

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

Foreword: *I wrote the original essay back in 2011. My intent was to focus on her business activities while a student in Seattle, a subject not covered in any of her biographies. My source was the trove of letters she wrote to her mother from 1918 to 1920. Since then, there has been a spate of interest in the life and accomplishments of Maria. In November of 2018, her hometown of Taal, Batangas celebrated her 125th birth anniversary with a dinner and program, attended by VIP guests such as the town Mayor, representative of the provincial Governor, tourism officials, food writers and dozens of Orosas. In April 2019, there was a cooking contest using Maria's recipes, judged by Orosa descendants. A bust of Maria is being sculpted, to be unveiled in time for her birth date in Nov. of 2019. An editor of the online magazine Atlas Obscura contacted this writer, expressing interest in featuring an article about Maria in their magazine. There was also the question of whether Maria stowed away on a freighter as advanced by some writers, or whether she went to the U.S. legally. That issue is addressed at the end of the essay. Maria may be gone, but certainly not forgotten.*

My father and his 7 siblings were all overachievers. They reached maturity in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, when going to college was rare, especially in the Philippines. All 8 earned college degrees, with 3 receiving their college education in the United States. It was done by dint of hard work and talent. Their father had passed away in 1910, leaving a 47-year old widow, Juliana. Their youngest son was only 6 years old. Juliana, better known as *Lola* (grandma) *Kanang*, made her living operating one of those small stores ubiquitous in the Philippines. She certainly didn't have the financial resources for college. Of the 8, Maria was the fourth, born in 1893. She received recognition earlier than any of her siblings who were to achieve their own degrees of prominence after WW II. She was a pioneer, scientist, inventor and administrator who spent her career with the government. She is the only one of the 8 with several biographies; among them one written by my first cousin, Helen Orosa del Rosario^a, and another by Helen's physician father Dr. Sixto Y. Orosa Sr., who was 2 years older than Maria. Two of Helen's sisters, Rosalinda L. Orosa^b and Leonor Orosa Goquingco, wrote extensively about Maria. There is a Maria Y. Orosa street in Manila named after her. Her memory is kept alive with articles in Manila newspapers on the occasion of her birthday and death anniversary. But there are some events, such as her time in Seattle, that are barely mentioned in any of her biographies or other essays. This is written to fill that void, using letters Maria wrote to her mother between 1918 and 1920.

While a student at the University of Washington in Seattle, Maria wrote regularly to her mother Juliana. The letters were put away and I hadn't known about them until 2002. Juliana lived with her youngest son Rafael in the house she owned for more than half a century. She probably kept her old letters and personal mementos in a chest we call "*baul*." I've always wanted one of those elaborately carved wooden chests. Some of them have aromatic wood lining and the outside of them have either intricate carvings or are inlaid with mother of pearl. Juliana passed away in 1958 and it did not appear that Rafael did much with her papers. After Rafael himself passed away in 1988, his son, Apolinario, gained possession of Juliana's papers, among which were the letters of Maria. Apolinario showed me the letters and I took digital pictures of them. There were letters from Maria's younger brother Jose who also went to the University of Washington. Jose and Maria's time in Seattle overlapped starting in 1919. There was a single letter from my grandfather, Simplicio, to my father while my father was studying in Cincinnati, OH in 1907. By the time I saw

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

Maria's letters, they were already more than 8 decades old. With the Philippine heat and humidity, the letters were not in good condition. The ink had run in some places, making them difficult to read. Thank goodness the termites didn't get to the letters. The first letter was dated April 4, 1918. It talked about selling merchandise sent by her mother. Daughter, mother and another relative Maria called Tia Emiliang (Aunt Emilia), apparently had an export business that started small and later expanded and thrived. Maria did the marketing, selling, accounting and remitting. With the letter, Maria enclosed a money order for \$56. Later, we will see that the business generated hundreds of dollars which would have been a boon for Juliana who still had 2 teenage boys at home who were dependent on her store or "*tindahan*" as referred to by Maria. These small family owned stores are now called "*sari-sari*" meaning miscellaneous. The merchandise that sold for \$56 by Maria consisted of baby bibs and a "*terno*" which is a formal dress. The terno sold for \$50 which was about two weeks wages for a working American at that time. The \$6 was for half a dozen baby bibs. There was an unsold terno. Maria suggested that her mother stop sending ternos and dresses since they were difficult to sell. She mentioned World War I, observing that the American people were being very frugal and not spending because of the war. But the bibs were a big seller and Maria even suggested sending hundreds. In one instance, merchandise worth \$72 netted \$37.50, a profit of 52%! It was not mentioned if the cost had included shipping. It is a long way from their hometown of Bauan, Batangas, 100 kilometers south of Manila, to Seattle, WA! With various stops in China, Japan and Hawaii, voyages to the U.S. west coast took a month.

