

JOSE Y. OROSA

My father Vicente had four younger brothers – Sixto, Jose, Rafael and Nicolas. Sixto was the most cerebral, a physician, author and intellectual. And a renaissance man to boot, he was an excellent ballroom dancer even though I would consider him vertically challenged, perhaps five foot three. He could compose articles in English, Spanish and Tagalog. Rafael was the dutiful son who stayed with his aging, widowed mother, literally minding her store. He was the jolliest of the group, the only one I recall who regularly told jokes, following it with a laugh in his baritone voice. Nicolas was the corporate lawyer and wheeler-dealer. Of the five my father was easily the most well known nationally from his government cabinet level positions and Masonic activities, but he was also the most laconic and self-effacing. On the other hand, Jose, or Tio Pepe, was Mr. Outside. He was gregarious, organized; about as close to a backslapper as there was one among the very conservative Orosa clan. He became President of the Manila Rotary, easily the most prestigious of all Philippine Rotary Clubs. In the late 90's I was lucky enough to have been invited to a Rotary luncheon by my boyhood friend Atty. Babes Reyes (a former Rotary president himself) and I got introduced to an impressive array of members. A couple of the members I met were men such as the Canadian ambassador and Alfredo Lim, a retired General and the former Mayor of Manila, to name just a couple. I emphasize men since to this day in January of 2003 they don't have women members. Going over the roster of the Club during my visit, I recognized a billionaire or two. Tio Pepe moved among similar titans of industry and business during his days of the 1950's and early 60's. Their meetings were at the Manila Hotel, with its ornate lobby and chandeliers, dating back 100 years. Tio Pepe's social and business circle included the family of the Lopez brothers Fernando and Eugenio. Fernando was elected Vice-President under two Presidents (Quirino and Marcos) and was often referred to as the gentleman politician. Eugenio headed the Chronicle newspaper and later TV network and controlled sugar companies. Tio Pepe did some work for the Lopezes, becoming a board member of their various entities and a trusted executive. Another friend was the American lawyer Eugene Perkins, a partner in the most prestigious law firm during the Commonwealth era. Tio Pepe's son Eugene was named after Perkins, who was also his godfather. The first Filipino partner of Perkins was Alfonso Ponce Enrile, another family friend. The law firm has since passed on to Don Alfonso's heirs and other Filipino partners. I don't imagine the Rolodex was in use during Tio Pepe's time but he would have the thickest one of all the brothers, probably more than all of them combined.

I remember starting to work for Procter & Gamble in 1960 and during one of their regular executive tours, the General Manager of P & G Philippines approached me and said he was my uncle's friend. The GM was an American named Denneth Howe. Being twenty years old, I was too dumb to make the connection so I had to ask Mr. Howe which one since I had four uncles. Of course it could only be Tio Pepe. Mr. Howe probably castigated the personnel manager for hiring me, who didn't even know who his uncle's friends were. Wonder if he ever told the story to Tio Pepe.

Tio Pepe was the General Manager of H.E. Heacock, an American owned department store and distributor of appliances. It was a combination of Macy's and Tiffany's, located on the Escolta, a street of only several blocks but the most prominent in Manila. He was the first Filipino to head such a prestigious American business. The exclusive department stores, jewelers, the Philippine National Bank and Heacock were on the Escolta. I don't know if Rolex was popular in the 50's over there but you would likely have to purchase it at Heacock.

He held a daily kaffeeklatsch at the Botica Boie on the Escolta. It was a ritual and I am positive a lot of business was conducted plus catching up on the latest. Among his friends were two newspapermen, Teodoro "Doroy" Valencia and Jose "Joe" Guevara. They both wrote columns and Doroy's was appropriately called "Over a Cup of Coffee." There was always a pipe in Tio Pepe's hand, almost welded to him as a part of his anatomy. He would regularly take a puff and

