

CHAPTER 2

Quezon's Hospitality

Transitional Asylum and Humanitarian Intimacies during Philippine Decolonization, 1935–1941

James Pangilinan



In 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees encouraged the Philippines to prolong a storied “tradition” of hospitality by accommodating recent refugees.¹ The UNHCR cited Section 47(b) of the Philippines’ Immigration Act of 1940, which permitted the president to “admit aliens who are refugees for religious, political and racial reasons for humanitarian reasons, and when not opposed to public interest.”² This law appeared precocious, as it preceded by eleven years the 1951 Refugee Convention, which codified definitions for *refugee* and *persecution*. While the UNHCR cites this asylum clause to advance “burden sharing” by strategically localizing refuge in the global South, the claim that the Philippines set a precedent obscures a messier story of hospitality in the Philippines shaped through shifting relations of imperial rule and attempted decolonization.

A more critical reader of the UNHCR’s rhetoric might ask, “What is missed by conveniently citing the 1940 Immigration Act’s asylum clause as exemplifying a ‘tradition’ of Filipino hospitality?” Nevertheless, we may still consider why this storied tradition remains attractive to international and Filipino audiences alike. The recent film *Quezon’s Game* (2019) has popularly memorialized Filipinos’ “tradition” of hospitality by circulating an imaginative story of how welcoming Jewish refugees factored into the shaping of Philippine independence from 1935 to 1941. In this period, American and Filipino elites negotiated not only independence but also the curious potential for Filipino

nationalism to be refashioned through hosting displaced European Jews, when most European-American states rejected refugees. Undoubtedly, there existed a domestic landscape of conflicting interests and some Filipino nativism. But the popular framing of *Quezon's Game* usefully narrates the humanitarian potential of refuge in the global South as an anticolonial undertaking. Instead of underlining a legal precedent (as the UNHCR emphasizes), *Quezon's Game* provocatively asks, why did the Philippine president Manuel Quezon welcome refugees as a national cause advancing decolonization? This chapter details the circulation of *Quezon's Game* and the transitional context that the film popularizes through an accessible depiction of colonial Filipinos attempting to make humanitarian history even before achieving independence.

Dramatizing Filipino Hospitality

Centering an unlikely footnote in the interwar history of the Philippines, Matthew Rosen's Philippine-filmed, ABS-CBN-produced *Quezon's Game* opened to popular and critical acclaim in May 2019. Featuring performances from Raymond Bagatsing as Manuel Quezon and Rachel Alejandro as Aurora Quezon, the film's release quickly became the talk of the town. For a moment, it even competed with Hollywood blockbusters—no small feat in a market still dominated by American films.

The unlikely humanitarian story of Quezon's hospitality brings to light the considerable domestic negotiations and international maneuvering enabling refugee rescue even prior to the Philippines' independence. On the one hand, this humanitarian gesture played well internationally: Quezon took a morally distinctive, symbolic upper hand against the Philippines' American colonial rulers, who mostly rejected displaced Jews. On the other hand, this gesture also embodied Philippine society's inequalities, which formed through shared colonial connections among Philippine-American elite. In other words, these colonial relations provided the fraught historical conditions for the Philippines' refugee hospitality.

Yet the popular rendering of Filipinos' transitional receptiveness to host refugees has also reentered domestic Filipinos' consciousness through a series of parallel media stories and popular films recently released and transnationally circulated.³ Filmic depictions and journalistic reception have generally conveyed a heroic account equating the Philippine president to a colonial Oskar Schindler.⁴ But actual emphasis must also be placed on Manuel Quezon's intimate ties with diasporic Jewish organizers and US colonial officials, who together effectively shaped refuge in the sovereignty-aspiring Philippines. Of all the popular, memorializing accounts of the Philippines' transitional hospitality, what I find most fruitful is the way in which these relations of hospitality

between US and Filipino elites comprise the narrative focus of Matthew Rosen's film *Quezon's Game*. Socializing with the likes of US commissioner Paul McNutt, Dwight Eisenhower, and prominent, Manila-based Jewish entrepreneurs Alex and Herbert Frieder, Quezon came to devise alternative aid while simply enjoying informal parlor games. Such intimate spaces, wherein Quezon served as host to American and Jewish diasporic refugee advocates, were also pivotal in shaping the Philippines' transition to independence. By suggestively juxtaposing Filipinos' larger drive to independence with Quezon's political gamble of responding to refugees, *Quezon's Game* offers an imaginative story that provides the Filipino "nation" a kind of moral self-depiction exemplified by Manuel Quezon's reputedly "exceptional" response. Such presentations of the Philippines' hospitality appear even more "heroic," for Filipino viewers, because this humanitarian response preceded independence and served as an expression of emergent sovereignty on an international stage.

