



*Nina Trige Andersen*

## **Fly now, pay later**

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### TRAJECTORIES OF A FILIPINA WORKER IN COPENHAGEN

On January 14, 1972, King Frederik IX of Denmark died. The following day Maria Lourdes Robles stood on the balcony of Hotel d'Angleterre – located halfway between the Royal Palace and the Parliament in Copenhagen – watching with amazement as the masses poured into the streets to celebrate the inauguration of the heir to the throne, Queen Margrethe II.

“First time to see so many people in Denmark”, Ms. Robles noted in her diary that evening, in her usual concise manner (Robles archive, Diary). The small, barely urban capital in the northern periphery of Europe was quite something different than the gang-torn streets of Tondo in the capital of the Philippines that Ms. Robles had left behind. However, that day on the balcony not even the spectacle of popular rituals in the Kingdom of Denmark could make Ms. Robles forget why she had come this far. Why she had mobilized every resource and spent a year in Manila preparing for the journey, why she was still paying off her fly-now-pay-later ticket out of the meager wages she earned as a chambermaid at one of the most expensive hotels in town. She had her reasons<sup>1</sup>, as did each of the dozens of Filipina and Filipino workers who had come to Copenhagen from the mid-1960s, most of them for work in the booming hotel sector.

*The Filipino Pioneers* and *The Vanguard of the 1970s*, the first generations of Philippine workers in Denmark named themselves. They were recruited – and recruited each other – during the era of the so-called guest worker programs in Europe. Though Denmark never set up an infrastructure of foreign labor recruitment comparable to the one in for instance Western Germany, parts of the Danish economy did employ significant numbers of foreign workers, particularly from 1969-1973. The guest worker era quickly

became associated with male workers recruited from particular regions – in the case of Denmark primarily Pakistan, Turkey and former Yugoslavia – to unskilled labor in the manufacturing industry of Western Europe. The story of Ms. Robles is an example of a neglected part of labor- and migration history: Not only did the “guest workers” come from other regions (for instance Southeast Asia) to other parts of the economy (the service sector, not least the hotel industry), but the labor migrations of the 1960s and 1970s included women workers who in many instances did not migrate as spouses but as first movers, and also acted as intermediaries and recruiters of other workers. Based on private documents and archival studies, the narration in this text traces the trajectories of Ms. Robles from the streets of Tondo, a rough neighborhood in Manila, through the streets of royal Copenhagen and ties the everyday dramas in the life of a Filipina worker in Denmark to the creation of the world’s most extensive labor export program.

#### ‘WE SIMPLY CAN’T DO WITHOUT GUEST WORKERS’

In early 1971, the international hotel chain Sheraton opened in Copenhagen with a foreign labor force of around 25 percent, and the supply of particularly Philippine workers was seemingly endless; Ms. Robles who at that time had not yet left Manila was one of the many waiting for a job opening at the new hotel.

Though the Danish labor unions were skeptical towards recruitment of foreign workers, and had from the outset pushed for limitations on the issuance of work permits, the vice-president of the hotel- and restaurant workers union HRF acknowledged that the sector would face serious problems if the “guest workers” followed the call from immigration opponents and actually left Denmark:

If the guest workers not only left the iron industry but also the hotel sector, what then? - Well, then the hotel sector would suddenly lack a substantial part of its workforce, says Erik Johnsen, vice-president of the Union of Hotel and Restaurant Personnel. - We simply can’t do without guest workers in our sector because it’s impossible to get Danes to go for those wages. (interview in the newspaper *Søndags BT*, Quoted in *HRF-bladet* 1971, August:31)

For Ms. Robles and other Filipina chambermaids in Copenhagen it would take at least a year on “those wages” before they were able to even pay back the fly-now-pay-later tickets that had brought them to Denmark. In the meantime, they would, as the labor union rightly pointed out, live in crammed and unhealthy apartments (*HRF-bladet/Tre kuverter* 1971 no.4:11), spending as little as possible to be able to not only repay their debts, but also remit money to their families. On her first day off after starting work in Denmark, Ms. Robles sent 25 dollars back to her husband in Manila (Robles archive, Diary). He needed the money to prepare his own departure. Unemployment was not what made the Robles couple migrate. Though the later institutionalized export of labor from the Philippines was coined as a solution to rising unemployment, it was not primarily the unemployed that left the country – as going abroad often required capacity to mobilize substantial resources – something which migration scholars soon realized

