

# A Surgeon By Accident: Rizal and the Medical Profession<sup>†</sup>



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Rizal became a physician almost by accident. It had not been his original intention to take up the medical profession. His best talents and deepest inclinations lay elsewhere.

## *Limited Options*

When Rizal graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the Ateneo Municipal de Manila in March 1877, his options for a future career were limited. Today, a person with his talents and interests would have had an almost unlimited field of choice. In the Manila of 1877 (apart from a few "vocational" courses) only four professions were open: the priesthood or the professions of medicine, pharmacy or law. The priesthood was out of the question: Rizal did entertain the idea of becoming a Jesuit (as he was to state later) but he had decided against it.<sup>1</sup> Medicine or pharmacy did not appeal to him. That left the legal profession. So in July 1877 he enrolled at the University of Santo Tomas in the preparatory course for lawyers.

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<sup>†</sup>In its original text this paper was read at the 90th Annual Convention of the Philippine Medical Association held at the Philippine International Convention Center, Manila, 13 May 1997. It has since been revised, with documentation added.

<sup>1</sup>Rizal to Ponce and other colleagues in Spain, from Paris, 18 April 1879, *Epistolario Rizalino* (hereafter EpR) II. 165-168; also in *Cartas entre Rizal y sus colegas de la Propaganda* (hereafter, Cart col) I. 355-358. For bibliographical data on these works, see Bibliography.

### *The First Preparatory Course*

There were two preparatory courses at Santo Tomas required for those beginning university studies. One was in preparation for medicine or pharmacy, the other for theology or law. The preparatory course for medicine and pharmacy consisted of physics, chemistry and "natural history" (today called biology). The one for theology or law consisted of courses in philosophy. It was in this latter course that Rizal was enrolled in July 1877.

Philosophy was not *terra incognita* for Rizal. His last year at the Ateneo had been devoted to an introduction to scholastic philosophy, namely logic, metaphysics, and ethics. The preparatory course in which he was now enrolled at Santo Tomas meant more of the same: general metaphysics, theodicy, the history of philosophy. In his youthful reminiscences Rizal seemed to think that he did not do well in these courses. That modest claim is belied by the fact that he obtained the highest grades (*sobresaliente*) in all the subjects and by the fact that he was chosen to be the "defender" in the "act" in metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> This "act" was the usual scholastic disputation in which a "defender" propounded and defended a thesis and answered objections proposed by one or more "objectors," all in strict syllogistic form and all in Latin. That Rizal was chosen to be "defender" in such an act would seem to indicate the high opinion of his talents entertained by the two Dominican friars who taught the subjects.<sup>3</sup>

### *Other Activities*

But perhaps Rizal had reason to think that he had not done as well as he might have, because, in fact, he did not devote himself full time to the study of metaphysics and other philosophical questions. At the same time that he was enrolled at Santo Tomas for this course in philosophy, he was also enrolled at the Ateneo for the course in surveying, topography and agronomy, and he also did very well in these subjects,

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<sup>2</sup>*Memorias de un estudiante de Manila* (hereafter, *Memorias*) ch. 6 *ad finem*. (For details, see Bibliography.)

<sup>3</sup>On Rizal's studies at Santo Tomas this paper depends gratefully on Fray Fidel Villaroel, O.P., *Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas* (Manila 1984). (Hereafter, Villaroel.)

obtaining the grade of *sobresaliente* and the top medals in two subjects.<sup>4</sup> As if these were not enough, he also attended classes at the Academy of Fine Arts to perfect his technique in painting, under the same professor who had taught him drawing at the Ateneo.<sup>5</sup>

His simultaneous matriculation at three different institutions was not physically difficult, as all of them were situated within a few blocks of one another in Intramuros, the tiny Walled City of Manila. The Ateneo was on Calle Arzobispo near the western wall overlooking Manila Bay. Santo Tomas was a few blocks away to the northeast, nearer to the Pasig River. The Academy of Fine Arts was a few blocks to the south. Rizal himself lived in various boarding houses, most of them within the Walled City.

That, then, was Rizal's first year as a university student during the school-year 1877-78. In March he went home to Calamba for the summer vacation, and there he received a shock: his mother was unable to recognize him. She had developed cataracts.