Although *Quezon's Game* suffers from uneven performances by relatively A-list Filipino actors paired with rather underwhelming B-list American talent, the film dramatically captures the peculiar manner that the charismatic Filipino president Manuel Quezon sought to balance the strategic dance toward independence while struggling to convince US officials and fellow Filipinos to mount a humanitarian response to increasing Jewish displacement from Europe. Sympathy for dislocated Jews was rarely acted on during this period. American unwillingness to help refugees is outlandishly exemplified in the film by the US State Department's counsel general Lawrence Cartwright. Portraying the anti-Semitism prevalent even among US bureaucratic circles of the era, Cartwright (played by Paul Holmes) questions the wisdom of hosting displaced Jews during Filipinos' independence drive. For Cartwright, even though he held no affinity for Nazism, his discrimination against Jews colors his appraisal of Quezon and his collaborators' proposal of Jewish resettlement. Upon hearing of Quezon's requests for additional visas to facilitate Jewish migration to the Philippines, Cartwright expresses repugnance at the prospect of introducing Jewish refugees by going so far as claiming that Jews are worse than African Americans, who in Cartwright's racist language and anti-Black logic at least seem easier to segregate according to phenotypic difference (unlike European Jews). For Cartwright, Jewish resettlement thus seemed to offer only further political risks by injecting a new racial question during an uncertain transition to Philippine independence.

While Cartwright outlandishly plays the spoiler to Quezon, Paul McNutt, and Herbert and Alex Frieder's rescue plans, much of *Quezon's Game* is more generatively devoted to sharper, suggestive dialogue among Filipino elites expressing their somewhat more subtle misgivings at refugee resettlement. As we shall see, opposing Filipino nationalists generally favored prioritizing independence and Filipino welfare as opposed to charity for racialized Jews.

Philippine-American War veteran Emilio Aguinaldo and fellow Nacionalista Party member Sergio Osmeña appear in the film as influential domestic voices contrasting Quezon's moral concern. Unlike the power-hungry Quezon caricatured in the era's American press, Raymond Bagatsing's Quezon is depicted as positioned morally above the political fray. Quezon even appears heroically sacrificial, insofar as he is willing to risk his political fortunes by tethering Jewish rescue to the very possibility of independence. Thus, the film accentuates the narrative drama of how Quezon broke from his party and prioritized Jewish rescue even after becoming weakened by a relapse of tuberculosis. Eventually, his deteriorating health and the backlash resulting from his refugee support threaten to undo everything he sought to accomplish. In a word, *Quezon's Game* spares no intrigue. Such drama is fictionally heightened when an SS officer is stationed in Manila. With these high personal stakes and embodied risks, planning even a modest rescue mission would have to be undertaken surreptitiously—lest Nazis intercede from afar.

Hospitality as Transitional Exchange

Just as scholars of colonialism have shown how domestic politics, empire, and geopolitics play out through intimate interactions, *Quezon's Game* exhibits how seemingly everyday scenes of hospitality provide the generative basis for Jewish rescue as an outcome of Filipinos' aspirational renegotiation of American colonial rule. But as a far-flung part of America's overseas empire, the Philippines seemed to factor curiously into international responses to Europe's Jewish "refugee problem." Under the suspecting eyes of Cartwright and German onlookers, negotiations had to take place within informal spaces where Quezon frequently entertained guests over poker, cigars, and brandy. The day's legislative affairs, requests for state favors, and even refugee aid were all similarly shaped within intimate spaces of political collaboration and elite homosocial camaraderie. In this way, *Quezon's Game* offers an immediate representation of Filipino hospitality in practice. At the same time, the film lends useful insight on the substantial impact of smaller, intimate spaces for conceiving state policy, geopolitics, and specifically humanitarian efforts.⁵

To appreciate why this US territory offered refuge, one must examine how Philippine-American political relations in the 1930s centered around a collaboratively staged "decolonization." Under an ostensibly "benevolent" American colonial rule, elite Filipinos were subjected to liberal educational programs and thereby recruited as local protégés trained to gradually replace US colonial officials.⁶ Through this tutelary process, Filipino nationalists also competed among one another to satisfy the hierarchical standards of the "capacity to responsibly exercise power in the colonial state."⁷ Rivalries among Filipino

elites often led to inconsistent positions shifting between confrontation and collusion with American colonial rule. In other words, “decolonization” was re-fashioned according to elite political partnerships, strategic contingencies, and individually pursued redefinitions, including Quezon’s attempts to tie Philippine independence to Jewish rescue.

