

Vignettes – Mario’s Early Years`

Having been born in 1939, I have been frequently asked if I have any memories of World War II and the occupation of the Philippines by Japanese forces. I can honestly say I don't. But a well-meaning and persistent friend keeps reminding me to dig into my brain. Then during the last year or so, there has been a spate of interest in the life of Maria Y. Orosa (whom we called Tia Mary). She was killed during the Liberation of Manila during the month of February 1945. Writing about her life and having many Zoom conversations and memorial programs with relatives old enough to remember her, has triggered some more memories. So here is a collection of vignettes, with sources identified. Some stories I have known for years, but never put in writing.

From Rosario (aka Charito, who passed away from Covid in May of 2021 at the age of 86) – we were coached by our mother, also named Rosario, to bow properly in front of Japanese sentries. Our house was on then Aviles St. (now Jose P. Laurel*). We were less than a kilometer from Mendiola, which had 5 schools. There was La Consolacion College, Mapa High School, Centro Escolar University, San Beda College (my school, now a university) and Holy Ghost College (now Holy Spirit) which my sister attended. We typically went to Mass at San Beda, with my sister going to school at Holy Ghost during the occupation. We had to pass by two sentries, armed with an Arisaka rifle, bayonets fixed. One had to bow deeply to the sentry or suffer some consequence such a slap or worse. They were the lowest of rank and loved to lord it over Filipinos. We must have bowed nicely because nothing untoward ever happened to any in our household.

I do remember a visit to our house by a Japanese officer. You could tell the officers by their leather boots and swords. I do not recall the visit as confrontational. It was quite polite. The children were called, and we did our best bow. I've never found out what the visit was about.

From my mother Rosario (1897-1993) – she said I was always complaining about being hungry. After a year of occupation, food was getting scarce since the Japanese confiscated most food to feed their Imperial Army occupying Southeast Asia. That left little incentive for farmers. Urban gardens sprouted, including in our small backyard. The vegetable of choice was talinum, which is similar to spinach, very nutritious and easy to grow. There was an *estero* or estuary (they were still unpolluted during that period) a couple of houses from us. The estero connected to the Pasig River half a kilometer away. Our houseboy would frequently try to fish the estero, occasionally getting a *hito* or catfish. For other food items you had to barter.

My eldest brother Augusto (aka Toto) was born in 1919, making him prime age for the Philippine Armed Forces. He wanted to be a pilot but was rejected because he had a heart murmur. He lived to 83 years, was very seldom sick, so the murmur apparently didn't affect his general health. Towards the close of the war, as the American forces advanced to Manila, our family evacuated to my father's hometown of Bauan, Batangas. That's where dad grew up, and where his mother Juliana or Lola Kanang, then in her late 70s, still lived with her youngest son Rafael and his family. The house was never left without a household member present, to ward off looters. They were looking for food or anything that could be bartered. Cash was useless. The Japanese occupiers issued notes that were referred to as Mickey Mouse money and weren't worth the paper they were printed on. Toto and our house boy named Barlito were the sentinels.

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Toto had a .38 caliber revolver which he did not turn over to the Japanese. If he had been caught, that would have been the end of Toto, after the obligatory torture to extract the identify of his guerilla unit. He never slept without the revolver nearby. Years later, when no one was around, I showed the pistol to my friends. We were lucky no one was accidentally shot.

From Charito – as the Chief Engineer for Manila, my dad was allocated a car. Of course getting gasoline was another matter. A Japanese officer wanted to take the car. My dad refused to give him the keys. Enraged, the officer pulled his pistol and pointed at my dad. Our mother pleaded with both the officer and my dad, who finally handed him the keys. Miraculously, the car was returned a few days later, undamaged.

From Toto (he passed away in 2003) – our uncle Jose aka Tio Pepe, lived around the corner from us, on Buencamino St. Tio Pepe had a short-wave radio, which he did not surrender to the Japanese. That would have been a capital offense too. Toto would regularly visit Tio Pepe so they could listen to broadcasts from Australia. That’s how the family found out about MacArthur’s landing in Leyte during Oct. of 1944, and their subsequent advance north.