It very likely was that incident, more than any other, that induced Rizal to change his mind about his future career. He would be, not a lawyer, but a physician and surgeon. In particular, he would be an ophthalmologist.

### *The Basic Sciences*

This meant that his one-year preparatory course in philosophy had been wasted and that, in his second year at Santo Tomas (the school-year 1878-79), he would have to enroll in the other preparatory course, the one required for medicine. This was called a "*curso de ampliación*" on account of the fact that the students who had bachelor's degrees would already have taken courses in physics, chemistry and natural history. The preparatory course at Santo Tomas involved, in that sense, more of the same. Chemistry was taught by a lay professor, natural history and physics by Dominican friars.<sup>6</sup> Could this have been the basis for

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<sup>4</sup>*Memorias*, ch. 6. See also M.A. Bernad, *Rizal and Spain* (Manila, 1986) p. 34, f.n. 12 (hereafter, Bernad).

<sup>5</sup>Rizal to Lete, from Santa Cruz (Manila), 27 Nov. 1878. EpR I.9; See also Bernad, 36.

<sup>6</sup>Villaroel, pp. 89-97.

the "Class in Physics" described so devastatingly by Rizal in Chapter 13 of *El Filibusterismo*? He compares the physics class at the Ateneo with that at Santo Tomas. At the Ateneo it was taught in the laboratory, with the students performing experiments. At Santo Tomas, by his own account, physics was taught as a philosophical subject, beginning with a definition and proceeding to deduce conclusions therefrom. The lesson, described by Rizal, on the subject of mirrors, began with the definition of a mirror, and went on to ask whether the definition applied to this or that object, etc. Apart from the inept method of teaching, the class was taught by a friar who lacked the basic quality of a good teacher, namely respect for his students. This physics teacher treated his students with contempt.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not Rizal's class in physics was as inept as he describes it,<sup>8</sup> he himself received decent (though mediocre) grades from his two Dominican teachers in physics and natural history: the grade of *aprovechado* (which probably would be like an 80% grade today). From his lay professor in chemistry, however, he obtained the highest grade of *sobresaliente*.<sup>9</sup>

### *First Year Medicine*

Despite the fact that he had to repeat a preparatory course, Rizal did not in the end lose time. For simultaneous to his taking the preparatory course in the basic sciences, he was allowed by a special dispensation to also take the subjects of the first year of the medical course proper. That privilege of doing the preparatory course simultaneously with the subjects of the first year of the medical program was not easily given. The dispensation could be granted only by the governor general on recommendation of the university rector. There are instances of similar petitions having been refused. In that year of 1878, the privilege was granted to only four individuals, Rizal among them.<sup>10</sup> The subjects for

<sup>7</sup>One of the marks of contempt, particularly odious to Filipinos, was the use by many friars of the second person singular (the Spanish "tu") in speaking to Filipinos of whatever social status or educational attainment. On this point see Bernad, pp. 40-43 and 130.

<sup>8</sup>In fairness we should mention that Father Fidel Villaroel, O.P., in his book on *Rizal and the University of Santo Tomas*, dismisses Rizal's description of a physics class as contrary to fact (Villaroel, pp. 70-77).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 89-97.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

the first year of medicine were general anatomy and histology, descriptive anatomy, and exercises in osteology and dissection. At the end of the year he received the grade of *bueno* in all three subjects.<sup>11</sup> In a letter written at this time, Rizal describes his class in anatomy: "I am in the midst of cadavers and human bones, having become myself inhuman . . . I who used to be so delicate."<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his double load at Santo Tomas, Rizal continued his painting lessons. In that same letter he says, "I am now painting heads in oil, and directly from human models." His real interest, however, lay in landscape painting. He also took fencing lessons. In that same letter he says, "My hand shakes because I have just been playing the moro-moro."

It is amazing how anyone could do so many things at the same time, and still do well in them all.

