

## **Death of a Political Prisoner: Revisiting the Case of Ricardo Flores Magón<sup>1</sup>**

**ANDREW GRANT WOOD**

**University of Tulsa**

Entry by the United States into World War One prompted swift passage of the Espionage and Trading-with-the-Enemy Acts in 1917. Like today's Patriot Act, these measures allowed for federal authorities to pursue "suspicious" citizens and resident aliens such as Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón. Indeed, it was following the publication of Magón's newspaper *Regeneración* during the winter of 1918 that police arrested Ricardo on March 21<sup>st</sup>. They charged him with sending "politically dangerous" and "indecent" materials through the mail. On July 18, 1918 Judge Benjamin F. Bledsoe convicted the Mexican radical and sentenced him to twenty-one years in prison. Flores Magón was incarcerated at the McNeil Island Penitentiary near Seattle, Washington before being transferred to Leavenworth, Kansas in early November 1919. On the morning of November 22, 1922 he died of a heart attack. Ricardo was fifty years old.

Ricardo Flores Magón, along with his brothers and other Mexican colleagues, was influenced by the writings of mid-nineteenth century anarchists Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin. Both considered pioneers of anarchist thought, Proudhon's infamous 1840 tract *What is Property?* argued that property (and, by extension, profit) was theft. Complimenting his distaste for private ownership, Proudhon deeply distrusted

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the state—a view that would be shared by anarchists to the present day. Russian born Mikhail Bakunin met Proudhon when he came to Paris in 1843. He participated in the February 1848 revolution in Paris and soon traveled to Prague and then Saxony spreading radical democratic fervor. Bakunin was subsequently arrested and imprisoned for several years before he managed to escape Siberian confinement and make his way (at first on foot for nearly one thousand miles!) to Japan, California, New York and by 1860—London. There he published *Kolokol*<sup>2</sup> as well as a number of other writings that demanded the abolition of the State. While this position brought him into conflict with Marx and his followers, it nonetheless reinforced one of the central pillars of anarchist thinking later taken up by Flores Magón and others in the Americas.

European anarchist thought made its way across the Atlantic as thousands of immigrants came in search of a better life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once established in the New World, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists founded labor unions while also creating a culture of resistance that fought against the anti-democratic practices of the State. From Canada in the north to Chile and across the Caribbean, anarchists (and later to some extent, communists) did much to advance the position of working people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While unsuccessful in their long-term goal of abolishing private property and the State, anarchists in several countries forced government officials to reckon with their demands for improved social conditions and the recognition of certain basic civil rights.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Among other things, Kolokol-1 is also a psycho-chemical gas that was developed by the KGB and used recently in the 2002 Moscow theater siege.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of anarchism in Latin America see, for example, Luis Vitale, *Contribución a una Historia del Anarquismo en América Latina*. Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Espiritu Libertario, 2002, Angel J. Cappelletti and Carlos M. Rama (ed.), *El Anarquismo en América Latina*. Caracas, Venezuela: Biblioteca

As a public intellectual sharply critical of both the Mexican and U.S. governments, significant controversy surrounded Flores Magón. Demanding an end to the dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz, federal agents tirelessly dogged the radical journalist and jailed him several times. Once living in exile during the highly politicized late teens and early twenties, a majority of the citizens in the U.S. no doubt figured the Mexican anarchist extremely dangerous and a threat to national security. When he died in Leavenworth Prison many must have figured Flores Magón had finally “gotten his due” for daring to speak out against U. S. policies limiting freedom of speech. More sympathetic souls suspected, however, that prison officials might have played some part in the anarchist’s demise on orders from high-ranking officials in Washington.

Although many blamed “the tyranny of [Leavenworth’s] Warden Biddle” as the direct cause of Magón’s death, there is no apparent evidence of violent physical abuse of the prisoner. Instead, it seems that sickness developed over the long course of his confinement led to his fatal heart attack. More specifically, it is possible that an undiagnosed and untreated case of diabetes contributed significantly to his death.<sup>4</sup> If true, Magón’s dissolution is particularly tragic given that at the time of his death researchers in Canada were on the verge of issuing first insulin therapy for diabetes. Spurred on by this particular historical twist of fate as well as present day controversies regarding the ethical treatment of political prisoners, the following essay makes detailed use of prison records

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Ayacucho, 1990 and Alfredo Gómez, *Anarquismo y Anarcosindicalismo en América Latina*. Paris: Ruedo Ibérico, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Annual Report United States Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas. June 30, 1923. p. 55. Many at the time including Flores Magón’s friend Ethel Duffy Turner believed that the anarchist was murdered in Leavenworth. On this perception see for example Ethel Duffy Turner, *Revolution in Baja California: Ricardo Flores Magón’s High Noon*. Detroit, Blaine Ethridge Books, 1981, p. 83.

and personal correspondence to explore the role that diabetes might played in the anarchist's death.

**From Rebel to Political Prisoner**

Ricardo Flores Magón was born in the southern state of Oaxaca on September 16, 1873—Mexican Independence Day. Along with his brothers (the older Jesús and younger Enrique), his family moved to Mexico City where Ricardo attended the *Escuela Nacional Superior* and eventually, law school at the *Escuela de Jurisprudencia*. Flores Magón abandoned his fledgling legal career about the same time he began protesting against the authoritarian administration of Mexican President Porfirio Díaz. He founded an opposition newspaper called *El Democrática* in 1893, which the government soon shut down. In 1900 the Flores Magón brothers (with the help of their colleague Antonio Horcasitas) started another paper titled *Regeneración*. In response, Díaz arranged for a judicial decree to be administered in late June 1903 that ostensibly banned Ricardo Flores Magón from publishing in Mexico. When officials seized their printing press and began issuing death threats, Ricardo escaped across the border at Laredo, Texas in early 1904. His brother Enrique joined him and by November the two had restarted publication of *Regeneración* from their new base in St. Louis, Missouri.

Along with a handful of colleagues deeply committed to a return to four-year presidential terms with no allowance for reelection, in 1905 the Flores Magón brothers created the Organizing Committee of the Mexican Liberal Party or PLM in St. Louis. Aside from the aforementioned political concerns, their 1906 manifesto called for the establishment of an eight-hour day, minimum wage and the abolition of child labor. The

party's advocacy of workers' rights appealed to a wide range of labor and popular political organizers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. It also raised suspicion among U.S. officials who soon conspired with representatives of the Díaz administration to have the Flores Magón brothers along with their colleague Juan Sarabia thrown in jail. Police sequestered all materials in the *Regeneración* office while lawmen began processing extradition papers to have Flores Magón returned to Mexico. When in March 1905 the prisoners went free on bail, Ricardo fled to Toronto and then Montreal, Canada.

