



## Remarks of

**H.E. MR. TEODORO L. LOCSIN JR.**  
**Secretary of Foreign Affairs**

### **SAFE HAVEN: JEWISH REFUGEES IN THE PHILIPPINES**

3:00 p.m.-4:30 p.m., 27 January 2020 (Monday)  
Conference Room 4, UNHQ, New York

Good afternoon. I thank our partners B'nai B'rith International and the US-Philippines Society.

I am here to share an important but relatively unknown story of courage and decency that took place in the darkest period of the dark history of inhumanity — for nothing comes close to the cold, calculated, systematic, almost completely successful attempt at the extinction of an entire people.

It is the 1930s, the eve of the Holocaust. Jews in Europe are fleeing. They hear glass shatter and smell smoke in the air. We are seeing it again with refugees fleeing the Western proxy wars in the Middle East. The picture of the drowned boy at the sea's end, face down on the sand, captures the state of Western civilization today as trains going east captured it yesterday.

The Jews are desperate to find safe haven. But everywhere they turn, doors are slammed in their faces. Then, out of nowhere, a small country in the Pacific halfway around the world offers refuge. The people of this country had their own experience of near annihilation in a lost war of independence. It wasn't even a real country yet; it was just promoted from outright US colony to a US commonwealth possession. The Filipino government had no authority to take in refugees. Yet take them in it did. We opened our doors. There was no political incentive, like an early assertion of a nascent sovereignty, but the opposite. If anything, it was a step back from independence by challenging colonial policy. But it was the decent thing to do. There was no fuss, no publicity, no bother. That's why it was soon forgotten.

Today's event commemorates that simple decision to do the decent thing. Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon ordered 10,000 visas for the European Jews. US High Commissioner Paul McNutt risked his political career by facilitating the issuance. And the Frieder brothers of Cincinnati, owners of a Manila tobacco company, set up the Jewish Refugee Committee. And Jewish refugees from Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, Russia, Italy, Latvia and Bulgaria – who came to be called the "Manila-ners" – found a place of greater safety in a country two oceans away when the rest of world just wanted them dead.

And they sailed to an extraordinary welcome of open arms and open hearts. Many found their second home there. Many would have stayed on if not for the Liberation of Manila in 1945. For that liberation turned into a siege that turned the Orient's most beautiful city into a charnel house — after Warsaw, the most destroyed city in World War 2.

The rescue of the Jews speaks to a Philippine tradition of never turning away a stranger. Earlier my country opened its doors to White Russian Jews fleeing the 1917 Communist victory in Russia. One of them, Jewish, married into my wife's family. I visited the son, a distinguished old man, back in Moscow. Despite the risk under Stalin, he returned, and explained Germany had again attacked Mother Russia – “Rodina” he called her – and he had to be by her side. Another wave of White Russians washed up on our shores fleeing the Communist victory in China in '49. We took in defeated Spanish republicans fleeing mass executions. Vietnamese boat people fleeing the American debacle. Iranians the fall of the Shah. More Indo-Chinese in the wake of the genocide perpetrated by the US- and China-backed Pol Pot regime until Communist Vietnam stopped it. In 2000, East Timorese Catholics fled murdering militia. While the West rent its garments in grief, the Philippines offered refuge.

This proclivity for decency continues, anchored on the conviction that what we would not have done to us we shall not stand by when done to others. State sovereignty speaks to the care states must take of people inside them, be they natives or strangers passing through or staying on. True humanity doesn't just speak the truth to power from places of privilege; it acts to save humanity from power's worst excesses.

In this time of rising anti-Semitism, this story of my country's Open Doors Policy shows how plain decency can triumph over raging prejudice — which seems so irresistible when all we have to counter it is the soft quality of caring. It is a great moral victory that recognizes every life saved as immeasurably valuable for containing the infinite possibilities of a single human life. “The idea that a people would shelter another for the simple reason that they believe in their basic right to exist and pursue a life of freedom and fulfillment,” said President Quezon.

Our offer for safe haven was just one defining moment in our friendship with the Jews. Another was our epochal vote on November 29, 1947, here at the United Nations, for the creation of a Jewish state. The moral logic of saving homeless Jews from extinction whispered the duty to give them a home. And a third may have been when we were said to have sent tanks left over from the battle for Manila to Israel when she was encircled by enemies hellbent again on the extinction of the Jews. No one now remembers for sure; because we don't keep count; we never hold back; we give what we have.

The mother of the children of our President is Jewish. Traced from the mother's line, his children could be considered as Jews. When the President visited Israel with his children, he left these words at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial: “Never again.”

Thank you.

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