

# JOSEFA ABIERTAS

1894 - 1922

## *The First Filipino Woman Baptist to Gain National Renown*

By Demy and Gloria Sonza

The province of Capiz that has produced such outstanding topnotchers in the Bar examination for lawyers as President Manuel Roxas and Justice Jose Hontiveros, also holds the distinction of having raised the first Filipino woman lawyer and Bar topnotcher, Josefa Abiertas. Abiertas was truly a brilliant lawyer, but more than that, she was a fighting moral crusader and social reformer.

Josefa hailed from the town of Capiz, now Roxas City, where she was born in 1894.<sup>1</sup> Hers was a life of hardship and toil from the very start. Her parents were poor and when she was eight years old, she and a younger brother were completely orphaned. Their grandmother took custody of the children but she, too, was hardly able to feed and clothe them.

Young Josefa could not have gone to school had she not been found by two American Baptist missionary couples: Dr. and Mrs. Peter Ler-rigo and Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Robbins. The missionaries had her enrolled at the Baptist Home School\* when this was opened in Capiz in 1904.

It was also in 1904, some time in the month of January, when Josefa accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. With twenty-nine

other converts, she was baptized by Dr. Robbins in the sea three kilometers outside the town of Capiz. From that day 'her whole heart was captured by the spirit of Christ and her whole life was devoted to His service.'<sup>2</sup>

At the Baptist Home School, ten-year old Josefa lived with other orphans in a large house on the main street. The house was rented by the Baptist Mission and served as home and school (hence the name of the institution) for the motley group of parentless children who ranged in age from three to twelve years in the case of boys and four to fourteen in the case of girls. In 1906, the Mission purchased a lot on a hill overlooking the town and erected there a large bamboo and nipa building for the children.<sup>3</sup>

For many years there was only one paid helper in the school, a woman named Maria, who acted as house mother. Josefa joyfully did all the chores assigned to her. In class she was very attentive and showed great eagerness to learn. She also discovered the world of books and spent all the spare time she could find in reading. Mrs. Ler-rigo and Mrs. Robbins, noting the girl's intellectual curiosity and brilliance, encouraged her to study

\* Now the Filamer Christian Institute, Roxas City.

diligently. Josefa responded enthusiastically and finished the elementary grades at the top of the class.

Under the influence and guidance of the missionaries, Josefa's religious zeal grew more intense every year; and when she enrolled at the Capiz High School her enthusiasm electrified her fellow students, inspiring them with a crusading spirit. She told them what it means to be a Christian, "In the simplest meaning of the word," she explained, "a Christian is Christ's man. Christ sets us free from ourselves and leads us out into a glorious world of service for God and humanity."<sup>4</sup>

Responding to her personal witnessing, many of her classmates became Christians. One of them wrote, "We agreed that after graduation we would all go to Mindanao to teach and convert our unfortunate brethren."<sup>5</sup>

Josefa met financial difficulties in high school. She could not afford to buy books, so she studied her lessons with a girl friend. Yet, despite her poverty, she commanded the respect of other students who looked up to her as their leader because she was bright and knew the meaning of life. One of her classmates, paying tribute to Josefa's personal qualities, wrote:<sup>6</sup>

In 1913, Capiz had no fourth year high school class. Josefa had no money with which to go to Manila to study. She therefore sought a position in the Capiz treasurer's office. When, in 1915, a fourth year class was organized, she secured permission to work in the afternoons and to enter high school as an irregular student. The following year she completed her studies—valedictorian of the class.

She was able to finish the course together with the regular members

of the class because she was allowed to perform her chemistry experiments after school hours and to study some of her subjects at home. It was physically heavy for her to be working and studying at the same time. Miss Rose Nicolet, a missionary nurse at the Emmanuel Hospital, recorded an incident about Josefa: "Well do I remember her fainting one morning in the office. She had nothing to eat that morning, and no doubt little the day before."<sup>7</sup> It was really a hard struggle, but Josefa's determined spirit and brilliant intellect proved equal to it.

Scholastic triumph in high school further whetted Abiertas' desire for higher education. She wanted to take up law and serve her people as a Christian lawyer. No woman in Capiz, and in the whole country for that matter, had ever thought of becoming a lawyer. The law profession had always been only for men. Josefa must have come to her decision to study law after long consideration. She saw that it was in the legal field where she could do much to correct the many evils that plagued her country. She had embraced the philosophy of social action early enough. To her, faith without work is dead.

