PEACE OF MEMORIES

By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon

Jessie Lichauco, (97) is a lady of Irish-Scottish-Cuban-English descent. She has lived in the Philippines for 75 years. She and her husband were residents of Manila, during the Japanese occupation of WWII. Her vivid memories of this time, from the dropping of the first bombs to liberation, offer images of life during those difficult years and insights into the meaning of true courage, compassion, love, resourcefulness, friendship, generosity and honor, and the faith of the people through these cruel years.

I arrived in the Philippines from America in 1933, at age 18, and had been living in Manila for 4 years when the war descended upon us. At the time, I was visiting Tagaytay with my friend, Ruby Roxas. We knew something was wrong when we saw solders coming into the Taal Vista Lodge.

HONOR

The Roxas family evacuated to Bulacan soon after the bombing started, leaving Manuel Roxas, Ruby's father, alone in his home so we joined him there. One night I was sitting on the floor, listening to the news describe the horrors of what was happening and I felt a hand on my head. I turned around to find Roxas, the man who would become president of the independent Republic of the Philippines after the war. To this day, I get goosebumps when I remember the expression on his face. I have never seen a face with such misery and sadness. I was seeing this man, who had been so devoted to his country visualizing what was going to happen and already suffering so much.

Soon after came the day when Roxas, a reserve officer in the military was to join the American forces in Corregidor. He had put on his uniform and was ready to go, but first, he sat at his round table downstairs as loyal friends came to say goodbye to him. I had just put on his cap and pinned emblems into his lapel when he asked my husband Marcy to get him a sandwich and asked me to look for something he had forgotten upstairs. When we came back, he had gone. He left only a message saying "Tell Marcy I will see him again but I did not want to say goodbye."

FEAR

I remember the first time I felt really scared. The Japanese were coming into the city and they were stopping at various houses. At the time we were sharing a big house with several other people. I was pregnant with my first child and was home with several children. A group of soldiers knocked at the door. Knowing that I had to be anything but American, I spoke to them in Spanish and Tagalog. Our house had a tower on it, and they wanted to take the house to use this tower to see and put guns. I told them there was no one home but old people and children, but that next door was the YMCA, which was full of men and also had a tower. They went over and took that house instead. Lucky for us, in those days, they were just looking for houses- they had not started killing people yet, because they were trying to ingratiate themselves with the Filipino people. When they left years later, I was so overcome by the fear of facing them that I almost passed out!

LOVE

War can lead a mother to do the most extraordinary things. We had to move nine times during the war. One day we went to see a Scottish lady about a house that she was leaving. Her husband had been taken to the Sto. Tomas Camp and she and her two little children, a girl, Jillian, and a boy named Graham, were soon to be interned as well. I had never met this woman in my life but after 5 minutes of conversation, she looked at me with the eyes that a mother has when she is about to make a great sacrifice. She said, "Mrs Lichauco, would it be too much to ask of you to keep my little girl with you ? I don't want to take her to the camp. She will be better off with you."

My child Nelly was an infant at the time and Jillian and her yaya were left in my care, and later my sister-in-law's care, until the end of the war. In those days, the Japanese had a list on each household's door of how many people lived there and who they were. Luckily, Jillian could not speak yet, so when I told them I had picked up an orphaned child to keep my daughter company, there was no reason to question it.

SURVIVAL

There is nothing like living through a war to teach you the value of every single thing you have. Food supplies became so scarce that we had to become very creative about where we got our protein, and nothing we had ever went to waste. Eggshells would be washed before cracking eggs open and after cooking the egg itself we would then crush the shells, put them with calamansi and lemon and let them

Bags of rubble are the beginnings of the new structures. Less than 12 hours after the residents had fled in panic and chaos, these men, and many others, started to rebuild. Theirs is the precarious life of the landless, jobless Filipino poor.

forcibly, and it spewed its unlit gas into the confines of the home, and combined with the flickering candle, burst into an inferno.

Reynes and Abigail ran. They did not try to turn off the propane. They fled out the labyrinth and left their neighbors to rouse and shout and panic in their aftermath. One family woke another and the rush to get to the street began. In the dark and heat and smoke, the one-person pathways became crushing tunnels of half-naked and praying people.

One girl, 23, remembers only screaming "Let me through, let me through," over and over. The cry, "God help us, God save us" echoed everywhere. "Where's my son, where's my family," a father screamed.

Smoke, darkness and panic are the components of mass catastrophe, but if this community has anything going for it, it is the maze of passageways. One path leads to another and each and every path has a way out. Like the leaching from an old bucket, people squeezed from every crack in the walls, pouring out into the safety of the street and light of the sodium vapor lamps on Agham Road. No one died that we know of, though one dead man was incinerated.

