

I OWE THE PEACE CORPS

By R. David (Paul) Zorc, Ph.D.

I Owe my Life, Marriage, and Profession to the Peace Corps

As I graduated college back in June 1965, I was really floundering about what to do with my life. I had spent my four high school years and the first year of college in a seminary, studying to be a priest. It was a mutual decision that I was not cut out for that. So I attended my second through fourth years at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where I graduated with an AB cum laude in philosophy. I also was awarded Phi Beta Kappa (Delta of DC) in May 1965. I knew I wanted to help people in some way and thought that psychiatry might be an option. However, a series of aptitude and career placement tests suggested three alternative fields (which I rejected outright): osteopath, linguist, and musician. I didn't even know what an osteopath was. Although I had been composing some music, I thought I could not meet the demanding standards of such a profession and somehow earn a living at it. I also had studied Latin, German, and Classical Greek, and had done pretty well in those courses, but I did not really know what a linguist might do for a living. Hence I joined the Peace Corps to defer any decision and yet meet my "helping people" goal.

I commenced a 10-week intensive training program on June 18, 1965 at San Jose State College in California. There we were taught the basics of Tagalog (or Pilipino, the national language of the Philippines), TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) Methods, Practice Teaching, Cross-Cultural Studies, and Physical Education.

I was formally enrolled as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Philippines Group XIV on August 28, 1965. I was responsible to the Bureau of Public Schools and assigned to teach English (TESL) from grades one through six at the Kalibo Pilot Elementary School in Kalibo, Aklan on the island of Panay, from September 1965 through August 1967. There Tagalog was either unused or disliked (at that time), so I set about learning Aklanon (Inakeanon), quite a different Bisayan (Visayan) dialect from Cebuano or Hiligaynon, with which many readers may be more familiar.

In order to master the vocabulary, I made flash cards with Aklanon on one side and English on the other. Within two years, my collection grew to over 4,000 entries, and one of my co-teachers suggested that I work



Kalibo Boys Choir - outfitted

on an Aklanon-English dictionary, since there were no such resources on that language. As my second year tour-of-duty ended, I asked the Manila office if I could work on a grammar and dictionary of Aklanon. Since, at that time, the Peace Corps assisted in only three academic areas: teaching English, mathematics, or science in primary school, there could be no “official” project such as the one I proposed. Instead, the Director of Peace Corps/Philippines suggested that I become a “language coordinator,” a position within the Peace Corps hierarchy, but stay at my “subsistence” level of allowance (\$65 per month—pegged to the salary of a public school teacher), since I would be living in a province. That was fine by me, but I would have to learn the other five dialects of the West Visayas (Ilonggo or Hiligaynon, Capiznon, Kinaray-a, Romblomanon, and Loocnon) in order to offer language training assistance and administer Foreign Service Institute fluency tests to co-volunteers stationed throughout that region. So I set about going to those other areas and gathering as much data on each as I could. The first book I ever published in my life came out in 1967, *Peace Corps Primer for the Western Visayas Philippines* (U.S. Government Printing Office).

Since music mattered a lot to me and I was concerned about after-school-hours delinquency, I founded and directed the Kalibo Boys Choir,



David (cut off at left) conducting the Christmas Concert]

which had a membership of 80 in its initial year. This youth group fostered extracurricular activities including singing, camping, excursions, and sports. The most successful achievement of this choir was a Christmas Concert in 1967, which raised enough money to outfit all 80 members with a monogrammed t-shirt and black trousers and also to buy a complete set of sports equipment (baseball set, ping-pong, badminton, basketballs, and a volleyball set). Its popularity caused the group to swell to 120 by my fourth and final year.

I was allowed to extend for another two 1-year terms. The primer was revised and reissued in 1968 as the Peace Corps Western Visayas Dialect Field Book (Kalibo: R. M. Trading). In that second term, I began researching Aklanon vocabulary in earnest, doubling my flash-card collection. So the bulk of my work was on: A Study of the Aklanon Dialect: Volume One – Grammar (Aklan Printing Center, 1968) and an Aklanon-English Dictionary with Vicente Salas-Reyes (Aklan Printing Center, 1969), which had about 8,000 entries.

In trying to learn Aklanon, I originally sat in on vernacular classes in the first and second grades. There was no standard for spelling the dialect, and it broke my heart to see a second grader getting slapped on the wrist for writing a word the way he or she had learned to spell it in the first grade!

During my final year of service, I developed a new method of reading-education for the Aklanon dialect that reduced the time required to teach first grade pupils how to read and write the language from eight to only three months. I had learned the core ideas behind programmed literacy on several trips to Manila from the late, great Dr. Tommy Anderson at the Philippine Normal College. According to this method, one teaches the simplest and most basic elements first; after all, there is no inherent “magic” in alphabetical order. For example, teachers in Aklan taught the printing of the letter “a” by drawing a circle (but there you have the letter “o”) with a line to the right (so now you have the letter “l”).

On the first day of school, the word lolo “grandfather” can be spelled! The Division accepted the results of the original reading experiment and made it requisite for the entire province. So I presented seminars in ten of Aklan’s 17 municipalities, establishing spelling conventions among teachers. The publication of the dictionary helped to solidify the conventions brought up during those seminars. These lesson plans were published in 1969 as The Programmed Method of Reading as Adopted for the Aklanon Dialect: Teacher’s Guide and Lesson Plans. [A second edition was reprinted by SIL (the Summer Institute of Linguistics), Philippines, as Technical Memo #69, in March 1979.]