### *Four Years of Medicine*

The faculty of medicine at Santo Tomas was new. It had been organized in 1871, and was therefore only seven years old when Rizal enrolled in it for the first year class of 1878. The first graduates had received the licentiate degree in 1876, two years before. In 1875 the medical faculty had acquired a building where the academic lectures were given. But the clinical classes were held at the San Juan de Dios Hospital, where the physicians were also professors on the medical faculty. It was in those buildings, both located within the Walled City, that Rizal took his first four years of the medical course.<sup>13</sup>

It might be mentioned in passing (although extraneous to our present subject) that in 1875 the Santo Tomas faculty of medicine had obtained an endowment for its support which had also made possible the construction of its building. The endowment was made possible by

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 97-102

<sup>12</sup>Rizal to Lete, from Sta. Cruz (Manila), 18 April 1879, EpR II. pp. 165-168.

<sup>13</sup>The subjects of the second year of medicine were a continuation of those of the first, with the addition of Physiology and Hygiene (public and private). In the third year: General Pathology and its clinic; Surgical Anatomy and Operations, Therapeutics, Materia Medica, the Art of Prescribing. In fourth year, Medical and Surgical Pathology, Obstetrics, Sicknesses of Women and Children, Spillography (Villaroel, pp. 102-118).

the diversion of the funds of the “Colegio de San Jose” foundation, a seminary foundation, toward the support of the faculties of medicine and pharmacy.<sup>14</sup> The history of the “Colegio de San Jose” is an interesting chapter in the cultural, economic, and legal history of the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>

### *High Mortality*

Although Rizal’s grades in the medical course were not brilliant, they were not at all bad, in view of the fact that the student attrition rate at the medical course was high. Rizal began the first year of medicine in 1878 with a starting class of 28. By the time he had gotten to his fourth year, that number had dwindled to only nine, of whom only seven took the examinations<sup>16</sup>

### *Other Activities*

Rizal’s survival with decent grades through four years of medicine was remarkable, considering the fact that, besides his study of medicine, he

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup>The “Colegio de San Jose” was endowed in 1601 as a residential college for students for the priesthood studying at the Jesuit College of Manila. It received a royal charter. At the time of the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Philippines in 1768, both institutions were taken over by the Spanish Crown. The Jesuit College of Manila (Universidad de San Ignacio) later became the Colegio de San Carlos, predecessor of the modern Seminary of that name. The College of San Jose continued under its name and for a time became a secondary school. Paciano Mercado, Rizal’s older brother, studied there before taking up law at Santo Tomas. In 1875 the Colegio de San Jose endowment was converted to the support of the Santo Tomas faculties of medicine and pharmacy. Under American Occupation the Insular Government claimed it as “government property” like other *obras pias*. The case was elevated to both the Philippine and the U.S. Supreme Courts and it was decided that the Colegio de San Jose was a religious foundation and, as such, under Church jurisdiction. Whereupon Pope St. Pius X (in 1910) ordered the Colegio de San Jose endowment restored to the Jesuits to be used for the original purpose intended by the donor, namely, the training of priests. It gave rise to the present San Jose Seminary. On its early history see W.C. Repetti, *Jesuit Education in the Philippines: The Colegio de San Jose* (Manila 1941). See also H. de la Costa, *The Jesuits in the Philippines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) pp. 196-197, and elsewhere *passim*. The later history of San Jose awaits the researcher and historian.

<sup>16</sup>Villaroel, 94, pp. 116-117.

was involved in many other activities. We have seen how, during the preparatory course at Santo Tomas, he was also enrolled in the class of surveying and agronomy at the Ateneo, and was also taking lessons in painting. The painting lessons continued throughout his five years at Santo Tomas. He was also (as we saw) taking lessons in fencing, the popular sport of the young Filipinos in Manila and Madrid: they all wanted to become master swordsmen.

Moreover, throughout his five years at Santo Tomas, Rizal was active at the Ateneo as an officer of the *Congregación Mariana* (the Sodality of Our Lady) and of the Ateneo Academy of Science and Letters. It was as a member of the *Congregación* that he wrote his "zarzuela" *Junto al Pasig*, which was produced at the Ateneo on 8 December 1880, when Rizal was a third year student of medicine at Santo Tomas. The music for the *zarzuela* was composed by the organist of the Manila Cathedral, Blas Echegoyen.<sup>17</sup>

