

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CJW-1  
Manila: Barbed Wire and  
Bougainvillea

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Mr. Peter B. Martin  
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Dear Peter:

To get out of the Philippines a Filipino must get up early. By 4 a. m. the lines may be forming outside the American Embassy on Manila's Roxas Blvd. as the hopeful queue up to apply for a visa to the U. S. Those who succeed are not perceived as refugees on arrival in the host country, but there are legions of transient, often well-heeled Filipinos living throughout the world, their primary goal to avoid returning to their own nation. The continuing exodus has spawned its own support industries.

Airlines locate their offices across the street from the embassy and banner their U. S. fares across the plate-glass windows. Travel agencies abound in the area, advertising their ingenuity in securing visas rather than their facility in booking travel. Small-time entrepreneurs, never slow to scent opportunity, join the crowd and then charge late-comers up to seven dollars for a position in line. There is a flavor of escapism to life in the Philippines today and some would assert that those who stay work harder at avoiding reality than those who leave. Surviving in style requires a certain amount of finesse.

Many things are avoidable, others are not. The inflation rate--running at 20 per cent annually--has cut the purchasing power of Filipinos, most of whom already live hand-to-mouth (one tourist placed a tray of chicken scraps outside the hotel room door and the next morning found the bones picked clean). The well-to-do escape the hoi polloi by walling themselves away in places like Makati, the Philippines "richest municipality," as one guidebook calls it, "housing an impressive commercial center and the splendid suburb of Forbes Park." Neither the rich nor the poor are immune to the vagaries of officialdom, however, where cutting the wrong tree may be sufficient to land one in jail--indefinitely. And anyone may fall victim to crime,

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emanating from the top or the bottom of the social scale. Then there is the uncertainty in obtaining reliable information.

"I don't bother to read the newspapers anymore," one well-educated Filipino says. "What you read has nothing to do with what's going on."

Three hundred years of colonization by the Spanish and approximately fifty by the Americans have left the country with a borrowed culture: the religion is Roman Catholic, the language is English, the music is American and the food is vaguely Cuban. Extremes and contradictions seem to be the norm, rather than the exception. Acts of violence co-exist with passivity; stockaded "golden ghettos" with squalor equal to that of refugee camps; and ubiquitous tokens of religion with daily newspaper accounts of official mayhem and corruption. Manila is bougainvillea and barbed wire. Neither is symbolic of permanence.

For the majority of Filipinos, who can get neither visa nor plane ticket, escape is inward. People seem subdued, even withdrawn. Dozens of young men cluster on the streets, apparently with nothing to do, no place to go, no business to transact. They stand, stare and wait. A visitor can easily have the sensation of wandering into a time warp and emerging in Paris before the Revolution.

Some of the government's actions are no less escapist, though they tend to be manic, rather than depressive. The aimlessness of many young men is recognized by the authorities. An outbreak of stabbings and robberies in the university area of Manila led the Metro Governor (and First Lady) to announce the cause (too much idle time) as well as the solution. Let them put on skits, the governor said; dramatic presentations, amateur contests, musical programs, sports competitions and community dances. Immediately. Community officials are to assist families in planning neighborhood activities, on a rotating basis. However, no money need be spent, she said.

Hard work, like idleness, appears to accomplish little. The same waiter who serves a hotel guest an early breakfast may still be clearing tables at 10 p.m. Taxi drivers may be on the job for 24 hours at a time. One long-time resident says that "people just aren't making it."

"You can get a graduate engineer for 600 pesos (about \$83), a schoolteacher for P400-600 (\$55-\$83)," he said, referring to monthly wages.

For those at the other end of the economic scale, however, the Philippines is a throw-back to the unfettered capitalism of the industrial revolution. A protestant missionary who says she is horrified by the "low, low salaries" of workers, recounts the following story about the disparities.

"I was standing in a bus queue in Hong Kong last year," she said. "And I said to the man next to me, 'Have we missed the bus?' and we got to talking and discovered that we both lived in Manila. He said, 'You know, Manila is a wonderful place to have a business, you make so much money.' I said, 'I don't see how the people live,' and he said, 'Well, I don't doubt the wages are low but there's no limit on mark-ups or limits on what you can charge.'"

Extremes in wealth and poverty seem especially great, even by Asian standards. Splendid houses and shopping centers rise like citadels behind the walls that separate them from a sea of surrounding hovels.

The Makati Commercial District, a suburban shopping center, could easily pass for its counterpart in an affluent American city. The stores carry high-quality goods with price tags to match. The "Calvin Klein born rich and carefree" shop competes with a near-by store selling "Imported Sasson Maong jeans (on sale, (for) 190 pesos (or \$26, over half the month's salary of a nurse, residents say). At another shop a small, hand-lettered sign in the window says, "maids uniforms available." Nearby, two young women shop in tennis togs. Many shoppers alight from air conditioned cars with drivers. The latter may park at the center's multi-storied parking garage, so impressively designed (and festooned with plantings at each level) that one man mistook it for a hotel.

The people who shop seriously at places like the Makati Commercial District live behind walls inside of walls. They call their communities "villages." Such subdivisions may have hundreds of homes, each enclosed by its own high wall and iron gate. Then the entire village is surrounded by an even higher concrete wall, the latter topped by numerous strands of barbed wire and watched by the armed guards who control the entrance.