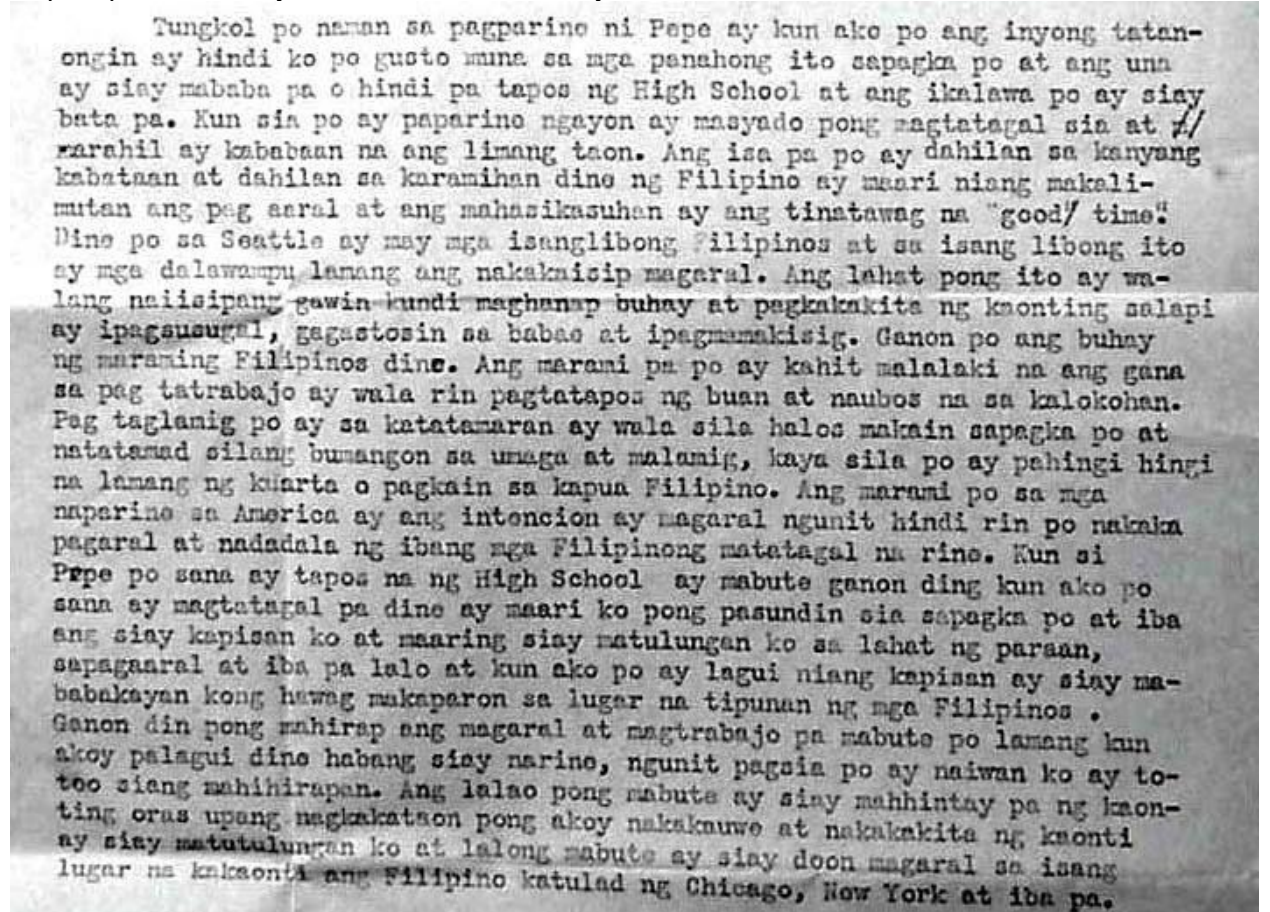
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you would easily recognize his sweet aromatic tobacco. Even after forty years, it is not difficult for me to remember that aroma. I don't know if Tio Pepe did any exercises but he was the trimmest, the rest of his brothers had paunches. My dad never exercised and had the biggest.

Tio Pepe received a degree from the University of Washington in Seattle, the third of his family to earn a baccalaureate degree from an American institution. The first of course was my father Vicente, followed by Maria. This is where Tio Pepe's story becomes somewhat interesting.

Maria was in Seattle, taking Pharmaceutical chemistry, which she finished in June 1918. Tio Pepe was a teenager then and must have indicated an ambition to follow the footsteps of his elder brother and sister to the United States. Maria was not supportive and wrote their mother in Bauan stating her reasons.

Below is a portion of Maria's letter to their mother written on April 16, 1918, at a time when Tio Pepe was not even eighteen. This is the actual paragraph from Maria's letter pertaining to Tio Pepe's plans to study in the United States. My translation follows the letter.