Quezon’s response to Jewish humanitarian advocacy followed this pattern of distinction-making and competition against the contrasting ambitions of his domestic and American colonial rivals. The necessity of welcoming refugees proved to be a matter of considerable debate even for members of his own party. In a pivotal scene, following a botched attempt to bribe the German ambassador to obtain the refugees’ exit visas, his former rival Sergio Osmeña furiously questions why the Philippines must receive refugees. Faced with Osmeña’s criticism that not even the United States is willing to accommodate more refugees (in reference Jewish refugees from the MS *St. Louis* who were kept from docking on the US mainland), Quezon asserts he cannot “wait and sit around for another country to do something. I’m not going to turn away those in need when I should have the power to save them. I am not like Roosevelt!” A distraught Osmeña retorts, “This is not a pissing contest” playing out with Quezon’s willingness contrasting with Roosevelt’s humanitarian limitations.

On the one hand, the Philippines’ receptiveness presented a moral contrast to American hesitance regarding Jewish migrants. On the other hand, Quezon touted the additional benefits of welcoming Jewish refugees to counter discontent. When Osmeña exhorts Quezon to “save some of that bravado for our Filipino peasants, who need your service just as much as those refugees,” the latter deflects this zero-sum framing of citizen-bounded responsibilities with a win-win counterargument. For Quezon, even Filipino peasants would benefit from injecting the skilled labor of Jewish refugees into the nascent Philippine national economy. Journalism from the period echoed Quezon’s counterargument. On 24 April 1940, the *Philippines Herald* reported that any “Policy on Jews” formulated by Quezon’s administration would be based on the “Hospitality of P.I. [Philippine Islands] To Harassed Race.”⁸ As Quezon asserted, “Filipinos are going to realize that in allowing these few refugees to come . . . we are not only performing a humanitarian act, but we are, in the end, going to profit from this humane act as is always the case.” Any relief for displaced Jews promised future returns, especially since displaced Jews were selected from asylum petitions by “doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, etc.” Economic benefits were expected by inviting Jewish professionals and active contributors, as seemingly attested by existing diasporic enterprises like the Frieder brothers’ Helena Cigar Company.

Alex and Herbert Frieder’s pragmatic friendship with Quezon arose from existing Filipino “cultures of hospitality” and colonially espoused “cultures of Filipino-American sociability” recounted by American commentators follow-

ing the Filipino-American War.⁹ Civil spaces of shared intimacy were important in easing tensions and inviting Filipino elites within the colonial project of postwar state building. In the later ten-year transition as a US commonwealth (1935–45), similar spaces of hospitality were centered by Filipino elites to showcase their elevated status as hosts aspiring to sovereign control. Filipinos thus sought to reverse imposed subordination as pupils and guests to imperially defined, racially hierarchical liberalism under American rule. In contrast to the hierarchies of the early American colonial period, Filipino elites during the Commonwealth era could now serve as hosts to anyone they so pleased, including refugees.

But acting as nearly sovereign hosts also articulated with Filipino elites' designs for continued domestic dominance. Indeed, the elite political dynamics and patronage practices established under colonial democracy would shape the trajectory for the Philippines' "independence without decolonization."¹⁰ These conservative patterns for forming enduring relationships serving Filipino elites is evidenced in *Quezon's Game* when McNutt and Alex Frieder try recruiting Manuel Quezon into finding a way to convince the German ambassador to provide exit permits for eligible refugees. To avoid drawing unwanted attention from the SS officer stationed at the German embassy, Quezon suggests that they throw a presidential ball as an amicable interface with the ambassador. Through the extension of social graces and liberally poured brandy, Quezon is thus depicted as skillfully exhibiting Filipinos' refigured position as hosts who can even skirt the wary eyes of Nazis and US officials. Quezon's manner of hosting even opposed parties is framed to exhibit his ability to renegotiate and reposition the Philippines under continued yet waning foreign control. Extending protection to Europe's racial others could signal an end to US colonial rule according to terms laid out by Quezon and allied Filipino elites.

