



Fresh off the Boat

Experiences of Immigrants in America

We Didn't Pass through the Golden Door:

A story of the Filipino immigration to America and the hardships they faced due to discrimination

REVIEW WRITTEN BY MATT LUTWEN | BOOK WRITTEN BY REUBEN S. SEGURITAN

This book discusses the significant moments in the history of Filipino immigration to the United States as well as the trials and tribulations with racial prejudice in the workplace faced by the Filipino migrants. Reuben S. Seguritan shares personal as well as family adversities endured after coming to America. He then discusses the achievements of Filipino Americans in civil as well as political matters. The book is a critical part of contemporary literature on the struggles faced by Filipino immigrants.

"Nurturing my heritage of culture from the homeland, I have tried to speak out for Filipinos. I have written on the plight of our veterans, nurses, doctors, domestic helpers, mail-order brides, and other countrymen and women in distress. I have felt it my duty as a lawyer to expose oppressive U.S. laws that discriminate against Asian Americans, Filipinos in particular." (1) Seguritan's inspiration was also noted in his family history, especially, his grandfather. In the 1920's, right before the Great Depression, his grandfather made the journey to America, moving from the woodlands of Northern Luzon in the Philippines. Once in America, he became a railroad worker, laying railroad tracks among the other migrants in the growing American countryside. Seguritan's mother's brother came at about the same time, and worked as a sugarcane cutter in Hawaii, and then later worked as a grape-picker in California. The husband of Seguritan's father's sister arrived and joined the U.S. army in 1942, and along with him, came Seguritan's father.

Five decades after Seguritan's grandfather came to America, Seguritan made the journey. However, his intentions differed from the rest of his family. In September of 1972, Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines. With news of tortures, arrests, assassinations, and salvagings, Reuben S. Seguritan knew he could not go back home. Seguritan was on the military blacklist for his work as a lawyer for the student and labor movements. "We were exiles of a repressive regime who have chosen to seek home in this land." (2) Originally, Seguritan came to America to be a resource speaker in an international youth seminar, as a guest from an American ecumenical group. This initially brief stay turned into more than two decades of working with the Filipino American community in New York. "Perhaps, too, it was as my relatives wished, that I stayed longer, nurturing the dreams as they had. After all, I come from a family of migrants claiming space in the vast expanse of America. Maybe I needed to suffer a little like the farm workers of Hawaii and California or experience the adventure-at once thrilling, nerve-wracking and frustrating-of workers who maintained the railroad tracks in the Pacific Northwest." (3)

In 1898, after Spain failed to take control of Philippines, the United States came in search to imperialize. Thus, the tired Filipinos surrendered and the United States gained the Philippines as a colony. Spain and the United States brought devastation and poverty to the consciousness and culture of the Filipino masses. "It could be said that except for those in Mindanao in the South, the Filipinos had lost almost everything they had to the colonizers and were left with almost no choice but seize the opportunity to migrate to other places in their struggle to survive." (4) Ethnographic data found by Marina Espina, an associate librarian at the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans, shows the Filipinos were in America as early as 1763. On December 20th, 1906, a small group of fifteen Filipinos arrived in Honolulu on the Doric with 288 Japanese, 130 Chinese, and a few Sikhs. At the time, the Philippines as a United States colony, so the group of Filipinos did not have to go through immigration like the rest of the foreigners. The fifteen Filipinos were called Manongs, the Ilocano word for older brother. Even though there had been Filipinos in Hawaii long before the Manongs, they had been the first to be identified, marking them the start Filipino immigration to the United States.

After the U.S. annexation of the Philippines, tens of thousands of Filipinos were recruited to Hawaiian farms in the early 1900's, and then to the rest of the states in the 1920's. Among all the Asian immigrants, Filipinos had the most familiarity and kinship with the west. Unlike the other ethnicities, the Filipinos immigrated to America not only by the promise of infinite opportunities, but also by the drive of their own colonial mind. "They could only look up to a dream of a golden door of opportunity in the new land." (5) The Filipinos that immigrated to Hawaii in 1906 mostly consisted of Ilocanos. From 1920 to 1929, over 30,000 Filipinos entered California. This group consisted of mostly males under thirty years old. The Manongs who stayed on the farms and canneries on the West Coast had many difficulties with discrimination and oppression. However, their minds were dominantly in a submissive and self preservation state. There were not many people to give them strength in a land that wasn't their home. The white men saw the Filipino workers as economic rivals, and were jealous of their sexuality as well. This led to the application of the California miscegenation law to Filipinos. With the addition, the law then stated that marriage between whites and "Negroes, Mullatoes, or Mongolians, and the Malay Race was prohibited. Many Filipino men were lonely because there were very few women they could pursue. "It is to the Manongs, or the Filipino immigrant laborers, that we trace our history as an immigrant group in America, and as mentioned, a lot of that migratory impulse or need goes back as well to Philippine colonial history. All that pain, bitterness, racial oppression, and nostalgia while exacerbated by the basic hostility of the white man's world to people of color, also inheres in our own failure to achieve true freedom for ourselves. The same basic failure accounts for our continuing crisis of identity and nationhood." (6)

