

Good Deeds

Most of the time, the news coming out of the Philippines is uniformly bad. We might as well say “good news is no news.” Publicity has revolved around the two preceding presidents, charged with “plunder” which seems like a catch all term but basically means “how do you explain your wealth given your measly salary.” The first president was found guilty and served time under house arrest but was pardoned by his successor, who is now being charged herself. But politics aside, Filipinos either individually or collectively have committed acts of generosity and courage throughout our history. In two examples I’m going to relate, any chance of reward or recognition at the time they occurred would have been limited at best. But the main characters did what was right, something any Filipino should be proud of.

Open Doors:

In 2009, the Israeli government erected a monument called “Open Doors” honoring the Philippines and Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon at the 65-hectare Holocaust Memorial Park in Rishon Le Zion south of Tel Aviv. This was 7 decades after the action of a few resulted in saving the lives of 1,300 European Jews. This number would have been much higher but the invasion of Poland and subsequent spread of the war intervened. The Philippines had committed to accept at least 10,000 Jews with Quezon even providing some of his family’s estate to accommodate the Jews’ housing needs. The number of Jews that made it to Manila exceeds those rescued by the more famous Oskar Schindler.

We first became aware of this little known rescue a few years ago. Val and I went to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to see an exhibit on the role that the Philippines played in providing refuge to European Jews prior to the start of World War II. Today, as during the 1930’s there is only a tiny Jewish community in the Philippines. The Frieder family had a cigar business on the east coast. They later bought a distributorship in Cincinnati, OH. Looking to expand, Samuel and his older 2 sons, Philip and Alex, went to the Philippines to import and later manufacture cigars. Two younger brothers, Herbert and Morris joined the family enterprise. Success in the Philippine cigar business would not have been an easy task. There were 2 major cigar companies that dated back to the Spanish era – Tabacalera and Alhambra. I know about these 2 companies since I used to stock up on cigars during my regular visits to Manila.

But the Frieders achieved success in the cigar business and became socially prominent. They hobnobbed with top government officials, including President Quezon and United States High Commissioner Paul McNutt. Quezon was also close to General of the Army Douglas MacArthur and was godfather to Douglas’ son Arthur. Their circle included an obscure Colonel named Dwight Eisenhower who was the Chief Aide to MacArthur. The Frieders were leaders of the Jewish community and became aware of the dangers facing the Jews after the rise of Nazism. The subject of accepting Jewish refugees was broached to McNutt and Quezon. This group would have been an unlikely combination – McNutt was a Protestant, Quezon a Catholic and the Frieders Jewish. The Philippines of course was an Asian country, a self governing Commonwealth under the United States.

The Frieders guaranteed financial backing and some employment. McNutt would facilitate the visas and Quezon provided the political backing (not all Filipinos were enthusiastic about the plan). The first European refugees arrived in 1939. But even before that, the Philippines had already accepted refugees who came by way of Shanghai, arriving there in 1934 after the Nazis came to power.

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The Jewish refugees did not have an easy time during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines which started in December of 1941. But unlike American nationals, they were not interned. They survived the occupation and the horrific Battle of Manila in Feb. 1945. But the Frieder cigar business was destroyed.

When the issue of a Jewish homeland was brought before the United Nations in 1947, the Philippines was the only Asian nation to vote for the UN Plan for the Partition of Palestine. The Philippines cast the deciding vote which required a two thirds majority. This led the way for the establishment of a Jewish state in May of 1948. With this event, the refugees left what had been their home for 9 years and resettled in Israel.

A documentary called "Rescue in the Philippines" is in the final stages of production and will be released early in 2013. Watch for it!

Operation Brotherhood

After their 1954 defeat in the epic battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French withdrew from Indochina. Vietnam was partitioned into North and South. The partition was meant to be temporary but the leaders of both north and south never went ahead with an election to unify Vietnam. The country suffered as refugees streamed across the divided frontier. Some of the early humanitarian work in Vietnam was organized by US Navy doctor Thomas A. Dooley III. After leaving the Navy, Dooley shifted his humanitarian effort to Laos. With perhaps hundreds of thousands of mostly Catholic refugees in South Vietnam, there was an urgent need for medical help.

The Philippine Jaycees in Manila sprung into action. A volunteer organization called Operation Brotherhood was formed for the purpose of sending a medical team to Vietnam. Many Filipinos consider the 1950's as the country's halcyon days. Per capita GDP was second only to Japan. With a population similar to Vietnam, the Philippines had a much greater number of doctors and nurses. The initial team that left for Vietnam at the end of 1954 numbered only 10. But by the end of 1956, medical personnel totaled 152, which included 9 surgeons, 19 physicians, 61 nurses and 8 dentists. In their most active 3 year period, the team was credited with 730,000 treatments in Vietnam. Aside from Médecins Sans Frontières or the U.S. Navy sponsored Pacific Partnership, I know of no other humanitarian effort that equals Operation Brotherhood.

A complete account of this humanitarian mission was provided by Miguel Anselmo Bernad in his book "Adventure in Viet-Nam: the story of Operation Brotherhood, 1954-1957."

Ngo Dinh Diem, the then President of South Vietnam, was moved to say ""the people of the Philippines have brought us the breath of courage and a share of that inner strength which only a free people know."

I don't know how many present day Filipinos know about Operation Brotherhood or the help President Quezon provided to the Jews during one of their darkest hours. With our collective amnesia, perhaps only a handful know. But we should remember.

"The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones." – From Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.