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BOOK REVIEW

This lawyer has a message: know thy rights; and a mission: assert and protect them.

The struggle goes on

By ANGIE CRUZ

It was in 1972 that I first met Reuben Seguritan, a "bagong salta" who got trapped in New York when martial law was suddenly declared in the Philippines. He had just started his law practice back home, and he had no aspirations to live and work in the U.S. He happened to be here because he was a resource speaker in an international youth seminar sponsored by an American ecumenical group. Reuben knew it was not safe for him to go home at that time, his name having been included in the first black list made public after the Plaza Miranda bombings. As a radical student activist at the U.P. only a few years back, Reuben was among those who initiated rallies and demonstrations, and successfully convened a national conference on student power in Diliman. Hence, he had no choice but to stay here while times were precarious in his native land.

Reuben's stay got extended time and again. Pretty soon he was part of the "Philippine brain



drain." The Philippines' loss became America's gain. An "exile" of a repressive regime, he has evolved to be one of the strongest pillars of the Filipino-American community. Since his admission to the New York Bar in 1974, Reuben has been chosen legal counsel by an impressive number of community organizations. Among the first of these was the Philippine Americans for Community Action and Development which we co-founded. Reuben was involved with most of PACAD's activi-

ties, particularly those directed towards political empowerment. He joined the pioneers among us, led by Tim Magistrado, in our efforts to be counted as Democrats in national and local elections. I can still remember our excitement when we became the first Filipino-Americans to be invited to the White House by then President Jimmy Carter, to discuss possible amendments to the immigration law, and the amnesty to be granted to illegal aliens.

Reuben's efforts to educate

Filipino immigrants on the importance of political empowerment and his advocacy efforts on their behalf, earned him the Presidential Award for Filipinos and Private Organizations Overseas

in 1993, in addition to other awards he has garnered through the years. The tools he used to achieve his mission were his speaking and writing skills which have already been exceptional



during his college days. He gave free lectures on the rights of Filipino immigrants in several seminars sponsored by the Philippine Consulate in New York from 1986 to 1995. A prolific writer, he submitted articles to various Filipino newspapers and magazines, including *Ningas-Cogon*, *Philippine Times* and others. He was a columnist for *The Filipino Reporter* for many years. The culmination of all those years of writing is his newly-released book, **We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Door: The Filipino-American Experience**.

We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Door: The Filipino-American Experience is a collection of essays written within the span of 25 years. The cover grabs the attention of readers immediately, and this is to be expected, since the design is a commissioned artwork by Jordin Isip, a prize-winning illustrator whose works have been found in mainstream magazines. Though the essays were written separately at various times, there is an underlying theme through them all: Reuben's vision for the Filipino American community and its quest for recognition and strength as a people. The book is well-organized, the sections and the chapters that went into each of the sections well-planned. It is easy to read and easy to understand.

The book covers a wide range of issues and describes myriad personalities that each and every reader can identify with at least one of them.

We Didn't Pass Through the Golden Door: The Filipino-American Experience is a successful attempt to chronicle the Filipino immigrant experience in the 20th century by presenting colorful vignettes of real people Reuben has met through the years. Very touching are his accounts of the old-timers. Rather than excerpting from history books and sociological treatises, Reuben wrote about his first-hand knowledge of and personal experiences with them, since a number of his relatives were among the "manongs." Of nostalgic interest to me are the essays on Severino Foronda and the late Ralph Langit. Though these esteemed men started way ahead of us in the struggle, our paths crossed sometime in the seventies. We joined forces in political rallies. We learned from their experiences, and they were excited and hopeful of the efforts of their younger compatriots.

The problems Reuben mentioned among the domestics and the mail-order brides became very real to us because he presented them as deplorable stories of real people with real names. In like manner, instead of merely pontificating about the qualities we should aspire to develop, he provided us with real-life role models in top businesswoman Loida Nicolas-Lewis and Lilia Clemente and Hawaii governor Benjamin Cayetano.

The chapters on discrimination against veterans, nurses and doctors were clearly written. They showcased his ability to write

about legal issues without the dreaded legalese. Had he included the pertinent dates and references, each of the chapters could have been "law made easy" precis.

Reuben had no reservations in exposing the problems and travails of Filipino immigrants, caused mainly by the government of their chosen new country, but he was impartial enough to point out that Filipinos are also partly to blame for the negative image they project. At one time or another, I am sure we all have shared Reuben's frustrations with our petty squabbles, disunity, mindless socializing. (It was comforting to read that our very own Jose Rizal experienced the same frustrations while on exile to Madrid.) Perhaps, we can also share in Reuben's optimism and belief that we have what it takes to make it in the U.S. We just have to "re-image" ourselves.

In "Connecting with the Homeland," the last section of the book, Reuben captures a common sentiment among Filipino-Americans: the deeply rooted desire to go back home no matter how successful they may have become in the U.S. Many of us who came here on the third or fourth wave of Filipino immigration, still think that the Philippines is the place to retire. Reuben could not hide his bullishness on the Philippines, as it takes its place among the young Asian economic tigers.

I truly enjoyed reading Reuben's book, as a sociologist who is fascinated by the Filipino-American experience, as a member of the Filipino American community who has witnessed most of what he wrote about, as a friend who has been with him in the struggle. My question to Reuben is, "When is the next volume coming out?"