The rebuilding of Agham Road settlement was underway less than 12 hours after its destruction. Those who were not too stunned to move were stripping and cleaning, or out scavenging for the material and the funds to begin again. Sacks of rubble were being hauled out and cocoa lumber was being carried in.

John Dexter's family was burned out. He is our feature model in this issue of Jeepney: photos taken weeks earlier. The morning of the fire, we caught him digging through the soot. His hands and feet were blackened and a towel was wrapped about his head.

We met his mother, Carlina Ruego. We met his 17-year-old sister, Chu Yen Joy Pegar. Theirs is a moving story, it changes and convulses with each breath of wind and each bit of moisture.

It started well to some extent. Their church was there for them. Kids International Ministries sent a team of workers from California and then Seoul. This was something unexpected. But a week passed and Chu Yen Joy's malnourished body was showing the effects of inadequate shelter. Their mother, Carlina, was injured by a hit and run driver on Quezon avenue. She has been hospitalized with a broken hip. Their future is far from certain.

The survivors of the slums are a people of overwhelming resource and overwhelming obstacles. They are struggling to prepare for the typhoons and monsoons rains. They know some will die from the elements and the lack of sanitation. Unlike the absurd people of the game and fight shows, this population is trapped in the "Octogan." They have been forced into its arena to live or die.

The rebuilding of Agham Road settlement will continue next month. Featuring the Pegar family, we will explore, as it happens, their struggle to rebuild and begin again. This family is faced with what seems to be insurmountable struggles: poor health, limited resources, limited education, widowhood and the ever-present risk of just giving up. At the hospital, Carlina's hand slipped one time to her forehead beaded with sweat. She wiped away the moisture that had gathered there and whispered.

"Why is this happening to us?"

Editors Note: There is nothing wrong with helping make this a success story. If you want to help provide for the Pegar's, contact Jeepney and all the funds will go directly to meet their needs . Our social worker is involved with them on a daily basis.

In one area of her 200-year old house, portraits of Jesse Lichauco's ancestors hang on the wall. She lives in the only colonial home left on the Pasig River. History radiates from every corner. She takes pride in her book collection, one the family has had for fifty years. Her family is a family of readers.

soak. We presumed that drinking this would give us calcium and vitamin C!

Protecting the little food one had was of such importance. I remember a time my nephew was on his way home carrying a basketful of eggs on his bicycle, and an accident left the eggs broken and leaking onto the street. A quick thinker Tony knocked on the door of the first house he saw and asked, "Can I borrow your stove? I have some broken eggs here I need to cook." The scrambled eggs were then shared with this family and he took the rest home.

COMPASSION

One very stormy night, with a Japanese sentry at our gate, the weather was so bad that we made some ginger tea. I asked the household staff, "who would go and give this man a cup of tea?". Of all the people there, it was my Chinese ammah, "Aseh" , whose family in Hong Kong and China had suffered greatly under the Japanese, who volunteered. The man took the tea and without any hesitation or suspicion, drank it with gratitude. I thought, "Wow, I could have poisoned him. I did this because I just thought maybe somewhere along the road, a Japanese would return the kindness to one of our people.

HEROISM

We were on Roxas Boulevard when the American and Filipino soldiers who had surrendered and were now prisoners of war, came back to Manila from Corregidor. It was the most haunting thing I have ever seen. Hundreds marched on the street in their army shoes but they made no sound as they walked. It was like death marching. Maybe they were ghosts.

HUMANITY

Next to Warsaw, Manila was the most destroyed city during the War. Thousands fled Ermita, Malate, and Paco to escape the massacres and destruction with occurred during Liberation. The only way out was via Herran, since renamed Pedro Gil, in Santa Ana. The bridge had been blown up however, so there was nowhere to go from there. Injured and sick people were crawling, carrying each other, walking, being pushed. It was chaos and desperation. One woman had her father on a sheet of galvanized iron, and she had put a strap around her waist and was towing this makeshift stretcher.

At the time, my husband and I were living in an old house on Herran. With the help of a few volunteer nurses, we set up a makeshift clinic. Hundreds came through and we even delivered babies.

People came to us with practically nothing, and a desperation in their eyes that I can never forget. I never stopped - sometimes I would work in my camiseta, giving away the clothes on my back . There were so many.

LESSONS

I watched so many people perish. I was very fortunate to live through the war. When you live through an impossible experience, you learn what is important and what is not, and you learn to survive.