

Summary Execution

The Political Assassinations of Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes

BY MIKE WITHEY ©

INTRODUCTION: MURDERS IN SEATTLE

Seattle: June 1, 1981

LOCAL 37 UNION HALL: 4:20pm

On the eastern edge of the Pioneer Square district in Seattle stood an historic but nondescript two-story terracotta building, crowned by a large, weather worn sign that read: “Cannery Workers ILWU Local 37” in large type, its blue and white paint peeling from the soft but incessant Seattle rain.

The entrance to the union hall led down a corridor into the large but lightly lit Dispatch Hall. This Hall was where the seasonal laborers – a predominantly Filipino work force – were sent out to back-breaking jobs on the slime lines of canneries that hugged the shores of Bristol Bay, Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak Island and Ketchikan, Alaska. The corridor paralleled two offices on its left; the first office lead into the second, interior office which was used by the President of Local 37, Constantine “Tony” Baruso. The wall of this office was decorated with a large picture of a smiling Tony Baruso shaking hands with the then President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos. Baruso was close with the Philippine dictator, having visited him in Manila on numerous occasions. He was widely known in the Filipino community as a leading pro-Marcos ally who praised his Martial law regime.

In the first office two recently elected union officers, Silme Domingo, Secretary-Treasurer and Gene Viernes, Dispatcher, worked diligently. The stale air in the union office only exacerbated the late spring’s uncharacteristic heat. Silme sat hunched over his desk, piles of yellowed papers at his right elbow. Gene stood at the filing cabinet, searching for information on a Local 37 member, Ben Guloy, who had called to find out if he could qualify for the first

dispatch of cannery workers to Alaska. Gene and Silme were waiting for a friend and fellow anti-Marcos activist, David Della, to arrive for a meeting. But he was running late.

At the union's first dispatch of the season to the Peter Pan Cannery in Dillingham, Alaska, there had been trouble. On May 26th, Gene gathered the members in the Dispatch Hall and announced a controversial new dispatch procedure, which assigned jobs at the canneries based on union member seniority and past work history in the industry. Under the prior arrangement, the industry foremen worked with Tony Baruso to create a list of workers to dispatch to each cannery. But both Gene and Silme wanted to end the system where members felt they needed to bribe both Baruso and the foremen in order to get work.

At that May 26th dispatch the head of the local Filipino Tulisan gang, Tony Dictado, challenged Gene openly, stating loudly that Gene needed to dispatch some of Dictado's "boys"—Tulisan gang members who worked in the canneries but also would run gambling operations in the Filipino bunkhouses at the canneries. When Gene refused, explaining that there were no exceptions to the new procedures, Dictado exploded, swearing angrily at Gene in a Filipino dialect Gene did not understand.

Dictado was used to getting his way. So was Baruso. In addition to taking bribes in exchange for priority in dispatch, Baruso was also suspected of getting a percentage of the gambling proceeds from the foremen. But Gene and Silme were idealist activists elected on a platform to reform the union, bring about a fair dispatch and promote stronger negotiations with the industry.

There was no love lost between Baruso and his new officers. They had founded the Rank and File Committee of union activists to confront the Alaska seafood industry about blatant race discrimination against Filipinos in the canneries. The Committee, along with the independent Alaska Cannery Workers Association (ACWA), also founded by Gene and Silme vigorously filed race discrimination lawsuits in the mid-1970s. Tony Baruso had made sure that Local 37 itself did not support the lawsuits, mainly because he was very close to the captains of the industry.

At 4:20 on that sunny Seattle day, Ben Guloy entered the union hall first, followed by Jimmy Ramil, another member of the Tulisan gang. They stopped briefly in the front office doorway as Ramil pulled a MAC .10 .45 caliber firearm, with a silencer attached, out of a brown paper bag, pointed it at Gene, and fired. Gene dove for the floor too late and landed with a dull

thud. Blood seeped from two wounds in his chest, oozing across the tiles and dyeing his white shirt scarlet.

Ramil then swung his firearm to his right, firing at Silme. The force of the bullets spun Silme halfway around in his swivel chair and punched four gaping holes in his chest.

