

Life and Labors of Manuel A. Roxas*

By

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It was a bleak and cloudy morning. A few drops of rain fell, but this did not mar the historic scene being enacted at the Luneta. People of all classes, men and women, old and young, were bowed in hushed silence as the culmination of their age-long dream for liberty was at last to be realized. The band struck the National Anthem. The Philippine flag slowly rose up to meet, halfway the pole, for the last time, the flag of the great American republic that was granting the Filipinos the independence they so infinitely deserved.

It was exactly forty eight (48) years since the Americans first came to set up a regime that was to be checkered with the glorious achievements of a happy Philippine-American collaboration and which in Bataan was to find a deathless expression in a common reiteration of faith in the principles of democracy and freedom. As the Philippine flag soared on high, many shed tears. That lone flag now flying proudly in the free morning air represented centuries of painful struggle waged by many heroes and martyrs. It was the fulfillment of a dream. Not even the hardened hearts of the people, steeled by the tyranny and suffering of a recent catastrophe, could tide back the tears that freely flowed.

Independence was a hard-won thing. And the people instinctively knew that real independence, unless they make it so, was still to be realized. As the aftermath of a cruel war, the nation found itself beset by multiple social, economic and political problems. The coming years would be a challenge. What could they do to avert failure and bring about the fulfillment of this dream? Were the resources not exhausted and the chances so slim? Were not the problems so complex for even a brave and determined people? The voice that broke the cold morning air to allay these fears was confident and more than consoling. It was the voice of Manuel A. Roxas, their President, who had played an important role in the fight for independence. He dedicated himself to them in peace; he offered them his life in war. Would he be equal to the problems of this peace that was more trying than the war whose aftermath it was?

On April 15, 1948, Manuel A. Roxas died. It was barely two years since he assumed office. The whole nation wept. The people wept not

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because of any selfish motive. They were not sorry for themselves. They wept because they loved him. It was hard for them to believe that even the good could be lost.

Manuel A. Roxas was born on January 1, 1892, in Capiz, Capiz, the youngest child of Rosario Acuña (still living) and Gerardo Roxas, who died in the hands of the *guardia civil* of Spain.

He received his education in the public schools, except for one year which he spent at St. Joseph's College in Hongkong and the time he took preparatory medicine in the University of Sto. Tomas. He finished his secondary education at the Manila High School in 1910. His early desire to take up law was impeded by the fact that there was no English-speaking law school at that time. Roxas enrolled with some fifty (50) others in the first private English law school established at the YMCA which was headed by former Secretary of Commerce and Police Charles B. Elliot. This school was established at the initiative of a young lawyer from Michigan, Geo. A. Malcolm, then an attorney in the Department of Justice. Malcolm became dean of that school and inevitably the tutor of the distinguished batch of Filipino students, who, a few years later were to take active leadership in the affairs of the country. The school became the college of law of the University of the Philippines. Roxas, graduating with honors, was the president of the class and was the topnotcher in the 1913 bar examinations.

While yet a student Roxas acted as interpreter in the Court of First Instance of Manila. After the bar examinations of 1913, he served as law clerk to Chief Justice Cayetano Arellano.

In 1917 he entered politics, starting as councilor of the town of Capiz. In 1919 he was elected governor at the youthful age of 27. Capable, although young, Roxas was chosen presiding officer of the governor's convention that met in Manila in 1920. He was elected representative for the first district of Capiz in 1922 and in October of the same year, was chosen speaker of the House of Representatives. As Speaker of the House of Representatives, which position he held for three successive terms, Roxas spent much effort in working for independence in Washington. He was first sent there as special envoy in 1923 with the Legislative Special Committee. Since then he had always been a member of the independence missions. Through his eloquence he dispelled the fog of misinformation among the Americans, giving them a true picture of the conditions in the Islands.

All through the work in Washington, Roxas believed that ultimate independence must be brought about by the Filipinos themselves. Re-

turning home from one of the missions, he organized the **Bagong Kati-punan** and met with fair success in indoctrinating nationalism to his countrymen.

