

From Kristallnacht to La Estrella del Norte

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During the federal elections 2015, I was invited by Shelly Faintuch of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg for a meeting. In this meeting, she mentioned about the upcoming Kristallnacht program of the community, which will feature the “Philippine –Jewish connection.” I also learned that the co-chairs of the event are Larry Vickar and Rod Cantiveros. I was glad to hear about this event, since for a time when I was still in the Philippines, I did a lot of research on the Levy Family in the Philippines who arrived in the old country back in 1870s. The reason why I got involved in this research was because I am grafted into one of the descendants of the three Levy brothers. I have done research on my side of the family and so the eagerness passed over to this new initiative. Mind you, family tree research is so addicting.

The pioneers of this family were the three brothers, Adolphe, Charles and Raphael Levy who came from Alsace, France. They left the country due to the impact of the Franco –Prussian War, travelled to the United States, and eventually moved to the Philippines and started a business. The three brothers organized the business called La Estrella Del Norte (The Star of the North) and later on added “Levy Hermanos” to the company’s name. “The first business that they established was in Iloilo where they sold religious medals, statues, gold chains, gilt eyeglass frames, perfumes and later they expanded their trading business, and Charles Levy opened what became the main office at Escolta, what used to be the central business street in Manila” (Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila, From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese*, 12). “La Estrella del Norte began to diversify. As early as 1889, the company introduced the first bicycle, in 1894 the first phonograph, and in 1899 the moving picture machine. In 1904, they brought the first automobile ever seen in Philippine society” (Lou Gopal, *La Estrella Del Norte*, Manila Nostalgia, Facebook).

The business catered to the taste of the aristocracy of the country during that period. More or less, the Levy brothers laid down the requisites of the business presence of the Jewish community in the country. According to a friend musician who attends the synagogue in the Philippines, Aryeh Meir Ben Avraham and online sources, the office of La Estrella del Norte was even “used for high holiday services until the first synagogue was built in 1919 ” (Lou Gopal, *Manila Nostalgia*, Facebook). This Synagogue will be known as Temple Emil. The book of Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila: From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese Terror*, tells of the story of how the Philippines welcomed the German and Austrian Jews numbering 1200 who escaped from the Holocaust or what is referred to nowadays by the Jewish community as the Shoah or Catastrophe. According to the book of Frank Ephraim, “the Levy brothers befriended Dr. Jose Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines prior to his martyrdom. They were even supportive of his views” (Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila, From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese*, 12).

From the time they arrive in the Philippines in the 1870’s up to the 1960’s, they continuously engaged in business. Through the years they were able to touch or influence the lives of people by their commercial activity that provided jobs, something that established goodwill especially with those who were running the government. I do believe that this goodwill contributed to the atmosphere of being welcoming to the Jews who escaped to Manila from Germany. When the last of the Levy brothers left the Philippines, there were already a lot of Jewish investments and of course relationships built up through the years came in handy in the effort to save their distressed brothers and sisters escaping the Shoah.

Some of the members of the family left the Philippines for the United States and others returned to France. The descendants of Adolphe Levy, the oldest of the three and known to be the founder of La Estrella Del Norte, are still in the Philippines. Adolphe Levy had a son with Benita Enriquez named

Francisco Levy who will be the great grandfather of the famous Philippine movie star Susan Roces or Jesusa Levy Sonora” (interview with Moises Levy, 2007 Toronto, Ontario included in *Levy Family History Manuscript 1870-2010*, researched by Levy Abad) and wife of the late Fernando Poe also a famous movie star, who ran for President in 2004 against Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. He lost allegedly due to massive cheating. To date 2015, there are hundreds of descendants of Adolphe Levy in the Philippines and others are residing in other countries.

The reason why I included a bit of the family background here is to honor the three brothers for their contribution in building the Jewish community in the Philippines. During this time “there was no Jewish community yet; the Levy Brothers tended to quietly support the Filipino quest for sovereignty, hoping it would bring about more religious freedom” (Frank Ephraim, *Escape to Manila, From Nazi Tyranny to Japanese, 12*). They were low-profile people who even if they owned businesses, you cannot find any pictures of the Levy brothers.

The Levy Brothers’ presence in the Philippines from the 1870s up to the time that there was a relative number of them to be considered a community and on to the 60s, I think, made an impact and yielded positive results in the lobbying during the war years that resulted in the decision of President Manuel L. Quezon to admit 1200 Jewish refugees. Lest I forget to mention that aside from factors discussed, Filipinos innate hospitality to strangers, which predates the Judeo-Christian influence, was also a contributing factor. The Filipinos are noted for being welcoming to strangers and helpful in times of dire need. The Jewish community, on the other hand, deeply appreciated the deed that they honoured President Quezon “by an attractive and imposing open doors monument in Rishon Lezion Memorial Park, just off Tel Aviv built in 2009” (Nena C. Benigno. *Israel honors the Philippines for Saving the Jews*. <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/47492/jews-honor-manuel-l-quezon-on-his-134th-birthday>). In one event held at Cincinnati, “Quezon was posthumously honoured the title “Righteous Person,” which, in the tradition of Israel and those commemorating the Holocaust, is the title given to a gentile who helped the Jewish people in their time of persecution”(Harruth Communications. *Quezon’s List*. <http://haruth.com/jw/QuezonsList.htm>). Accepting the honor on behalf of the late President Manuel L. Quezon was his grandson, Manuel L. Quezon III.

Quezon’s contribution has been recognized by the Jewish community in Winnipeg. In the invitation letter that I received from Shelly, President Manuel L. Quezon and the Frieder brothers (Alex, Phillip, Herbert and Morris Frieder), Jewish cigar makers, were mentioned as being actively involved during that time to save the Jewish refugees. It will be an honor to be a part of this event.