The Nipa Palace

Although I had rented an apartment at the outskirts of town during my first year, the mayor of Kalibo thought both I and the Boys Choir should have a home near the town center. Local houses are usually simple single-storey huts built on stilts and have walls interwoven with leaves called “nipa.” However, what the mayor built for me was a three-storey affair. A large, slightly sunken ground floor was where the choir could practice and became the home of a third grade class from the Kalibo Pilot Elementary School; it had a full bathroom accessible from both the first and second floors. The second floor had a living room, dining area, kitchen, and two bedrooms. The third floor had a library/study and the master bedroom. This eventually came to be known as the “Nipa Palace.”

One of the finest moments I have ever had was due to the interlinking of my religious background and my deep respect for and fluency in Aklanon. I was invited to write and to deliver one of the Seven Last Words of Christ (“I thirst” – Na’óhaw akó) to the entire province on the local radio station on Good Friday, 1969. As Steve Banta (a fellow volunteer and housemate at that time) observed: “the first and probably the only foreigner, maybe even first and only non-Aklanon, ever to do so. The Congressman from Aklan even offered to sponsor a bill to make Dave a Filipino citizen. And of course he married a local lass” [Worldview Spring 2009:26].

It was indeed in Kalibo that I met my wife, Maria Nellie Reyes Prado Zorc. We got married on May 3, 1969 (which was my parent’s 33rd wedding anniversary) and have been together for 43+ years. After two miscarriages, she gave birth to our son, David Nicolas Prado Zorc, on May 20th, 1974. She had two more miscarriages thereafter, but has been a super Mom and the number one provider for our family as a legal secretary in Washington, DC.

Since linguistics finally made sense to me, thanks to the friendship and efforts of Prof. John U. Wolff, I commenced studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY in September 1969, completing my course work and comprehensive exams in 2 years. I received a grant for field work throughout the central Philippines from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program between August 1971 and July 1972. I got my Ph.D. in Linguistics from Cornell in June 1975.

From mid-1973 through 1975, I was able to land a research position in Austronesian (primarily Philippine) Linguistics under Prof. Isidore Dyen at Yale University, funded by the National Science Foundation. This allowed me to cull data from my field notes and publish three papers, as well as to finalize my dissertation on “The Bisayan Dialects of the

Philippines: Subgrouping and Reconstruction,” which was published by Pacific Linguistics (Canberra) in 1977. It was there at Yale, on the departmental bulletin board, that I saw an advert for a position as a Senior Lecturer with the School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) in Batchelor, Northern Territory, Australia.

That position (1976-1986) was very much like my experiences in the Peace Corps, but it paid a whole lot more! I was able to work with Aboriginal students on 60 different languages, including an Aboriginal Kriol, teaching them to read and write their languages, and in some cases actually developing a writing system. Just prior to our departure I printed a Yolngu-Matha Dictionary (SAL, 1986). We repatriated to the U.S. in August of that year because our son was of high-school age and there was no such institution in the “Outback.” We wanted to live together as a family, rather than send him to boarding school.

Again, the Peace Corps came to the fore. It held its 25th Anniversary on the Mall in Washington, DC in October 1986. I went armed with CVs and good spirits on Sunday (the fifth) and met Pam Moguet, who was working for the Language Research Center (LRC) in Hyattsville, Maryland. I was interviewed on Monday, and started work on Tuesday, October 7th. I was at the LRC (originally part of MRM Inc., but McNeil Technologies since 1999) for almost 25 years. It turned out that my Peace Corps and SAL experiences in researching and publishing materials on less-commonly taught languages were right down the company’s alley! Through its publication arm (www.DunwoodyPress.com), I have been able to enjoy fascinating “arm-chair research” and the rewards of a wide-ranging series of publications such as: Cebuano Newspaper Reader (1987), Ilokano Newspaper Reader (with Pamela Johnstone-Moguet, 1988), Tagalog Newspaper Reader (with Annabelle M. Sarra, 1990), Tagalog Slang Dictionary (with Rachel San Miguel, 1991), Somali-English Dictionary with English Index 3rd ed. (with Madina Osman, 1993), Armenian (Eastern)-English Dictionary (with Louisa Baghdasarian, 1995), Oromo Newspaper Reader, Grammar Sketch, and Lexicon (with Yigazu Tucho and Eleanor Barna, 1996), Sotho Newspaper Reader, Reference Grammar, and Lexicon (with Paul Mokabe, 1998), Kinyarwanda and Kirundi Comparative Grammar (with Louise Nibagwire, 2007), Maguindanao Grammar Supplement (ed., 2009), Chavacano Reader (ed., 2009), and Tausug Reader (ed., 2011).

Perhaps one of the greatest honors I received was the Brother Andrew Gonzalez, FSC, Distinguished Professorial Chair in Linguistics and

Language Education (Linguistic Society of the Philippines) in Manila on February 26, 2005. As if that was not enough, my wife and I revisited Kalibo, where we were given a banquet attended by government officials, old friends, and many alumni of my Boys Choir, and I was officially proclaimed an “adopted son” of the municipality.

Suffice it to say that I have been truly blessed in this life. Besides a loving wife and wonderful son, I will leave behind an academic legacy of 26 books (24 of which are in the Library of Congress), seven monographs, 39 journal articles, 30 presentations at international conferences, 12 data papers, and nine book reviews. I am truly grateful to God and the Peace Corps for what and who I am. ■

About the writer:

David Zorc was born in 1943 in North Chicago, Illinois. After studying for the priesthood with the Divine Word Missionaries, he attended Georgetown University, graduating cum laude in 1965. After Peace Corps (1965-1969), he got his Ph.D. from Cornell University (1975). From 1976 through 1986 he worked with Australian Aboriginal languages at the School of Australian Linguistics. For the last 25 years, he worked for Dunwoody Press and published or edited 23 books (on Philippine dialects, Eastern Armenian, and several Cushitic and Bantu languages). He is retired and living in Wheaton, Maryland.