Residents of the "golden ghettos," as outsiders refer to the communities, respond to questions about their stockaded subdivisions by kicking the wealth upstairs--or next door.

"This is Millionaire's Row," a realtor says, pointing out Forbes Park, a particularly opulent village. "This is where the really rich people live." The realtor lives in Green Hills, another posh area, with half-a-dozen servants.

The latter come cheap.

One high government official remarked in conversation that the administration has recently raised the minimum salary for a maid (who generally lives in the house) to 80 pesos per month, or slightly over \$11. Similarly, gardeners may cut the grass surrounding a \$100,000 house with hand clippers, on their knees, for a few pesos per day.

The missionary, who has spent many years in Asia, pointed out that history has a way of repeating itself.

"It was the same in China," she said. "People don't seem to learn...It was the foreign enclaves in Canton and Shanghai that were a terrible source of discontent. In Shanghai it was the government enclaves and in Manila it is the business ones. They just need a hothead or two and things will blow up."

Economic extremes lead to enormous frustration.

"They try to accept it and go on and then finally it explodes over some little thing and they kill somebody," said a publishing executive. "They take and they take and they take. They must be the most passive people in the world and then they start shooting. With the police, they always shoot to kill. I think it's frustration built on frustration."

People argue over whether life is better (or worse) in Manila or in the countryside. Some argue that children have a better chance of education in the city, while others point out that the chance of getting enough training to actually better one's self is slim.

If they'd stay out in the barrios they'd at least be able to eat," said a woman who's spent several years in the Philippines for her company. "It frightens me to see these groups of young guys roaming the streets. They're uneducated and they've no jobs because they're not qualified. At least if they're in the barrios you can put a banana stalk in the ground and eat but in the city, what's left? You can just read the front page of the newspaper every day and it's nothing but corruption, corruption, corruption and it's all his officials."

Apparently muzzled on political and social affairs, Manila newspapers do carry a conspicuous number of stories on mayhem and corruption, the former often perpetrated by the military or the police and the latter by public officials.

For example, the following stories were prominently featured in papers over a two-day period:

----Three Quezon City policemen reportedly headed a syndicate that kidnapped two children on their way to school, demanding ransom from the children's father, a Chinese businessman.

----Three Bureau of Forest Development officers were formally charged with offenses ranging from graft to nepotism.

----The Minister of Justice, addressing the national convention of the Philippine bar association, requested the bar's assistance in "weeding out corrupt prosecutors and judges."

During the same two-day period, Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 1683, which mandated death as the penalty for illegally manufacturing or trafficking in dangerous or regulated drugs. One person was killed and two were wounded in a grenade blast in Cotabato City and two troopers and two informers were killed in an ambush in Davao.

Like the random nature of the street crime, there is a random quality to actions taken by the government. Tax follows tax and edict follows edict, dealing with everything from the picayune to the grandiose. Both are within the prerogative of the regime, which has been operating under martial law since 1972. Consequently, practically everything that occurs is attributed to the government.

"It's Marcos this and Marcos that," said a visitor in exasperation. "It's as if Marcos is the only person in the (darned) country."

People consistently refer to the President and First Lady as he and she or her and him, as in, "She's the governor"(of Manila) or "He has the power base"; or "She had the bougainvillea planted"(bougainvillea has been planted along the boulevards, neatly held in place by strands of barbed wire).

However, he or she who ignores what conceivably might be the First Family's wishes on a matter may suffer the consequences. Land is being reclaimed from Manila Bay for projects supported by the Marcos regime (the Philippine International Convention Centre has already been built), yet being associated with the effort can have its disadvantages. When Marcos happened to drive down Roxas Blvd., alongside the bay, and noticed some palm and acacia trees being cut he dispatched the contractors for the reclamation project to jail. The crime was poor planning, the president said. After much explanation the contractors were released but not until Marcos reportedly forbade them to ever cut another tree on public property without his personal permission.

Leaving the Philippines, like living there, carries the flavor of escape. Sidewalks outside the airline terminal are thronged with Filipinos who are not allowed inside (only those with tickets or passports are permitted past the guards at the doors). All passengers must proceed through at least eight check-points, most of which involve searches and the final one culminating in a frisking.

Travelers spend their final minutes in the Philippines in an air-conditioned departure lounge, tucked beyond the stares of the people outside. Like the villages of the well-to-do, the lounge is kept under constant surveillance by security guards, dozens of whom patrol the area, armed with guns, night sticks and at least one machine gun. Likewise, there is a vast array of wealth stored inside, this time in duty-free shops. Available are Nina Ricci belts for \$55; Yves St. Laurent ties for \$35; Charles Jourdan handbags for \$195. Each shop comes equipped with at least half a dozen uniformed sales clerks. Like the hotels, offices and stores of Manila, each duty-free shop has an armed security guard stationed outside.

Customers, however, are scarce and most of the sales force stare blankly into space at scenes of their own making, their lips forming the words of the American music piped into the lounge. The scene is eerie: "Make the most of your week-end," the disc jockey says in English and all the soft, little voices begin singing along with Barbra Streisand and "The Way We Were."

The security guards don't sing; their eyes track the movement around them, however, and their hands are never far from the guns at their sides. Three guards casually move toward the last check-point. One smiles, cocks a machine gun and aims at the ceiling.

Sincerely,

*Cammy Wilson*

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