In September 1906 Flores Magón returned to the U.S. to lend support to a plan to overthrow the Mexican government. Stationed clandestinely in El Paso, TX, Ricardo eventually was forced underground after being spotted by government officials. After an arrest warrant and \$25,000 reward went out across the U.S. Southwest, his pursuers eventually apprehended him on August 23, 1907 in Los Angeles, California. Kept in jail for more than twenty months while prosecutors built their case, Flores Magón eventually stood trial in Tombstone, Arizona. The jury convicted him of violating neutrality laws. Serving out his sentence in Yuma and Florence, officials finally released him on August 1, 1910. Shortly thereafter Flores Magón returned to Los Angeles and restarted publication of *Regeneración*. For this U.S. authorities again arrested Ricardo, his brother Enrique as well as their associates Librado Rivera and Anselmo Figueroa.

By this time, however, the Mexican Revolution had begun after thousands in Mexico had responded to Francisco Madero's November 1910 call to arms against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Largely unsympathetic to events unfolding south of the border, U.S. officials accused Flores Magón and his colleagues of sending men, guns and ammunition to fight against the Díaz government. After being declared guilty, Ricardo

and Enrique fought the verdict for nearly a year by claiming that the prosecution had won its case through the use of fabricated evidence and testimony. Unsuccessful in their appeal, officials sent them to McNeil Island Penitentiary to serve a twenty-three month sentence. On January 19, 1914, they went free.

A few months later, Flores Magón published a “Manifesto to the Workers of the United States.” The anarchist argued that capitalist elites were responsible for the injustice and suffering of the world’s majority:

[I]t is a duty of all class conscious workingmen to support with all their moral and material strength the workingmen who are spilling their blood to shake off the yoke of capitalism. The Mexican problem is not really a problem incumbent only to Mexico; it is a universal problem, it is the problem of hunger, the problem that the disinherited of all the world have to resolve under the penalty of living with their bodies bent down under the yoke of the master class.<sup>5</sup>

With this and similar statements by Flores Magón being distributed and read widely, U.S. agents jailed Flores Magón in February 1917 and then again in March 1918 U.S. officials. Each time they claimed he represented a threat to “national security.” Subsequent prosecution under wartime legislation provided only a thin cover for the fact that both the U.S. as well as the new revolutionary government in Mexico cared little for Flores Magón’s internationalist ideals. From this time on, the anarchist’s fate would remain in the hands of the Justice Department. Thus when he died on their watch many naturally blamed the U.S. government. Yet given Ricardo’s fragile condition during much of his incarceration, who, if anyone, should be held accountable for his death?

**“Gruesome Narratives of Old, Ill-Treated Flesh”**

Ricardo suffered from a number of ailments including rheumatism, bronchitis, “bad nerves” and—according to the anarchist himself—diabetes.<sup>6</sup> Early evidence of Ricardo’s deteriorating health can be seen in 1908 during his first incarceration in the Los Angeles County Jail. At this time he asked his wife María to find a doctor other than the one provided by county officials. Shortly thereafter, she contacted University of Southern California physician Dr. Horatio Walker who agreed to examine him. In a report filed with the Department of Justice, Walker declared the anarchist to be suffering from chronic bronchitis and suggested that additional jail time would seriously compromise Ricardo’s then already fragile health.<sup>7</sup> Meantime, government physician Dr. E. H. Garrett looked over Flores Magón. He noted that Ricardo suffered from a persistent cough and had lost nearly twenty-five pounds over a relatively short time. Nevertheless, he declared the prisoner reasonably fit, commenting that Flores Magón’s health problems could be attributed to his smoking “great quantities of brown paper cigarettes.”<sup>8</sup>

Failing to win the sympathy of federal officials, authorities transferred Flores Magón along with his Liberal Party associates Antonio Villarreal and Librado Rivera to

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<sup>5</sup> Ricardo Flores Magón, Enrique Flores Magón, Librado Rivera, Antonio de P. Arajo and Anselmo L. Figueroa., “To the Workers of the United States, November 7, 1914.” Reprinted in MacLachlan, pp. 121-125.

<sup>6</sup> Raat doubts whether Flores Magón had diabetes. He notes “although the prison physician at McNeil Island indicated that he was a diabetic in his report of 2 October 1918, subsequent tests of his urine at Leavenworth all indicated negative sugar, and any diabetes would have been so mild as to have not been likely to contribute to his death.” Regarding his eyes, Raat writes “he was suffering eye failure of 10 and 20 over 100 because of immature cataracts. Although diabetes can be related to blindness, it is usually blindness due to retinitis (inflammation of the retina), not the opacification of the lens known as cataracts.” Raat, *Revolutosos*, p. 287. MacLachlan contends “although he had complained frequently of diabetes, it is not clear whether his condition had ever been medically confirmed. In any case, his death appears to have been consistent with the effects of diabetes. Medical research indicates that approximately half the people stricken with heart attacks between the ages of thirty and fifty suffer from the disease. His impending blindness can also be attributed to diabetes.” MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, pp. 103-104. My analysis takes Flores Magón at his word and assumes he suffered from the disease despite the fact that he was never officially diagnosed or treated adequately.

<sup>7</sup> Affidavit of Dr. Walker, December 4, 1908. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Tombstone, Arizona in May 1909. During their trial, the jury found the three men guilty of conspiracy to violate U.S. neutrality laws. Judge F. M. Doan issued a sentence of eighteen months in Arizona territorial prison. At the time, Ricardo's colleague Práxedes Guerrero commented:

Ricardo is very sick, he is suffering with nervous prostration and bilious disorders, and has been transferred to the hospital; but his condition will not better there, even if he does not get worse, for the climate in Yuma is exceedingly hot. Our unfortunate companion is a mere shadow of what he was a year and a half ago.<sup>9</sup>

Ricardo survived his term and returned to Los Angeles in August 1910. Approximately one month later, he restarted publication of *Regeneración*.<sup>10</sup>

After inspiring a popular uprising that attempted to establish an independent republic in the Baja California, authorities again arrested and jailed Ricardo along with his brother Enrique, Librado Rivera and their colleague Anselmo Figueroa in mid-June 1911.<sup>11</sup> Once again, lawmen charged them with violating U.S. neutrality laws. Soon, however, the ensemble made bail and went free on July 15, 1911. In the ensuing trial, however, a federal grand jury found the Flores Magón brothers, Rivera and Figueroa guilty on June 22, 1912. Three days later, the judge sentenced each of the four men to

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<sup>9</sup> Guerrero to Manuel Sarabia, July 25, 1909. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Mexican Revolution began as members of the Mexican Liberal Party as well as supporters of Francisco Madero initiated military actions in Northern Mexico. In late February 1911, Flores Magón openly split with Madero—a decision that would eventually prove harmful for Flores Magón and his colleagues. Subsequently, many North American Socialists as well as Ethel Duffy and John Kenneth Turner withdrew their support for the Mexican Liberals. In contrast, General Secretary of the Industrial Workers of the World, Vincent St. John, unhesitatingly endorsed Flores Magón.

