

Patria Adorada

By Ian Rosales Casocot

That her passing last February 9 seemed to have generated a conspicuous absence of remembrances in Silliman University or Dumaguete City is a shame unworthy of local history: the first Miss Silliman, Patria Obsequio Gonzaga, crowned in 1947, had passed away. She was 84.

It is understandably hard to give the proper obituary honors to a woman whom I barely know, except for the fact of the historical title she first wore. And yet nothing less than a tribute is worth somebody who first set out to redefine what, for many of us Sillimanians, are the (now admittedly queasy-sounding) "quintessence of the Silliman woman."

Indeed, from the very start, the kind of queenly beauty that Patria Obsequio was instantly set apart the kind of pageants we hold in the name of Miss Silliman. This was no ordinary parade of beauties, we have continuously claimed of it: this was instead a celebration of feminine totality, foremost of which are the sharp faculties of having the kind of education one could have in this campus by the sea. Indeed, for most of its history, to be chosen Miss Silliman was to be paragon of fierce reckoning: you win the title not just for the superficial consideration of what is considered "pretty"; you win it because there is substance—and a fierce wit—behind all the glitter.

This was Patria Obsequio's mark, and legacy.

She was not the country's first pageant queen. There had always been, in beauty pageant-crazy Philippines, the traditional beauty titles even before Miss Silliman's first bow in 1947: the annual coronation of the Carnival Queen that started in 1909 during the American colonial period was an even older pageant, and among the early Queens included Paz Marquez Benitez who would be considered as the mother of the Philippine short story in English, whose "Dead Stars" is distinguished as the earliest mature example of the genre. By 1939, on the eve of World War II, no more carnival queens were crowned.

The devastation of the war found a country in utter ruin, and Dumaguete was not spared from the smoke and the inhumanity of three years under Japanese military rule. And yet a certain positive spirit drove many of those who survived the war, and when Silliman reopened its gates to admit students, it saw a spike in enrollment it had never seen before. Part of that euphoria can be attributed to a genuine desire among many to build a better country after the war. Indeed, for Silliman, 1947 was a start of a golden age. It began flexing its muscles as a university of increasing renown that year. That was also the year the school organ, *The Sillimanian*, started soliciting manuscripts for a new folio titled *Sands & Coral*, jumpstarting Silliman's distinguished literary reputation.

That was also the year *The Sillimanian* thought of sponsoring a new contest. In the 7 February 1947 issue of the paper's newssheet, it was announced: "Silliman to Hold Popularity Contest." The short article entailed that it would be a search for "the most

popular coed in campus," that it was open to all female students of Silliman, and that Park, Town (now Ever), and Lux Theaters were donating the prizes. Ballots could be had from the coming issue of the paper.

The ensuing days proved exciting, and the campus was thrown into a loop as it was besieged by a kind of fever unseen in Dumaguete. Balloting was a frenzy, and one after another, the various campus beauties were considered for the plum prize in huge campaigns waged by various student organizations and colleges. In the February 21 issue of the newsheet, it was finally declared that the College of Education's Patria Obsequio, the "sweetheart of the Alpha Sigma Chi," was elected Most Popular Coed with a total of 333 votes out of 1,084. She won a month's worth of tickets to Park Theater (now Unitop), and won the hearts of the Dumaguete community, starting a tradition that would last sixty years. The College of Business Administration's Zeny Cueva, with 252 votes, was adjudged the Cover Girl, and won movie tickets to Town Theater. Evelyn Gentilezo of the College of Education was Headline Girl with 149 votes, and won movie tickets to Lux Theater. It was, according to *The Sillimanian*, "a spirited battle of beauties and personalities."

Why hold the contest? In his editorial in the following issue of the paper, *The Sillimanian's* managing editor Ishmael M. Rodriguez explained the concept behind the whole exercise: "Popularity is the result of a successful adjustment to one's fellows, which is precisely what a college education aims at the training of individuals, in order to give them the ability to adjust themselves successfully to such conditions and circumstances that they most need in this world." The title holder, in other words, becomes iconic for how we successfully adapt ourselves for the success that we seek in the world. Patria Obsequio was that.

By the time 1948 rolled along, her title of Most Popular Coed had been changed to Miss Silliman University (with Leticia San Miguel as the next winner)—but the unique tradition that Ms. Obsequio began continued in the years since then. There are now 59 women who hold this title, each of them accomplished, a roster that would include Palanca Hall of Fame Awardee Elsa Martinez-Coscolluela, Carlisle Dans, Arlene Delloso-Uypitching, and Ninotschka Sierra-Yoldi.

In this simple recounting of biography, Patria Obsequio lived a good and blessed life. She was born in 8 October 1923 in Zamboanga City to Simeon Obsequio and Josefa Torralba, the middle child of seven—but even in childhood, she had always been considered the "star" of the family. She was a writer and a great speaker, and she played the piano proficiently. She also excelled tremendously in high school and college. She was popular and had many friends, and according to her family, "her strong sense of character was grounded by her faith in God that made her survived all the trials that come her way and been victorious."

After she graduated magna cum laude from Silliman University, she married Samson Araneta Gonzaga, with whom she had seven children: Samson Jr. (married to Juliana Garcia), Eric Rolando, Josette (married to Dennis Gustilo), Simon Patrick, Natalie June (married to Rainier Guimera), Jorge Orlando, and Janine (married to Hector Cordero).

She had twelve grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. She was a devoted teacher, and for most of her life, she served faithfully and tirelessly as an officer and active member of various religious and civic organizations.

When I met Patria Obsequio for the first (and the last) time, it was 1996 and when we were celebrating the 50th year of Miss Silliman. We had, by then, reconceived a pageant that was fast showing its age, and when we realized that it was foolhardy to have a Miss Silliman pageant without taking note of its historical impact, we immediately thought of having the whole thing become a showcase of the various achievements of the Miss Silliman title-holders since its inception in 1947.

Of course that meant inviting Ms. Obsequio to come home once more to Dumaguete and take her rightful place as the queen who started it all. And suddenly, at the end of that year's program, there she was, at the tail-end the parade of all the Miss Silliman winners that came after her. I knew that it was a momentous occasion that would never happen again. At the end of the crowning of CD Esguerra as the new Miss Silliman, I hurried to the stage to shake Patria Obsequio's hand, and to welcome her back to the campus. When she smiled, I melted. Even I had to contend with the sudden, unexpected shivers of having touched a part of local history.

"Good evening, ma'am," I said, "It is a great pleasure to have met you." Indeed it was, for one always thinks of history as the wrinkling, sepia pages crumbling in our fingers, something remote and positively bygone. What else could be said than that plain confession of taking pleasure at having beheld history? There she was in front of me, the first Miss Silliman. It was a moment for all time.

And with her passing, we certainly remember Ms. Patria Obsequio with all our hearts.