on April 21, 1921.¹²

From Camaguán, Rafael arrived in San Cristóbal in the province of Táchira. Here, he began suffering fierce persecution from a certain priest. Despite death threats, Rafael continued his work in this part of the country. Having just finished one of his last deliveries in Mérida, he wrote a letter dated April 4, 1922, addressed to the brethren of the Venezuelan Mission: "Today, I finished making a delivery here. God has helped me. Otherwise, it would be impossible. One would need to come here to know what it means to deal with priests. I hear things after making deliveries that make me think that angels have rescued me from the hands of evil men."¹³ Because of various letters López sent to his wife, Esperanza, who was in Puerto Rico, explaining his unpleasant encounters with hostile priests, Pastor Steele of the Puerto Rican Mission sent him a telegram: "López, return to Puerto Rico."¹⁴

On May 14, after meeting with a group of believers, Rafael López Miranda left for the mountain village of El Cobre. Bandits who had been contracted by the priest who had threatened his life awaited López at the brook of

La Raya. The investigation of the case revealed that they had not stolen the 850 pesos that López had in a money belt, which led to the conclusion that his assassination happened because of religious intolerance.

In 1977, General Conference Director of Publications J. N. Hunt visited “the remote village of El Cobre, Venezuela, to pay respects to a fallen martyr, Rafael López Miranda, a Puerto Rican literature evangelist assassinated on May 15, 1922.”¹⁵ The remains of Rafael López Miranda rest in the cemetery of El Cobre, waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord.

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NOTES

1. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, personal knowledge from conversations with her mother, Carmen López de Morales.
2. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, personal knowledge from conversations with Carmen López de Morales and her first cousin, Rafael García, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, 1993.

3. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, personal knowledge from conversations with López Miranda's wife, Esperanza Cortijo de López, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico.
4. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, personal knowledge from conversations with Carmen López de Morales.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Takoma Park, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1915), 160.
6. Nicolás Chaij, *El colportor de éxito* (Miami, Florida: Inter-American Division Publishing Association, 1994), 29.
7. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, *El Viajero* (Miami: Inter-American Division Publishing Association, 1994), 65.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Takoma Park, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1919), 257, accessed 2019, documents.adventistarchives.org/Yearbooks/YB1919.pdf; and Morales, *El Viajero*, 70.
9. Lourdes Morales de Gudmundsson, personal knowledge from conversations with Carmen López de Morales.
10. Antonio Lamas, interview by author, Maracay, Venezuela, 1973.
11. Julio García D., "Brother Francisco Meléndez obituary," *The Inter-American Division Messenger*, vol. XIX, no. 2, January 15, 1942, accessed 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/IAM/IAM19420115-V19-02.pdf>.
12. Ibid.
13. Morales, *El Viajero*, 97.
14. Ibid., 98.
15. L. A. Ramírez, "Visit to Martyr's Grave," *Inter-American News Flashes*, no. 160, March 8, 1977, accessed 2019, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/IAM/IAM19770308-160.pdf>.

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