Not waiting to check the bodies, Ramil tucked his weapon back into the bag and, together with Guloy, left the union hall heading south down the adjoining alley. They passed a third Filipino, Teodorico Domingues, also known as Boy Pilay, who had been standing lookout at the entrance. When they were gone, Pilay dragged his gimpy leg behind him across the street to a black Trans-Am with a large golden eagle on its hood. He slipped into the front passenger's seat, and the car sped off, a death wagon bursting through the brightly lit day. The driver beside him was none other than Tony Dictado.

Back in his Local 37 office, Silme gasped for air. He turned to see Gene bleeding out onto the scuffed white tiles of the office's floor. He gripped the edges of the desk and managed to stagger onto his feet. Clutching his chest, he moved from the office to the corridor, losing hot blood with every step. The door of the union hall rushed up to meet him, and he lunged through it, dragging his body down the steps before collapsing onto the sidewalk yelling for help.

Seattle firefighter James Huckins was working at Fire Station 10 on the corner of Main Street and 2nd Avenue, a block from Local 37, when a young girl ran in. She was shouting that there was a man lying face down on Main Street. He looked injured, she claimed, and was crying for help. James immediately radioed for the aid car, grabbed a portable medic cart and rushed out of the fire station toward the union hall.

Firefighter Frank Urpman, also at Fire Station 10, heard shouts for help outside. When he looked out the second story window he saw Silme lying on the sidewalk, blood staining the concrete beneath him. Frank ran down the stairs and out into the street, reaching Silme at almost the same time James did.

"Were you robbed?" Frank said, his voice calm as he applied pressure to the wounds on Silme's chest.

"N-no...shot." Silme gasped, face twitching in pain as James and Frank ripped open packets of gauze and applied them to the gaping gunshot wounds.

"Do you know who shot you?" James asked.

Silme groaned, eyelids fluttering, "Yes...I do. They...might still be in the building."

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“Who are they?”

“Ramil and Guloy,” Silme said, voice pained but otherwise clear.

Frank took out a piece of paper and a pen, wrote the names down and showed them to Silme.

“It’s Ramil with an L,” Silme corrected him. Frank crossed out the last letters, and wrote “Ramil” instead of “Rammo.”

Silme had begun to pale. His blood had fully soaked through his shirt, and he was breathing heavily. James continued to ask Silme questions to keep him alert – what day it was, where he was and the names of the hit men-Ben and Jimmy. Finally aid arrived and Frank and Jim loaded Silme into the Medic ambulance.

“Am I going to die?” Silme said, his voice a whisper.

Frank cradled Silme’s head in his hands and spoke to the wounded man gently but honestly. “It looks bad.” The ambulance roared off to Harborview Medical Center, sirens blaring.

Across the street from the union hall, a middle aged man in a grey suit and dark glasses emerged from a telephone booth, looked across to the scene in front of the union and slipped into his car. As he pulled away from the curb, heading south on 2nd Avenue, he lifted a CB radio to his lips and started to speak.

BEACON HILL: 5:15pm on June 1st

Terri Mast first met Silme in 1997 at a meeting of the Anti-Martial Law Coalition, a national organization which opposed the repressive regime of Ferdinand Marcos. She came from a strong working class background and was also active, with Silme and Gene, in the Union of Democratic Filipinos, or KDP. KDP was a US-based democratic socialist organization of hundreds of activists opposed the Marcos regime, supported the leftist opposition parties in the Philippines and advocated for Filipino rights in the US. Patient, organized and level headed, Terri met her love match in the passionate Silme, who became her common law husband. Together, they shared major responsibilities for implementing the reform work within Local 37, organizing in the Filipino community, and attending rallies and demonstrations as part of the

anti-Marcos movement in Seattle. They also parented two young daughters, Ligaya, 3, and Kalayaan, an 11 month old toddler, who were the joy of their lives.

Terri was at home in their Beacon Hill apartment, watching Ligaya play with trucks, when her friends and fellow KDP activists Elaine Ko, John Foz and Shari Woo showed up unexpectedly.

“Terri, get your overnight stuff; we have to go to the hospital. Gene and Silme have been shot...” Elaine’s voice broke. Terri could see unshed tears fresh in her eyes.

It took her words too long to form. “How...are they...?”

“Gene is...Gene didn’t make it. Silme is going to go into surgery now. Shari will watch the girls.”