(see for instance Böhning 1979, 1984; Pedersen 1999; Horst 1980). As a pharmacist, Ms. Robles had had her own clinic in the Tondo neighborhood, home to scammers and sex workers, and a battle field of the notorious gangs OXO and Sigie-Sigue. By providing medical assistance to outlaws and outcasts in the Philippine capital, Ms. Robles had as the eldest daughter in a poor peasant family provided for her siblings’ education back home in the province. These efforts were nothing, however, compared to the pain of leaving it all behind in late 1971, not knowing if and when she would be reunited with her husband and their two children. Alone in Copenhagen she noted meticulously in her diary what hour she would wake up every night, unable to sleep soundly, crying instead, and praying for her family’s safety.



Ms. Robles in her clinic in Tondo, Manila. Robles archive

Some of the Filipino Pioneers went ahead to Denmark on tourist visas with neither connections nor job offers and figured out things along the way. Others, like Ms. Robles, tried to get everything in order before departure. Both options could involve quite some drama. Ms. Robles and six other Filipinas had been recommended for chambermaid jobs at Hotel Sheraton in Copenhagen by “ate Lidia”<sup>2</sup> (Robles archive, Letter July 27, 1971), who had come to Denmark in the late 1960s and since earned the name “Grand Old Lady of the Philippine Pioneers in Denmark” (FAD 1990a). Ms. Robles spent a good part of the year 1971 getting the proper documents from the Philippine authorities, as well as corresponding with friends and potential employers in Denmark, with the Royal Danish Consulate in Manila and the Consul General Hjalmar Ibsen in Copenhagen (Robles archive).

By mid-June everything finally fell into place, only to fall apart a month later, when the job offer from Hotel Sheraton was canceled. Ms. Robles' papers had been processed faster than the management of the hotel had expected, while other Filipinas had arrived to fill in chambermaid positions later than planned, and the flow of hiring personnel was jammed. The staff manager Inga Grum apologized by letter and offered to help Ms. Robles and her friends find jobs at other Copenhagen hotels (Robles archive, Letter July 14, 1971).

Immediately after the discouraging letter from Hotel Sheraton arrived in Manila, ate Lidia in Copenhagen received a telefax about the problem: "... THEIR APPLICATIONS WITHHELD STOP MEANWHILE THEY HAVE PREPARED NECESSARY PAPERS PLEASE FOLLOW UP WITH SHERATON AND ADVISE IMMEDIATELY LOVE AND KISSES" (Robles archive, Telefax July 22, 1971).

Ms. Robles also sent her own letter to Inga Grum, thanking her for her assistance and assuring that she would be "ready to go anytime", should a job become available in one of the Copenhagen hotels (Robles archive, Letter July 22, 1971). By September, Ms. Robles received a new job offer from Hotel Sheraton. The salary would be 2,000 Danish Kroner per month including uniform and meals during duties of 40 hours per week (Robles archive, Letter September 10, 1971).

Ms. Robles booked a fly-now-pay-later ticket that cost her 5,047.92 Philippine Pesos, including more than 12 percent interests, to be paid in 12 monthly rates (Robles archive, Diary). By today's rate it was equivalent to more than 40,000 Danish Kroner.<sup>3</sup> Though the workers who went abroad were rarely among the most impoverished, a plane ticket for Copenhagen did cost way more than most could afford, and thus the fly-now-pay-later option was what brought many Filipino Pioneers to Denmark.<sup>4</sup>

Ms. Robles left for Copenhagen on an SAS flight on November 13, 1971. That same year, Denmark had tripled its official representation in Manila, and already in 1969 the Danish consulate office had moved to the compound where the Philippine Department of Labor was located (Udenrigsministeriets Kalender 1966-1977).