In the previous year, 1879, a poem of his won a prize in a public literary contest in Manila. It was entitled *A la juventud filipina* (To the Filipino Youth), his first manifesto as a nationalist.<sup>18</sup> That poem had been awarded the first prize in a double contest in which the works of Spaniards were judged separately from those by native Filipinos. But in 1881, when he was in third year of medicine, there was a literary contest open to all, regardless of race: Spaniards and non-Spaniards competed on equal terms. The occasion was the 360th anniversary of Magellan's coming to the Philippines. Well-known writers participated, including a Spanish friar and a Spanish journalist. The entries were (as usual) submitted anonymously, with the real name of the author in a sealed envelope. The judges chose as winner a prose composition entitled *El Consejo de los Dioses* (The Council of the Gods). To the amazement of some and the dismay of others, it was discovered that the author of the winning entry was neither a Spaniard nor a well-known writer, but an *indio* named Rizal.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The text of *Junto al Pasig* is in *Poesías por Jose Rizal*, 99-113 (hereafter, *Poesias*). For a good literary critique of the musical play, see Nick Joaquin, *Rizal in Saga* (Manila 1996) ch. 19, pp. 141-150.

<sup>18</sup>Text in *Poesías*, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup>Text in *Prosa por Jose Rizal*, p. 1 ff.

There were other extra-curricular activities engaged in by Rizal. On Sundays and holidays he visited his girl friends. (He seems to have had many.) And he organized a fraternity inspired by the romantic adventure stories of Alexandre Dumas about the three musketeers and the companions of Jehu.<sup>20</sup>

In shouâ, Rizal, although serious in his studies, was not a bookworm but in reality a boy with romantic ideas. But from the beginning he was recognized by his companions as a leader.

### *Departure*

Had he been left in peace to pursue all these various pursuits, Rizal would probably have graduated from Santo Tomas with a licentiate in medicine, and become a physician practicing either in Manila or in his hometown of Calamba. He probably would have continued writing poetry and other literary pieces. And he might have held a one-man exhibition of his paintings.

But the times were not propitious. It was not possible, under the conditions then prevailing, to pursue these activities in peace. An ominous incident took place in the summer of 1881, after his third year of medicine. Back in Calamba for the vacations, he was walking one dark evening and did not see the guard and so failed to salute him. During the Japanese Occupation, such an infraction would have been punished with a slap in the face. Under the Spaniards, things were harsher. Rizal was put in jail for a day.<sup>21</sup>

In any case he was already a marked man. His mother had been imprisoned for two years on a trumped-up charge of trying to poison a relative. His brother Paciano had had to give up his studies at Santo Tomas after the execution of Father Burgos in 1872. At the hacienda in Calamba, things had not yet come to a head, but eventually Rizal's entire family would be evicted from their house and lands, together with all their tenants.

That was in the future. But in 1882 it was becoming clear that the times were not propitious for the quiet study of medicine or the

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<sup>20</sup>On these activities, see Villaroel, pp. 130-135.

<sup>21</sup>On this incident see Joaquin, *Rizal in Saga*, (Manila 1956), pp. 135-136.



pursuit of the muses. In May 1882, after his fourth year of medicine, Rizal abruptly and secretly left for Spain.<sup>22</sup>

### *In Madrid*

Rizal did in Madrid what he had done in Manila: instead of enrolling in only one institution, he enrolled simultaneously in three: the Faculty of Medicine (at the Colegio de San Carlos), the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters (at the Universidad Central), and in the painting lessons of the Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando. He also took up gymnastics. He even found time to begin writing his novel, *Noli me tangere*. All this at a time when he was frequently short of funds, sometimes skimping on his meals.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the Filipinos in Madrid, some of them from families much more affluent than Rizal's, wasted their time in frivolities, carousing at night and spending mornings in bed. Rizal did not waste time. "I hope I will not be accused of wasting time," he said.<sup>24</sup> He wanted to learn as much as possible in as short a time as possible. Did he perhaps have a premonition that his life would be short?

### *The Licentiate in Medicine*

Because he had already completed four years of the medical course in Manila, he needed only two more years in Madrid. Most of his subjects were clinical: two years of medical and surgical clinic, one year of obstetrics clinic, and a class in legal medicine.<sup>25</sup>

Among Rizal's papers that have survived, there are two which record his clinical observations in the hospital wards in Madrid. One of them,

<sup>22</sup>On Rizal's departure from the Philippines, see L. Ma. Guerrero, *The First Filipino* (Manila 1961) ch. 6 and 7; also Bernad, 25-48. On Father Francisco de P. Sanchez's view, see Bernad, pp. 7-8. A different interpretation is given by Villaroel, 294-295, and by Nick Joaquin, *Rizal in Saga*, 177 ff.

