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Celia Mariano Pomeroy: Communist revolutionary who went on to teach in London primary schools

Thursday 22 October 2009, by [RICHARDSON Jim](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2009).

Celia Mariano, political activist and teacher: born Manila 1915; married 1948 William Pomeroy (died January 2009); died 22 August 2009.

Celia Mariano Pomeroy lived the first half of her remarkable life in her native Philippines and the second half in England. Here she will be remembered with affection by her former pupils at the primary schools at which she taught in the 1960s and 1970s - Harry Gosling in Tower Hamlets and Joseph Tritton in Battersea - and by the many progressive groups in which she remained active until well into her eighties, notably the National Assembly of Women, Liberation, and migrant workers' organisations.

In the Philippines she will be remembered as a Communist revolutionary who played an important role in the wartime resistance to Japanese occupation and in the post-war rebellion against the neo-colonial regime installed by the United States.

Celia Mariano was born in Manila in 1915. Her family was well-to-do, but even as a child, she recalled in an unpublished memoir, she was deeply disturbed by the poverty she saw in the city's slums. As a student at the University of the Philippines she started to think about what she personally could do to "bring the greatest good to the greatest number," and as a young woman in the late 1930s she became involved in the liberal and leftist campaigns of the times. Increasingly, she was drawn to Communism, which to her offered a great sense of engagement with the world and its problems, and which promised to do away with exploitation and to stand firm against fascism.

She joined the Philippine Communist Party (PKP) in September 1941, three months before the Japanese occupation forces landed. Her first great service to the party was to persuade her parents to allow two farms they owned in the hills to the east of Manila to be used as guerrilla training camps and hideouts. Celia herself was assigned to the rice-growing provinces to the north of Manila where the PKP-led guerrilla forces, known as the Huks, had their strongest mass support. She travelled from village to village as an organiser and instructor, known only by aliases and disguised as a peasant. Later she became the editor of *Katubusan* (Redemption), the newspaper of the Huk resistance. The previous editor had been abducted by collaborators of the Japanese and tortured to death with hot metal rods.

By the time the American forces under General MacArthur returned to the Philippines in October 1944, Celia had been elected to the PKP's central committee. There was intense debate within the

semi-legal, semi-underground party about how to respond first to the American “re-occupation” and then in 1946 to the establishment of the Philippine republic, nominally independent but in reality still subservient to American interests and virulently anti-Communist. Many activists in the labour and peasant unions were arrested, beaten and killed. Villages in the movement’s heartlands were shelled by artillery. In self-defence, the Huk guerrillas remobilised, and the PKP shifted towards a strategy of escalating the armed struggle.

In these post-war years Celia worked full-time for the PKP, for a while taking charge, at her own request, of the party’s efforts to advance the role and status of women, both within the movement and in society at large. She also agreed, in 1947, to act as the guide and interpreter for an American communist, Bill Pomeroy, who had come to the Philippines to write a book about the Huks. In the course of their trips they fell in love, and in 1948 they married.

In 1950, encouraged by a rising tide of anti-government unrest, the PKP decided that a “revolutionary situation” existed in the country, and led the Huk guerrillas to mount an ill-judged attempt to capture state power. In April that year, as the rebellion intensified, Celia and Bill left their home in Manila and took the road south to a guerrilla encampment hidden in the forests of the Sierra Madre. They lived a hidden, often harsh existence in the hills for two years, producing leaflets and papers and organising training schools.

With American help, the Philippine government succeeded in quashing the Huk movement. Celia and Bill were captured by the army in April 1952, charged with rebellion “complexed with other crimes” and sentenced to life imprisonment. After a decade behind bars, mostly kept apart, they were finally freed by presidential pardon in December 1961. Then they had to endure almost two more years apart because Bill was expelled from the Philippines after his release, and Celia was initially denied a passport to leave. Only after Bill organised an international campaign, which was backed by Bertrand Russell, Fenner Brockway, Graham Greene and many other prominent figures, was the passport finally granted. Barred from each other’s countries, Celia and Bill settled in England, and lived for more than 40 years in Twickenham.

Celia remained a Communist to the end of her days. To outsiders, she recognised, her life might appear romantic. But in reality, she said with characteristic frankness, her decision to become a revolutionary had meant that her life had been filled with hardship, turbulence, fear and danger. It had also meant a very personal sacrifice. She and Bill had no children, because when they married they decided to delay starting a family until their situation was “normal”, and it never was. By the time they were released from prison it was too late. The only romance in her life, she said, was the love she shared with Bill.

P.S.

* From The Independent (London):

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/celia-mariano-pomeroy-communist-revolutionary-who-went-on-to-teach-in-london-primary-schools-1806786.html>