### MOMMY URDING

The generation of Filipino Pioneers that Ms. Robles joined in 1971 was treading foreign territories in every way. If the US – the preferred destination of most Filipinas and Filipinos at the time – was "abroad", Denmark was a different planet. Ms. Robles had to make seven transfers before finally arriving in Copenhagen: Manila-Bangkok ("over Mekong river – what a sight"), Bangkok-Calcutta, Calcutta-Karachi, Karachi-Teheran, Teheran-Rome, Rome-Zurich, Zurich-Frankfurt, and, finally, Frankfurt-Copenhagen (Robles archive, Diary).

The number of Philippine workers who arrived in Denmark between 1960-1975 is difficult to determine with accuracy. The data bank of Statistics Denmark includes Filipino



Ms. Robles entering an airplane in Manila, on her way to Denmark, 1971. Robles archive

migration to Denmark from 1980 onwards. Prior to 1980, one has to rely on data from the Central Register in Denmark, from where the total numbers of residing Filipino citizens in Denmark are available from 1975 onwards. In 1975, 473 Filipinos were registered in Denmark, and by 1979 the number had risen to 666 (Larsen 2014).<sup>5</sup> From the Filipino Pioneers' oral accounts it would seem that the figures from the Central Register only cover part of the migration in that period, however. Some of the workers who arrived between 1960-1973 never officially resided in Denmark, but arrived on tourist visas and worked with or without permits for limited periods of time, and then moved on to destinations in for instance Canada, Norway or the US.<sup>6</sup> One might thus assume that the annual inflow of workers from the Philippines was larger than what the number of residing Filipinos 1975-1980 would lead to believe.

It was in the early 1970s that the number of Filipinos started to increase significantly. By the 1960s, it was no more than a couple of dozen workers who – many by chance – had found their way to Denmark. In the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication of the Filipino Association of Denmark (FAD, established in 1970), a total of 150 Pioneers (meaning arrivals prior to 1973) are named, including 18 who since left for other countries, while

in a text about the beginnings of the association, it is mentioned that approximately 200 Filipinos joined in the first years (FAD 1995:13, 28, 33).

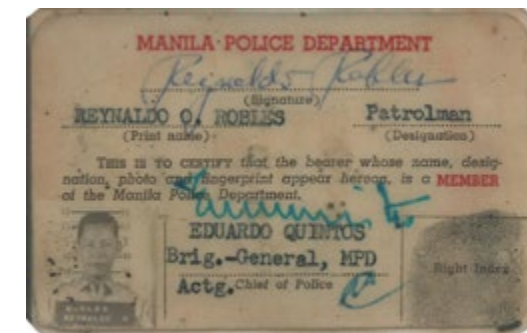
Ms. Robles was one of those first FAD members, and as she was a bit older (in her 50s) than most of the early arrivals, she became known as “Mommy Urding” in the growing Philippine community.



Portrait of Ms. Robles from around the time of her arrival in Denmark. Robles archive

She was a member of FAD until she passed away in the late 1990s after two decades in Copenhagen. Ms. Robles had never intended to stay in Denmark, though. Going abroad in 1971 was a precaution she took to protect her family not from the gangs of Tondo, but from the clashes between an increasingly radicalized political opposition and an increasingly repressive dictatorship of General Ferdinand Marcos.

Her husband Reynaldo Robles was a patrolman with the Manila Police Department. The story of their love was “worth a movie”, as their son describes it (Robles, interview, 2014-2015). They had been childhood friends and youth companions, but were separated when they both had to migrate to the capital for work. Both in their 40s none of them had married when they coincidentally met again – Reynaldo had been assigned to patrol the neighborhood of Maria Lourdes’ clinic (FAD 1995a:10). They got married on May 22, 1965 (Calendar 1965, Robles archive). A few years later, social and political unrest started building up in Manila, and though the last thing Ms. Robles wanted was to be parted from Reynaldo once again – and from the two children they now had – she found it necessary to go ahead and prepare a base for the family in Copenhagen where she had contacts, until the situation had improved in the Philippines.