<sup>23</sup>On Rizal's sojourn in Spain, Nick Joaquin has an excellent treatment with good insights, but marred by inaccuracies. (*Rizal in Saga*, ch. 24 ff.). See also Bernad, pp. 25-75.

<sup>24</sup>Rizal to his family, from Madrid, 28 Oct. 1883, *Cartas entre Rizal y los miembros de su familia* (hereafter, *Cart fam*) I.157. Rizal attended classes from eight in the morning till after eight at night, with a break for midday meal, *Cart fam* I. pp. 141, 163.

<sup>25</sup>Villaroel, p. 179.

entitled *Apuntes de clínica* contains his observation of patients in the medical wards during a period of six months, from 4 October 1883 to 29 May 1884.<sup>26</sup> The other, *Notas clínicas*, contains detailed notes on patients in the surgical wards.<sup>27</sup> He records pertinent data about the patient (age, sex, temperament, medical history); also the symptoms, the diagnosis, the prognostics, the treatment given or indicated. With surgical patients, he describes the type of surgery performed or to be performed, sometimes in great detail.

The medical cases ranged over a wide field: pneumonia, bronchitis, stomach ulcers, Bright's disease, tuberculosis, diabetes, endocarditis, "ataxia locomotriz." A 27-year-old man who had been to America was suffering from "sifilis terciaria."

In the surgical wards he noted many cases of sarcoma, carcinoma, epitelioma, and these were found in various parts of the body: the lips, the nose, the cheeks, the shoulder, the genitals. In women there were cases of breast cancer, of "sarcoma peri-uterino." In the case of one patient he was not sure: was it sarcoma or carcinoma? (Medical science has since made great advances in the analysis of cancerous tissue.) Whichever it was, he says, the tumor had to be removed. Other cases included "Calculo vesical", prostatitis, one case of "finosis congenita" and he describes the surgery in detail, which also led him to inquire into the history of circumcision.

One case was particularly pathetic: a young man of 20 had to have his wrist amputated. Rizal gives the history of the case, and indicates just where the amputation had to be done.

He completed the required courses in medicine in February 1884. He then enrolled in a review program in order (as he told his family) to become acquainted with new ideas, especially those from Germany. (In Spain and in the Philippines, he said, the medical and surgical ideas prevailing were still the old ones, mostly coming from France.) In June he took the final examinations.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>*Escritos varios de Rizal* I, pp. 203-232.

<sup>27</sup>*Escritos varios*, II, pp. 358-428. This document is undated.

<sup>28</sup>Rizal mentions his examinations and corresponding grades: *Clinica medica*, 20 curso (*Bueno*); *Clinica quirurgica*, 20 curso (*Notable*). These examinations took place on June 5 and 6. On June 9 he submitted his petition for the degree. Later that same month he took the examinations in the other faculty, that of philosophy and letters, in which he did brilliantly. *Carta fam* I, pp. 156-157.

His graduation on 21 June 1884 with the degree of Licentiate in Medicine was a high point in his life. To his family he wrote jubilantly, "At last I am a physician!" (*Por fin, soy médico.*)<sup>29</sup>

### *The Doctorate*

In Europe and in the Philippines of that day, the licentiate in medicine was the degree required to practice the medical profession, just as the licentiate in law was what the lawyer needed to practice the legal profession. The licentiate was (and is) the European equivalent of the American M.D., which was adopted in the Philippines (in place of the licentiate) during the American Occupation. In Europe a doctorate was a post-graduate degree needed to qualify for a chair (*catedrático*) in a faculty of medicine.