Yet, going to law school was easier thought than done. It meant she had to go to Manila. Where would she get the money needed? Could she leave her grandmother and brother behind? Could she find a job in Manila? These and many other questions assailed her mind.

But Josefa had a strong faith in God. She knew that if it was God's will for her to become a lawyer He will provide a way. For days she prayed hard for God's guidance and help. Finally, feeling guided by the Holy Spirit, she requested for transfer of work from the Capiz treasurer's office to that of the Insular Treasurer's Office in Manila. Since she had a

high performance rating in Capiz, her request was granted. Of course, insofar as she was concerned, the approval of her request for transfer was God's work.

Trusting in God's assistance and protection, young Miss Abiertas took her aging grandmother and brother with her to Manila. That was her first trip outside Capiz but if there was any moment when she was disturbed by fear or doubt she never showed it.

In the big city, Josefa rented two tiny rooms in a boarding house. Her grandmother and brother did their best to help her with the housekeeping and this lightened a bit her work. But her earnings were not enough. Often she denied herself food that she might feed her little family.<sup>8</sup> She worked from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon and attended night classes at the Philippine Law School. Within a short time her Christian influence was felt in the office where she was working.

One time, Dr. Robbins, her pastor in Capiz, was in Manila and paid her a visit. "I did not need inquire whether she was there," reported Dr. Robbins. "The moment I entered the treasurer's office I could feel her in the atmosphere."<sup>9</sup>

Abiertas spent her money very prudently. In order to save on transportation, she walked to the office and to school. At times she was so hungry, but since she had no money for snacks, what she did was to drink water and then more water to assuage her hunger.<sup>10</sup> And she never complained of the hardship. Her motto was "Trust God, work hard and just keep sweet when things go wrong."<sup>11</sup>

The zealous Christian young lady found Manila a great challenge not so much for physical survival as for spiritual growth and social service. Aside from attending church, she associated herself with the YMCA and despite

her work and schooling, found time to wage a crusade against vice and sin.

Upon her arrival in Manila in early 1916, she was appalled by the criminality and vice, especially drunkenness and prostitution, that prevailed in the city. She lost no time in starting a campaign to combat these evils. She talked to her co-workers in the office and her classmates in school to solicit their support.

"Year after year," she wrote to a friend, "hundreds and hundreds of young people go to perdition because of these drinking salons, these canteens and these red light districts. O, how I wish I were the Chief Executive of the city . . . With the help of God, I am determined to launch a fight against these evils."<sup>12</sup>

There were at that time hundreds of wretched girls, some of whom foreigners who were virtually kept prisoners in the vice dens of the red light districts. Abiertas took it upon herself to champion their cause. She demanded a hearing of the municipal council. Without mincing words, she told the city fathers that by permitting this nefarious practices they were inflicting a curse upon the people they were elected to serve and protect.<sup>13</sup>

She organized a group of like-minded young people to help her in the campaign. Together they interviewed preachers, priests, teachers, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, public officials, even the Governor-General. They talked to editors, publishers and reporters and the newspapers warmly espoused their cause. As a result, public sentiment was so aroused that the city government was forced to take action.

One night, Mayor Justo Lukban ordered the police to crack down on the vice dens. Around 600 girls were rounded up, thrown into jail and then unceremoniously shipped to Davao on 18 October 1916.<sup>14</sup> Instead of appeas-

ing Josefa's moral sense, the mayor's action horrified her. She thought it was grossly unfair to the outcasts who, to her mind, deserved better treatment. Driving them away was not the best way of solving the problem. She reasoned that so long as there were places of vice in Manila, there would always be some people who would be tempted to go to those places.

The maintainers of the vice dens went to court to challenge the mayor's arbitrary decision of shipping the girls to Davao. The court ruled that Lukban's action was illegal. Consequently, many of the girls were taken back to Manila to resume their trade.

Alarmed at this development of events, Abiertas organized demonstrations and rallies against the cabarets and the red light districts. Responding to the public indignation, the city council conducted public hearings on the problem. Then, one day, the councilors voted to ban all public dance halls within the city limits, which in effect abolished the red light districts. That evening Josefa's brother found her in her room kneeling down and crying as though her heart would break.

"What's the matter, Manang?" he asked. "Has something terrible happened?"

"Yes, she answered, "something terribly glorious."

"Well, that's a funny way to act then."