Reynaldo Robles’ patrolman badge. Robles archive

### DIVINE INTERVENTION

Though leaving her family had been difficult, Ms. Robles arrived in Copenhagen assured that she would be able to start working at Hotel Sheraton immediately, and thus get on with her plans of having Reynaldo and the children follow her. But between the job offer received per post in September and Ms. Robles’ arrival in November, another Filipina had already been employed in her position. “No place in Sheraton”, Ms. Robles noted in her diary, “told to come back in the afternoon for letter of recommendation to d’Angleterre”. The next morning Ms. Robles tried her luck at the old exclusive hotel in the historic center of Copenhagen. After a job interview with the Executive Director, Eigil Hummelgaard, she was sent to the Department for monitoring foreigners under the National police [Rigspolitiet, Tilsynet med udlændinge], then back to the hotel, then to the Employment Office [Arbejdsformidlingen], and then to three different addresses to find temporary accommodation. The day was exhausting and confusing. That night, all she noted in her diary was: “Sleep, cried again” (Robles archive, Diary).

Her working hours at Hotel d’Angleterre turned out to be significantly more than allowed according to standard rules: Officially it was 40 hours per week, but Ms. Robles was asked to work from 7 AM to 3 PM every day including Sundays. From the documents she was provided to get her work permit it appears that the official salary was also significantly less than what Ms. Robles had been promised by Sheraton: Instead of 2,000 she would

get 1,350 Danish Kroner. As compensation Hotel d'Angleterre offered accommodation to the Filipina chambermaids in a rented building close by<sup>7</sup>, where Ms. Robles got a room on November 17, 1971. But she needed money to be reunited with her family. On November 29, two weeks after her departure from Manila, she cried herself to sleep again: "Because I remembered my dearest son Rod, how are you?" Every night she would wake up around 3 or 4 AM, crying, consoling herself by praying for her "three loved ones far home". To speed up the plans of having them join her, she started doing night shifts as well, 6-10 PM, even though she already after three weeks started feeling pain after work, and had a hard time eating and sleeping. Between her day and night shifts she spent her time corresponding by post with her family in the Philippines, depositing money in the bank, paying visits to Filipina friends in town and not least trying to secure a work permit for her husband. On May 1972, she received the first rejection and had to notify Reynaldo to cancel his ticket for Copenhagen. "Dear Lord, please help + guide us", she noted in her diary, and the next days would actually bring if not divine intervention, then a helping hand from a fellow believer (Robles archive, Diary).

Already on December 26, 1971, Ms. Robles had met the nuns at the Catholic St. Joseph Hospital in Nørrebro when a fellow Filipino accompanied her there to let the nuns know of Ms. Robles' medical skills. As Ms. Robles an afternoon in the spring of 1972 was crying her heart out at the Sacraments Church on Nørrebrogade, one of the St. Joseph sisters recognized her and asked about her troubles. Having explained about the rejection of Reynaldo's work permit, the nun promised to help her the best she could. Two days later, the nun called on Ms. Robles: St. Joseph Hospital had assured the police that a job was awaiting Reynaldo Robles, and a work permit was issued.

Eight months after their parting, Reynaldo and Maria Lourdes Robles were reunited in Kastrup Airport, on June 25, 1972. It was high time: In September, Marcos declared Martial Law in the Philippines, swiftly repealing all civil rights, but the protests and armed mobilizations against the regime continued. As their children had been left behind, Ms. Robles kept worrying. The Christmas of 1972 the Robles couple spent with ate Lidia, and Reynaldo promised his wife that by Christmas next year, the whole family would be together. They were still not sure if they would stay in Denmark – a relative had written to them about "nice opportunities" in the US (Robles archive, Diary). They never went, though, and by the summer of 1973, they both had secured contracts of permanent work, Reynaldo in the newly opened Hotel Scandinavia at Amager and Maria Lourdes at St. Joseph Hospital.