<sup>11</sup> On the Rebellion see Lowell L. Blaisdell, *The Desert Revolution: Baja California, 1911*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1962, James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992 and Lawrence Taylor, "The Magonista Revolt in Baja California: Capitalist Conspiracy or rebelión de los pobres?" Paper presented at the American Historical Association Pacific Coast Branch annual meeting, San Diego, California., August 6-9, 1998.

twenty-three months incarceration at McNeil Island.<sup>12</sup> They served their time and returned to Los Angeles in early 1914.<sup>13</sup>

Ricardo and Enrique helped establish the Edendale Colony in northeastern Los Angeles in mid-1914.<sup>14</sup> Yet at the same time they struggled to keep the exiled Mexican Liberal Party together. Production of *Regeneración* became erratic over the next year due to financial difficulties.<sup>15</sup> Once the paper returned to regular weekly publication, police arrested Ricardo on February 18, 1916 and locked him up in the Los Angeles County Jail for alleged violations of the federal penal code section 211—a statute created to guard against the mailing of “indecent” materials.<sup>16</sup> In jail Flores Magón grew anxious, issuing several requests that his bail be lowered. Unsuccessful, Ricardo’s physical condition deteriorated.

Believing that Ricardo required special attention, Judge Oscar Trippett called upon Doctor E. H. Garrett to examine the anarchist at the Los Angeles County Hospital

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<sup>12</sup> After both the delivery of the verdict on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and sentencing on the 25<sup>th</sup>, Lucía Norman, Mercedes Figueroa and several other relatives of the Liberals helped launch a popular protest denouncing the verdict. On the 25<sup>th</sup> nearly two thousand had gathered outside the jail to express their anger towards the police and justice officials. Later, the Los Angeles Examiner remarked that the gathering had been “one of the wildest riots witnessed on the streets of Los Angeles.” “Wild Street Riot Incited by Girl,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 26, 1912, “Magonistas and Police in Fierce Battle,” *Los Angeles Express*, June 25, 1912, “Woman Leads Mexican Rioters,” *Los Angeles Herald*, June 25, 1912, “Bloody Riots [bids] Magón Adieux,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1912. Worried that another melee might break out, special care was taken in the transfer of prisoners from Los Angeles to McNeil Island. See “Magons Rushed to McNeils (sic) Close-Guarded,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, July 5, 1912, “Remove Prisoners in Dead of Night,” July 5, 1912, *Los Angeles Record*, “Heavy Guard Secretly Rushes Magons North,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1912.

<sup>13</sup> Their sentences had been shortened by four months on account of good behavior. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Others who participated included Librado Rivera, Blas Lara and Ricardo’s companion María Brousse among others. Raat, *Revoltosos*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Following weekly publication during the spring and summer of 1914, financial troubles eventually grounded the paper until October 1915 following irregular publication in the fall of 1914. *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> An example of the *Regeneración* mailing list with a fascinating number of names and addresses is available at the Federal Records Center in Laguna Niguel, CA.

in early May 1916.<sup>17</sup> Garrett's report indicated that the prisoner had indeed developed a "nervous condition" but suggested that he was in no serious danger. Writing to the U.S.

District Attorney Albert Schoonover on May 8, 1916, Garrett stated:

I have this day examined this prisoner in the Los Angeles County Jail. I do not find anything wrong with him except that he is extremely nervous and has lost about six pounds in weight since February 18. All this is due to confinement. He is in no worse condition than many other men in jail. I offered to prescribe for him and send him medicines for anything that he might need to help him, but he declined my services.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Garrett's generally positive report, Ricardo made his first complaint about diabetes when he testified during the trial:

I was arrested on this charge February 18, 1916 and have been confined in the jail and the hospital for diabetes...I feel sick from diabetes [and] have been under treatment for that, but my treatment has stopped; I feel my brain is tired; physically I feel pretty bad, I have been sick for about five or six months; the government physician has examined me; I was sent to the hospital under his instruction and the court and was brought from the hospital here for this trial.<sup>19</sup>

Had Flores Magón been diagnosed and temporarily treated for diabetes? Why did Garrett not mention Ricardo's alleged hospitalization and supervision? Was it true that Ricardo refused his assistance? Yet it was not just Garrett who examined Ricardo at this time. Seeking a second opinion, supporters had also arranged for Los Angeles Doctor Theodore Perceval Gerson to examine Flores Magón. After looking him over, Gerson

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<sup>17</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1916. The following day Judge Oscar Trippet indicated he had no intention of lowering the bail of Flores Magón by stating "even if Magón were dying I would oppose a reduction of the bond." *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1916, pt. 2, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Report of E. H. Garrett, MD Surgeon in Charge of U.S. Prisoners (May 8, 1916). Federal Records Center, Laguna Niguel, CA, RG 21, case 1071.

<sup>19</sup>Statement of Defendant Ricardo Flores Magón, June 3, 1916. Records of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of California, case #1071. RG 21. Federal Records Center, Laguna Niguel, CA.

prescribed treatment for an ailing stomach and nervous condition but made no mention of diabetes.<sup>20</sup>

In part, it is quite possible that both doctors discounted the possibility of diabetes because information on the disease was relatively scant at the time. Like high blood pressure, diabetes is a chronic, potentially deadly disease that silently attacks the pancreas and stops the natural production of insulin in the body. As a result, individuals experience abnormally high blood sugar levels, which, if untreated, eventually lead to severe damage of all the major organs. Most prevalent among the complications that come as a result of diabetes is heart disease and blindness. Related dysfunction of the kidney and liver are also quite common as are difficulties that arise from poor circulation in the hands, legs and feet. Among the classic symptoms of undiagnosed diabetes are cloudy vision, excessive thirst, frequent urination, extreme fatigue and dramatic weight loss. If untreated with proper diet and insulin therapy, someone with diabetes will eventually become comatose.

Whatever his specific health status, authorities convicted Flores Magón's in June 1916 and ordered he and his brother to serve another term at McNeil.<sup>21</sup> Luckily, Flores Magón's lawyer Jack Ryckman successfully fought the decision and allowed his client to go free on bail in late June. Later writing to his lawyer Harry Weinberger about this period, Ricardo remarked that "I got a sentence of one year and one day for I was

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Langham, *Border Trials: Ricardo Flores Magón and The Mexican Liberals*. El Paso, Texas Western Press, 1981, p. 56. See *Regeneración* of May 6, 1916 and May 13, 1916 for articles on Ricardo's poor health.