The year 1933 saw the fruition of the independence campaign waged by Roxas and other Filipino leaders. Roxas and Osmeña secured the passage of the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Bill which provided for a period of transition before final independence. It also provided for United States naval and military bases in the Islands. Quezon chose this occasion for a showdown with his political rival, Osmeña. Promising to get another law which will not provide for U.S. naval and military bases, Manuel L. Quezon brought about the rejection of the HHC Law. He secured the Tydings-Mcduffie Law. The people stood by Quezon and the Osmeña and Roxas (Os-Rox) faction was beaten. As an offshot of this defeat, Roxas fell from the speakership "into the hearts of the people"

Roxas was a delegate in 1934 to the constitutional convention which drew up the Commonwealth constitution that was also to be the fundamental law of the forthcoming Republic. He rendered much help in drawing out the master plan for the government and the charter of the people's right. It is interesting to note that with the bloc of one hundred delegates offered him by Vicente Lopez, Roxas could have beaten Convention President Claro M. Recto, a Quezon man. But Roxas knew that politics had no place in a convention of that kind. He believed that all efforts must be expended to the achievement of the great objectives for which the convention was called.

The Commonwealth era was ushered in with hopeful jubilation. In this period, Roxas found himself in the thick of work. Roxas was appointed member of the Joint Preparatory Committee on Philippine Affairs and of the government boards as the Mindanao Land Settlement Project, the Rice and Corn Corporation, the National Relief Board and the Board of Regents of the University of the Philippines. He was chairman of the National Economic Council which was created to discover a new basis for Philippine economy theretofore entirely dependent on the free American market and to look for new fields in the world of commerce. He was also chairman of the Tax Commission, the Rural Progress Administration, the Board of directors of the National Development Company and the Committee on Educational Policy to reorganize the University of the Philippines.

In 1938, the late President Manuel L. Quezon appointed him Secretary of Finance. He held this position up to 1941 when he ran for the Senate and was elected. On December 31, 1941, he was to take the oath of office as President of the Philippine Senate. But the Pacific

War broke out and the Japanese, two days after Pearl Harbor struck at the Philippines. Among those who first rallied to the call of the colors was Manuel Roxas. With the rank of major, he was first assigned as aide to General Douglas MacArthur, Commander-in-Chief of the USAFFE. He later acted as liaison officer with the rank of lieutenant-colonel between the USAFFE High Command and the Philippine Government headed by President Quezon.

In Bataan, Roxas came to the field and bolstered the soldiers' morale. He helped procure badly needed foodstuffs by organizing a blockade runner, the *Legaspi* manned by Captains Luis Conejero and Jose Amoyo. The *Legaspi* was able to make two successful trips before it was scuttled to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy.

Bataan was smouldering in ruins. Final defeat was to come in a matter of days, and Quezon had to go. It was not remarkable that he insisted on Roxas coming along. Quezon was old, and so too was Osmeña. It was apparent that the old leader was conscious of the future role of Roxas for the country. He wanted to make sure that in case he or Osmeña, were disabled, there could still be someone who could take the reins of government.

But Roxas was adamant in not going. His whole stand was predicated on the thought of his country. "My place is right here in my country," he said. Roxas knew the danger of leaving the country in the hands of leaders who might betray the country to the enemy. He wanted to remain and avert this tragedy, or if this could not be possible, to suffer with his countrymen. Before Quezon departed from Corregidor, he made two orders. The first was the delegation to Roxas of all extraordinary powers vested on the President by the Philippine Congress. The second was the order of succession to the Presidency, whereby, if by the exigencies of war, Quezon, and after him, Osmeña, may suffer death or incapacity, Roxas was to become president until a successor would be duly elected. It was a testimonial of proven faith and trust.

In Mindanao, Roxas saw President Quezon set off for Australia. Ten days after the capitulation of Corregidor and after General Wainright had issued the general order of surrender to all USAFFE forces in the Philippines, Roxas now raised to the rank of Brigadier-General, thin, haggard and sickly, was forced to give up himself in Malaybalay. Given internal command of the camp, he helped fight down the monotony of prison life which threatened to cut the ebbing morale of his fellow soldiers. When the prisoners were finally released from Malaybalay, General Roxas refused to go until he saw the last Filipino internee out of the camp.