Maria acknowledged receipt of new merchandise consisting of straw bags, oil (I assume it is coconut oil), abaca and hats. Abaca or Philippine hemp was a prized item for cordage until the invention of polymers such as nylon decades later. It was used for large ropes and every ship large and small was moored using abaca. For the next shipment, Maria ordered jute bags, coffee and women's slips. They certainly handled an eclectic mix of merchandise! Maria, in between her studies, must have been scouting among her friends, acquaintances and the Washington landscape for opportunities to market Philippine products.

World War I had been raging for almost 4 years. It would go on for another 6 bloody months. Maria in her letter implored her mother not to let her 2 older brothers, Sixto and my father Vicente, join the Philippine National Guard. The Philippines, being under American administration and with the U.S. having entered the war, there were plans to mobilize a Philippine National Guard unit to support the American forces in Europe. Maria repeated the word "*huwag*" several times. "*Huwag*" means don't so her words could be translated as "don't, don't, don't, don't join the National Guard." Perhaps news of the carnage in battlefields such as Verdun and Somme had reached Seattle. Maria enjoined her mother to write back to Dean Coldwell, the Dean of Women at Seattle, and her landlady Mrs. Nelson. Apparently, both had written Juliana but hadn't received a reply. That would have been interesting since I don't think my grandmother ever learned to read or write English. But one of the sons still at home was 16 years old Nicolas, who would go on to become a corporate lawyer, so he could have helped. Maria then closed off with saying she had to run to class.

Maria wrote again in the fall, telling her mother about her summer job. She stayed 3 months in Chomly, Alaska along with a friend she called Charing. (Charing would be Rosario M. Cordero,

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

also from Batangas, who left the Philippines with Maria and was her roommate.) Maria didn't describe the job but Chomly, located at the southeastern tip of the Alaskan panhandle, was then the center of the salmon industry. The factories employed a lot of seasonal labor with a significant number of Filipinos. Chomly is across the strait from Ketchikan which is now a port of call for cruise ships. The work must have agreed with Maria, because she told her mother that she gained 5 pounds. That may not seem like much, but Maria was under 5 feet tall.

Maria and Charing were planning to move out of Mrs. Nelson's boardinghouse to get an apartment of their own. Charing was getting an after-school job which ended at 8:00 pm. Maria was offered a job by Dean Charles Johnson of the College of Pharmacy, to work at the Food Laboratory. They didn't want to make a lot of comings and goings while living at the boardinghouse but Mrs. Nelson said they could return at any time. Not only was Maria going to school and working, but she also had to take time to sell her mother's merchandise. While they were in Alaska, the landlady received the latest shipment consisting of embroidery and hats. One of the industries of Batangas, to this day, is embroidery ranging from napkins, handkerchiefs, placemats and tablecloths, along with material for barong or men's formal shirts. She placed her next orders for small handkerchiefs, night gowns, slippers and baby items, once again saying don't send dresses.

Hardly 2 weeks passed before Maria wrote the next letter. She had accepted the offer from Dean Johnson to become his assistant. She hinted of prevailing racism, saying that in getting jobs whites would be considered first ahead of Japanese, Chinese or Filipinos. So, it was an honor that she was offered the job ahead of the whites. She referred to herself and fellow Asians as "de color." She not only broke the "color" barrier but the gender barrier as well! Besides being Dean, Dr. Johnson (he had a Ph.D. in chemistry), was also the State Inspector for food. Maria conducted tests on milk, eggs, sugar, vinegar and extracts of lemon, vanilla and ginger or other foodstuffs local inspectors brought in. She reported the test results to Dr. Johnson. She said there was a lot of adulteration going on. Her test for milk was to determine if they had the right amount of butterfat and would reject anything substandard. Woe to the farmers or grocers who messed with Maria! Making her even happier was the fact that she was provided a white assistant, a former classmate. Maria didn't have to wash her instruments and glassware or prepare reagents. Dr. Johnson also gave her college credits as well, something akin to the co-op programs today. She placed another order for 150 "baby yokes" and reiterated that her mother should bundle the merchandise such that the stated value would not exceed \$100. The last shipment had been held up and she had to pay extra duties because it exceeded this threshold. My grandmother filled the customs declaration honestly. It would have been easy to declare that everything was under \$100. But honesty is in the Orosa DNA. Maria, the nutritionist, encouraged her mother to eat well, consume fresh eggs and meat also to get adequate rest and sleep. In a separate letter to someone she addressed as Tia or aunt, who had apparently been ill, her prescription was 6 raw eggs a day, 2 with every meal. Remember this was 1918. Raw eggs? Shades of Rocky Balboa.