<sup>21</sup> According to one source, Judge Trippett privately considered suspending Ricardo's sentencing if he agreed to leave the country for good. Arguing against such an idea, however, the prosecuting attorney suggested Flores Magón's condition could be adequately cared for in federal prison. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, p. 71.

expected to live only a few months having been taken from a hospital bed to be tried.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Ricardo’s health was in a fragile state. Invited by fellow militant Alexander Berkman to a rally in San Francisco that fall, Ricardo declined to attend because of his condition. Reports in late 1916 indicate that Ricardo’s health continued to deteriorate. Shortly before his play *Land and Liberty* was to be performed in Los Angeles, an unspecified illness forced Flores Magón to take to his bed.<sup>23</sup> Soon hearing word of Ricardo’s fragile state, supporters made an appeal in an issue of the anarchist paper *Blast* that “the Kropotkin of Mexico” be afforded the medical care he desperately required. For what disease/specific ailments he should be treated for remained unclear.<sup>24</sup>

After publication of two new issues of *Regeneración* in early 1918, authorities charged Flores Magón with mailing “politically dangerous” and “indecent” materials. Once again, he returned to the Los Angeles County Jail. On July 18, 1918, Judge Benjamin F. Bledsoe declared Flores Magón guilty and sent him to McNeil Island the next month. Later commenting on his fate to a friend, Ricardo wrote “a sentence of twenty-one years is a sentence of life for a man as old and worn out as I am.” At the time he was nearly 46 years old.<sup>25</sup>

### **Life in the Federal Penitentiary**

Once installed at McNeil, Flores Magón’s physical condition grew worse. Answering questions by prison officials regarding his health as he entered the

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<sup>22</sup> Flores Magón to Harry Weinberger, May 9, 1921. Reprinted in Juan Gómez-Quiñones (ed), *Sembradores: Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano: A Eulogy and Critique*. Los Angeles, Aztlan Publications, 1973, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup> Enrique Flores Magón, “Ricardo en cama grande,” *Regeneración*, December 23, 1916.

<sup>24</sup> *Blast*, January 15, 1917. Cited in Maclachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, p. 72.

penitentiary, Ricardo indicated that he was “presently sick” and suffering from kidney and bladder disease. He did not specify his symptoms but did tell McNeil staffers during the intake exam that he had struggled with diabetes and had lost approximately thirty pounds over the over the past year.<sup>26</sup> Doctors tested Ricardo’s urine and indeed found it contained dangerously high sugar levels—a clear indication of untreated diabetes. From that point, the staff at McNeil Island put their prisoner on a strict diet.<sup>27</sup> Although no specific are mentioned, Flores Magón’s regimen most likely followed other pre-insulin treatments for diabetes at the time and probably consisted mostly of meat, no sweets and only small amounts of carbohydrates.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, Ricardo’s wife María announced to supporters that her husband suffered from “chronic diabetes” as she began efforts to gather funds to help provide special medical attention.<sup>29</sup> In a letter to Dr. Theodore Perceval Gerson she pleaded

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<sup>25</sup> Flores Magón to Gus Teltsch, December 15, 1920. Quoted in Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 210.

<sup>26</sup> McNeil record for Ricardo Flores Magón. Health questionnaire, August 16, 1918. National Archives, Pacific Northwest Region, Seattle, WA. RG 129, Bureau of Prisons, Box 52, file 3233. Federal policy by the late 1920s dictated that physical examinations be conducted for all incoming prisoners. Describing several of the reasons why prison officials wanted inmates examined, Doctor Frank L. Rector wrote in 1929 “the examination gives an opportunity to...bring to light all chronic conditions from which the inmates may suffer and permits the formulation of a program for their treatment and control. Chronic heart affections (sic), kidney disease, tuberculosis and similar conditions are discovered in this way.” Nevertheless, Rector acknowledges that “in several prisons, especially those in which no permanent record was made of the findings of the examination, the procedure is hastily carried out and superficial in character. Only gross defects, such as an inspection of the body would reveal, are recognized. By such means all incipient defective conditions are overlooked and the most hopeful period in their treatment, that of the early stages, is disregarded.” Frank L. Rector M. D., *Health and Medical Service in American Prisons and Reformatories*. New York, The National Society of Penal Information, Inc., 1921, pp. 103, 105.

<sup>27</sup> MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Tragically, insulin therapy for type 1 (Juvenile) was being developed by researchers in Canada at nearly the same time but would not be available to the general public for several years. Alternative oral drug treatments for type II diabetes (Adult onset) would not available until after 1945.

<sup>29</sup> María herself was certainly not living comfortably. A letter from Kate Crane Gartz to Margaret Wilson (wife of President Woodrow Wilson) complained about the poverty and poor-health of María after Gartz had visited with her shortly after María’s release from an eight month term in jail. Kate Crane Gartz to Margaret Wilson, no date, (in) *The Parlor Provocateur: From Salon to Soap-Box*. The Letters of Kate Crane Gartz. Pasadena, 1923.

“defense attorneys have done all in their possibility (sic) to have the government transfer Ricardo to a hospital where a treatment may [save] his life, but their generous efforts have been of no avail.”<sup>30</sup> Subsequent complaints to prison officials over the next year about his deteriorating eyesight, rheumatism, bad teeth and ulcerated foot caused the anarchist to secure a transfer to the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas. Prison officials delivered Flores Magón and a handful of other prisoners to the Midwestern facility on November 3, 1919.

In Leavenworth, Ricardo worked in the chaplain’s office and library while occasionally enjoying the company of his associate Librado Rivera and members of the I.W.W.<sup>31</sup> Meantime, appeals to state officials argued that prison staff were not providing the prisoner adequate medical attention. Given that insulin therapy was not yet available, we can presume that the most basic treatment for diabetes should have consisted of a special diet low in carbohydrates and fat. Yet from available prison records it appears there was little if any information regarding the diagnosis and treatment of diabetes. Commenting on the food at Leavenworth, for example, an annual report at the time mentions that hospital kitchen was “inadequate” and “the provision for the caring for foods...[was] most unsatisfactory.” The year after Flores Magón’s death, no mention is made of provisions being made for the two diabetics (no names are given) accounted for in the Leavenworth report. According to the prison physician Dr. A. F. Yohe, however,

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<sup>30</sup> María B. Magón to Gerson, n/d, 1919. Theodore Perceval Gerson Collection, UCLA Special Collections #724, box 2, folder 2/7.