Approximating Independence

Even prior to governance under American occupation, native elites in the Philippines were accustomed to creating relationships of political dependence, hospitality, and indebtedness with foreign actors in order to renegotiate imperial intrusion and foreign rule in their own land. Existing accounts attempt to explain the emergence of the Commonwealth's asylum offer as the sole project of US high commissioner Paul McNutt.¹¹ But limitations arise from a biographically driven narrative that individually centers US colonial leaders while overlooking American dependence on Filipino elites. By turning American control over migration to and from the Philippines into an issue for Filipinos to rally around, *Quezon's Game* vividly depicts how responding to Jewish

displacement offered the ailing Manuel Quezon a gesture and avenue to pursue “decolonization” on elite Filipinos’ own terms.

Put conversely, Quezon’s efforts to reshape Philippine “independence” provided the mixed grounds for Filipinos’ expression of qualified solidarity with Jewish refugees. Although from the very onset, “Filipinization” was the operative logic of US colonialism in the Philippines, where power was gradually delegated to US-trained Filipinos, the Commonwealth period from 1935 to 1945 evidenced how political power remained entrenched in the hands of a national elite and a handful of political parties. Basically, only a few factions of Filipino elites competed among themselves by voicing vacillating demands for independence or American retention, statehood, or dominion status.¹² Quezon’s Nacionalista Party figured as one of usually two parties since 1898 that rhetorically championed claims to independence (immediate or otherwise) while privately or publicly questioning the timing and terms of “decolonization.”

Quezon’s Game places the independence question as central to how Quezon thought of refugees by maintaining his hold on domestic politics. Indeed, historian Aruna Gopinath apologetically contends that Quezon gambled prospects of Filipino independence by undercutting, delaying and redirecting independence legislation advanced by his main rival Sergio Osmeña so as not to appear to be “playing second fiddle” to Osmeña.¹³ The film hints at lingering competitions between Osmeña and Quezon, even though they share cordial scenes where Osmeña and his fellow emissary Manuel Roxas are scheduled to visit Washington to lower excise taxes on Philippine crops. But, pivotally, Quezon’s “real play” is to renegotiate scheduled independence sooner, “during [his] lifetime.”

While this aspiration is portrayed as intensifying with Quezon’s tuberculosis relapse, Quezon also sent Osmeña and Roxas to reconsider the independence timeline for political reasons. It served as a move in the “power game” Quezon sought to play “with the intellect and skill of a master strategist.”¹⁴ For political gain, Quezon undermined his rivals’ claims to secure independence by organizing opposition to the initial independence framework—the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Act formulated during Osmeña and Manuel Roxas’s 1933 mission to Washington. Under pressure to scrap this bill, the Philippine Assembly rejected their proposal. Yet their bill provided the blueprint for Quezon’s preferred 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act. Burnishing his anticolonial credentials before the Commonwealth’s 1935 elections, Quezon himself went to Washington to nominally renegotiate independence phased in after ten years. “Staking his political future on one great gamble,” Quezon struck a coup by triumphantly returning from Washington with “the same old act but for a change of some fifty words.”¹⁵ These nominal revisions reinforced Quezon’s dominance over rivals including Osmeña, Roxas, and Emilio Aguinaldo. Such power grabs led

some commentators, such as socialist Pedro Abad Santos, to warn of imminent descent into a dictatorship—a palpable fear given the era’s fascism.

With growing fears of a dictatorship, Nacionalistas resorted to “populist” strategies of welfare and social relief. Quezon’s concern for refugees echoed this stylization as both the “friend of the poor” and the “warrior-hero needed to lead them to the promised land of independence.”¹⁶ Returning from Washington with a recycled independence framework, Quezon also came back with New Deal-inspired “social justice” projects intended to appease “forgotten” Filipino “masses” through pursuing development initiatives across the whole archipelago.¹⁷ But “Social Justice” reinforced his patronage networks instead of amounting to actually equitable reform. In Quezon’s intimately conceived view, “Social Justice or its equivalent has always been *an urge in me*. As President . . . I had fought with all vigor for the rights and welfare of the working man.”¹⁸ Quezon’s social justice struggle amounted more to a reciprocal transaction of debt between capital and labor: “When I declared in my inaugural address . . . I did not hesitate to declare that Labor is more essential to Capital because the factory of all wealth in this world is an indebtedness to Labor . . . [which] is entitled to a latitude of fairness because the security of the State depends upon it.” Debt and reciprocal obligation—not dispossession and capitalist exploitation—are the ties that bind capital and labor in Quezon’s vision. In other words, “social justice” articulated with Quezon’s politics of intimate collaboration with business leaders or American officials.