From Toto – during the Battle of Manila, our mother was often hysterical. Our neighborhood was spared any fighting except for some snipers who were rapidly dispatched. Half a kilometer away, the Malacañang Palace, home of Spanish and later American Governor Generals and Philippine Presidents, was likewise spared. But one could see the smoke from the burning buildings to the west and southwest. American artillery was incessant (by this time there was no Japanese artillery). Our mother thought the fighting and destruction would come to us, but it never did. It was all over by the first week of March 1945.

From Toto and our cousin Apolinario Orosa (known as Naring, he passed away in August of 2021 at the age of 95) – one of the tragic casualties of the Liberation was Remedios Hospital, a former Catholic school which was converted by volunteers to serve as a hospital. Tia Mary was wounded in the government building where she worked, then brought to Remedios for treatment. Despite the Red Cross painted on the roof, the building was leveled by American artillery. At least 400 patients and volunteers died, including Tia Mary. Toto and Naring were tasked to see if the remains of Tia Mary could be found. They were unsuccessful. To this day, the remains of Tia Mary have not been located. There is an ongoing project with other families to excavate some mass graves and identify the remains.

From Naring – the occupation tested the ingenuity of the Filipinos. Without gasoline, Batangueños engineered makeshift engines that operated from charcoal. I’m not quite sure how this works, I haven’t checked YouTube. But today, charcoal engines are supposedly making a comeback in North Korea. Naring’s father turned the Orosa house in Bauan into a hotel to accommodate traders. Downstairs was a restaurant. The house is less than a block from the beaches of Batangas Bay. Traders from nearby islands such as Mindoro, Romblon & Masbate would bring their goods to Bauan to barter. Remember cash (Mickey Mouse Japanese money) was thrash. Naring’s dad Rafael did the bartering. They were also a conduit for guerilla information, with the traders as couriers. Amazingly, the Japanese never caught on, with all the traders coming and going between the smaller islands and Luzon.

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From Evaristo S. Orosa, aka Tito Evar, a cousin of my father. Tito Evar celebrated his 100th birthday in Oct. of 2021. He was attending De La Salle College, where he was taking the required ROTC training. After the invasion, his ROTC unit was going to be mobilized. Before they could get fully armed and deployed, the Japanese had already surrounded the Philippine & American forces (known as USAFFE) in the Bataan peninsula. So, ROTC units were disbanded, instead forming guerilla units. Known as ROTC Hunters, these guerillas fought gallantly during the occupation. While at De La Salle and during his ROTC years, Tia Mary kept in touch with Tito Evar, always looking after his welfare. But as the occupation dragged on, they lost contact. In the meantime, as the war turned against Japan’s favor, their brutality increased. Massacres were committed in Batangas. Tito Evar led his family from Batangas to the adjoining province of Cavite, traveling by night to avoid detection. Everyone survived.

Mario - After the liberation of Manila, the war wasn’t over yet. Gen. Yamashita retreated north to the mountains of Central Luzon, from where he kept a resistance before surrendering after the atom bombs fell on Hiroshima & Nagasaki. Despite the death and destruction during the 30 day Battle of Manila, Manileños were joyful. As the liberating American troops and Filipino guerillas marched in the streets on their way north, every Aviles St. family was out, waving and giving whatever drinks they could to the troops. Hoarded liquors appeared from wherever my dad had hidden them and were offered. Some of the troops accepted.

Mario – after the war, my dad was accused by some as a “collaborator.” He had never left his position as Chief Engineer. His office was responsible for maintaining the streets, bridges, rails, etc. This poses an existential question. If you were the Police Chief, Fire Chief, Power Plant Manager, City Water Manager, or garbage collector who stayed at their jobs while your city was under occupation, would that make you a collaborator? Would you shut down the city, shut off the power and water, and let the fires burn? At any rate, the accusations were dismissed. The new president, Manuel Roxas, a former guerilla general, promoted my dad to the first of his cabinet positions, Under Secretary of Public Works and Communications.

As soon as San Beda College opened in 1945, I started 1st grade, all the way to high school, under the tutelage of the Benedictine Monks, or Order of St. Benedict (OSB).

Mario E. Orosa
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