Rizal, now a physician, was of two minds, whether to return at once to the Philippines and begin a medical practice or to remain in Madrid and undertake doctoral studies. His quandary was solved by his brother Paciano, who insisted that he should take up the doctorate.<sup>30</sup> So, in the school-year of 1884-85 (while he was in his last year in the faculty of philosophy and letters) he undertook the doctoral studies.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the year he did not have the money to pay the extra fees. So it was not until two years later (as we shall see) that he received his doctoral diploma.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Other Licentiate*

At the same time that he was pursuing the above-mentioned studies in medicine, he was taking an entirely different course in the faculty of

<sup>29</sup>Cart fam I, pp. 156-157. The letter is dated 28 June 1884.

<sup>30</sup>From Paciano, 10 Feb. 1884, Cart fam I, p. 154. (Nick Joaquin in *Rizal in Saga* devotes a chapter to Paciano who played a crucial role in the studies of Rizal.)

<sup>31</sup>The doctoral subjects with Rizal's corresponding grades were as follows: Advanced Normal and Pathological Histiology (*Sobresaliente*); Chemical Analysis Applied to Medical Science (*Bueno*); History of Medical Science (*Aprobado*). Villaroel, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup>Nick Joaquin in *Rizal in Saga* says twice that Rizal did not get the doctorate. This same statement has been made by several columnists in the Manila papers. Rizal did in fact get the doctorate two years after he had finished the course-work. This doctoral degree would have qualified him to teach in any European faculty of medicine.

philosophy and letters at the *Universidad Central*. This was a three-year program (1882-1885) consisting mainly of languages, literature and history and ending also in a licentiate. If his grades in medicine were mediocre, those in the humanities were of the highest: *sobresaliente* in almost all subjects and the first prize in two: Arabic and Greek Literature. The prize in Greek was won in a class of two hundred students.<sup>33</sup>

This illustrates what we said in the beginning, that Rizal's real talents and deepest inclinations lay elsewhere than in medical science. What a boon it would have been to the study and development of Philippine culture had Rizal been allowed to teach at Santo Tomas or other institution of higher learning, to share with the young his knowledge and enthusiasms! He himself realized that in the Philippines of that period, he would never have been allowed to teach.<sup>34</sup>

It is in this context that one can appreciate the significance of his speech, delivered at a banquet in Madrid on New Year's Eve, 31 December 1883. At an International Exposition two Filipino painters, Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo, won the first and second prizes for their paintings. The jubilant Filipino community in Madrid arranged a banquet in their honor, to which Spanish officials and political and civic leaders were also invited. The "brindis" or toast was to have been given by someone who could not come. Rizal was asked to give it. He spoke of the need for cooperation between Spain and the Philippines, not as sovereign and subject, but as two equal nations working together for progress. To the Filipinos it was an eye-opener. It gave them a new vision. To the Spaniards in the Philippines (when the text of the speech got to Manila) it was treason. Paciano wrote to him that everyone was agreed that Rizal could no longer come home safely.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>To his family, Madrid, 28 June 1884, Cart fam I, pp. 156-157. See also Miguel Varela, S.J., "Rizal's Studies in the University of Madrid," *Philippine Studies*, 9 (1961), pp. 294-300.

<sup>34</sup>In a letter to Blumentritt (from Brussels, 31 March 1890) Rizal speaks of his dream to teach in the Philippines. EpR V, p. 545 ff.

<sup>35</sup>The text of the speech is in *Escritos políticos e históricos por Jose Rizal*, pp. 7-10. On the reaction of the Spaniards in the Philippines, see Paciano to Rizal, from Calamba, 5 Nov. 1884, Cart fam I.160. Nick Joaquin sees in this speech the real beginning of the Propaganda Movement, *Rizal in Saga*, pp. 236-238. - The banquet was presided over by Segismundo Moret, who was to become prime minister. Guests included the Mayor of Madrid and representatives of the press and of cultural and academic groups.

### *In Paris*

In July 1885 Rizal left Madrid for Paris. He had two licentiate degrees and he had completed the course-work for the doctorate. What he needed now was specialized training in surgical operations on the eye. Therefore he was going to Paris, where one of the internationally known eye surgeons had his clinic.

This was not Rizal's first visit to Paris. He had spent one summer there, from June to August of 1883. He was then a tourist, seeing the sights and trying to perfect his knowledge and pronunciation of French. Now he was a physician seeking specialized training.