Foreign yet Domestic Refuge

Focusing on this personal collaborative dynamic, *Quezon’s Game* highlights the way that solidarity with refugees can become entangled—while simultaneously increasing tension—with domestically focused social justice. Much of this tension is depicted through dialogue that relays how Quezon’s moral concern conflicts with rival preoccupations voiced by his counterpart Sergio Osmeña. While the latter sought to prioritize domestic poverty over refugee needs, Quezon suggests that Jewish misery exceeds even Filipinos’ mundane needs: “Our people have rights . . . the Jews do not. Our people need our help to prosper. The Jews need my help to escape slavery, torture, execution.” These conflicting duties and needs arose in a moment when the Philippines’ political transition coincided with intensifying Jewish persecution following the 1935 Nuremberg laws, Germany’s March 1938 invasion of Austria, *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, and the annexation of Poland in 1939. These events outraged Filipinos even from afar. Yet unlike other Filipinos, Quezon’s immediate outrage was prompted by a visit to Paris and Berlin in 1937 to promote Philippine interests abroad.¹⁹ According to the president’s grandson Manuel L. Quezon III,

the hostile appearance of Nazi soldiers “shook” Quezon’s wife Doña Aurora Aragon to her core.²⁰ Not surprisingly, Quezon came under considerable pressure to respond to this dark turn.

Condemnation of Jewish persecution grew following the publicized violence of *Kristallnacht*. Even as Jewish social economic dislocation had existed for some time, outrage in the Philippines solidified following *Kristallnacht*. A major “Indignation Rally” convened at the Ateneo University, where Jewish and Christian leaders joined “civil society” and more radical opposition groups, including the Philippine Independent Church founded by Gregorio Aglipay.²¹ While some remained wary of involvement in the Jewish refugee question, Filipinos visibly expressed sympathy for Jewish refugees through early Filipino editorials, public rallies, and even some Americans’ appreciation of the Philippines as a potential refuge.²² In this way, *Quezon’s Game* rearticulates the positive appraisal of Philippine refuge through recirculating popular international encouragement of localized accommodation of the displaced in the global South.

Yet the film underscores limitations in the way Filipinos’ willingness to accommodate refugees conflicted with Americans’ salient anti-Semitism, which buttressed the colonial metropole’s distancing of Jewish refugees. On the one hand, Quezon could act as a strong-handed host, whose mostly uncontested dominance over domestic and international Philippine affairs allowed the larger game over independence, trade, and refugee aid to play out smoothly. On the other hand, this did not always play out without friction expressed by his fellow Filipino politicians. As *Quezon’s Game* dramatically conveys, one issue, which complicated Quezon and the Frieder brothers’ rescue plan, was the way American and European racial inequalities did not fully resonate. There existed some disharmony between Filipinos’ experience of US colonialism and the racial persecution of European Jews. Before the film nears some narrative resolution, announcing an “Open Door” policy for Jewish asylum-seekers, Osmeña still voices exasperation with Quezon, who refuses to put aside his seeming obsession with the Jewish question over what could be best for the Nacionalista Party. For Osmeña, Quezon’s stance risks additional vulnerability to their domestic rival Emilio Aguinaldo, who wields the refugee issue against them. Dismayed by Osmeña’s advice to cease offering asylum, Quezon colorfully suggests, “When you go to the White House, use their toilet.” A surprised Osmeña asks, “Are you joking?” Quezon insists, “Use their toilet, Osmeña, for your countryman.” Osmeña questions why he would have to go to separate facilities: “I know how Americans treat the Negros, but I am not a Negro!” But Quezon highlights, “It doesn’t say ‘Negro,’ it says ‘Coloreds.’ As in not white. That’s you, me, and every one of your countrymen. We are only allowed in the White House because we have seventeen million votes behind us.” While anti-Black racism and American colonialism are mutually reinforcing, it takes

