

A Time of Trial

For this column I am reproducing parts of essays from my cousins Apolinario "Naring" Orosa and the late Maria Christina "Diding" Orosa Naylor. Ten years ago I requested Naring write about his father Rafael Y. Orosa or "Tio Paito" as we called him. Naring graciously wrote an account which is in our Orosa website. Naring is 85 and lives in the San Juan district of Metro Manila with Melinda, his wife of more than 50 years.

Diding wrote an essay about her family which was not for publication but which she shared with me. However I am only excerpting a few paragraphs that relate to the war experience of the Sixto Y. Orosa family. Both excerpts deal with some of the Orosa experience during the war, thus the title "A Time of Trial." Diding passed away in Edinburgh in the spring of 2010 at the age of 67.

From Naring Orosa's essay on his father Rafael:

"With the outbreak of WW II, the regular shipping companies servicing the various islands in the archipelago stopped operations. Thus the only way to travel from Luzon to the eastern and western Visayas was limited to wooden sailboats of about 50 to 100 tons capacity. Bauan had quite a number of these "*batels*" so through word of mouth among stranded Visayans in Luzon Bauan became a hub of the *batel* trade. My father was a highly respected businessman, quite popular so he became a ship broker. People who wanted to charter a *batel* would usually go to my father - who knew all the boat owners. From a trickle of passengers the volume grew to such heavy traffic that my father converted the house to a hotel - appropriately named "Sailboat Hotel." Carmelo "Miling" O. Ylagan (our first cousin) worked as manager and I helped out waiting on tables. The rich and famous "*hacendero*" (plantation owner) families of eastern and western Visayas - the Lacsons, Lopez, Lizares, Gastons, Osmenas, etc. all passed through Bauan and spent some days at our hotel. Some of them usually left hundreds of sacks of sugar (a very scarce commodity during the war) for my father to sell. In addition to the normal passengers, some agents of the Allied Intelligence Bureau^a, an underground guerilla outfit in Negros Occidental, also passed through Bauan becoming friends of my father. The guerilla unit had direct contact with the forces of General Douglas McArthur in Australia. During the war, we were among the first to receive U.S. propaganda material such as candies and the latest copies of Time and Life magazines. These came through via US Navy submarine landings in Negros."

"It was at this time that a young, energetic and seemingly fearless young lady from Binan, Laguna named Severina "Binay" Rivera^b started coming to Bauan to buy and sell whatever goods were available. My father helped her in her business - sometimes giving her goods such as sugar on consignment payable after she had sold them in Manila. Travel to Manila (about 100 km) then was by old trucks fueled by charcoal, quite slow and messy. One had to go through several checkpoints manned by Japanese sentries. So it was through my father that Binay was introduced to "Tio Inte" (Mario's father Vicente) after the war. In the early 1960's, when Binay engaged in a real estate business in Balibago, Angeles City (Pampanga) she asked Tio Inte to become the Chairman and General Manager. The company, named Diamond Baligbago, is still operating today."

"There was a Japanese military garrison in Bauan during the war. Somehow they learned of our support for the guerilla unit in Negros. Because of this we were placed on the "wanted" list. My father sensed that we were about to be picked up by the Japanese

A Time of Trial

so he decided that we must all leave immediately and evacuate to Mindoro. That same night, we surreptitiously boarded *bancas* (dugout canoes) with outriggers and paddled all the way to Mindoro. The Bauan residents later told us that barely an hour after we shoved off from Bauan, a platoon of Japanese soldiers arrived at our house looking for the Orosa family. We stayed in Mindoro with some relatives and waited there until the liberation from the Japanese.”

From Diding Orosa’s essay:

“Manila fell to the Japanese on 2 January 1942^c and all foreigners were interned^d. Lolo Sixto (Dr. Sixto Y. Orosa) was the only non-Japanese to visit the internees regularly. He took with him concentrated *calamansi* (Philippine lime juice) rich in vitamin C and *darak* (rice bran) biscuits rich in vitamin B, concocted by his sister Maria. She worked for the Bureau of Plant Industry. She was a pioneer in food technology, experimenting with all types of fruits and vegetables. She held the rank of captain in the underground of Marking’s^e Guerillas during the war. She died of shrapnel wounds during the liberation of Manila in February 1945. There is a street in Manila named after her. Although she was my godmother, I never knew her.”

“My father Ting (Sixto Jr.) joined the Batangas Unit of the Blue Eagle Guerillas^f, thereby imperiling the rest of the family. The Japanese regularly checked each neighbourhood and did a head count. A family was made to suffer for the unexplained disappearance of any male relative. In 1944, the entire family, including my mother, brothers, and me, moved to the ancestral home in Bauan. When they left their home at 1913 Taft Avenue, the district was elegant with Spanish style mansions and tree lined streets. When the war finished in 1945, it was a wasteland almost everywhere. Manila was second only to Warsaw in devastation – bombed and sacked by the Japanese. Bombed and barraged with artillery by American liberating forces. Burned and looted once more by the Japanese who were making a last stand. The Taft Avenue house was reduced to rubble.”