The clinic of Dr. Louis de Wecker attracted patients in large numbers. There were from fifty to a hundred patients a day, and some days as many as ten operations were performed. Rizal was one of several physicians in training from various places. Their task was to interview the patients, diagnose the case (under supervision and review of the professor) and to assist at the operations.<sup>36</sup>

Rizal worked in that clinic for five months. At the end of that internship period he felt that he could perform any kind of eye surgery. However, he would like to develop greater expertise in retinal cases. And so he went to Germany to which he had always been attracted.<sup>37</sup>

Even in Paris, however, despite heavy work in the clinic during the day, he found time at night to continue writing the *Noli me tangere*.

### *In Germany*

He arrived in Heidelberg early in February of 1886. It was winter. When spring came and the flowers began to come out, he walked one early morning along the banks of the still frozen river and plucked some of the flowers, intending to press them between the pages of a book and send them home so that his family would see what German flowers looked like. This inspired him to write one of his most beautiful and most profound poems, *Flores de Heidelberg* (Heidelberg Flowers).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>To his family from Paris, 4 Dec. 1885 (Cart fam I, p. 207), and 1 Jan. 1886 (*ibid.* I, p. 209).

<sup>37</sup>He had expressed an intention to go to Germany even before he left Spain. (Cart fam I, p. 154.)

<sup>38</sup>Text in *Poesías*, p. 118. The poem is dated 22 April 1886.

The surgeon he had gone to see in Heidelberg was Dr. Otto Becker, who had acquired an international reputation through his books. Rizal served as an intern in his clinic for several months. But he was disappointed: the clinic did not attract as many patients as the one in Paris.<sup>39</sup> When he felt that he had learned everything they could teach him, Rizal left Heidelberg and retired to a village to complete writing the *Noli*. He then had it printed in Berlin and prepared to go home.

It was at this time that he obtained his doctoral degree. After long delays and despite difficulties at home, Paciano was able to raise one thousand pesos (a large amount in those pre-inflation days) and through an intermediary sent it to his brother in Paris. It would probably be sufficient (Paciano said) to enable Rizal to pay his doctoral fees and to buy the most necessary instruments for ophthalmology and would also cover Rizal's travelling expenses. Rizal was thus able to send to Madrid the required amount for the doctoral diploma. He also sent his acceptance speech. He did not have enough funds to travel to Madrid and receive the diploma in person.<sup>40</sup>

With his two licentiate degrees and his doctorate, and with the *Noli me tangere* already printed, Rizal began his homeward journey for his first homecoming.

### *In Dapitan*

The events of that homecoming, the brief but dangerous stay in the Philippines, his departure once more for Hong Kong, Japan, America and back to Europe, his stay in London, his return to Paris where his edition of Morga was published, the printing of his second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, in Belgium, his journey to Hong Kong to join his family who had been evicted from Calamba, his trip to Borneo to arrange for the relocation of their tenants who had similarly been evicted – of all these, we need not speak. Let us therefore jump over to his exile in Dapitan where he remained for four years, from 1892 to 1896. There his practice of the medical profession came into full flower.

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<sup>39</sup> To his family, from Heidelberg, 16 Feb. 1886. (Cart fam I, p. 226) and 11 March 1886. (*ibid.* I, p. 232).

<sup>40</sup> Paciano to Rizal from Calamba, 6 March 1887 (Cart fam I, p. 275) and Rizal to Paciano from Berlin, 27 April 1887 (*ibid.* I, p. 282).

In the first half-year of his exile, he did very little practice of medicine, as he told Blumentritt in February 1893. But after he was established, with a house and farm of his own and with a school for boys in which he was the only teacher, he resumed his medical practice. His reputation as an eye specialist and as a “physician from Germany” began to spread. Patients came to him in growing numbers. By August 1893 (a little over a year since his arrival in Dapitan) he could tell his brother-in-law that he was performing “many operations on paying patients.” But most of his patients were poor and could not pay him. “I enjoy great success but little money,” he told his brother-in-law. By March 1894 he could say, “I have very many patients who come from different places.” They came from various *pueblos* of Mindanao, from the Visayas Islands, from Luzon, and even from Hong Kong. They came with all kinds of ailments. He became a general practitioner besides being an eye specialist.<sup>41</sup>