some insistence to forge resonance between Filipinos' colonial subjection, Jewish persecution, and anti-Black segregation. After Quezon insists on a racial analogy and alignment against the kind of racist hostility prolonging US colonial rule, Osmeña quietly relents and finally agrees to renegotiate independence with the aim of enabling Filipinos to set their own immigration policy as a key point of contention. As Quezon reasons, the juxtaposition of Filipinos' potential hospitality for Jewish refugees with Americans' mundane racial hostility underlines the need for placing the Philippines under sovereign Filipino control. Being able to welcome anyone thus becomes imaginatively imbued with anticolonial possibilities in *Quezon's Game*, because hosting refugees could elevate Filipinos' position against the subordinations of US colonialism and racial liberalism.

By reframing the stakes of Philippine independence, welcoming refugees offered more than merely another one of Quezon's self-serving attempts to appease elites and working Filipinos, as was the case with Quezon's banking on "the emotional capital of the independence issue."²³ Rather, the film dramatically suggests that Quezon's increasing awareness of his mortality necessitated a legacy of redemptive benevolence beyond self-aggrandizement. *Quezon's Game* reaches its dramatic arc when Quezon delivers a rousing televised speech resembling his February 1939 "Open Door" policy proclamation. The film concludes by suggesting that the stakes extend beyond the technical challenge of the Philippines seeking to control its own immigration and borders through a new immigration law. Rather, Filipino hospitality could serve as a rallying cry advancing actual independence.

Quezon's Dramatic Entry at Évian

Quezon's Game presents a memorializing story that recalls actual depictions circulated during the fraught prewar period. Before Quezon's "Open Door" policy announcement, American president Franklin Roosevelt organized an ambitious thirty-two-nation conference to coordinate refugee relief. The 1938 Évian Conference has been widely panned as failing at delivering an adequate response.²⁴ One reason for this failure was agreement from the start that resulting assistance had to conform with states' existing immigration laws in a period of considerable immigration restriction exemplified by the stringent US quota system in place since 1921. With Depression-era labor pressures, increasingly restrictive sentiment in Europe and the United States led to official and popular pressure to situate Jewish resettlement elsewhere. Latin America presented one alternative landscape for receiving displaced Jews during a period when immigration to Palestine was limited by the British Colonial Office.²⁵ While Zionist-leaning scholars suggest that the reason Évian failed was because Pal-

estine remained off the table of options, considered non-Zionist Jewish advocates including the Frieder brothers of Manila and the New York-based Joint Distribution Committee collectively sought out alternative havens beyond “Zion.” Sidelining Palestine from Évian’s geography of possible settlement could not alone explain the overall failure of European and American states to mount an effective refugee response, even following *Kristallnacht*.

Against this international backdrop of limited refuge, Quezon grandly signaled Philippine support for Jewish refugees.²⁶ In December 1938, news broke from Évian that the Philippines welcomed refugees. In so doing, Quezon suggested the Philippines could prove to be more generous than Western states and most of Latin America—except for Santo Domingo—which mostly rejected Jews.²⁷ Claiming some moral high ground compared to the Philippines’ colonial and geopolitical hegemony, Quezon’s staging of Filipino hospitality offered a “means of expressing and reversing a pattern of domination” upheld by Euro-American refugee rejection (see figure 2.1).²⁸

However, like other alternative settlement offers in the Dominican Republic, British and Dutch Guyana, Australia, and Bolivia, the Philippines offered a limited option. Each settlement project only conceived of accommodating no more than a few hundred refugees.²⁹ However limited, these few options were nevertheless seriously considered by the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGC), Évian’s successor forum. Struggling to manage German demands of externalizing its Jewish population through overseas “resettlement,” IGC negotiators sought to avoid setting a precedent for other European states



Figure 2.1. • “A Home for the Persecuted,” Alfonso Torres, Manila, 1940. Courtesy of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library.

contemplating a fix to their “ethnic” problems by pursuing policies “compelling political, religious or ‘racial’ minorities to flee as refugees.”³⁰ Given these overlapping concerns, any option for Jewish settlement necessitated careful framing, advocacy, and considerable persuasion. Proposals for refugee settlement were often framed as advancing asylum countries’ “development” needs. For states emerging from colonial dominance and political economic exploitation, like the transitional Philippines, refugees were positively cast as populations who could offer specialized labor for a newly independent national economy. However, in the rhetoric invoked by Quezon and the rescue plan’s publicists, these contributions took on moral terms as expected reciprocation for offered hospitality.

