

MILA A. GARCIA Rumormonger Par Excellence or Piddling Reporter?

By Balita | November 4, 2013

~ An eighty-six-year-old grandmother was visiting from Manila to tell her horrific experience at the hands of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. At the small reception and program set for her in Toronto, she tried to shed some light on what thousands of women in several countries in Asia had undergone as sex slaves. The forum was somehow obscured by the presence of a suspected communist of a left-leaning tabloid who seized the opportunity to spread venom. Little did she know that the person she had tried to enlist as a sympathetic ear would be the one to reject and condemn her attempt.

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“People would say bad things about you, because it is the only way their insignificant self can feel better than you.”
— Dennis E. Adonis

TORONTO – The invitation to cover Lola Fidencia David, one of the few remaining survivors of Japanese sexual slavery during World War II, came from Toronto Association for Learning and the Preserving of History of WWII in Asia (ALPHA).

The request, including a press release dated Oct. 16, outlined her three-day speaking itinerary. At the bottom of the email was the complimentary closing “warm regards” and signed by a person named Tara Johnson, education officer, and cc’d to another official identified as Sarah Bleiwas who, I learned later, is the group’s project coordinator.

Personally, I use phrases depending on the degree of familiarity or friendship or formality with the recipients. Most times I close with “thanks and best regards”. In other situations, I just say “regards” or “all the best”. But for those I’ve known and have been friends with for a long time, I prefer “warm regards”.

The friendly warmth embodied in the letter, however, hardly materialized on the evening of the culmination of Lola Fidencia’s speaking tour at the Barbara Frum branch of the Toronto Public Library on Tuesday, Oct. 22. Billed as a “community conversation”, the Filipinos who attended were no more than the fingers of one hand. (Video at: <http://youtu.be/cdW-R8L5Ro>).

In the diverse crowd were suspected communists Hermie Garcia and Mila Garcia, both of Philippine Reporter, the left-leaning tabloid that looks like a hybrid leftist propaganda sheet and community billboard. They sat apart from each other, she on the second row and he on the fifth. (Video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4vVh6sZsPc>).

Mila Garcia was literally hanging by the coattails of Lola Fidencia, breaching her private bubble, in the minutes before the program started, which made it impossible for me at least to shoot a picture without her in the frame.

The few times she strayed from the 86-year-old, Mila Garcia was engaged in animated conversations, or whispering to the ears of what I believe to be officials of Toronto ALPHA. Shortly after, the dagger looks began to come my way. One lady glued her eyeballs on me as I walked around waiting for a chance to take photos.

I tried to catch Lola Fidencia as she moved from the small reception area to the elevator where a bespectacled Chinese-looking guy took her by the arm and had some talk. I took a shot of the two, but the guy, already hostile to me, approached with a warning that that moment was “private”. If I didn’t stop, he said, I would be unwelcome to cover the event.

The threat came as a shock. A note pasted near the elevator door informed attendees that the event would be photographed and video-recorded. Indeed, three other people were doing the recording.

The man was one of the speakers, it turned out, identified in the program as Joseph Wong, a family physician and apparently a founder of Toronto ALPHA. At this point, I could not reconcile his antagonism towards me and his group’s friendly invitation for a media coverage of this forum.

“The media are welcome at the events listed in the media release x x x It would be great if you could help us get this out to the public as it is very likely the last time a survivor from WWII in Asia will be able to present to such a wide audience,” the invitation reads.

Were the dagger looks and Wong’s enmity a result of Mila Garcia’s “whispering campaign”?

As I scanned the faces of those in the reception, my intuition told me that I was being turned into a conversation piece – or shall I say the subject of rumour-mongering? – during that evening. I later conveyed that feeling to Sarah Bleiwas after she thanked me for the video coverage.

“At some point, it’s true that I felt unwelcome,” I told Sarah. “Maybe it’s just my hunch, but the presence there of Mila Garcia of the already defunct CASJ made me feel that way.”

I informed Sarah: “Mila and her husband Hermie Garcia x x x are the subjects of my many write-ups and exposés in my website and in Balita where I write. One of the stories I uncovered to prove that they were not beyond reproach was their attempt to run away from their debt. The Ontario Superior Court of Justice ordered them to pay \$20,000.” (Full story at: <http://www.balita.ca/2013/05/harbinger-of-death-of-press-freedom-in-toronto/>).

Further I told Sarah: “I was actually going to ask one of your people to tell Mila Garcia to stay away from Lola Fidencia knowing that Mila loves photo ops and would always, yes always, want to be in the picture. Besides, I could not ask Lola Fidencia for some information.”

Having expressed that honest sentiment, Sarah wrote back and apologized profusely for “jumping to assumptions” and for the hostilities I felt and encountered.

But it was her own admission that really astounded me. “You are correct that we were informed about you by one person,” Sarah said without identifying who the person was. I keep wondering what was said to engender such animosity.

Sarah was candid enough to admit that “. . . we believed what we were told without exploring and understanding for ourselves” and again apologized for it.

Outside of Lola Fidencia and Cristina Lope Rosello, the author and clinical psychologist who was translating for her, the Filipinos who were there were the Garcias and their sympathizer. I was the fourth one, which number makes for very little room to wiggle out. (Video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAVsCjSm1q0>).

The turn of events did not escape notice of Ms. Rosello. In an email to a mutual friend two days later, she recounted:

“When I arrived at the Barbara Frum Library, I saw Mila Garcia whispering to Dr. Joseph Wong. It turned out that she was talking against Romy Marquez. For me, this spoiled the evening because no pictures of the event were allowed. At one point, Dr. Wong snapped at Romy Marquez. My heart went out for this Filipino”.

My hunch was correct. This was an active participant in the program, an eyewitness, to whom Mila Garcia was unloading her garbage. She was spreading venom to people I don't know and who don't know me as well.

I didn't solicit Ms. Rosello comments; she asked our mutual friend to relay the contents of her email to me.

In that, she wrote: “I know that Mila Garcia is ingratiating herself to Dr. Wong so before I left, I categorically explained everything to Sarah . . . that Romy Marquez in my view is innocent, just the victim of the usual leftist black propaganda. Unfortunately, I had no chance to talk to Mr. Marquez”.

Ms. Rosello added: “I also told both Dr. Wong and Sarah not to listen to any negative propaganda against you (meaning our mutual friend). I know this will be forthcoming . . . just observing how Garcia makes their mood. She was with her husband and someone from Migrante. I am really so fed up with these people . . .”

The sad part is that Wong and his crew were immediately judgmental. Except Sarah. And to think, Toronto ALPHA is preaching human rights!

Ref.: <http://www.balita.ca/2013/11/04/mila-a-garcia-rumormonger-par-excellence-or-piddling-reporter/>

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