<sup>31</sup> Leavenworth Labor Record, November 1919-June 1921. U. S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons Records for Leavenworth Penitentiary, Prisoner #14596. See also Ralph Chaplin’s account for a description of life in Leavenworth at the time. Ralph Chaplin, *Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948.

the food Flores Magón and other prisoners ate “[was] sufficiently varied in character; well prepared and wholesome.”<sup>32</sup>

Details regarding Flores Magón’s life in Leavenworth are in relatively short supply. Of the few prison records that remain, mention is made of Ricardo being admitted to the hospital on February 17, 1920 with a temperature of 101. Staff returned him to his cell five days later. No cause is listed. Sources reveal occasional treatments for irritations of the stomach and mouth as well as fairly regular consultations with doctors to examine his eyes. Curiously, the brevity of Flores Magón’s official prison health record contrasts sharply with the running commentary available in his correspondence to friends and colleagues. Despite the fact that he often pretended to be indifferent to matters related to his health, his last letters are nonetheless worth considering in revisiting his medical condition while in prison.

### <sup>33</sup>**“Gruesome Narratives of the Miseries of Old, Ill-treated Flesh”**

Writing in the spring of 1920 to Gus Telsch in Lake Bay, Washington, Flores Magón testified that he felt better, “with the exception of his vision which [was] getting weaker every day.” Elaborating further, Ricardo told Telsch he believed his eyes were already significantly damaged and that “he was condemned to go blind.” Assuming that officials in Washington held no value for “humanitarian arguments” and cared little about his plight, Flores Magón informed Telsch “a sentence of twenty-one years is a life sentence for a man as old and decrepit as I.” During the winter of 1921, Flores Magón told his friend that the condition of “his eyes had grown worse” and that he needed strong

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<sup>32</sup> Annual Report, United States Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, 1923. pp. 48-49.

lenses in order to read and write.<sup>34</sup> A letter to Nicolás Bernal in Oakland, California dated October 30, 1920, finds Ricardo fondly remembering his days in the Bay Area while complaining about his condition in Leavenworth. Flores Magón lamented that many that of colleagues from that earlier era now seemed to have achieved riches and power while he “was poor, depressed, sick and nearly blind.” Nearly a month later he again commented on his failing eyesight to Bernal.

Magon’s correspondence with a young woman who embraced anarchist beliefs and worked as a member of his defense committee in New York named Lilly Sarnoff (aka Ellen White) provides some of the most telling information regarding the his situation in Leavenworth.<sup>35</sup> In a letter from Flores Magón to Sarnoff dated December 14, 1920, the anarchist confesses that he “has been sick, very sick, [with] colds [that] always attack in the most severe form, accompanied by fever, headache, toothache, rheumatic pains, and ...pneumonia.”<sup>36</sup> Further, Flores Magón characterized his situation as being a “poor tropical plant” uprooted and suffering under a “cold, gray, frowning sky.” He told Sarnoff he would be better in a few days and well until he is stricken by “another attack.” Two weeks later, Ricardo clarified what he meant when he said: “My cold? It gives me a two or three-weeks’ truce, and then charges again with great fury making my life miserable.”<sup>37</sup> This “cold” –or *grippe* as noted in his prison medical record–would continue to bother him through the early part of 1921.

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<sup>34</sup> Flores Magón to Gus Teltsch, May 4, 1920. Manuel González Ramírez/Grupo Cultural Flores Magón, *Ricardo Flores Magón: Epistolario Revolucionario e Íntimo*. Mexico, Grupo Cultural “Ricardo Flores Magón,” 1925, vol. 1, pp. 9, 59.

<sup>35</sup> Material from the Flores Magón/Sarnoff (aka Ellen White) correspondence was compiled by Paul Averich. Paul Avrich (ed.), “Prison Letters of Ricardo Flores Magón to Lilly Sarnoff,” *International Review of Social History*, 1977. pp. 379-422.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

Curiously, a letter to Sarnoff on February 8, 1921 suggested that prison officials had made at least a superficial effort to remedy his condition:

My cold mortifies me always, I feel my head so heavy. Yes I have taken medicines here, but without avail. What I need is a change of climate, I need my tropics.<sup>38</sup>

Later in February Ricardo again confirmed that he was still bothered by his “cold” and was still under some kind of medical care. Exactly what kind of medicine prison staffers may have administered is unclear. All the prison records show is a consultation with Dr. Yohe on January 28, a note on February 15 with the inscription “Dig. Mix” as well as a visit with the eye doctor for treatment of his “immature cataracts” on the same day. Flores Magón later indicated to Sarnoff that he was feeling better:

My eyes do not ache. Occasionally there is a twitch in them, and that is all. As to the doctor, he has not come any more, but he does right-I do not need him now, and his coming would be an absolutely unnecessary expense, a mere waste of money. The cataracts have to ripen by themselves, and in the meantime nothing can be done but to wait.<sup>39</sup>

From this it appears that whatever the exact nature of the treatment, it provided some relief. The effect would prove short-lived, however.

Corresponding with the chairperson of the amusingly named National Socialist Party’s Prison Comfort Club in Chicago Winnie Branstetter, Flores Magón’s mood appeared to have darkened significantly by late March 1921. Holding on to what little hope he may have had for release, Ricardo stated “my fate has been sealed...I have to die within prison walls:

Now I have to die a prisoner, and under the sway of my growing infirmity. Before I be dead, darkness will have enshroud me with a night without moons nor stars...<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 395.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Flores Magón to Winnie Branstetter. March 24, 1921. Gómez-Quñones, *Sembradores*, p. 141.

Adding that he felt persecuted for his “thirty years of struggling for justice,” Flores Magón now was now fighting to keep from losing his vision. With earlier campaigns proving unproductive, Flores Magón’s lawyer Harry Weinberger launched final appeal to secure his release on account of his fragile health.<sup>41</sup>

### **“The Diabetes is Destroying My Weak Organism”**

In mid-April 1921, Weinberger sent an appeal was sent to U.S. Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty asking for Flores Magón’s freedom. Daugherty’s reply to Weinberger somewhat acknowledged Flores Magón’s condition of ill health but insisted upon him serving out his term. The Attorney General indicated: “The Justice Department has determined that the physical condition of Flores Magón is sufficiently normal so as to permit him to remain in confinement. Similarly, I don’t see any reason which would merit his being released at the present time.”<sup>42</sup> Daugherty failed to act on the request and echoed the concerns of federal officials when he reminded Weinberger that many believed Flores Magón to be a “dangerous man” unwilling to obey the laws of this country and intent on spreading “seditious and revolutionary ideas.” As a foreigner, a radical and a sick man incarcerated during this era of political paranoia, the probability of

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<sup>41</sup> In a letter dated December 15, 1920 to Gus Teltsch, Flores Magón indicates that “various organizations and other friends in different parts of the country working to secure my liberty because of my imminent blindness.” Flores Magón received several letters of support from the Bakers Union in San Luis Potosí that lifted his spirits. Later in September 1921, he mentions to Nicolás Bernal that members of the graphic arts union in Mexico City had also written in solidarity. In early 1921, the Mexican Congress approved a motion that allocated funds to give to Flores Magón as a pension. The anarchist declined to accept the money.