Quezon’s Protection and Patronage

Balancing Filipinos’ material demands with moral imperatives to assist refugees presented challenges and symbolic possibilities. Quezon rhetorically sought to translate humanitarian motives into filial terms of paternal protection, hosting, and indebting intimacy. Such reframed reasons were similar to the terms mobilized in his “Social Justice” gestures. In the popular press, Quezon similarly tried circulating a depiction of the Philippines as a welcoming “home for the persecuted.”³¹ Upon visiting an early refugee-run farm in the Marikina Valley, Alfonso R. Torres, a journalist from *Philippines Free Press*, relayed the storied suffering and resilience attested by refugees.³² Morris Grimm stood out to Torres for his remarkably toothless appearance. In the Philippines, Grimm would finally receive dental help after losing his family and teeth at the hands of Nazi concentration camp guards. Morris was one of several hundred refugees welcomed at Marikina Hall, a model refugee farm built on Quezon’s own land north of the new capital Quezon City. Not only was a new “home” in the Philippines at the invitation of the Jewish Refugee Committee of Manila on offer in Marikina, but the “Jews at Marikina Hall” also became grateful beneficiaries of Manuel Quezon’s accumulation of power and capital.

Put simply, refuge in the Philippines came at the behest of Quezon, whose land and shaping of Philippine independence appeared to benefit even non-citizen displaced Jews. Popular stories of Filipino hospitality, such as *Quezon’s Game*, incompletely detail and thus hint at the manner that formerly persecuted refugees became the beneficiaries of Quezon’s intimate and paternal accumulation of power. Unlike contemporaneous criticism of Quezon’s increasingly strong-handed rule, his offer of protection lent a compassionate veneer to the Philippines’ international image.³³ Ironically, when asked of their opinion of Quezon, one refugee at the Marikina model farm observed, “Herr

Quezon strikes me as fatherly, a leader who is inclined to be paternalistic in his ways. As for Hitler, let's not talk about the blankety-blank." A peculiar irony of Quezon's hospitality is that he shared the totalitarian tendencies of Hitler. Yet, although the Philippine president appreciated the fascist leader's style of nationalist leadership amid the trials of 1930s upheaval, Quezon's authoritarian inclinations could be put to other uses.³⁴

Protected by "Fatherly Herr Quezon," Jewish refugees expressed gratitude for his hospitality and "freedom" from racial violence. As Torres observes, though this early stage of the "Jewish refugee experiment . . . is rich in idealism, but virtually lacking in cash," refugees at Marikina Hall appeared optimistic, and "the general feeling that prevails among them is one of gratitude, gratefulness for the opportunity to live free among their fellow men."³⁵ But, even if accommodations outside Manila were certainly freer than in Germany, hospitality under Quezon's sovereign protection entailed ambiguities and asymmetric expectations expressed through giving, gratitude, and reciprocation. Anticipated returns included morally and symbolically burnishing Quezon's international image. In this symbolic manner, refugee accommodation tied to Philippine decolonization remained marred by the same political and social inequities that Quezon and his allies sought to preserve.

Rereading the Final Scenes of Decolonization and Jewish Refuge in the Philippines

Celebratory narratives of refuge in the global South can overlook historical complications and the tensions of colonialism setting uneven grounds for refuge, as evidenced by the transitional Philippines' welcoming of Jewish refugees. The reproduced series of international rhetoric, such as the UNHCR's, and popular depictions, such as *Quezon's Game*, present stories that dramatize, and potentially exaggerate, the humanitarian potential of hospitality in the global South.

Nevertheless, there are valid reasons for tracing popular humanitarian depictions of national hospitality, distinctive care for refugees, and the moral benevolence of anticolonial elites. Studying how such stories circulate enables us to appreciate the way national constructions of humanitarian memory and reputed "lessons learned" remain entangled with the complications of colonialism and the ambivalent attempts that even elite colonial subjects make to reshape imperial relations through humanitarian action. *Quezon's Game* memorializes and turns one of the interwar period's rare rescue plans into an accessible narrative of the Filipino nation formed through hosting otherwise rejected refugees. By serving as hosts, Filipino elites translated and rewrote colonial relations into a renewed story of national hospitality and receptivity

to displaced others—others who would nevertheless be subjected to the messy, fraught, and implicating processes of American colonialism and elite-framed decolonization.