His associates in Malaybalay shared with him the thoughts of organizing a nation-wide guerrilla movement. In Manila, the nerve center of the enemy, he was to form a daring espionage ring working in coordination with various guerrilla units in Luzon. Two Elizalde brothers (Juan and Manuel), Generals Lim, De Jesus, Segundo and Natividad, Senator Jose Ozamiz and some other prominent leaders were killed by the Japanese when the ring was uncovered. Roxas and two or three others escaped miraculously.

Not knowing the guerrilla connections of Roxas, General Waeti, chief of staff of Commander-in-Chief Tanaka, and Syozo Murata, adviser of the Military Administration, took turns in convincing him to take active participation in the puppet Philippine Government. He came dangerously near death when he refused alleging that his illness prevented him from accepting the office. Even the physicians sent by Premier Tojo from Tokyo to personally attend to Roxas were not able to remedy his "sickness"

His refusal to serve in any important office was a signal to the people for continued resistance. This is not to say that the alleged collaborators were traitors. He knew that other leaders were making sacrifices of their own. In the later part of the Occupation, he himself consented to head the Economic Planning Board and the **Bigasang Bayan** (BIBA) in the hope that he could alleviate to some degree the acute food shortage. After liberation, as President of the Republic, he gave amnesty to the collaborators.

In his home in Taft Avenue, the ranking members of the government almost daily went to hear his views on important questions at issue. He was able in this way to influence the leaders to take up the constitution of 1943 with minor changes, as the basic law of the puppet government. He was also instrumental in advising Laurel to declare a state of war, which was only a statement of an existing fact, to beguile the Japanese who were insisting on a declaration of war against the United States whose armed might was fast pressing forward to the Philippines from the Pacific. Leyte came. Then American convoys landed in Pangasinan.

One day, in the mountains near Baguio, an American advance patrol came face to face with a haggard man, thin and very sickly. He wore a USAFFE uniform and had one star each on his shoulder straps. It was Brigadier-General Manuel Roxas. MacArthur was happy to know that the man about whom Quezon had worried very much was alive. Roxas was assigned to general headquarters as assistant chief of G-2.

Roxas was deeply conscious of the situation in which the nation found itself at the end of the war. There was a long hard way to nor-

maly. So much of his country was broken down, physically and morally. Houses in large portions of the country had been burned down. Education was at a standstill. The economy was shattered, the government coffers empty. Moreover, there was a dearth of honest and self-sacrificing men. Immediately upon his election as President of the Commonwealth, succeeding Sergio Osmeña, he campaigned vigorously for the approval of the Bell Bill which was an invitation for the investment of badly needed American capital in the Islands. The overwhelming acceptance of the Bill despite charges that Roxas was selling away the patrimony of the nation, was proof of complete confidence of the people in him.

Peace and order was another serious challenge that faced his administration. Armed peasants who once fought the Japanese now turned their arms against their government. Roxas knew that there were grave and serious iniquities in the *kasama* system. Even before the war, he had suggested to President Quezon the giving of a more equitable share to the tenant. This was forestalled by the war. But he was resolute in implementing the reforms. He outlined a program based on the following principles: (1) purchase of big estates and redistribution of the land to the people; (2) settlement of the undeveloped areas; (3) increased shares of crops for peasants; (4) modernization of agriculture. All this was to be done under a system of free enterprise. To this direction he arranged to be acquired large church estates and private haciendas for resale on easy terms to the peasants. The 70-30 Tenancy Rice Sharing Law was passed. The farmers were given priority in the purchase of machineries in the various surplus depots in the country.