<sup>42</sup> Harry M. Daugherty to Harry Weinberger, April 18, 1921. Reprinted in Nicolás T. Bernal (ed.), *Por la libertad de Ricardo Flores Magón*. Mexico, Author’s Edition, 1922, pp. 62-63.

Flores Magón's release was not good. Nevertheless, he and his supporters pressed on.<sup>43</sup> On April 26, 1921, Weinberger wrote to Daugherty again requesting that Flores Magón be released on account of his failing eyesight. Weinberger argued that the anarchist might completely and permanently lose his vision if he did not receive special medical attention.

Meanwhile, Flores Magón had told Lilly Sarnoff in a letter dated March 22, 1921 that he appreciated Weinberger's efforts but held out little hope of being freed. Referring to his ill health and noting a special concern about diabetes since his stint at McNeil, Ricardo believed federal officials had consistently ignored his medical needs:

The Attorney General does not mention at all the report made by the prison physician at McNeil Island to the Department of Justice, in 1918, as to my being afflicted with diabetes and rheumatism. It is true that my urine was examined here [Leavenworth] in September 1920, and in the report made on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the same month the urine appears to be normal, but can this be taken as proof as to the sickness having been cured? Any doctor can say that diabetes is an incurable disease. The emissions of sugar with the urine may temporarily disappear in this strange disease, but the malady remains the same. This low pressure of my blood, this anemic condition of mine, as reported by my actual physician on September 13, 1920 cannot be accounted for by the diabetes? And what of the rheumatism that still pains me and this eternal cold which never heals?...As you see, I am not only losing my eyesight, but I am afflicted with other diseases.<sup>44</sup>

Strangely here, Flores Magón continues to make mention of diabetes while the focus of prison personnel is nearly always on likely symptoms of the disease: clouded vision, weight loss and other ailments. Subsequent correspondence with Weinberger added to Flores Magón's charge against the U.S. government. On May 9 Ricardo wrote:

Mr. Daugherty agrees on my being sick, but he thinks that I can be taken care of in my sickness in prison as well as it could be done on the outside.

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<sup>43</sup> For a history of the Red Scare era see William Preston Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2nd ed., 1994.

<sup>44</sup> Avrich, "Prison Letters," p. 398.

Environment is all-important in the treatment of diseases, and no one would ever imagine that a prison cell is the ideal environment for a sick man, and much less when the presence in prison of such a man is owing to his having been faithful to truth and justice.<sup>45</sup>

Is it possible that, as with a significant number of individuals today, Ricardo's diabetes remained undiagnosed and untreated?

Soon, Flores Magón again suffered from a relapse of his "cold." Writing to Sarnoff he expressed regret for having talked too much about his physical condition that only seemed to be bothering him more and more. His letter to her dated May 31, 1921 reveals an extremely proud and deeply troubled man:

My cold? I am just recovering from an unusually severe attack of the dreadful ailment that lasted two weeks. I was very, very ill. I do not say any more about it, because I think it tiresome for my friends to be told of my ailments each time I write them, and besides, this, I hate to waste my two pages with gruesome narratives of the miseries of my old, ill-treated flesh.<sup>46</sup>

While Ricardo routinely tried to downplay his health concerns he nonetheless had made his deteriorating condition clear.<sup>47</sup> Yet from this point, it seemed that Flores Magón had also grown tired of complaining. In a literary dash he temporarily denies his disease to paint himself a romantic hero:

I deliberately and carefully shun the subject, thus keeping out of sight the miseries of the flesh, as when in the throws of agony the Hellenic warrior used to pull his shield to his face, as though to put a screen between his contorting face and the grandeur of Nature. It is for Beauty's sake that I place the shield of silence between my ailments and you.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Flores Magón to Weinberger, May 9, 1921. Gómez-Quñones, *Sembradores*, p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> Avrich, p. 402. Prison officials limited Flores Magón's correspondence to two pages per letter.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* Later in June, he told Teltsch that workers in Mexico had petitioned President Obregón, requesting that the Mexican government work through diplomatic channels to secure his freedom. Flores Magón to Teltsch, June 16, 1921. González-Ramírez., Ricardo Flores Magón, vol. 2, pp. 13-14.

Perhaps to uphold whatever last traces of pride he possessed, Flores Magón's correspondence with Sarnoff revealed no further discussion of health problems for the rest of the year. Instead, he appears to have felt more comfortable discussing his situation with certain male colleagues. In September 1921, for example, Ricardo did mention a "relapse of his sickness" to Gus Teltsch. A month later in his musing about the future to his friend Nicolás Bernal, he complained about persistent foot ulcers.

Efforts to win Flores Magón's freedom continued. On November 7, 1921, Ricardo appeared to be in good spirits when he told Gus Teltsch that, although weak, he was hopeful that the efforts of Harry Weinberger and his friends in New York would pay off. He thought he might be able to leave Leavenworth in a short while. If so, Flores Magón imagined he would need "two or three months of freedom in this country...to attend to my health and prepare for my journey to Mexico City."

A few months later, Flores Magón's correspondence to Teltsch dated January 2, 1922 shows that whatever optimism he may have maintained had diminished after learning that Attorney General Daugherty had no intention of granting him amnesty. Slowly giving up hope, Ricardo wrote again about his eyes:

In a little while my eyes, already very tired, will be [completely] insensitive to light. Then, I will no longer be "a danger" as Mr. Daugherty likes to call me. [No] I will incapable of writing [altogether].<sup>49</sup>

The seriousness of the situation was made even clearer when he responded to another East Coast supporter—Miss Alice Stone Blackwell—in early 1922. In his letter dated January 26, Flores Magón wrote that he was sent to die within the walls of the prison because he was old and his health failing. "It is not probably that I will be able to survive

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

the sentence of twenty-one years that they gave me in the summer of 1918.” He told Blackwell that “hopefully death would arrive soon” to relieve him of the impending darkness brought on by his failing eyesight and the “agony he felt each minute.”<sup>50</sup> What comes across in his correspondence is the fact that he was rapidly losing weight. Flores Magón’s communication to Nicolás Bernal dated February 1, 1922 indicates he had recently lost nearly twenty-five pounds. Was this, as Dr. Garrett had stated years earlier, simply “due to confinement”? Surely such a dramatic weight loss suggested something more serious—perhaps diabetes. His letter to Sarnoff on February 14 shows a deepening despair and mentions that his “infirmities” were reaching an “alarming” state. Meantime, prison officials became increasingly secretive about Flores Magón’s condition while maintaining that he was in good health.

