Benito Soliven: A Patriot for All Seasons

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Benito Soliven was a man for all seasons. I knew him for barely ten years of my own life, but that was time enough for memories of him to accumulate in me that have lasted a lifetime. Many years ago I was invited to appear as guest speaker before the Manila Rotary Club, home to such intimidating personalities as Carlos P. Romulo, Manuel Collantes, Andy Soriano, Hanz Mensley. To get the men assembled there to listen to what I had to say, I reached back to a childhood memory I had of my father. I was only 9 at the time, but already in a biology class. One day, upon arriving home, I ran up to my mother with a question that I didn’t know at the time had the potential to embarrass, “Mama, Mama, how do Lions make love?” Without batting an eyelash, and looking me straight in the eye, she said, “Oh I don’t know, son, you see, your Papa’s Italian.” The gleeful applause I received from my interlocutors reassured me of yet another intervention from Papa. Once again he had come to the rescue by breaking the ice for me.

The young Benito was totally orphaned at the age of 4, with his mother and father dying within months of each other. His closest relative was a sister, who was 10 years his senior. So he grew up more or less alone. A true barrio boy, his early schooling took place in Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur. He later attended the Colegio Seminario in Vigan, which at the time was conducted by the Spanish Jesuits. Its qualifying exam, naturally, was in Spanish, a language he did not understand. To get through that difficulty, he memorized the entire Spanish Galleon Dictionary. He passed the exam, going on to become the Valedictorian of his high school class. He proceeded to obtain a bachelor’s degree (with honors) from that same seminary. He then made preparation to become a priest. But then, one day, Father Guscove, of the Society of Jesus, his confessor, summoned him to the confessional and said to him, “You know, Benito, I am convinced you can do more for the church outside of it than in it…” The young man thereupon packed his
bags, traveled to Manila, and inquired about getting into the country’s premier school, the University of the Philippines. What stunned him was the discovery that its entrance exam was in English, a language he had no knowledge of! So he got hold of an English grammar book, memorized the contents of the *Merriam Webster International Dictionary*, and passed the exam. He gained admission that way into the U.P. College of Law, graduating at the head of his class, summa cum laude. Along the way, he received the Quezon Gold Medal in English oratorical speechwriting, with Quezon himself in attendance, although he was absent from the awarding ceremonies, as he had gone downtown to watch a movie, not in the least expecting to win.

He went on to acquire a Masters Degree in Law, summa cum laude, which was followed upon by a Doctoral Degree in Law, once again, summa cum laude. As a lawyer he operated with a passion, with gusto, handling many, many cases, pro bono. People remembered him for that. When he ran for a seat in Congress at the age of 27, he won over the veteran incumbent, Judge Simeon Roxas, by a landslide. Every subsequent electoral victory was succeeded by another one, including one he enjoyed over Elpidio Quirino, the kingpin of Ilocandia, and his own ninong sa kasal. In Congress he was indefatigable, crafting a great number of legislative proposals, and shepherding them all the way to their enactment into law. This earned him, in the press, the appellation, Congressional Valedictorian. He kept the memory of his beloved alma mater, the University of the Philippines alive in his work. Among the numerous bills he authored was one creating the U.P. Basilan Land Grant, which provided the University with much needed revenues it needed to expand its programs and facilities, and fund scholarships for promising students whose only liability was that they were poor. He authored the law that facilitated the settlement of Mindanao, granting title to lands on both sides of the national highways crisscrossing across it to families signifying their intention, and then actually, settling there. He authored the resolution transforming the legislature itself from the unicameral National Assembly into the bicameral Congress, consisting of a House (with local electoral districts), and a Senate (chosen by the nation from the nation at large), a system continuing to this day. He amended the constitutional provision limiting the President to a single six-year term, so this person could instead serve a first term of four years, and possibly be reelected for another four years. In academe, he
co-founded the Ateneo College of Law, acquainting his students with legal material he had picked up from his own studies at U.P. The free press called him as well the Resident Bishop of Congress because many of the laws he authored contained a moral dimension, such as the one providing for religious instruction in public schools. He also authored the law establishing the Board of Review for Moving Pictures, the ancestor of today’s MTRCB and Optical Media Board. In his legislative politics he was not only forward-looking, he also was a maverick at times.