"It is a way girls act when they are happy," she said, laughing and crying at the same time. Arising, she opened her notebook and stood motionless as she read for the hundredth time her favorite lines:<sup>15</sup>

Resistance will meet your endeavor  
While striving to dare and to do;  
But be like the meteor's onrush - -  
Take fire and burn your way  
through.

The youthful crusader's earnest labors seemed Sisyphean, however, for the owners of the cabarets simply moved them a short distance outside the city limits and continued with their business. Yet Abiertas was not disheartened. She knew that a good fight had been started and that there would be other righteous citizens who would continue it.

Corollary to her campaign against prostitution was her attack on the old idea, implanted in the Filipino popular mind by the Spaniards, which claimed that though the women must be good, the men may be as bad as they pleased. Josefa would never tolerate the so-called double-standard morality. To her what was wrong for women was also wrong for men.

She next directed her efforts against gambling. She convened a public meeting at the YMCA auditorium to protest the law permitting gambling and cock-fighting on Sundays and holidays. Speaking at the meeting, she enumerated the evils of gambling, even pointing out that it was a desecration of the day of the Lord, and then perorated: "Is this helping to make the Philippines worthy of respect of other nations? Gambling is a chain which we must break from the feet of our country: we must and we will!"<sup>16</sup> The hall shook with the thunder of applause.

Josefa could easily win public opinion and support not only because of the righteousness of her cause, but also because of her forensic skill. She was gifted with a golden tongue. A proof of this is that while she was only a freshman in college, she pitted her talent against the best male orators of her school and won. That was during the First Annual Oratorical Contest held at the Philippine Law School on 18 March 1917. Abiertas' oration was entitled "The Filipino Woman's Best Gift to Her Country." The piece was later included in the book, **Gems of Philippine Oratory**, and for a long time scarcely was there an orato-

rical competition in the Philippines in which some Filipino high school girl did not deliver this stirring oration.<sup>17</sup>

Like many other enlightened Filipino women, Josefa Abiertas wanted the Filipina to take active part in public affairs. In her-winning oration, she said:<sup>18</sup>

As a daughter of the Philippines, as a part of the Filipino people, a Filipino woman can never be justified in being a mere spectator to the drama of life that is played within the four corners of her country. What affects her country affects her own self. Therefore, let her come out on the stage of Philippine affairs and let her play the part of a heroine, for it is only in doing so that she can be considered as bringing her best gifts to the altar of the land she loves.

She argued that Filipino women, especially those who have acquired an education, cannot remain neutral to the exciting events and issues of the time. The oration continues.<sup>19</sup>

In this age of enlightenment . . . no Filipino man or woman who is endowed with good mental perception can ever conceive the idea of such a thing as "standing still" or stagnation, for a country. Our highly adored Philippines must either go forward or slide backward, or it must rise triumphantly upward or fall ignominiously downward and be once more under some cruel hand. Of course, we all wish to see her lifted up into the atmosphere of progress and dignity. But how can this be done? Unless there is an equal force of interest, courage and patriotism from both our men and our women to push the Philippines upward, unless the women, too, of our country are willing to set their hands upon the plow which would dig up the weeds of ignorance, laziness, selfishness and superstition from the minds of the majority of our people . . . in short, unless the

Filipino women are willing to make themselves "Pillars instead of pinacles, aids instead of idols" of these Islands, the Philippines will never thrive nor climb the heights for which our patriotic sons have struggled for years.

She exhorted her fellow women to help the poor, and above all, to raise their children well and educate them so that they may become useful citizens. "One of the best gifts that a Filipino woman can give her country," she declared, "is her untiring and unremitting effort to help mitigate the deplorable condition of her less fortunate countrymen and to rear up from the cradle in her home children who are to be the bright prospects of the coming generation."<sup>20</sup>

She believed that education should be more than just improving the intellect. It should include the moulding of character and development of social conscience. "Moral and spiritual education should go hand in hand with mental education in enabling a Filipino woman to produce her best gifts to the country," she said and continued:<sup>21</sup>

A Filipino woman who is highly educated mentally but whose heart and soul are not taught to condescend and consider the needs of her countrymen is not the woman whom the Philippines is looking for, Filipino women must be really earnest Christian women, who look not only for their own prosperity but also for their countrymen's welfare.

