

The Last Refugee



Dr. Yasbar Hirsbaut (lower right) with family and friends.

*The story of a German Jew who took refuge in the Philippines
together with 1,200 more during the Holocaust.*



The shambles of Manila. February 1945.

Text by Cheryl Baldicantos - Photos from Dr. Yashar Hirshaut

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McNutt and the Freider brothers, American Jews, devised a plan for the settlement of 10,000 Jewish people in the Asian country.

"I was about a year old then. We had to leave. Me, my sister, my mother, who worked as a teacher, and my father, who had a career as an accountant", Dr. Hirshaut recounts. It was a time when a lot

"The German government was ordering Jews to leave. My father saw a newspaper ad saying that the Philippines was hiring Jewish professionals and he applied", Dr. Yashar Hirshaut, a Jew from Berlin, recounts as he sits on his big brown chair in his New York office. Dr. Hirshaut is one of the more than 1,200 Jews who fled to the Philippines as the German Nazis under Adolf Hitler started sending thousands of them to concentration camps.

After the destruction of Jewish shops and synagogues on November 9, 1938, Filipinos in Manila staged a rally for their government to help the Jewish people in Germany and Austria. The then Philippine President Manuel Quezon, Colonel Dwight Eisenhower, American High Commissioner to the Philippines Paul

of countries around the world turned their backs on the Jewish people. There was an instance when a ship full of Jewish escapees from the Nazi regime was not allowed to dock in the United States. But they had to flee Europe or risk death in the systematic killings in concentration camps.

"I remember the Philippines very fondly. It was a magical time for me. I remember the American school and our house in Taft Avenue.

I remember the kalesas (Filipino horse-drawn carriages). Oooh, there were so many horses!" Dr. Hirshaut recounts. From around 250 American Jews in Manila, the number grew multiple times almost overnight. The Philippines were under the American colonial guidance then.

Dr. Racelle Weiman, director of the Center for Holocaust and Humanity Education at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, believes that President Quezon was thinking of his own country then. She has copies of letters of correspondence that prove that he had plans to modernise the Philippines and educate the Filipino people with the help of the foreign Jews. The country

needed well-educated doctors, accountants and other professionals to help improve the economy. He saw the need for European know-how.

The Jewish people were to be resettled in Moro-occupied Mindanao - the biggest island of the Philippine archipelago. An opposition group barred these plans, saying that President Quezon just wanted to control that part of the country.

For a time, Dr. Hirshaut's father worked for an American company in Manila.

"I remember our Filipino maid Gracia. She knew about Jewish customs, and so she taught me as a child. There was no one else like Gracia. She was maybe 25 or 28 years old at that time", Dr. Hirshaut sniggers. At that time, there was an underlying division of classes through the colour of skin - the brown Filipinos and the white foreigners.

However, the Jewish people's bare escape from the Nazis' hands in Europe was short-lived as they had to endure another war when the Japanese came on in 1944. The Americans, who were part of the allied forces in the combat against the Germans in Europe, had already pulled out their troops from the Philippines at that time.

"I remember a Spanish-American lawyer who taught me and my sister, together with his children, during the war when the schools were closed. We lived with the Brady family when we were forced to flee our house in Taft", Dr. Hirshaut recalls as he shifts on his chair.

The Japanese used the Jewish synagogue, Temple Emil, as a storage house for weapons. By that time, the Jewish community was already integrated with the Filipinos in the country. Some of the Jews who were in the Philippine army died in the war according to Dr. Weiman.

"I remember the Japanese going from house to house. Then the Americans came back. It was the Americans versus the Japanese. They were shelling each

other. It was a Friday. We watched that night how old Manila burned down. I can still see the fire fall off the church that night. A lot of people got killed", Dr. Hirshaut speaks and gets silent for some seconds.

The Jewish people were witnesses to the stages of the recapture of Manila - from the struggle of Filipinos to resist the Japanese to the coming back of General Douglas MacArthur and his troops. "The Japanese soldiers thought we were Germans so we got spared. The Japanese were not anti-Jewish but they were very vicious", Dr. Hirshaut describes.

The Japanese sided with the Germans in the Second World War. In the Philippines, they killed more than 100,000 people. "We moved to another house then and this house, the Officers' Club, accidentally caught fire so we had to move to the Jewish community house in Francisco de Montes. It was primitive living. I remember the mosquito nets and my mother cooking on charcoal. To me, as a child, it was very interesting", Dr. Hirshaut laughs. Cooking on charcoal was common in the majority of Filipino houses at that time.

"To me, there was no sense of antagonism from the Filipinos. In the Philippines, I felt very welcome. The way I speak, the way I think, my early education was shaped in the Philippines", Dr. Hirshaut smilingly explains.

After the war, Dr. Hirshaut's father worked as a broker at the Philippine stock exchange. Life, he said, was good. "I feel that there were no barriers. In Europe, people were seen as different. In Manila, people were all the same", Dr. Hirshaut recalls.

However, in 1946 Jews started to leave the country. This was during the time of the declaration of Philippine Independence. "Even if we were doing good, there were no Jewish schools, the temple was very restricted, and there was only a limited sense of community. There were no Jewish holidays. It was a strange land. Nevertheless, we were accommodated and became part of the culture. So we are very appreciative", Dr. Hirshaut explains.



Dr. Yashar Hirshaut

The majority of the German Jews left for the United States or Israel.

The story of helping the Jews remains unknown to most Filipinos. It is not mentioned in history books nor taught in schools in the country. "People don't usually look at the good things. Nobody's made it a priority. Filipinos should know and appreciate the story. It is the evolution of a country. It helps guide citizens into answering the question: What do I stand for?" Dr. Weiman explains. She has been awarded the Order of Lakandula in 2005, one of the Philippines' highest honors, for her work on the Jewish refugees in the country.

A monument to President Quezon was unveiled at the 65-hectare Holocaust Memorial Park in Rishon LeZion in Tel Aviv, Israel on June 21, 2009. This is a step in the process of recognition. However, in studies about the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust, the Philippines is hardly ever mentioned. Even the Jewish Community of the Synagogue in Berlin, Germany, and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance don't appear to have knowledge about this.

"President Quezon's story on the Jewish refugees - it could have been one of the greatest rescue stories ever told, until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in the Philippines by the Japanese happened", Dr. Weiman comments.

Before leaving to see another patient, Dr. Hirshaut says that in the Philippines, he saw friendship. "Dr. Hirshaut is one of the leading doctors for cancer in the world today. If the Philippines had not opened their doors to rescue the Jews from the Nazis, he wouldn't have had the chance to save many lives", Dr. Weiman stresses.

Dr. Hirshaut later adds: "Well, the Germans killed six million Jews. They killed at least 25 people in my family. How can I forgive and forget. The only thing I can do is encourage the people of Japan and Germany to explore for themselves how they turned from civilized people into unprincipled and merciless killers. The tragedy is that such transformations can lie within the bounds of human nature."



The children of the Spanish-American lawyer, Joyce and Will Brady. Christmas .1945.