<http://apsewell.org/2009/books/lutwen.html>

3/7/2010

Fresh off the Boat // APUSH '09

Page 2 of 3

Numeriano Seguritan, Seguritan's granduncle, represents the Filipino intellectuals who came to the United States before the Depression. He came in 1924, at the age 19, after he had graduated from high school in the homeland. Numeriano comes from Cubagua, Ilocos Sur. "Like many of the starry-eyed migrant dreamers, he came to America with the earnest hopes of making it big." (7) He started out as a grape picker and farm worker, beginning in California and then moving to Seattle. In the winter, he would work at the canneries in Alaska. Then he put himself through college in order to find him a better, less punishing job. Luckily, a professor of his took him in as a houseboy and looked over him throughout his college education. Numeriano achieved a degree in Linguistics and Philology at the University of Washington. Even at a time when racism was at its strongest, his grades were mostly A's. He studied 17 languages, and could write and speak fluently in nine of them. Even with his Bachelor's and Master's degree, he could not get the job that he wanted for himself. He was discriminated against, as were the other non-white migrant workers. Numeriano ended up going from one job to the other, most of them manual labor. His college degrees did not help much during the Depression years, and it was difficult to survive each day. However, he was highly regarded as "one of the most brilliant among the luminaries of the Filipino intellectuals of Seattle." (8) Numeriano always had faith that the "Filipino world" would emerge triumphant. In the mid-fifties he left to apply as a teacher at the universities back in Manila. It was tough for him to adjust because, "he felt displaced but gradually found fulfillment where he belonged and although he had already adopted American citizenship by then, he lived a good part of his productive life from the fifties to mid-seventies, teaching language courses at the University of the Philippines and in other universities in Manila." (9) Although he went back and forth from America to the Philippines, he had always felt a sense of purpose and an unflinching national pride which guided him through his journeying. Once the Philippines were granted their independence in 1946, Filipino intellectuals and professionals in America have had a much easier time pursuing their interests in their desired job fields.

Reuben's main purpose is to spread awareness of the injustice, discrimination, and hardship, that the Filipinos in America have faced. He wants to spread the positive aspects of the Philippines and descendants in America. "Let us build on the confidence of our people with words and deeds. Words and gestures must be consistent. Efforts must be sustained to ease the distress of moral, economic, political, and economic recovery." (10) Seguritan knows that the Filipino people in the U.S. are not recognized as highly as they deserve. However, most Filipinos are too busy trying to get by in their hard lives to care enough to spread positive notions of their culture.

Seguritan's point of view of America is strong, critical, yet very much logical because of his in depth knowledge on Filipino immigration to America. The bad sides that he has seen are not projected through American sponsored television, radio, and newspapers. Thus, his views are not popular perception. "America should not complain; she has been mining a lot of our natural resources and now has got many of our best minds. Was it not that American history is basically a history of immigrants? And what a big empire it has become probably owing to the contributions of the best minds that it has absorbed from Asia, the Philippines, and from all over the world." (11)

Filipino literary critics have highly regarded Seguritan's book as an eye-opening message that should be read by anyone interested in Filipino immigration to America. One of these critiques, Libertito Pelayo, passionately stated that "This book adds a new dimension to the culture and character of the immigrant uprooted from the old sod. In the case of the Filipinos who in time embraced a second nationality, the experience was wrenching but somehow were able to come to grips with a host of problems inherent in naturalization. Seguritan's book eloquently captures the agony and ecstasy of the immigrant colony, as a group or as a person." (12) The other critique, Edgar B. Badajos, stated that "The book is a treasure which every one of our Kababayans in America who cares about their past and are concerned about the future ought to have. I hope that the book also finds its way (if it has not done so already) into private libraries (and consciousness) of our compatriots back home." (13)

Reuben Seguritan is a vital component in the rise of Filipino appreciation and recognition all over the world, but essentially in America, where he does his work. If, "every migrant Filipino uncertain of his role, to finally get involved to help build national dignity and recognition" so that Filipino Americans would not only, "erase doubts but also confirm the strengths of Filipinos as a people and our position of equality with all other races." (14), Seguritan will feel that his book was the upmost success. However, previous to reading his book, We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door, most Americans have little knowledge of the walls that Filipinos have faced to get where they are to today in America. These hardships are not taught in elementary schools, middle schools, or even high schools in America today. Is this to preserve the U.S. "image" of equality and freedom? If we hide the truth from the youth, they will grow up to be unaware to the hardships that Seguritan and other Filipino leaders work to spread. The masses of ignorance are always going to be the stronger opponent to the minorities who deserve more acknowledgment and respect.