Despite all these, disorder reigned in Central Luzon. Roxas continued to offer the dissidents an invitation to a lawful life and tried to prevail on them to seek reform under democratic processes. Apparently the question was not merely one of social reform. Evidences had been captured showing affinity of the local Huk movement with a foreign ideology. That much the President could not serenely watch. His was the lawful government. He must uphold the integrity of that government and the country which voted it into power. On March 6, 1948, he issued a presidential declaration outlawing the Hukbalahap and the **Pambansang Kaisahan ng mga Magsasaka** (PKM) organizations headed by Luis Taruc and Mateo del Castillo, respectively.

The declaration was met with opposition from various political quarters. Many averred that the Huks were merely seeking reforms. But under President Quirino, six months later, it became manifest that the Huks were adverse to living peacefully under a government other than their own chosen ideology.

President Roxas gave the Filipino veterans, their widows and children, a bill of rights not dissimilar to the American GI bill of rights. To increase government revenues, he asked and secured from Congress a revision of the tax laws. The government machinery was streamlined. All unnecessary offices were abolished, and those requiring help were bolstered with the proper funds. He secured the authorization of the United States Congress for a loan of 150 million. He negotiated for the transfer of vast surplus piles worth ₱1,274 million as well as for ₱50 million cash for the redemption of guerrilla currencies and other obligations incurred by the United States Army in the Islands during the war. He attended to the needs of educational development by appropriating an extra amount of ₱16,715,000 at the start of his administration for the maintenance of additional classes. Roxas also undertook a sweeping attack on corruption in the government. He negotiated with the United States a treaty of amity, another treaty giving to the United States use of some bases in the Islands as well as a treaty of military assistance. A treaty of amity was also negotiated with China. Working close with Vice-President Quirino, Roxas laid down a definitive foreign policy based on a close cooperation with the United States and the United Nations.

Roxas urged the people to make mass agricultural and industrial production; he was successful in warding off famine which stalked the land on his assumption of office. He instituted rice rationing and gave everybody the chance to buy rice at low prices. He asked for rice allocations from the International Food Commission. Irrigation systems were rehabilitated. Financial loans were given to the needy farmers. Seedstocks of rice were commandeered from those who had plenty and distributed to the poor tillers of the soil. House rentals were subjected to strict regulations. He provided the government employees and laborers with decent wages commensurate with their work. Roxas also ordered that the laborers in the employ of the government should not resort to strike to secure their demands. He proposed the establishment of a Central Bank to manage Philippine economy and save the peso from the shocks of inflationary and deflationary trends. In the conference of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East held in Baguio in 1947, he advocated drastic reduction of tariffs and lowering of trade barriers among the different countries in Asia to facilitate trade among them and to encourage production in their respective countries.

We come close to the end of his life. More than a year ago, on March 10, 1947, a man named Julio Guillen attempted to assassinate him. Roxas was seated on the platform in Plaza Miranda after having delivered a speech advocating acceptance of the Bell Trade Act when a grenade fell a few paces from his feet. Someone was able to kick

the grenade off the platform. It fell below the stairs where it exploded injuring many people but sparing the President. Roxas was saved from the hand of the assassin but he was not able to escape the strain of heavy work.

On April 13, 1948, he was commencement speaker in the University of the Philippines where he was honored with a degree of doctor of laws. The following day he gave a reception in honor of Ambassador Emmet O'Neal in Malacañan. On April 15, 1948 he visited Clark Field as guest of the United States Air Force. At two o'clock in the afternoon, he made a brilliant speech reiterating a pledge of Philippine-American amity. In the midst of his speech, his voice quivered with an unmistakable sign of strain. The dreaded crisis came. At 9:25 in the evening while Army doctors and his private physicians feverishly and valiantly fought a losing battle, President Manuel A. Roxas quietly breathed his last. The morning after, the people woke up to hear the dreadful news of their leader's passing. As the tragic news reached every part of the Philippines, the whole nation was plunged in grief. Sorrow fell as the full impact of the words broadcast over the radio was grasped by his 18-million countrymen. Henceforth, Manuel A. Roxas, "soldier, statesman, patriot, friend of the common man, champion of democracy, architect and builder of the Nation",¹ belongs to the ages.

¹ Inscription on the tomb of Manuel A. Roxas at the *Cementerio del Norte*.

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Where law begins, tyranny ends.

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