On March 7, 1922, Flores Magón again wrote to Alice Stone Blackwell, stating that his “physical condition had grown worse since October past.”<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere in the letter, however, Flores Magón encouraged her to send a copy of a recent medical exam conducted at the prison laboratory to Harry Weinberger. His March 14 letter to Sarnoff reveals what he was thinking when he made the request:

[The lab report] is the most convincing document as to the seriousness of my ailments, for it is not the opinion of a physician based on guesses, and which might be influenced according to his sympathies or antipathies. The laboratory report is based on stern facts—the reactions operated by chemicals on the sputum (sic). The chemicals say the truth; they do not incur in error; they cannot have bias, and for this reason I have insisted so much in the importance of Mr. Weinberger getting hold of the laboratory’s report in its full length, for I understand that the experts make in it some recommendations as to what I need to prevent consumption. Please tell Mr. Weinberger that a faithful copy of the complete document should be

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>51</sup> González Ramírez, Ricardo Flores Magón, p. 78.

desirable, as after that no one would dare to insist stating that my health is good.<sup>52</sup>

The call for an examination makes clear that prison authorities had become increasingly concerned over the matter of Magon's condition. Yet they kept the results secret and reported publicly that Ricardo was relatively healthy. Warden Biddle's response to officials in Washington stated that "there is nothing in [Flores Magón's] general condition to warrant the belief that he is in anything but good health, and no dire effects are to be expected from his confinement." Included among Biddle's enclosures was the prison doctor's chemical analysis of Ricardo's sputum sample from the prison exam.<sup>53</sup>

In sharp contrast to official reports, Ricardo's letter to Nicolás Bernal on March 28, 1922, indicates that he had recently added tuberculosis to his long list of ailments. The same letter also reveals his deep frustration over the results of the medical test:

[After] Weinberger went to Washington and told the Department of Justice about my situation they sent orders to the doctor at this institution [Leavenworth] to render a report on the state of my health. The report was sent on the twentieth of this month and says that my health is good; that I have no illness and that the conditions of the prison are satisfactory...[they said this despite the fact that] when the sample of my saliva was analyzed by those little bastards at the laboratory in Topeka, Kansas, the report said unequivocally that I suffered from an illness in a very advanced stage in the respiratory organs and that the tuberculosis would only develop further if not attended to and a change of climate arranged. This, my dear Nicolás, gives you an idea of the hatred that I face...They know well that I am sick, but they deny it.<sup>54</sup>

A letter to Gus Teltsch on April 4, 1922 indicated much of the same. Ricardo wrote that although he continued to feel bad, prison authorities still maintained "the environment of the prison has no detrimental influence over my physical condition." Reviewing his

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<sup>52</sup> Avrich, "Prison Letters," p. 418.

<sup>53</sup> Leavenworth Warden Biddle to Heber (sic) H. Votaw, Superintendent of Prisons, Department of Justice, Washington D. C., April 8, 1922.

health record, he summed up the history of his deteriorating health over the past six years. I doing so, Flores Magón makes clear his battle with diabetes even if no one appears to have been listening to him:

The facts speak otherwise just as was the case in May 1916 while I was in jail in Los Angeles waiting for trial. [At that time] I was so sick that judge Trippet ordered that I be taken to the hospital to be treated for diabetes. When I arrived at McNeil they analyzed my urine to see if I suffered from diabetes. [Subsequently] the doctor informed the Department of Justice that not only did I have diabetes but I also had contracted rheumatism...Additionally, it is a fact that prison has affected my vision and that I have developed cataracts in both eyes. This fact has been corroborated by an expert who examined my eyes and concluded that the total loss of my vision was only a matter of time. It is also equally true that I suffer from a dangerous illness in the lungs which causes me to cough continually and occasionally spit up blood. This has me in a constant state of fever and nervousness with headaches and constant pains—sometimes in the heart or in the left lung—I can't tell for sure. Nevertheless, the Department of Justice says that I am in good health, and they say this despite the fact that I am constantly losing weight.<sup>55</sup>

Further, Flores Magón told Teltsch that he could no longer write without the help of powerful glasses and that “the diabetes is destroying my weak organism while the tuberculosis is waiting in the wings.” If these two evils did not kill him, he wrote, then he would have to endure months of painful suffering in a local hospital. Prophetically, he ended by saying that “it is certain that I will be liberated one night in a way which will end my complaints.”<sup>56</sup>

Later that month, Ricardo told Bernal that he was feeling weaker and weaker—another clear symptom of untreated diabetes. While fighting to stave off the total loss of his vision, he added that tuberculosis is “threatening.” Subsequently, Flores Magón

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12. <sup>54</sup> Flores Magón to Bernal, March 28, 1922. González Ramírez, Ricardo Flores Magón, vol. 3, p.

<sup>55</sup> Flores Magón to Teltsch, April 4, 1922. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

informed his friend “my only hope for recovering my health is [to gain my] freedom, a change of climate and [a new] lifestyle...but these [possibilities] are quite distant.”<sup>57</sup>

Ricardo’s situation remained much the same during the months of April and May 1922. Writing to sympathizer Irene Benton on May 31, 1922, he told her “I have been sick with fever and headache during the last few weeks.” Noting the changing season, he commented that “maybe these warmer months will help improve my health a little.”<sup>58</sup> Corresponding with Nicolás Bernal he assumed a dark tone when he described his suffering from “constant headaches that have tormented me the entire month.”

By this time most of Flores Magón’s supporters were utterly convinced he was not being treated adequately. Meantime, Librado Rivera suspected that Warden Biddle had begun carefully monitoring the prisoner’s letters beginning in June 1922. Allegedly, a letter from Rivera to Gus Teltsch around that time charged that prison staff was denying Flores Magón medicine and appropriate attention for his ills. According to Rivera, once the warden got a hold of this letter, prison staff indicated they might cut off his correspondence altogether. Rivera claimed that from this point Ricardo’s letters contained little of much importance because Warden Biddle had threatened to “punish him and even cut away all of his good time—seven years—if he dared to show me (Rivera) any of his letters, or to tell any of his friend that he was not receiving careful attention by the prison physician.”<sup>59</sup>

These warnings notwithstanding, Ricardo’s letter to Lilly Sarnoff dated August 25, 1922 described how he had been spitting up blood. “They have examined me but I do

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<sup>57</sup> Flores Magón to Bernal, April 26, 1922. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>58</sup> Flores Magón to Irene Benton, May 31, 1922. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>59</sup> Librado Rivera to Raul Palma, November 25, 1922. Gómez-Quiñones, *Sembradores*, pp. 154-55. See also the editors’ note in González Ramírez, Ricardo Flores Magón, vol. 3, pp. 42-43.

not know the result as the sample was sent to Topeka and has not yet returned...I understand that in one way or another I will die.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, an October 15 letter to Sarnoff speaks of a “grayness of this life of mine in this pit wherein souls and flesh rot.” Flores Magón told Sarnoff that another report on his physical condition—this time conducted by a Dr. Longworthy—mentioned that he now had bronchitis but little else. The letter also mentioned his fears regarding the dangers of tuberculosis. Objecting to Longworthy’s assessment that concluded that Ricardo was ill but not seriously so, Flores Magón complained “it is not a fair and impartial report.” Clearly, Ricardo’s health condition by this time had become highly politicized as official reports continued to deny that he was in grave danger. Nine days later he was found dead in his cell.

