From barrio boy to ambassador — Part I

Dionisio's rise is as kilometric as his titles

by Teresa Dolasco

He is slender and tallish (5'8½, 138 pounds) and his hair is gray (" With streaks of dark struggling hard to survive," he adds with an impish smile and nervousness is the word. He looks somewhat frail but that look is deceiving when you discover that he plays golf at least once a week and pulls his golf cart, instead of him, which means he walks the course instead of riding a golf cart, and that on Sundays he spends the whole day gardening in his yard in Hollywood or his daughter's in Redondo, planting vegetables and flowers and things. He proves it to you by showing his palms, you are appalled to see calluses on them.

"Calluses are no strangers to my hands," he smiles. " Back home when I was a kid I was always out in the fields or the woods with my trusty bolo chopping at things. I was a barefoot barrio boy, you know, born in a nipa hut. When I came to America in 1936 I worked in the lettuce and tomato fields in California and the salmon canneries in Alaska. I was 18 and I worked my way through high school (Aberdeen, Washington) and college (University of Washington, Seattle). I am no stranger to work."

He pauses and turns his swivel chair sideways to better his eyes thoughtfully at the still waters of Pearl Harbor just a block from Kamehameha Highway.

"Of course," he resumes turning his swivel chair back to face me, "that kind of work stopped when I joined the service of the Philippine government. It happened in 1944 in the middle of World War II when men were being drafted. Manuel L. Quezon, himself, President of the Philippine Commonwealth inside and in me, after asking if I was married and how many children I had. 'Well, you are now in government.' He didn't say, 'Would you like to join the government service?' or 'Would you accept a job in the government?' He said, 'You are now in government.' Period.

"That was President Quezon. I was no less sure to my relief's eye, lying there in his hospital bed, his face and hair white as bedsheets, his wing, Jesús Fábara holding the report Colonel Romulo had suggested I write to be sent ahead to Miami Beach for more fun and for him to down, reading paper. He is gone as he gazes thankfully out of the window to the sea through the grove of coconut trees. We are on the second floor bedroom and the view outside is breathtaking. Mrs. Quezon and I are sitting on straight-backed chairs close to the bed, with me nearer to the President, the order for him to hear me. It is no point in the room I've always been our watchdog. Then the President breaks the silence.

'Dionisio, do you see those coconut trees outside?'

'Yes, Mr. President.'

'I only live for the day I can see the coconut trees in our country again.'

Mrs. Quezon breaks into a sad and pawky smile at it recalling a big lump in my throat.

There was a long pause...Dionisio was silent and unthinking. I recruited. "You bet me, Sir. Where did you come from and how did President Quezon get to Miami Beach, Florida?"

He laughed. "Ah, yes" he said. "But the beginning was so long ago and he even I corrected from Stockton, California where I had lived since 1940 with my wife and our children. I was reconsidering as an associate editor of the Washington D.C. based DIPLOMAT magazine published by Dr. Oondjela W. Tog and I had written an article for the magazine which in effect was addressed to President Quezon, asking what plans the government would take to the participation of the Filipinos in the United States in the rebuilding of the Philippines after the war, like we had World War One) is.

"Dionisio after the article appeared I received a telegram which said, 'Can you come to Washington to discuss plans of government in exile?' The telegram was signed Carlos P. Romulo, Secretary of Information and Public Relations."

"Nobody in the Philippine government knew me from Adam. I told my wife, Irma, 'Somebody's pulling my leg.' So I answered the telegram that I would have written a week and was awaiting further instructions. The instructions promptly came and I knew the first telegram was not from a prankster.

"I'm all in love the President wants to be in Miami Beach. Before Corregidor Fortress fell to the Japanese in April 1942, President Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur to send President Quezon and Vice-

Antonio Gonzalez, president of the Filipino Intercommunity Organization of the Western States, Juan C. Dionisio, resource representative of the Philippine Resident Commissioner, 2nd and 3rd from left, and Leocadio Vivona, Officer-in-Charge of the Office of the Resident Commissioner in the United States (extreme right). July 2, 1988.

President Osmeña and their families to the United States by very obvious reasons. Because Quezon was in the last stages of tuberculosis, he was elevated from Sarasota Lake, New York to Asheville, North Carolina to Miami Beach, Florida. I met President Quezon for the first and only time in January 1944.

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Dionisio...

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On August 1st of the same year, he died, 19 days short of his 66th birthday."

Strong nationalistic in his Pantridge office (and with his books (they belong to his lawyer friend, Ramón Reyes who made the office available to him) was in awed, impressed and delighted browsing to Dionisio. He were barefoot barrio boy also at 16 years of age has lived in world's history, especially of Filipino immigrants of the 1930s, the 1) I'm on he calls them (Old Flowers) whom he regrets are fast disappearing from the scene.

He himself came in 1936, barely 18, and he came via steerage like all the old Filipino immigrants on the ship. But he did not discriminate in Honolulu, for his ticket was 1st Preclass. One is awed and impressed at the distance he had traveled literally from his barrio in Tarlac, Aklan province in Central Philippines, and figuratively at what he has accomplished for himself in his search for dignity.

At 70, he has accomplished more than sometimes others have accomplished in their lifetimes.

At 18, he still has a memory that was small even the most vicious debate of a life rich in history and progress.

At 70, he carries a steady posture and dignified presence that come about as in other years of living the life of a diplomat accustomed to mixing with people of high culture to society and government.

At 70, he has seen all of the Far East and Middle East and he has traveled to automobile from San Francisco to Washington, DC and New York and back to San Francisco, he has also traveled by automobile from Pakistan to Paris via Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Figuratively, he has traveled far, very far from his small barrio in the Visayas as a barefoot boy and yet is inspired to consider the kilometric titles he was given an antidote of those successes - the first one being the "Western Representative of the Resident Commissioner of the Philippines to the United States (1944) and the second "Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of the Philippines" (1988).

In between he was Vice-Consul and Consul in San Francisco and Chicago, acting Consul-General in Honolulu, Chief of Foreign Service Administration, Department of Foreign Affairs, Consul General in Honolulu, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur and finally Ambassador to Pakistan and concurrently Iran, a position he held for nine years from 1980 until his retirement in 1979. In the latter office in Manila, he also served as Special Assistant to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Counselor on Political Affairs.

Dionisio served under all Philippine presidents from Quezon and Osmeña of the Philippine Commonwealth-in-Exile to the presidency of the Republic, from Manuel Roxas, Elpidio Quirino, Ramon Magsaysay, Carlos P. Garcia, Diosdado Macapagal and Ferdinand Marcos.

When he was appointed Consul-General in Honolulu in 1957, Ambassador Romulo wrote to him from Washington, D.C. "I was delighted to know that your ability and competence as well as integrity of character have at long last been recognized." the letter stated. "Dionisio is one I have always seen in you the potential of property surround is a valuable asset to our foreign service..."

Next week: Juan C. Dionisio: The Community leader and journalist

Juan C. Dionisio