Because he had no hospital and there was no hostel where the patients (and their relatives) could stay while undergoing treatment, he allowed them to construct nipa huts on his property. “Hospital huts have sprouted on my land,” he wrote to his brother-in-law.<sup>42</sup>

Without hospital facilities, without the aid of an anaesthetist or even a nurse, Rizal performed operations single-handed. In the 1950s our Filipino volunteers with Operation Brotherhood would do something similar among the thousands of refugees in Viet Nam; but in their case the surgeons had the help of assistant physicians and nurses. Rizal was alone. “I perform operations with the means at my disposal,” he wrote. The one handicap he felt most was the lack of books to consult. He had to rely entirely on his habitual knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

He records three cases in which his efforts failed. One was afflicted with tuberculosis so advanced as to be beyond medical help. Another had fibrous cancer of the larynx who refused to be operated on. There was a third case: a man who climbed a coconut tree and fell. Rizal said

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<sup>41</sup>EpR IV 111, pp. 169, 197-198. The patient from Hong Kong came with his ward, Josephine, who became Rizal’s wife. Among Rizal’s surviving papers is a list of prescriptions for various patients, among them “a blind man from Cebu” (*el ciego de Cebu*), *Escritos varios*, II, p. 429.

<sup>42</sup>EpR IV, p. 198.

<sup>43</sup>EpR IV, pp. 225 ff. 198.

he could have saved him, had he the required facilities, instruments and medicines.<sup>44</sup>

One case in which he almost failed was his mother. He operated on her for cataracts and the operation was successful. She regained her vision; she could see with great clarity. For three days all went well. Then trouble started. Today cataract operations are performed on out-patients. In the past, several days of convalescence were required in which the patient had to remain in bed. The old lady refused to stay in bed. She would get up, go to the kitchen remove the bandage, scratch her eyes. To her son's protests she would not listen. The eye became inflamed. "I hope I can still save her," Rizal wrote. The case apparently ended well for she was eventually able to go back to Luzon. But he learned a lesson. He wrote, "Now I understand why physicians should be forbidden to treat members of their own family."<sup>45</sup>

To the Filipino expatriate in Hong Kong, Jose Ma. Basa, he wrote of his frustration at being helpless to remedy many things:

This town of Dapitan is very good. I am on good terms with everyone. I live at peace. But it is a very poor town, very poor. I don't mind the remoteness or the solitude, but it pains me to see so many things wrong and not able to remedy them. There are no means nor the money to buy instruments or medicines. . . .<sup>46</sup>

He talks of having to use rattan or bamboo as splints for fractures. But he adds, "*Hago las cosas más graciosas con los medios que hay*" (I do the most wonderful things with the means at hand.)<sup>47</sup>

That is the proof of the really dedicated physician: to do everything possible to help others, accepting every handicap, making do with whatever is available.

And of course there was little money to be gained. Some patients could pay. The majority could not. "I cannot present a bill because the patients can't pay. I even have to donate the medicines *gratis*."

<sup>44</sup> EpR IV, pp. 198, 225 ff.

<sup>45</sup> EpR IV, pp. 207-208. The letter is dated 4 July 1894.

<sup>46</sup> EpR IV, pp. 225 ff.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



### *The End of a Medical Career*

For reasons that we need not go into, Rizal finally wanted to get out of Dapitan. When he heard of the Cuban war, he volunteered to serve in the medical corps of the Spanish army. His offer was accepted and he sailed for Spain. Unknown to him, while he was at sea, the Revolution broke out in Luzon and they blamed it on Rizal. Upon his arrival in Barcelona he was arrested, sent back to the Philippines, imprisoned in Fort Santiago, sentenced to death, and was executed by a firing squad.

It was the death of a patriot. It was also the end of what might have been a brilliant medical career – not in the usual sense of “success” by having a famous clinic in a large city, patronized by wealthy patients who could afford to pay enormous fees. Not that kind of success. But real, genuine success, of a physician and surgeon employing his knowledge and skill to help people who needed help.

Rizal was many things: a poet, a novelist, a painter, a sculptor, a surveyor, an educator, a gymnastic instructor, and, above all, a patriot. But, not least, he was also a physician and surgeon who should be considered one of the glories of the medical profession in the Philippines. ↪