## **Conclusion**

Prison doctor Yohe reported to Warden Biddle on November 21, 1922:

[T]he night attendant at the hospital was called by [the] guard in Cell House “B” about 4:15 o’clock this morning. The attendant went over promptly and found Flores Magón suffering with distress and pain about the heart, he examined him and returned to the hospital for medicine. While the attendant was returning to the hospital the guard called again and stated that Flores Magón was dead. The body was immediately brought over to the hospital and examined by me this morning. It is my opinion that Flores Magón died of angina pectoris. You will, no doubt, recall that Flores Magón had been recently examined by both doctors Langworthy and myself and in those examinations we were unable to find any evidence of disease of heart (sic). Prompt service was rendered Flores Magón and he was not neglected in any way.<sup>61</sup>

Focusing his report on Flores Magón’s heart and not the larger context of the prisoner’s deteriorating condition and longstanding complaints about diabetes, Dr. Yohe

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<sup>60</sup> Flores Magón to Sarnoff, August 25, 1922. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> Dr. A. F. Yohe to Warden Biddle, November 21, 1922. U. S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons Records for Leavenworth Penitentiary.

attempts to absolve himself and his colleagues of any wrongdoing. The fact is that Ricardo had complained about a number of ailments over the years including diabetes—a leading cause of heart disease. Contrary to the coroner’s report which professes “prompt service” and a lack of neglect on the part of the prison staff, consistent failure to respond adequately to the prisoner’s condition implicates Leavenworth Warden Biddle and the U.S. Justice Department in death of Ricardo Flores Magón. His demise did not come after a beating as some alleged, but in the form of a slow death sentence brought on by ignorance and neglect.

As a political prisoner, the Flores Magón case elicited little sympathy from federal authorities despite persistent appeals by his lawyer Harry Weinberger, Kate Crane Gartz and others.<sup>62</sup> In a letter to New York supporter Erma Barsky dated March 16, 1922, Flores Magón poignantly describes what he saw as his persecution by the United States government. Ricardo thought himself to be “caught by the formidable mechanism of a monstrous machine, and my flesh may get ripped open, and my bones crushed, and my moans fill the space and make the very infinite shudder, but the machine will not stop grinding, grinding, grinding.”<sup>63</sup> While Ricardo’s actual condition may have not been as dramatic, if we are to take him at his word, it was U.S. officials in silent partnership with a case of untreated diabetes that savagely grinded him down, sapped his energy, crippled his eyesight, filled his chest with congestion and ate at his feet. In a final, and some might say merciful blow, it finished him off with a fatal heart attack.

A letter from Librado Rivera to Raul Palma immediately after Ricardo’s passing rightly offered damning testimony relating illness and Flores Magón’s cause of death.

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<sup>62</sup> Crane Gartz wrote several letters to federal officials including President Harding complaining about what she saw as the “abusive treatment” of prisoners at Leavenworth.

Rivera wrote that Ricardo “was very sick” and that “appeals for an impartial examination of his body” went largely unheard. Flores Magón’s colleague contends that “all medical attention was denied to Ricardo, even medicines.” Rivera backs up his highly charged accusations by reconstructing some of Ricardo’s personal history beginning with his being sent to the hospital in 1916 for diabetes.<sup>64</sup> These comments make clear that Los Angeles doctors believed Ricardo had diabetes at least six years before his death. Yet they kept this information private and failed to prescribe any treatment.

Although many at the time figured it was the “tyranny of Warden Biddle” that killed Flores Magón,” a reconstruction of events suggests that it was a lack of medical attention provided the anarchist that killed him.<sup>65</sup>

Proper attention paid to Ricardo Flores Magón’s undiagnosed diabetes may have helped prolong his life. Instead, between stints in the prison library and trips to the Leavenworth hospital, he was largely left to complain bitterly to his supporters about weight loss, lack of energy, dimming vision, persistent cough, rheumatism, tuberculosis, bronchitis, ulcerated feet and “frequent colds.” With facilities at Leavenworth adequate for treatment of only minor illnesses, the Justice Department should have done the right thing and transferred him to a nearby public hospital. Another alternative would have been to repatriate the anarchist with the idea that he could secure his own medical services somewhere south of the border. In the end, official diagnosis and close attention paid to his diabetes no doubt would have improved his quality of life in prison if not prolonged it to some degree. Had he been given attention for this chronic and incurable

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<sup>63</sup> Letter to Erma Barsky, March 16, 1922. González Ramírez, Ricardo Flores Magón, vol. 3, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Gómez-Quñones, *Sembradores*, p. 155.

yet still treatable disease that he needed and rightly deserved, he would have been eligible for parole on August 15, 1925.<sup>66</sup> Instead, like so many political prisoners held around the world today, his was sadly a case of not-so-benign neglect.

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<sup>65</sup> Eugene Debs came to a similar conclusion in his “The Assassination of Magón,” printed in the New York Call that same year. Another theory asserting that Flores Magón had been strangled by a prison guard (John Bull) has been convincingly proven false. See Raat, *Revolutosos*, pp. 287-289.

<sup>66</sup> Notice of Flores Magón’s death quickly circulated throughout Greater Mexico. A small sampling of articles include “Murio en Leavenworth el socialista mexicano Ricardo Flores Magón,” *La Prensa*, San Antonio, TX, November 23, 1922, “La memoria de Ricardo Flores Magón honrada en la camara,” *El Demócrata*, Mexico City, November 23, 1922, “Se lamenta el fallecimiento de R. F. Magón,” *Excélsior*, Mexico City, November 23, 1922. A dissenting opinion on Flores Magón can be found in “Traidores como Ricardo F. Magón no deben descansar en el suelo de México,” *Excélsior*, November 23, 1922.