Tungkol po naman sa pagparino ni Pepe ay kum ako po ang inyong tatan-
ongin ay hindi ko po gusto muna sa mga panahong ito sapagka po at ang una
ay siay mababa pa o hindi pa tapos ng High School at ang ikalawa po ay siay
bata pa. Kun sia po ay paparino ngayon ay masyado pong magtatagal sia at //
marahil ay kababaan na ang limang taon. Ang isa pa po ay dahilan sa kanyang
kabataan at dahilan sa karamihan dine ng Filipino ay maari niang makali-
mutan ang pag aaral at ang mahasikasuhan ay ang tinatawag na "good/ time."
Dine po sa Seattle ay may mga isanglibong Filipinos at sa isang libong ito
ay mga dalawampung lamang ang nakakaisip magaral. Ang lehat pong ito ay wa-
lang naiisipang gawin kundi maghanap buhay at pagkakakita ng kaonting salapi
ay ipagausugal, gagastosin sa babae at ipagmamakisig. Ganon po ang buhay
ng maraming Filipinos dine. Ang marami pa po ay kahit malalaki na ang gana
sa pag tatrabajo ay wala rin pagtatapos ng buan at naubos na sa kalokohan.
Pag taglanig po ay sa katatamaran ay wala sila halos makain sapagka po at
natatamad silang bumangon sa umaga at malunig, kaya sila po ay pahingi hingi
na lamang ng kuarta o pagkain sa kapua Filipino. Ang marami po sa mga
naperino sa America ay ang intencion ay magaral ngunit hindi rin po nakaka
pagaral at nadadala ng ibang mga Filipinong matatagal na rine. Kun si
Pepe po sana ay tapos na ng High School ay mabute ganon ding kum ako po
sana ay magtatagal pa dine ay maari ko pong pasundin sia sapagka po at iba
ang siay kapisan ko at maring siay matulungan ko sa lehat ng paraan,
sapagkaal at iba pa lalo at kum ako po ay lagui niang kapisan ay siay ma-
babakayan kong hawag makaparon sa lugar na tipunan ng mga Filipinos .
Ganon din pong mahirap ang magaral at magtrabajo pa mabute po lamang kum
akoy palagui dine habang siay narine, ngunit pagsia po ay naiwan ko ay to-
too siang mahihirapan. Ang lalao pong mabute ay siay mahhintay pa ng kaonti-
ting oras upang nagkakataon pong akoy nakakauwe at nakakakita ng kaonti
ay siay matutulungan ko at lalong mabute ay siay doon magaral sa isang
lugar na kakaonta ang Filipino katulad ng Chicago, New York at iba pa.

"Regarding the subject of Pepe's coming here, if you were to ask me, I don't like the idea at the present time because first he has not finished high school and secondly he is too young. If he were to come over at the present time he would have to stay longer, perhaps as long as five years. One other reason is that in his youth and with the presence of other Filipinos, he might easily forget his studies and devote his pursuit to what they refer to as a "good time." Here in Seattle there are one thousand Filipinos and of this number only about twenty have thought of

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studying. The others think of nothing else but to earn a living and as soon as they come into a little money, they spend it on gambling, pursuing women and showing off. That is the life of a lot of Filipinos here. Many have very good wages in their work but at the end of the month they have used it all up on crazy pursuits. During the colder season, their laziness is such that they wind up with almost nothing to eat. Because they are too lazy to get up on cold mornings, they constantly ask for money or food from other Filipinos. Most of them came to the United States with the intention of studying but have not done so due to the influence of Filipinos who have been here longer. If Pepe were to finish high school, it would be good and I could stay longer here to allow me to stay with and monitor him. I could help him in studying and everything else since he will be with me I'll provide guidance so he would not visit the gathering places of the other Filipinos. It is difficult to study while working so it would be better if I stayed while he's here since if I leave it would be a hardship for him. But it would be best if he waited for a while until I return and start earning so I can help him. It would also be better if he were to study in places with few Filipinos, like Chicago or New York and others."

It is a little difficult to capture in English Maria's respectful tone when writing to her mother. It is akin to the Spanish use of *usted* instead of *tu*, and more. Maria and all the siblings wrote in a similar manner. Although worrying about a younger sibling is part of our family culture, I wonder why Maria seems excessively so. Maria's older brother, my father Vicente, came to the United States a dozen years earlier at the younger age of 16.