“The Bauan house was crowded with refugees, so a dilapidated *nipa* (palm) hut was found on the beach on the outskirts of Barrio Aplaya. Later the family was able to move to a slightly better house. Mama remembered that when the air raid siren sounded she had to grab us children and dive under the hut, straight into the pigsty. *Nipa* huts were built on stilts and domestic animals were kept underneath.”

“Lolo resumed practice as a *barrio* (village) doctor battling dreadful disease with inadequate facilities. During a house call to a neighboring island, the “house” turned out to be a small boat where a man lay bleeding from stomach ulcers. Lolo was rushing the patient to Bauan when Japanese soldiers stopped and searched the baot and found recent issues of banned American magazines. He was able to convince them that this was an emergency. So he and the patient were allowed to disembark, but the rest of the crew was tortured and the owner-captain executed. At four the next morning, Lolo was taken by the soldiers and made to stand for 4 hours in the middle of the main road. Fortunately a Japanese civilian recognized him and arranged his release.”

A Time of Trial

“Soon after this a warning came via a Japanese friend that all the men in Bauan were to be rounded up and killed. The family decided to do a moonlit flit by sea to Mindoro, where my father’s unit, now officially attached to the 11th Airborne Division of the U.S. Army, was based. The Americans had retaken the town of Calapan, which is where the two *batel* (very lightly made sailboat) headed for, with grandparents in charge of one each. Passengers included Aunts Leonor and Rosalinda, Uncle Jose, my mother, my brothers, me and friends that Lolo could not turn away. Aunt Helen was a nurse at the Philippine General Hospital and felt obliged to stay at her post.”

“During the journey, they encountered heavy weather and the *batel* under Mama Binay’s^g charge lost its sail twice, nearly got shipwrecked, then finally made it to shore not in Calapan, but in another town, Naujan. None of the men knew how to handle sails and it was Mama Binay who, having spent many years in a seaside town, told them what to do. Even in war greed can be a frightening thing. Everyone had been told to bring only the barest essentials, but when items had to be thrown overboard during the storm, it was discovered that a man had brought cartons of cigarettes to sell. During the Japanese occupation, cigarettes were rarer than pearls.”

“Eventually the refugees were reunited in Calapan. Again there was no room at relatives’ houses. They found a deserted farmhouse. They used wooden crates for tables, tins for plates, fingers for eating. The family jewelry, titles, deeds, etc. had been buried in bamboo tubes in the garden in Bauan.”

“The day after the flight, the Bauan men were indeed rounded up and imprisoned in the church, which was then blown up with dynamite. After liberation, Jose was sent back to dig up the bamboo tubes. He found everything intact, including diamond parures and pieces that were Mama Binay’s family heirlooms. Commonwealth peso bills were still new and crisp, and a big bottle of pearls lovingly collected during their years in Sulu. Jose chose to return to Manila, entrusting the tubes to a family friend to take back to Mindoro. The friend eventually turned up claiming that his *batel* had capsized and the tubes went overboard. Assorted pieces surfaced later, adorning other women, so the friendship died.”

“Lolo had a lucrative practice in Calapan and was perfectly happy to stay on there after the war. However, once Batangas was free, Mama Binay insisted on returning to her family home in the provincial capital. Lolo was against a move from Calapan but, bearing in mind how Mama Binay had followed him to hardship postings^h without complaint or backward glance, he felt he could not say no. The two doctors set up in Batangas and rented a house in Manila for the children. Soon, they started missing the children so closed up shop and moved back to Manila, where Lolo became the locum resident physician of the U.S. embassy for 8 months, resigning in 1946 when his replacement arrived from the U.S.”

Footnotes added by Mario E. Orosa:

- a. A unit, under American command, directed to contact guerilla units around the country and establish an intelligence network during the occupation.

A Time of Trial

- b. Binay, her husband and family became lifelong friends of the Orosas. One of Binay's other businesses in the 1950's was a taxi company called Diamond. Their taxis were Mercedes Benz, believe it or not. Didn't I say the 1950's were the halcyon days? Tragically, Binay was assassinated in her office in Angeles in 1964. The assassins were never apprehended and are believed to have been trying to extort money from the corporation.
- c. Gen. Douglas MacArthur declared Manila an open city so it was spared any fighting initially. This wasn't true during the battle for liberation 3 years later.
- d. Most of those interned were American civilians, including priests and nuns. There were two main civilian internment camps, the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in the heart of Manila the other outside the town of Los Baños. Diding is referring to the UST camp.
- e. A guerilla unit organized by Marcos Agustin taking the nom-de-guerre of Augustin V. Marking.
- f. A guerilla unit operating in the provinces of Luzon and Cavite.
- g. Diding's grandmother, Dr. Severina Luna Orosa, wife of Dr. Sixto and a medical doctor in her own right.
- h. Shortly after their marriage, Dr. Sixto was posted to Sulu in Mindanao, where the overwhelming majority of the people are Muslim. It was there that Dr. Sixto wrote the seminal book "The Sulu Archipelago and its Peoples," published by the World Book Co. of New York in 1923.