

My Recollections

Maria Teresa Escoda Roxas — Former President of the Cultural Center of the Philippines

My mother was taken away before my very eyes. Several members of the Japanese military police force suddenly burst into our home carrying rifles. I was 16. I will never forget that moment. It happened on Aug. 27, 1944.” A rage that will never be quenched burns in the heart of Maria Teresa Escoda Roxas, former president of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Her mother, Josefa Llanes Escoda (1898–1945), was noble, an angel. She devoted herself to helping others, never expecting anything in return. Even under the Japanese military occupation of her country, she showed no fear, visiting and helping Filipino and American soldiers in detention camps and prisons. Though those around her tried to persuade her to stop, she refused. “I am not afraid to die,” she declared. “I will risk it because our soldiers badly need aid.”¹

One Filipino veteran never forgot, even decades later, how Mrs. Escoda had helped him and his family: “She was a generous woman, and so long as we have Filipinos like her, life is worth living.”²

Mrs. Roxas recalls the day her mother was taken away: “The Japanese military police spoke politely, but they forced my mother to go with them. My mother was taken out of the house, one large soldier accompanying her on either side, and put into a car. She was taken to Fort Santiago, which at that time was being used as a prison.... That was the last time I ever saw her.”

Mrs. Roxas’ father, Antonio Escoda, a journalist, had been arrested several months earlier.

The three Japanese military police still in the house began searching it, looking for any evidence of anti-Japanese activities. “I think the Japanese military became angry when they discovered my mother was helping not only Filipino soldiers but American soldiers, as well,” says Mrs. Roxas. “But she said: ‘If the shoe were on the other foot and the Japanese soldiers were the ones suffering in prison, I would help them in the same way. I would do what I have to as a human being.’ My mother was a true humanitarian. She wanted to offer help, without discrimination, to all who were suffering. But the Japanese militarists did not understand her actions.”

Mrs. Escoda was what we call a bodhisattva in Buddhism. And her love was not reserved for human beings alone. If a carriage driver began to mercilessly whip his horse, Mrs. Escoda would not hesitate to stop the carriage to reprimand him.

During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, the military forced all Filipinos to bow their heads when encountering a Japanese. If they failed to do so, they were slapped across the face in public. The Filipinos remember the occupation as a period when the entire country was transformed into a terrifying concentration camp. The Japanese committed terrible atrocities, such as tossing Filipino children up in the air and then piercing them with their swords as they fell back to earth.

The young Mrs. Roxas was determined not to forgive the Japanese, but her mother told her: “There are good Japanese and bad Japanese. There are good Filipinos and bad Filipinos. There are good Americans and bad Americans. We should show goodwill toward good Japanese. It is enough to hate the bad Japanese.” Mrs. Escoda did not care about a person’s nationality; she judged people solely on their worth as human beings.

The Japanese militarists were exactly the opposite. The most important thing was whether a person was Japanese or not. That they were a human being came in a distant

second. That is how they justified the unspeakably cruel acts they perpetrated on the Filipinos — acts they would not dare commit against other Japanese. They treated the Chinese and the Koreans the same way. And perhaps the Okinawans as well.

Any Japanese who resisted or criticized those unspeakable acts was attacked as unpatriotic — as was the case with Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, the first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai. Both of them were in prison themselves at the time Mrs. Escoda was carried away by the Japanese military police in the Philippines. They were all victims of Japanese militarism.

Oppressors who live by lies, discrimination and raging ego; people's movements driven by truth and humanity — the struggle between these two forces continues today.

Mrs. Escoda's conviction to live with unwavering humanity remained unchanged in prison. Seeking to obtain information about the anti-Japanese movement from her, the Japanese cruelly tortured her, leaving her battered and bleeding. But she didn't say a word. On occasion, her captors would withhold food for as long as a week. Even then, she would talk to her companions in prison of her plans for the future, of her hopes for the development of the organizations she had founded — including the Philippine Girl Scouts and the National Federation of Women's Clubs — and that her two children would have the opportunity, as she had when she was young, to study in the United States.

Whenever she received food or water from outside, she shared it with her fellow prisoners, though of course she must have been extremely hungry herself. "I'm fine. You eat!" — such words brim with more goodness of humanity than any famous words of wisdom.

At the beginning of 1945, Mr. and Mrs. Escoda were taken from their cells and executed. To this day, the method of execution remains unknown. "I don't even know where they are buried," laments Mrs. Roxas. But before she died, Mrs. Escoda smuggled out a message: "I have done my duty.... If you happen to survive, and I fall, tell our people that the women of the Philippines did their part also in making the ember sparks of truth and liberty alive till the last moments."³

Mrs. Escoda did fall, in the cause of keeping the sparks of liberty alive. For that great cause, she died. She laid down her life so that truth might live. Nothing is more eloquent than the silence of death — especially if that death is that of a martyr who has given his or her whole being to the cause of freedom. Mrs. Escoda's life was brief; she died at the age of 46. But even today her example cries out in a silent appeal, inspiring others. Mrs. Escoda's picture appears on the thousand peso note — the highest denomination of Philippine currency — and many streets proudly bear her name.

But most important, she has energetic spiritual successors in the form of her beloved son and daughter. People whom she had helped, in turn assisted her children, raising money to make it possible for them to study in the United States. One of the dreams that Mrs. Escoda had cherished in prison was thus realized. And today Mrs. Roxas is energetically carrying on her mother's work.

Mrs. Roxas was weak and sickly as a child, so her mother encouraged her to study ballet to strengthen her constitution. Later, Mrs. Roxas became the president of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Mrs. Escoda was a mother of peace, who loved culture; Mrs. Roxas is a mother of culture, who loves peace.

The goals of the Cultural Center of the Philippines are to foster creative activities, keep traditional culture alive and sponsor cultural exchange programs with other nations. As its former president, Mrs. Roxas created a lasting legacy. With regard to Japan, she has earnestly stated: "I think the Japanese have a distorted view of the Philippines. I want to

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change that.”

Our talks together resulted in a Japanese tour by the Cultural Center–affiliated Ballet Philippines, sponsored by the Min-On Concert Association in 1993. The troupe is unsurpassed in Asia, and has been praised the world over. An American newspaper said that it was “worth walking a hundred miles” to see them perform. Prior to that, the 1990 Min-On–sponsored performance of the Ramon Obusan Folkloric Group, which is also affiliated with the center, revealed the high level of Philippine national culture to the Japanese.

Mrs. Roxas said: “The only faces of Japan that the peoples of Asia know are those of militarist Japan during World War II and a contemporary Japan that is an economic superpower and cares only about profit. Japan should present other faces to its Asian neighbors. Japan needs people who will promote such cultural exchange.”

She also said: “For many, many years, I was not able to accept the Japanese. But my feelings changed when I accompanied my husband to Japan on a business trip and encountered Japan’s traditional arts. I came to love Japanese arts, and through them, at last, to open my heart to the Japanese people. Art can lead us to transcend love and hate. Culture is the strongest tie that can bind human beings together.”

Will the cries of this mother and daughter for tolerance and humanity across two generations ever reach Japan, “the soulless nation”? Or will cowardly arrogance lead Japan once again to ruin? Our neighbors in Asia are watching to see which road Japan will take.

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1. Tito Guingona, *The Gallant Filipino* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1991), p. 45.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.