Through the sensational story of Jewish rescue, Quezon's dramatized generosity underscores how humanitarian memories can be reimagined through the moral fantasies of the nation and how such fantasies can overlook asymmetric grounds of colonial intimacies and imperial relations lasting beyond formal decolonization. With Jewish exiles and American officials newly positioned as guests to Quezon's nearly independent nation, intimate gatherings could occasion less plausible promises of hosting even more Jewish refugees than previously imagined. While the film maintains restraint in keeping with the early negotiations over settling refugees in Manila, in fact, at a luncheon with McNutt and the Frieders, Quezon's vision for potential Jewish settlement mushroomed into inflated prospects for "resettling as many . . . refugees as we cared to in Mindanao . . . [which] is big enough to support as many people as Luzon . . . we could settle a million refugees in Mindanao."³⁶ With Quezon's dramatic flair, such "lavish hospitality" was neither wholly disinterested nor unparalleled by contemporary undertakings, for instance, by his Dominican contemporary Rafael Trujillo.³⁷

The eventual failure and eclipse of Quezon's rescue efforts were not entirely forgotten through the unfortunate course of World War II. Hinting at postwar complications of decolonization in the Middle East and Mindanao, Filipino journalist Alfonso Torres asserts that Jewish refugees in the Philippines had another "big task before them." This comprised settling "unpopulated" spaces with the same steadfastness as "their brethren who revitalized Palestine and established it, after years of noble sacrifice, on a sound economic footing."³⁸ Doubtless, these expansive visions of "virgin" lands overlooked Indigenous communities, as was the case in Palestine. Comparisons were palpable for Alex Frieder, who reported after his luncheon with Quezon, "If refugees want to settle in Mindanao, it will be a bigger project than Palestine. The land is more fertile than Palestine, there are more minerals, timber . . . it is the richest land in the Philippines."³⁹ Clearly, trafficking in comparisons and racial stereotypes of Jewish hyperproductivity remain excessive and questionable. And as with other long-distance depictions of the nation, such expansive fantasies of diasporic abundance and Global South refuge would go on to have far-flung significance beyond the Philippines itself. As late as November of 2019, *Quezon's Game* would be played at Philippine embassies abroad, cinemas in Israel—from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—and even at the United Nations.⁴⁰ While presenting this film serves as a strategic reminder in the face of Israeli campaigns to deport Filipina caregivers, this wider circulation of Quezon's humanitarian collaboration with diasporic Jewish advocates has helped sustain compelling moral fictions of Filipinos' potential for care far and near.

James Pangilinan is a PhD candidate in human geography at the University of British Columbia. His work focuses on diasporic humanitarianism, decolonization, and transnational asylum politics arising relationally through the Philippines. He is currently completing a dissertation entitled *Filipino Hospitality and Transpacific Spaces of Humanitarian Practice*.

Notes

1. Kerblat, "Most Urgent Story"; Penamente, "Nine Waves of Refugees."
2. *Philippines Star*, "Filipinos Helping Refugees."
3. Rosen, *Quezon's Game*; Hodge and Scott-Johnson, *Rescue in the Philippines*; Hernandez, *Last Manilans*.
4. *San Diego Reader*, "Quezon's Game"; Quismorio, "House to Honor People."
5. Pain and Staeheli. "Introduction."
6. Kramer, *Blood of Government*, 191.
7. Kramer, *Blood of Government*, 192.
8. *Philippines Herald*, "Quezon's Policy on Jews," 24 April 1940, NARA, RG350, box 1388, folder 2.
9. Kramer, *Blood of Government*, 188–89.
10. McCoy, "The Philippines."
11. Kotlowski, "Breaching the Paper Walls."
12. McCoy, "The Philippines"; Kotlowski, "Independence or Not?"
13. Gopinath, *Manuel L. Quezon*, 17–21.
14. Gopinath, *Manuel L. Quezon*, 172.
15. Gopinath, *Manuel L. Quezon*, 174.
16. Gopinath, *Manuel L. Quezon*, 21.
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