In the midst of all this, he took some time out to fulfill a personal dream, which was to marry a girl from his own hometown, whom he confessed he had secretly loved ever since she had come into his line of vision as a young girl of twelve, at a testimonial dinner that his townmates, led by her Dad, had organized to celebrate his achievement at the Bar. And do you know, anticipating Bayani Fernando by more than half a century, he arranged to have our home on Herran Street, Manila, painted a bright rosy pink, over our Mother’s objections. He explained, so it would not be difficult for his constituents, coming in from their points of origin in distant Ilocos Sur, to locate him when they needed to. His crowning act of political defiance consisted, however, in his vote of dissent in relation to the deployment in Philippine elections of the block voting system, supported by no less than Manuel Quezon. The system amounted in his mind to the emasculation of true choice in the matter of people’s choice of their own governors. This presented him with the occasion to announce his retirement from politics. Two months later, however, the country was plunged into war.

Benito Soliven elected to fight in that war. As a National Assemblyman, he did not need to. But he left home anyway to join the troops, despite Mama’s entreaties, delivered on her knees, that he stay, if only for their ten young children. I watched as he clasped both her hands in his, and kissed them, gently saying to her that it precisely was for their sake that he needed to go, because one day they would ask him what he did for their country in its time of need. Being a U.P.-trained lawyer, he served on the staff of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, as its Judge Advocate General. When the tide turned against them, he declined the opportunity to flee to safety in Australia. He chose instead to live through the humiliation of surrender, the Death March from Bataan to Capas, many months of cruel incarceration, until finally, stricken
with malaria, his life ebbing away, not yet 44 years of age, with so much yet to be done, in an instant (it seemed) he was gone! Max, my eldest brother, was only 12; I was ten. Our young mother, widowed at the age of 30, was constrained to raise the remaining 9 of us, on her own. By the grace of God, we survived.

You know, it still brings tears to my eyes, but also causes a certain swelling up of pride in myself, to receive from the lips of veteran after veteran, accounts of how my father had virtually saved their lives by passing on to them instead the food and medicine that my mother had, at great risk to herself, succeeded somehow in smuggling into the camp, on the idea that they were for her husband. A retired star-general once wrote (I paraphrase): “Benito helped us not just through small favors such as sharing with us his food and medicine, but through teaching us, showing us what we would gain by facing up to adversity, gutsily, no matter what it took, no matter how rough the going. He gave us reasons to hang on to our pride, even in defeat.” Those words in particular, flashed on screen, have burned themselves in my memory: “He gave us reasons to hang on to our pride, even in defeat.” My old friend and classmate, Ninoy Aquino, once said “konting bato, konting cemento, monumento.” Now if we talk about monuments of stone, Benito Soliven has them. One stands in the main square of his hometown, Sto. Domingo, Ilocos Sur, next to another one of Jose Rizal; another on the Plaza Burgos in the capital city of Vigan. A monument of another sort consists in one of the largest towns in the Province of Isabella, located along a great river, choosing to rename itself, Benito Soliven. A barangay in Basilan similarly chose as its name, Barangay Benito Soliven. The U.P. College of Law, his beloved alma mater, honors him with a monument of yet another sort, by memorializing him with a large and commodious seminar room located next to where you enter to get on its premises. But when I was a child, Papa would read English poetry to us, a true romantic at heart. He felt a special fondness for a poem by Horatio Alger. As I think about him at this moment, I think I understand why. The poem plays itself out as follows: “Wrote my name upon the sand, and trusted it would stand for aye; but, soon, alas! the refluent sea had washed my feeble lines away. I carved my name upon the wood, and, after years, returned again; I missed the shadow of the tree that stretched of old upon the plain. To solid marble next, my name I gave as a perpetual trust; An earthquake rent it to its base,
and now it lies, o'erlaid with dust. All these have failed. In wiser mood I turned and ask myself, 'What then?' If I would have my name endure, I'll write it on the hearts of men."

In his own very short time on this earth, Benito Soliven served his country and his people so very, very well. What memories I have of my father are precious, of course. But those memories have become part and parcel of my own living. They have seeped into his family's blood. By the way we live, we keep him alive in ourselves!

Willie and Ofelia Soliven
blissful in their conjugal retirement from
The Central Bank of the Philippines

Assemblyman, later Major
Benito Soliven