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Prologue

The famous saying of the Spanish philosopher George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," had haunted me for years. It became my impetus to write a book as a reminder of the brutal repression under the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship and the role of Filipino and Filipino-American women, still largely unacknowledged, in the struggle to restore democracy in the Philippines.

The process of recalling this traumatic period in Philippine history has become more urgent because so much is at stake. Thirty years after the overthrow of Marcos, the Philippines is on the cusp of another national election, scheduled for May 2016. Marcos's son, Ferdinand, Jr., an apologist for martial law, is running as a candidate for vice president. Young Filipinos, who did not experience martial law, do not have a collective memory of that era. Many who lived through those times have become so frustrated by the worsening graft and corruption that they have expressed openness to some form of iron rule. Some former activists have even questioned whether their years of fighting Marcos were worth it.

Prior to imposing martial law, Marcos was in the final years of his second and final term as president, years marked by a deteriorating economy. His government faced growing opposition from a broad spectrum of Philippine society. Marcos seized on the increasing influence of the Left to rationalize expanding militarization around the country.

The growing unrest raging in the Philippines was part of the worldwide protest against U.S. imperialism. Internationally, students and other activists were taking to the streets, protesting the U.S. role in the Vietnam War, opposing nuclear proliferation, and supporting national liberation struggles.

The Communist Party of the Philippines spearheaded the growing opposition to Marcos. The CPP galvanized a united front of students, workers, peasants, professionals, religious groups, and other nationalists towards a coherent program for bringing change and social justice to Filipinos. The movement called for a national democratic revolution that aimed to eliminate the intractable poverty and inequality resulting from the stranglehold of U.S. neo-colonial domination, semi-feudal system, multinational corporations, and patronage politics. Marcos used his position of power as president to perpetrate these exploitative relations.

On September 21, 1972, President Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines, marking the beginning of 14 years of totalitarian rule by one of the most repressive dictators in the world, supported by the U.S. government.

After four decades of colonial rule, and "granting" their former colony independence in 1946¹, the U.S. managed to protect its economic and military interests through unequal treaties with a country devastated by the Second World War. The trade and military bases agreements were highly favorable to the Americans, assuring the U.S. neo-colonial control of the Philippines.

Describing Washington's imprimatur of Marcos's seizure of power, Raymond Bonner, in

¹ Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino. *The Philippines: The Continuing Past*. Manila: The Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978. 189-206.

his book *Waltzing with a Dictator*, writes: “If Washington had wanted to defend democracy in the Philippines it could have sent a very strong message to Marcos that martial law would not be tolerated, that there would be a cutoff of aid, or some other step taken, if he usurped democracy. No such message was ever sent. And Marcos had reason to be confident that it wouldn’t be.”

Under martial law, tens of thousands of activists were arrested and detained and countless tortured and murdered; women prisoners were raped, subjected to others forms of sexual violence, and killed. Besides clamping down on all civil liberties, the totalitarian state used all branches of its military to spy on citizens and suppress dissent. Soldiers forcibly seized suspected opposition members from their homes and put them in prison camps, where they were subjected to relentless interrogation and inhumane treatment. Some of the best and brightest young Filipinos simply disappeared after being taken by the military and later found “salvaged;”² the bodies of many others were never found. The regime also extended its repression to the Filipino community in the U.S.

The Marcos dictatorship drew out great courage from thousands of women in the Philippines and in the U.S. Despite the exigencies of fighting a dictator, they asserted women’s empowerment and opposed patriarchy within the anti-dictatorship movement.

This book highlights the first person stories of six women who joined the historic struggle against Marcos. I have also included short recollections of my own journey towards activism, and my sister Violeta’s letters from the underground, which helped inspire me to pursue this path.

- Thrust into leadership of the movement during the First Quarter Storm, Aurora “Oyie” Javate De Dios organized demonstrations attended by thousands, denouncing the Marcos repression and U.S. neocolonial control of the country. She worked in the underground for three years, was arrested in 1976, and became a political prisoner.
- Aida Santos’s activism began when she was a student at the University of the Philippines (UP). She and her husband worked in the underground movement, until their arrest and imprisonment four years later. She survived horrifying psychological torture and sexual abuse while in detention.
- Two months before the declaration of martial law, journalist Mila Aguilar went underground, where she became one of the few women in leadership and advocated for women’s equality in the movement. She was imprisoned for two years, released soon after the People Power Revolution that ousted Marcos.
- Defying the traditional image of religious women, Sister Mary John Mananzan supported workers at the first major strike in the country since the imposition of martial law. She witnessed government soldiers savagely beating up strikers – her first encounter with violence – and never looked back, becoming a tireless advocate for political prisoners, informal settlers, women, consumers, and migrant workers.
- A few months after arriving in the Bay Area, Geline Avila, a former student activist at the University of the Philippines who was detained at Camp Crame for two harrowing days,

² During martial law, the military practiced “salvaging,” the term coined for extra-judicial killings of activists, who were tortured and killed in secret locations and their bodies left in public areas as a cautionary tale to others.

joined the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP). She became a leader in the anti-dictatorship movement in the U.S., spearheading nationwide opposition to Marcos' state visit to Washington in 1982.

- In Seattle, Cindy Domingo also joined the KDP after visiting the Philippines (her parents' homeland) and witnessing the poverty and repression under the Marcos regime. For nearly a decade, she led the community effort to achieve justice for the 1981 murders of her comrades, her brother Silme Domingo and friend Gene Viernes, by Marcos' hired gunmen.

My short essays introduce the chapters, each of which represents a major chronological benchmark during the dictatorship; the women's stories help highlight and illustrate that particular period. In the Epilogue, each woman sums up her activism for the reader.

My process for evoking the memories of the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship involved face-to-face interviews with four women in the Philippines and two in the United States, over the course of several years working around their busy schedules. The women participated in hours of interviews at whatever times they could take off from their jobs and advocacy for social justice. We talked at their homes or their offices, at cafes and restaurants. For U.S.-based women, we also held writing retreats in the Bay Area and Seattle, hosted by supportive friends.

While I executed the first and final drafts, the women became actively involved in the editing of their narratives and some wrote significant parts of their stories. The process was not always easy, as the women at times agonized over recalling their difficult experiences and those of their comrades at the hands of the Marcos regime. As the editor, I made the decision to use initials in some of the stories because of concerns about privacy.

It is important to note that the stories in this book are based on the women's recollections of events spanning almost 50 years. Despite my substantial research devoted to this project, there may occasionally be conflict in terms of some facts and details. However, the essence of their narratives remains consistent with the roles they played in the anti-dictatorship movement. Three decades after the end of the Marcos dictatorship, they remain committed to their visions for improving the lives of millions of Filipinos.

May their stories inspire this generation and future generations of Filipino and Filipino-American women. And may everyone always remember to resist any attempt to repeat a repressive past anywhere in the world with a resounding "Never Again!"

-MDG