On July 29, 1973, their children finally arrived, accompanied by a friend returning from family visits in the Philippines. The only thing that remained to be solved was finding a proper place to live. The first months the four of them lived in a rented room in the apartment of a rather disorganized man in Kålundsgade, Vesterbro. Sometimes Ms. Robles could barely enter the apartment because dogs or drunken men were blocking the door. The Robles couple went almost daily to ask the municipality for help relocating to a proper

living space, but housing was scarce in Copenhagen and the authorities expected the many guest workers to be temporary (Arbejdsministeriet 1971; Mortensen 1978). Finally by late 1973, the Robles found an apartment behind the St. Joseph Hospital through their own network. After everything had fallen into place, Ms. Robles' only diary notes were numbers of checks, registration of mail correspondences, phone numbers. The last entry was on January 6, 1975. That same year Philippine Labor Minister Blas F. Ople was given the prestigious role of President of the International Labor Conference (under ILO), and proudly spoke to colleagues from around the globe of how the Filipino people was "engaged in building a new social order", and how the Labor Code adopted in 1974 – institutionalizing labor export – was pivotal to this project, recalling how President Marcos had coined unemployment as "the greatest exploiter of labor" (Ople 1979a:11, 14).

#### 'THE OBLIGATION OF THE FILIPINO

The Robles couple had always thought they would return to the Philippines when the situation back home allowed it. For the same reason they sent their children to the newly established International School in Copenhagen, so that they would one day more easily be able to re-adapt in the Philippines. Throughout the 1970s, the Philippine community continued to grow in Denmark, despite the so-called immigration stop adopted on November 29, 1973, officially marking the end of the guest worker era. Similar laws were adopted all over Europe, as the oil crisis transformed years of economic prosperity into economic crisis and rising unemployment (Hahamovitch 2003). In the Philippines, however, state-brokered labor export flourished: "(...) we no longer apologize for the outflow of Filipino labor abroad", as Labor Minister Blas F. Ople phrased it (Ople 1979a:219-221), calling labor export a "vital component of the national employment strategy" (OEDB Annual Report 1978, introductory pages). While the large-scale recruitment of foreign workers in Western Europe during the 1960s and early 1970s was replaced by restrictions on migration during the economic crisis of the late 1970s, some sectors continued to 'fill the gaps' with migrant workers, legally and semi-legally as well as through clandestine measures. Seasonal work in particular was increasingly done by migrants, and one of the sectors that continued to figure as a "labor-shortage sector" was the hotel- and catering business (Böhning 1991) to which many of the Philippine workers in Denmark were continuously recruited (Andersen 2013, 2014).

When the Marcos dictatorship was finally overthrown in 1986, it was too late for the Robles couple to return to the Philippines. Their lives, and the lives of their children, were now tied to Denmark.

The fall of the Marcos dictatorship was also in any event a major change with minor effects. The rebels, communists as well as Muslim separatists, continued their armed struggle, and the counter insurgency tactics of the democratically elected president Corazon Aquino was as ruthless, and as disrespectful of human rights, as the practices of the Marcos dictatorship. Many leading figures from Marcos' time, in military and



Maria Lourdes Robles and Reynaldo Robles visiting the Philippines in 1993. Robles archive)

police as well as in politics, were allowed to stay in their positions or were actively invited back in. Blas F. Ople, the “big man of Department of Labor”, had been in the US during the people’s revolt against Marcos in 1986, and succeeded in keeping himself unstained by the mud suddenly thrown against the fallen dictator even from former allies. The Department of Labor reacted to the winds of change by publishing a tribute to “Ople of Labor”, “a great man whose greatest misfortune, we think, is having to shine at the wrong time” (MOLE 1986: preface). Before the year came to an end, Ople had been asked by President Aquino to help draft a new constitution.