Maria's last letter in 1918 was in December to wish her mother and family a "*Magandang*" (beautiful) Christmas. (Today we use "*Maligayang*" which means happy.) She spoke of loneliness being so far from home. She described the American tradition of Christmas trees, decorations and lights. She would be shocked today to see how far we've carried this tradition both in the U.S.

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

and the Philippines. But she was not forgotten and was visited by Dean Ethel Coldwell, the Dean of Women. She brought gifts of fresh fruit, home-made plum pudding and preserves. Their former landlady Mrs. Nelson gave presents of warm socks.

Enclosed with the letter was a money order for \$240 from the sale of embroidery. There was more money coming but she still hadn't settled everything with Frederick & Nelson^c. F & N was the pre-eminent Seattle department store of its day. This is the first time Maria mentions F & N so it turns out that Maria was selling some items wholesale to F & N. As in every letter, holiday season or not, there was talk of business. Maria was still waiting for the 150 baby yokes she ordered in October. It must have been a slow boat. She now ordered 500 nightgowns. She also had a buyer for the baby yokes. They would net 25 cents after selling for 75 cents.

Maria had heard that there was influenza and cholera going around the Philippines. She proceeded, in almost every letter, to provide advice to her mother. Boil everything. Don't eat food where flies had been sitting. Don't eat using your bare hands; wash your hands thoroughly. (Filipinos love to eat meals using their hands only, sans utensils.) This woman was ahead of her time! Maria said not to worry about her, that the influenza epidemic wasn't widespread in Seattle. Unfortunately, as we shall see in her next letter, the flu bug didn't spare her.

Maria's first letter of 1919 was the first that was typewritten. She reported that she had been sick with influenza but had recovered. 1918 was the starting year of the great influenza or Spanish flu epidemic. It didn't end till 1920, killing millions worldwide. Maria was bedridden for 3 weeks but told of others who were incapacitated for longer periods. Her care was provided for by the university with a doctor and nurse attending to her. She spoke glowingly of the attention given her by the nurse. She didn't pay for any of the care except for the doctor who charged \$2.50 per visit. Hmm, the state of Washington already had universal care in 1919 and we're still debating it in 2019? There was also good news for enclosed with her letter was another money order, the largest so far - \$850. She had made \$900 but subtracted \$50 to take care of some expenses including paying the doctor. This amount was from the sale of the embroidered goods. There were still some unsold so there would be more money forthcoming. But among a shipment of 500 gowns, 70 had stains from apparent water damage so she was going to make a claim for insurance. Then she would sell the gowns for a lower price. She was selling the larger quantities to what she called a "casa" or Spanish for house, most probably another retailer. She ordered more merchandise, again baby yokes and small handkerchiefs. These were cash cows with a sure profit of 25 cents each. Maria had some unsold hats (she used the Spanish term sombreros) but a buyer ordered a dozen at \$3.50 each so she asked to send more, to be received before summer when they would sell better. Ending the letter, Maria complained about her younger sister Felisa whom she had written and sent dress shoes to but hadn't written back. Maria was always asking about Felisa, what she was doing and if she was going for dentistry. (Felisa went on to become a pharmacist and marry a physician.) Maria's next letter was in the spring and very little was said about business. Most of the letter was devoted to talking about her younger brother Jose (born in 1900). Maria was trying to discourage Jose from coming to the United States before finishing high school. She wasn't particularly happy about the status of Filipinos in Seattle. According to Maria there were about 1,000 Filipinos in Seattle but very few of them were going to

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

the University. Most got jobs and spent their hard-earned wages on the pursuit of what Maria called “good time” of wine, women and gambling. Maria didn’t want her younger brother exposed to this atmosphere, even suggested that if Jose came, he would be better off where there were few Filipinos, in towns such as Chicago and New York. But when all was said and done, she offered to help and protect him. She even volunteered to stay longer to provide support to Jose.