It was for the purpose of serving God and her countrymen that Abiertas tried hard to gain a college education. She gave to her studies the same zeal and vigor that she devoted to her moral crusade, because it was her obsession to prove that a woman could achieve as much academically as a man. During the first two years that she was in college she was the only girl at the Philippine Law School. When she learned that another girl intended to take up law, she happily

wrote, "Next year another girl will be in the Philippine Law School. She is a Christian and advocate of woman's suffrage. I hope in the near future the good Lord will help us with women representatives and senators.<sup>22</sup> Those were prophetic words.

Abiertas believed that a new age of women had dawned on the Philippines. When she graduated in 1920, she delivered another stirring speech, her valedictory address. The piece is appropriately titled, "The New Age of Women." A portion of the address rings with deep sentiment:<sup>23</sup>

Already women are marching with great bold strides into the arena of active life. Though they are nectar-sweet, tender-hearted and soft-handed, they are not meant to be parasites. They desire not only to share men's happiness, but also life's bitter battles. Amid torn socks and garments women have burned out their wonderful energies. Day and night they have struggled to rear children only to have the subjects of their love ruined and their fond dreams shattered by the vices all around them. Our mothers thought they could do nothing, and so they bore their suffering in silence. But silence is no longer Christian; a new era has dawned. No use arguing, no use denying what woman demands. She realized that she must not only make her children angels, but must make the world safe for angels to live in.

Standing flushed and radiant, she brought forth round after round of applause as she delivered her valedictory. Then she gave the final peroration:<sup>24</sup>

We will live, and gladly will we die, if through our suffering there may rise from the blue waters of the Pacific a Philippine republic proud not only of its sons, but proud, yea, doubly proud, of her loyal daughters.

Immediately after graduation Josefa prepared to take the bar examination.

Long and late she studied, knowing that only about fifteen per cent of those who wanted to take the examination that year would pass. When the results were released, she obtained the highest mark of them all, and one of the best, it was said, ever achieved in the Philippines.<sup>25</sup>

Once she had become an attorney-at-law, she made herself the legal champion of the oppressed and the less fortunate. Among the first people she helped were some poor farmers who were being victimized by usurious, land-grabbing landowners. She thought it was a great shame that some men would accumulate wealth by causing suffering to underpaid and overworked laborers.

Because of her high grade in the bar examination, one manufacturing firm offered her a high position with a big salary. She refused the offer because she had learned that the workers in the company were not treated fairly. "If you wish me to accept the position," she told the owners of the firm, "you had better treat your employees well."<sup>26</sup>

In keeping with her qualification as a lawyer, she was promoted to the position of division chief in the Bureau of Commerce and Industry.<sup>27</sup> She also taught at the YMCA High School, not only because she needed the extra money, but because she wanted to impart to young people her Christian ideals.

She continued her campaign for morality. One vice that she earnestly wanted to minimize, if not totally eradicate, was drunkenness. In this regard, she was influenced by the Prohibition Movement that was sweeping across America during the period. To wage a massive, concerted attack on drunkenness, she organized and became the first president in the Philippines of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.<sup>28</sup>

The movement for woman's suffrage also received the whole-hearted sup-

port of Attorney Abiertas. She delivered speeches on feminine political rights whenever she had an opportunity to do so. At one meeting to which some senators and representatives to the Legislature had been invited, she orated: "The women must vote. It is sad to see a nation like ours clamoring for a high place in the society of nations while women have as little political rights as criminals and children."<sup>20</sup>

People who heard her speak on women's suffrage could not help being convinced that the Filipino women should be allowed to vote if only for the fact that one of them was a brilliant lawyer and eloquent speaker.

Attorney Abiertas never slackened her vigorous drive to improve the social conditions in the Philippines. And she never spared herself any sacrifice in her desire to press towards her ideal which was to be "like the Master in pleasing the Father and in serving humanity."<sup>30</sup>

The years of hardship and privation, of struggle and hard work, took a heavy toll on her frail body, and she contracted tuberculosis in the prime of youth. She was confined at a Manila hospital. One of those who visited her at the hospital was the famous American missionary, Dr. Frank C. Laubach. Dr. Laubach noticed that there was a worn out New Testament by her side on the bed. He thumbed through the pages of the little book and found that there were verses underlined with red ink. Some of the verses are:

Even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.

He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Be of good cheer, it is I, be not afraid.

With her strong faith, Josefa bravely faced death. Finally, on 12 Jan-

uary 1922,<sup>31</sup> with her hands holding her much read New Testament, she answered the call of Him who said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I shall give you rest."<sup>32</sup>

Of her it may be truly said that the good die young. Indeed, she lived true to the last lines of her slogan:

But like the meteor's unrush—  
Take fire and burn your way  
through.