Of course Tio Pepe was not to be deterred. Maria's letter was written in April of 1918 but by the fall of 1919, he was enrolled in the business department of the University of Washington at Seattle. This is the same school Maria was still attending to earn advanced degrees. There may have been many letters Tio Pepe wrote to his mother but the earliest one I have a copy of is dated Jan. 28, 1920.



Pinoy dudes in America. Were these the kind of guys Maria was warning her mother about?

But whatever Tia Mary's concerns were, they were unfounded. Tio Pepe graduated with honors.

From what I can discern, Tio Pepe had a somewhat checkered career before hitting his peak as the General Manager of Heacock, then leaving the private sector for public service. He became head of Namarco, the government food import corporation. In the 1930s, he became a college professor at Jose Rizal College (now University) and was instrumental in getting my brother Augusto or "Toto" to attend JRC. Toto repeatedly told me that Tio Pepe was his mentor.

The details would be very difficult to reconstruct but Tio Pepe was involved in a business venture called Ismar, which was controlled by the de Santos family. Apparently his mother Lola Kanang and sister Maria (Tia Mary) were involved too. Tio Pepe was a manager (he called himself an employee,) not an investor, and was sent to the United States to market their product. He was stranded in New York City after the product failed. He wrote a letter to my father on March 21,

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1935 explaining the situation. They needed \$1,000 in order to conclude their business and return to Manila but Ismar and the de Santos people were not forthcoming with the funds, thus the exchange of letters and cables with my dad. He was relying on my dad to facilitate with de Santos. Tio Pepe was with his first wife Salud. (I do not remember her, she died when I was very small and they did not have any children.) The sole source of my information is the aforementioned letter and I would surely love to know the business venture they were entering. Here are a few words from Tio Pepe's letter "I do not apologize for our failure here" and "the *product* simply did not sell and I doubt that any could have succeeded under the very limited financial support I received from them." What product????

I will write about Tia Mary separately but she was an entrepreneur and was importing Batangas products to Seattle while still a student. A variety of products, mostly fine embroidery for which Batangas is noted was sent to Tia Mary by my grandmother for resale. In one instance, Tia Mary was able to remit \$850 back to Lola. The reason I mention this is to speculate on the possibility that the Ismar venture involved an invention or product developed by Tia Mary with Lola's sponsorship, financial backing from the de Santos and using Tio Pepe's management and marketing skills. Did I jump to too many conclusions based on a three-page letter from 1935?

Later on during the decade Tio Pepe became a partner in a stock brokerage firm named Angel Padilla and Company. Several Orosas were involved, including Tio Pepe's younger brother Rafael, a cousin named Carmelo Orosa Ylagan and my brother Augusto. But only Tio Pepe was the partner, the others were employees. This venture was never mentioned to me by Augusto. The years before the outbreak of WWII were supposed to have been boom years in the Manila stock market fueled by gold mining. Benguet was an American controlled gold mining company that was listed on the New York Exchange for a long time.

Tio Pepe had been married to Salud Ponce since 1928 but they weren't blessed with children. Tia Salud had always been in poor health and passed away towards the end of the war. Tio Pepe married Amparo Canlas (Tia Amparing) not too long after and had four children in succession. The youngest two were born after Tio Pepe had already turned 50. (Hey, the older the parents the better the offspring. I speak from experience) Tia Amparing was not a stranger to the Orosa family. She was a home economist who worked for Tia Mary at the Bureau of Plant Industry.

This story was told to me by my late sister Charito. Her godmother was Tia Salud. When Tia Amparing found out, she became Charito's self appointed godmother, never forgetting her birthdays or Christmas. Charito marveled at Tia Amparing's kindness.

The best years were still to come. I have a brief write-up entitled "The Halcyon Days" referring to the 1950's when the Orosas lived an idyllic life, all were successful and prominent, having a Matriarch who kept them on the straight and narrow and a clan that was close knit. During the 1940's, 50's and 60's, there was an annual Orosa reunion. No holiday season was complete with the reunion traditionally held in January. Each of the siblings took turns in hosting the reunion. Tio Pepe's was easily the most memorable. He set up a bar for the adult males (the women didn't drink). He posted appropriate signs, such as "Caution: Men Drinking." As the family grew in numbers, we used different venues. Tio Pepe was the first to hold the reunion at the Club Filipino.

By Mario E. Orosa
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