By the time of her next letter in the late summer, Jose was already in Seattle. Apparently, Maria’s advice about waiting was for naught. However, now that Jose had arrived, Maria was full of praise. Jose was hard working and frugal. Maria opened an account for him to save the money he earned. Maria enclosed \$100 from embroidery sales and she said she was going to deposit another \$380. Maria was getting a month off in August and the three of them were going to a farm to pick fruit. She didn’t name the third person, but it was probably her roommate Charing. She said the wages were good. There were Orosa fruit pickers in America a long time ago. Maria’s first letter of 1920 was written on stationery from the State of Washington Department of Agriculture. Dr. Johnson was the Ph.D. Chemist and Maria the Assistant Chemist. She talked about her younger brother Jose completing high school and taking the entrance exams to the university. Just like a big sister, she was trying to discourage Jose from working full time so he could concentrate on his studies. As in every letter, there was a report on their business. Maria was working with an importer who wanted 500 tons of copra every month. That is serious, a lot of coconuts.

A month later she spoke of the plight of Filipinos in Washington. (After WW I ended, there was a recession in the U.S.) There was a layoff and a family friend by the name of Marasigan was among those affected. The prevailing wage among Filipino workers was \$4.16 per day which works out to \$85 a month. This was enough to sustain them comfortably. Maria mentioned Mr. Marasigan going shopping for a complete wardrobe and personal items not knowing he was going to get laid off. The last letter that I have was written on July 21, 1920. She talked about the progress she had made at the University and the Food Laboratory, despite being “de color.” Her nameplate was on the door of the laboratory. She was the envy of other Filipinos. Dr. Johnson encouraged her to pursue a Masters degree starting in September, which would take a year. Dr. Johnson even offered to lend her money if she needed it, but she declined. Maria did go on and obtain her Masters’ degree, finishing in June of 1921. In all there were several letters each year from 1918-1920. Although these were all Apolinario found, I’m pretty sure there were more since Maria left the Philippines in 1916. She renewed her passport in November of 1921 for the purpose of returning to the Philippines. We could be missing letters from 1916, 1917 and 1921. Incidentally, when renewing her passport, she was required to sign a document attesting her allegiance to the United States.

Let’s hope that more letters materialize. I would love to learn what happened to the export business. Would Jose have been able to continue the business? After all, he later went to earn an MBA from Columbia in New York. But the letters you’ve just read about here is all I have seen.

After leaving for the Philippines in 1922, Maria returned to the United States in the spring of 1929, crisscrossing the country visiting food plants and staying for six months. Including stops in China, Japan, Hawaii before arriving in San Francisco, then returning via Europe, Maria was gone for

Maria Y. Orosa, Entrepreneur

nearly a year. Her trip was mentioned by prestigious newspapers like the New York Times, Washington Post and South China Morning Post. She wrote a card to my parents, Vicente and Rosario, but this time it was in English. After more than a generation under American administration, English was becoming the lingua franca, which it is today.

Maria's letters are indicative of an era gone by. There are numerous references to "*sa awa ng Diyos*" or through God's mercy. The letters begin not just with "Dear Mother" but "Beloved and Dearest Mother" and ends with "respectful and loving daughter awaiting your blessing at all hours." The letters of Jose emit a similar respectful tone.

Postscript:

Stowaway or not? In his book *Through Three Generations*, Maria's brother Dr. Sixto Y. Orosa indicated that Maria left the Philippines with two companions, Rosario Cordero and Jose Sangalang. However, other writers, including Sixto's daughter Rosalinda, wrote that Maria stowed away. Atlas Obscura wanted to know which version is correct.

Thanks to ancestry.com^d, we can definitively say that Maria did NOT stowaway. I found the manifest of a Japanese ship, the *Shidzuoka Maru*, which contained the names of Maria and Rosario Cordero. Per Washington state arrival records, they arrived on Aug. 18, 1916. Unfortunately, I could find no record of Jose Sangalang associated with Maria and Rosario.

Written in Tagalog, all of Maria's letters have been translated and available at Orosa.org.

Footnotes:

a - Helen Orosa del Rosario, born while Maria was still in Seattle, passed away 2 years ago at the age of 97. The book is titled *The Recipes of Maria Y. Orosa With Essays on Her Life and Work*.

b - Rosalinda L, Orosa continued writing past her 90th birthday. She has since retired.

c - I am indebted to my friends Lon and Dedie Taylor of Ft. Davis, TX for telling me about Frederick & Nelson. I originally assumed from Maria's letters that Frederick Nelson was a person and perhaps related to her landlady Mrs. Nelson.

d – ancestry.com is a subscription website for genealogists and historians. The site has digitized millions of documents, including school records, census, military records, ship manifests, etc. They also offer DNA testing.

Mario E. Orosa

12/9/2011

Updated 7/9/2019