Aquino also vigorously continued the state-promoted export of labor and the state efforts of bringing the foreign migrant-earned money to the Philippines, paralleled by a deregulation of the private sector involvement in overseas employment. One of the first messages from the presidential palace Malacañang to reach the migrants in Copenhagen in 1986 was a letter titled “Pres. Aquinos appeal to Filipino Taxpayers residing abroad” (Robles archive).

“Now that we have restored democracy and honor to the Philippines”, the letter opened, “it is both necessary and timely to focus on the obligation of the Filipino to pay his taxes which is his share of the burden of effecting a national recovery. This obligation follows every Filipino citizen wherever he may be residing”.

Following the tradition of Marcos, Corazon Aquino also sent a special greeting to the diaspora associations; to the Filipino Association in Denmark, Aquino sent a picture of herself with the handwritten message: “To the Filipino community in Denmark, with good wishes, Cory Aquino, Aug. 5, 1986” (FAD 1986:3).

Reynaldo and Maria Lourdes Robles, like thousands of other workers, faithfully paid three percent of their income to the Philippine state, on top of the taxes paid to Denmark where the Robles couple faithfully provided their labor for almost two decades before they opted to become Danish citizens.

Since the arrival of Ms. Robles in 1971, thousands of Filipinos have come to Denmark, many of them finding their first job as chambermaids at the Copenhagen hotels. However, the 1973 “ban on migration” for third country nationals domesticated migration options, as access to Denmark became contingent on access to a family: through marriage, family reunion, transnational adoption or – what Filipinas since the 1990s have increasingly used as a migration strategy to Denmark – through au pair contracts (Andersen & Myong 2015). The year Marcos was overthrown, around 1,200 Filipinos were formally residing in Denmark; today the number is more than 10,000, not counting the temporary migrants such as those on au pair contracts. While around two out of three Filipinos in Denmark were women already in 1980, today more than 85 percent are (Statistics Denmark, StatBank). The labor migrations that general Marcos and his labor minister Blas Ople transformed into a state-brokered export industry<sup>8</sup> – and which subsequent governments have continued to expand – have for half a century provided migrant women workers for the Danish economy.

The 1986 letter from president Aquino to Filipinos abroad closed with a message evoking the spirit of a trans-border Filipino Nation: “Wherever you are this is your country and its progress can only add to your new pride as free Filipinos”.

Filipinos, as in Filipino taxpayers. Free, as in free to leave.

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Robles, Rod 2014-2015: Several interviews conducted in his home, as well as e-mail correspondences.

Robles archive. From the lives of the late Reynaldo and Maria Lourdes Robles who arrived in Denmark in 1971 and 1972 respectively. Kindly made available by their son Rodrigo 'Rod' Robles who joined them in Denmark in 1973. The archive consists of letters exchanged with employers and consulate before and after arrival in Denmark, tax receipts, work permits, diplomas, letters from the Philippines state to Filipinos abroad, newspaper clippings, photographs, diaries. Parts of it will be included in the online archive *Filippinernes Danmarkshistorie* [A Filipino History of Denmark], which is under construction.

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## NOTER

1. The story of Ms. Robles (who died in the late 1990s) is based on interviews with her son, Rod Robles, as well as the private archive left behind by the Robles couple (Robles 2014-2015 and Robles archive).
2. "ate" is a Filipino word that means "older sister" and is used as a way of showing respect and affinity (not limited to biological kinship).
3. Calculation done with the tool *Converter in the past*: <http://fxtop.com/en/currency-converter-past.php> and the *Old money converter* <http://www.oldmoney.dk>.
4. Based on oral accounts from appr. 30 interviews with the Pioneer generation (who recall how they themselves and their friends and relatives came to Denmark during those years).
5. In 1976 it was 512; in 1977:535, in 1978:586.
6. Formal interviews and informal conversations with 30-40 Pioneers during the years 2010-2015.
7. Gothersgade 39.
8. On the phenomenon of "labor brokering state", see for instance Rodriguez 2010.

## BILDMATERIAL

Fotografi på sida 69 är ett utsnitt av fotografiet "Ms. Robles in her clinic in Tondo, Manila" (Robles archive)