Past Filipino migrants worked farms on the Hawaiian Islands and California, as well as canneries in Alaska. Seguritan's relatives offer the many different experiences that Filipinos have dealt with throughout the tough years. They led hard lives every day, even the highly skilled intellectuals or artists, because of ignorance and discrimination by the white men. At the start of the twentieth century, Asian Americans were demoted to the term "Orientals", which, "exuded an image quite alien and incomprehensible to Americans, the pressure to limit their entry and assimilation into American society became even stronger." (15) The Immigration Act of 1924 allowed virtually unrestricted immigration from western and northern Europe to America. Sadly, American immigration denied "Orientals" eligibility for citizenship though some were already in the U.S.

1946 is the year that separates past and present Filipino immigration. Even though times are much easier now for Filipino immigrants, there are still hardships because they are part of a lowly recognized minority. Filipino veterans had waited long to receive the benefits, as well as a promised citizenship, for helping America during World War II. Filipino nurses and doctors have always faced oppression in their fields. Today, Asia outnumbers Europe in immigrants to America due to the Immigration Act of 1965. Seguritan says the Filipino population in America has the potential for so much more; however, the fault is that "Not many are that farsighted." (16) Back in the Philippines, the Filipino government is progressing the way Seguritan would like to see it do. "The Philippine government has launched in Manila a new initiative which places overseas Filipinos in the ring of the country's economic agenda. For the first time, the government has given serious indications that it is willing to consider incentives for foreign-based Filipinos in an attempt to court much needed investments into the country." (17) Seguritan says this is a good start, although much more needs to be done.

"Immigration to America has the longest history, the most challenging, and the most sought. Despite fifty years of American colonization of the islands-including documented accounts of American atrocities against Philippine Independence forces, especially in the early part of this century, despite anti-American sentiments spawned by the student activist movement leading to the dismantling of the U.S. military bases in 1991, Filipinos have not stopped coming to America." (18) Reuben S. Seguritan has the utmost pride for his heritage and the Filipino community. Currently, he is advocating the message of spreading new light to the "Filipino Image" to the rest of the world. The world's general perception of the Philippines is not one to be proud of; most would say the Philippines is a country of poverty, crime, complaints, and brownouts. However, this depressing perception is formulated because of the Filipinos themselves, and the way they talk of their homeland. Seguritan wants his fellow Filipinos to take more pride in their country, to talk of their colorful traditions, healthy culture, exotic food, and fine areas of entertainment. Through this, the Filipino community in America can rise up and gain more respect and recognition that they have worked tirelessly for and deserve. "The average Filipino American often bewails the litany of woes plaguing the home country...Yet, to speak of the country in these terms as a way of introducing the Philippines to others is also a way of tarnishing the image of his

<http://apsewell.org/2009/books/lutwen.html>

3/7/2010

Fresh off the Boat // APUSH '09

Page 3 of 3

origins. This kind of imaging for the Philippines eventually belittles all Filipinos before the world. This injurious national habit must cease. It is time to speak of the country with pride and hope. After all, it has been a while since Filipinos have spoken of their country in loftier terms. It may be the time to reassess achievements and chart a future beneficial to us all." (19) Throughout the book this is the general message the Seguritan stressed very repetitively, and rightfully so, for it is very important that the potential of the Filipino community continues to be fulfilled.

Endnotes

1. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (3)
2. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (2)
3. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (2)
4. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (11)
5. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (12)
6. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (16)
7. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (17)
8. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (19)
9. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (20)
10. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (223)
11. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (47)
12. Libertito Pelayo. Publisher/Reporter. The Filipino Reporter. New York.
13. Edgar B. Badajos. Consul. Philippine Consulate General of New York.
14. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (26-27)
15. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (36)
16. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (174)
17. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (226)
18. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (4)
19. Seguritan, Reuben. We Didn't Pass Through The Golden Door. United States of America: Institute for Filipino American Research, 1997. (223)

<http://apsewell.org/2009/books/lutwen.html>

3/7/2010