At the necrological service held in her honor at the Central Student Church, the Reverend Otto Houser summed up the qualities of Josefa Abiertas in the following words: "Too much can be hardly said of her fitness for leadership. She was progressive without being radical, enthusiastic without being offensive, warm-hearted without being sentimental, intellectual without being cold, poised but not stiff, purposeful but not stubborn, a reformer but not a fanatic, a trained lawyer but a Christian, a social servant but not forgetful of the Church, a student but not neglectful of the Greatest Book, a patriot but asking no pay for it."<sup>33</sup>

A magazine, **The Young Generation**, published the following eulogy in its issue of January 1922:<sup>34</sup>

Josefa Abiertas, the woman, the Christian, the reformer, the lawyer . . . perished with the January flowers, in the springtime of her life.

She is gone, but the name Josefa Abiertas shall live. The Pasig may change her course, her waters may cease to flow, but the sweet memory of that "fair flower" shall linger in our hearts.

And linger long it did. Eight years after her death, a group of prominent civic leaders, including Justice Jose Abad Santos, Don Teodoro Yangco, Dr. Rebecca Parish, Mrs. Asuncion Perez, Dr. and Mrs. Henry Steinmetz, who had known Abiertas in Capiz,

and Mrs. Josefa Jara-Martinez, founded an institution devoted to the assistance of the victims of white slavery, a social malady that Abiertas tried hard to mitigate. The Josefa Abiertas House of Friendship was inaugurated on 11 November 1930. Located at Santolan, Quezon City, the institution has served hundreds of unwed mothers and fatherless children.<sup>35</sup>

Undoubtedly, in the hearts of these unfortunate people, and in those of many, many others who have been influenced by her ideals and example, Josefa Abiertas continues to live. She might had been a meteor that vanished so soon but the fire that she brought had caught on and the flame is still burning.

#### Notes :

1 Herminia M. Ancheta, **Leading Pilipino Women** (Quezon City; P. L. Bustamante Press, 1953), p. 79-

2 Henry Weston Munger, **Christ and the Filipino Soul: A History of the Philippine Baptists** (mimeographed edition, 1967), p. 125

3 *Ibid.*

4 Frank C. Laubach, **Seven Thousand Emeralds** (New York: Friendship Press, 1929), p. 99. Hereinafter cited as Laubach, **Seven Thousand Emeralds**.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

6 *Philippine Prose and Poetry* (Manila: Bureau of Education, 1946), vol. 2, p. 228.

7 Laubach, *Seven Thousand Emeralds*, p. 90.

8 Munger, *loc. cit.*

9 Laubach, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

10 Munger, *loc. cit.*

11 Frank C. Laubach, *The People of the Philippines, Their Religious Progress, Preparation for Leader-*

*ship in the Far East*, (New York: Gense H. Doran Co., 1925), p. 291. Hereinafter cited as Laubach, *The People of the Philippines*.

12 Munger, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

13 *Ibid.*, 127.

14 "Girls of Gardenia Deported to Davao," *The Manila Times*, October 18, 1916.

15 Munger, *loc. cit.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, p. 229.

18 Munger, *loc. cit.*; *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, p. 82.

19 Josefa Abiertas, "The Filipino Woman's Best Gift to her Country," *Philippine Prose and Poetry* (Manila: Bureau of Education, 1946), vol. 2, p. 82.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Munger, *loc. cit.*

23 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

24 Laubach, *Seven Thousand Emeralds*, p. 99.

25 *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, p. 229.

26 Ancheta, *loc. cit.*

27 One of her subordinate employees at the Bureau of Commerce and Industry, Vicente T. Remitio, remembers that Abiertas was so strict against smoking in the office.

28 Laubach, *People of the Philippines*, p. 293.

29 Laubach, *Seven Thousand Emeralds*, p. 99.

30 Laubach, *People of the Philippines*, p. 293.



31 *Philippine Prose and Poetry*  
p. 229.

32 Matthew 11:28.

33 Roberta C. Aranzano, et. al.,  
*Women of Distinction* (Manila: Bu-  
kang Liwayway, 1968), pp. 4-5.

34 Laubach, *People of the Philip-  
pines*, p. 293.

35 "Unwed Mothers, Their Babies,  
Find Refuge in Abiertas," *The Phil-  
ippines Daily Express*, November  
5, 1976.