

MARIA ROSA HENSON, Woman of Courage: 1927-1997

by Lilian Mercado Carreon

Maria Rosa Henson, whom the public called Lola (grandmother) Rosa, stepped through our office doors one morning in 1993, shortly after she came out with her story of rape and torture in the hands of the Japanese army that conquered the Philippines in 1941 and made her a sex slave. She had a cloth wrapped around her shoulders, its ends she held to prevent it from slipping. In her other hand was a white handkerchief, its edges trimmed with white crochet. She walked slowly, taking one small step after another, and quietly took her seat. We sat around her, pleased that she came for this meeting. It was just small talk, the follow-up interview with our director did not happen until days later. It was a pleasant conversation and I watched Lola Rosa as she spoke, not really listening to what she was saying. A black headband sat on top of her head, keeping her short hair in place. But some of the silvery white would not obey and a strand fell loose and dangled from behind her ear. Her wrinkled hand went up to stroke it back to its place. The fingers on those hands were thick and strong, the nails short. Lola Rosa smiled, and her eyes did too. She was a beautiful woman who inherited her looks from her rich landlord father to whom Rosa's mother, at 15, was sent by her impoverished family to work as a maid. This landlord raped Rosa's mother many times and Rosa was the child of those rapes.

Lola Rosa was 14 when World War II broke out. Money became even harder to come by and the family earned by gathering firewood. Rosa was helping do this when she was first raped by three Japanese soldiers. After she was raped a second time, her mother decided to move to the province where Rosa joined the

Hukbalahap, the armed underground Philippine movement as a courier gathering medicines and transporting arms. She was on one of her dangerous missions when she was abducted by Japanese soldiers and brought to a garrison.

In her biography, Lola Rosa described her ordeal. "Every day, from two in the afternoon to ten in the evening, the soldiers lined up outside my room and the rooms of the six other women there. I did not even have time to wash after each assault. At the end of the day, I just closed my eyes and cried. My torn dress would be brittle from the crust that had formed from the soldiers' dried semen... When the soldiers raped me, I felt like a pig. Sometimes, they tied up my right leg with a waist band or belt and hung it on a nail on the wall as they violated me. I was angry all the time. But there was nothing I could do. How many more days, I thought. How many more months? Someday, we will be free..."

But for 50 years, Lola Rosa kept all this inside her. No one knew what had happened to her, not even her children. It was enough, it seemed, that she had survived the ordeal. She was content, she had thought, with having been able to feed and raise three children. She had fought off their poverty by sewing clothes and by washing and ironing other people's laundry. Until one day, she heard a leader of the Philippine women's movement appealing on radio to the sex slaves of the Japanese Imperial Army to stand up and fight for their rights. The appeal would repeat itself over and over in her mind and refused to let go. On September 18, 1992, Lola Rosa became the first sex slave to come out in public. Her courage inspired many more and after only



Rick Rocamora/PCU

two months, 30 more came forward. They were each called "comfort woman."

On August 18, 1997, Lola Rosa died. She had won her measure of justice, had succeeded in making Japan pay her and some other sex slaves damages due them. She had published her story, which she herself wrote by hand on lined sheets for about a year and illustrated. In the book, she said she "felt like a heavy weight had been removed from my shoulders, as if thorns had been pulled out of my grieving heart. I felt I had recovered my long-lost strength and self-esteem." Her sad and anguished life Lola Rosa had survived with grit and grace. Now, finally, peace. ☺

Lilian Mercado Carreon was working with an independent group of investigative journalists when she first met Maria Rosa Henson. Lilian is now with Isis International-Manila.