

Good Deeds II

Foreword: *In a 2012 essay, I wrote about two examples of good deeds done by Filipinos. First was providing sanctuary for over 1,000 European Jews during the days leading up to WWII. The second was sending a team of medical personnel to Vietnam shortly after the defeat of the French and the division of the country into North and South. Two more good deeds deserve mention.*

Tiempo Ruso:

First, a little background. During the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 & subsequent civil war in Russia, the antagonists were the Communists (Reds) and those loyal to the Tsar (Whites). The Reds prevailed and thousands of loyalist Whites, fearing persecution, scattered throughout Europe and Asia. In the latter location, they settled mostly in China, forming enclaves in Shanghai and Harbin. Fast forward to 1949, during the Chinese civil war. The Communists under Mao Zedong were on the cusp of victory over the Nationalists under Chiang Kai Shek, who fled with his Kuomintang government to Taiwan. Fearing the communists, the Whites looked for another place of sanctuary. As the world had demonstrated time and again, calls for providing sanctuary often fall on deaf ears. As before, the Philippines answered the call. Although still recovering from the destruction of WWII and struggling to contain their own Communist-inspired Huk insurgency, the Philippines under President Elpidio Quirino^a offered to accept some of the White Russians.

Under the aegis of the International Refugee Organization^b, a camp was built and 6,000 Russians were settled on the island of Tubabao, 650 kilometers southeast of Manila, just north and to the west of the southernmost tip of the island of Samar. To the west is Leyte Gulf and the island of Leyte, made famous only five years before as the landing point of General Douglas MacArthur, fulfilling his vow of "I Shall Return." To the east, across a narrow channel from Tubabao is the town of Guiuan, which had jurisdiction over the island.

Although the area is now dotted with resorts, there wasn't much of anything either in Guiuan or Tubabao 70 years ago. The Lonely Planet travel guide described Tubabao as an almost uninhabited island. But the Russians made a go of it. In the ensuing years, it became Russia in the tropics. They built two Orthodox churches, schools, medical facilities, installed a police force and court, various businesses, etc. There were cultural activities. They traded with the locals, exposing them to classical music and ballet. (I wonder if Nutcracker was presented during Christmas of 1949 or 1950.) At first the settlement was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. During a visit, President Quirino famously had the fence removed. As the years went by, the Russians resettled elsewhere, mostly in the United States and Australia. Their religious leader, Vladyka (Bishop) John had gone to the U.S. and successfully lobbied for granting immigrant status to 3,000 people. Decades later, Vladyka John was "glorified" to sainthood. He is now referred to as St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco.

By 1952, the settlement was gone. But the Russians remembered. The locals remembered too, referring to the years as Tiempo Ruso, or Time of the Russians. The youngest Russians who

Good Deeds II

came to Tubabao would be in their 70's by now. From time to time, some would return for a visit and speak fondly of their experiences in Tubabao. All they would find today are a few graves, marked by their Cyrillic alphabet. Igor Khovaev, the Russian Ambassador to the Philippines, visited Guiuan and Tubabao in 2018, referring to the Philippines as a "*country of refuge, country of assistance and help, and country of care.*"

Kinna Kwan, who hails from Guiuan and is the daughter of a former mayor, made this story the subject of her Masters thesis. The Elpidio Quirino Foundation has the best record of the history of the settlement. The two pictures below are from their collection.

The Boat People:

Not long after the fall of Saigon in 1975, some people, particularly the Christians and ethnic Chinese, started to leave Vietnam. Just like the African and Middle Eastern migrants of today trying to cross the Mediterennean, the Vietnamese took to their boats. Thus the name, "boat people." The mass exodus reached its peak during 1978 and 1979. Other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia provided temporary shelter, but none was willing to take on any significant number for any length of time. The Philippines, then under the leadership of Ferdinand Marcos, once again stepped up to the plate.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Philippine government agreed to build what would become the largest refugee center (see photograph below) for Vietnamese refugees. Called Philippine Refugee Processing Center, it was located in Morong, province of Bataan^c, 170 km northwest of Manila. The mandate was a simple one. The refugees would undergo all sorts of tests, including medical, and be sorted out as to who goes where. Think of Ellis Island in New York nearly 100 years before. The United States had already committed to taking in most of the refugees. Waiting periods sometimes stretched into months and even years. In the meantime there was English instruction, or ESL (English as a Second Language). Imagine a Vietnamese speaking English with a Filipino accent, compliments of their Filipino instructors. Exact figures are hard to come by, but a chalkboard tally indicated that 292,000 refugees were processed at the Center. Most were Vietnamese, but there were refugees from Cambodia and Laos as well.

Another camp, called Philippine First Asylum Center, was established on the island of Palawan, 760 km southwest of Manila. It was also funded by UNHCR, with additional help from the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. The camp was initially within the capital city of Puerto Princesa, with a capacity of 11,000 (the center in Bataan could hold 18,000). After most of the refugees had been relocated, about 2,700 still remained in 1996. With UNHCR funding dried up and nowhere to go, refugees were faced with forced repatriation back to Vietnam. The CBCP persuaded the Philippine government to give the refugees permanent resident status. The Catholic bishops and Vietnamese communities around the world sprang into action. Enough funding was secured to enable relocation outside Puerto Princesa and to construct a small community, appropriately named Viet Ville. A beautiful historical account of Viet Ville was

Good Deeds II

written by Phung Nguyen, a Vietnamese Canadian, for the website www.resilientpeople.ca. In time, most of Viet Ville's remaining refugees were able to make their way to the U.S. and Australia. Viet Ville was virtually abandoned. A few Vietnamese remained, having married Filipinos. One of Viet Ville's businesses, an eponymous restaurant, has become an institution and tourist attraction. It even averaged 4 stars at TripAdvisor. If you are in Puerto Princesa and hungry for pho, Viet Ville is only a 20 minute tricycle ride away.

Estimates vary, but as many as 400,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees may have passed through the Philippines out of nearly 2 million who left their countries.

UNHCR has lauded the Philippines for its strong humanitarian tradition, recognizing the country's role in resettling or providing transition facilities for refugees. UNHCR lists nine waves of refugees who found succor in the Philippines.

- 1st - The First Wave of White Russians
- 2nd - Jewish Refugees Fleeing Nazi Persecution
- 3rd - Spanish Republicans Flee New National Government
- 4th - Chinese Refugees Escape from the Mainland
- 5th - The Time of the White Russians (Tiempo Ruso)
- 6th - Vietnamese Boat People Arrive on Philippine Shores
- 7th - Iranian Revolution's Aftermath Leave Refugees Stateless
- 8th - Indo-Chinese Neighbors Flee Regime Changes
- 9th - East Timorese Refugees Flee During Struggle for Independence

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me," Matthew 25:35

Footnotes:

a - Quirino was the Vice-president under Manuel Roxas when the Philippines attained independence in 1946. When Roxas died in office, Quirino succeeded him. He would later win the 1949 presidential election and served another four years.

b - The International Refugee Organization would later become the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Sadly, the work of UNHCR has only increased through the years. There are currently over 20 million refugees under their mandate.

c - Bataan has its own place in Philippine and American history. After the Japanese invasion of December 1941, Filipino and American troops held out for four months in the Bataan peninsula before surrendering. 76,000 POWs were then subjected to the infamous Bataan Death March.

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Good Deeds II



The bearded man is Vladyka (Bishop) John, the Tubabao settlement's spiritual leader. Some years after his death, he was "Glorified," attaining sainthood in the Eastern Orthodox Church.



Looks like a family lined up for lunch.

Photos above from the Elpidio Quirino Foundation

Good Deeds II



November 12, 1979

The Philippines and the UNHCR signed the agreement for the construction and operation of the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in Morong, Bataan.



The Viet Ville restaurant outside Puerto Princesa, Palawan.