Terri fell back onto the sofa when she attempted to stand, whispering, “No...no...” She felt shell-shocked. They all were. Shari came and sat down beside her as tears poured down Terri’s cheeks. “Silme was just talking last night about what would happen to US if something were to happen to him... What’s...what’s his condition?”

“He was shot in the stomach,” Shari admitted. “Not good. They need you and his folks down at Harborview as soon as possible. Dave Della had a meeting with Gene this afternoon and showed up late... When he got there he found Gene...” She struggled to speak. “He found Gene dead on the floor of his office. By then Silme was already on his way to the hospital. Dave called Glenn Suson at the headquarters, and Glenn called US.”

Elaine held out her hand. “Come on, Terri. We have to go. For Silme. We have to go.”

Terri wiped the tears from her cheeks, robust with color from the sun and the adrenaline that poured through her. “You’re right.” She nodded once and rose to her feet, Shari helping her as she walked out the door.

Shari watched them go down the steps. The moment she closed the door, she took Ligaya and Kalayaan into her arms and gently cradled them for what seemed like hours but lasted mere minutes, worrying what was in store for them. She then got them ready to be dropped off at a friend’s house.

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA: 6:30pm

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Cindy Domingo was at her apartment in Oakland when she received the call from Dale Borgeson, a national leader of the KDP living in Oakland. . Static on the line made him hard to hear. Or was he was sniffing? Cindy's stomach clenched.

"Are you sitting down?" he asked.

Reflexively, Cindy said yes, even though she wasn't. She was standing at the window looking out at a peach colored sky.

"I have some...some terrible news."

"What is it? What happened?"

"Your brother...Silme...he was..." He paused and began again after a few seconds of strained silence. To Cindy that silence lasted not seconds, but eternities, and when it ended and Dale finally told her what happened, she was not the same woman she had once been. She was decades older.

The peach sky turned dark grey, suddenly ominous.

Cindy was a KDP activist assigned to the KDP National Secretariat at its headquarters in Oakland after getting her Masters' Degree at Berkeley. The National Secretariat was the organizational center for the KDP, responsible for publishing its' newspaper, Ang Katipunan, and scheduling its membership and chapter activities. She had recently been approved for a transfer back to Seattle. She'd wanted to be closer to her family... And now?

"It can't be." Cindy said, voice louder than she'd meant for it to be.

"I'm so sorry," Dale repeated. "Cindy, can you fly up to Seattle with me tonight? We can both go to Harborview where everyone is on vigil.

"Silme..." She couldn't grasp a reality that seemed hell-bent on eluding her. Sometime in the past few moments she'd sat at her kitchen table. Now, she stood. "Okay, let's go to the airport. Has someone...has someone called my parents? I need to talk to them."

"Elaine is taking Terri to Harborview, and both Ade and Nemesio are on their way there right now, as well."

HARBORVIEW MEDICAL CENTER: 6:55pm

Ade Domingo, matriarch of the Domingo family, greeted Terri with a long hug in the Harborview ER lobby. Ade had taught and encouraged her children to take a stand for people

who were less fortunate that they were, but at the same time she was always worried about their work. This was her worst nightmare.

“Silme’s in surgery,” She told her daughter in law. “He is fighting for his life. He was shot in the stomach four times...Oh, my son, my son....” She stopped, voice catching on a sob.

“Any way we can get to see him? Is he conscious?”

“The surgeon said we needed to wait until he is out of surgery. The staff will let US know.” Ade clutched the rosary that hung around her neck with enough force to turn her knuckles white.

Faced with a long wait, Terri’s community organizing instincts kicked in. “We need to get everyone we know to the blood bank on Madison,” she said, turning to the friends and family that filled the small room. “He will need all the blood he can get with stomach wounds. Then they can come down here for a vigil.”

She looked around the room. “Did someone call Gene’s family in Wapato?”

“Yeah,” Emily Van Bronkhorst, a longtime family friend and Rank and File Committee stalwart said. “Stan and Steve Viernes are heading over here now with Andy Pascua. Gene’s sister Barbara is going to stay with the family for now. She will come over for the memorial.”

Nemesio Sr., Silme’s father, was sitting on a couch, silently praying. His oldest son, Silme’s brother Nemesio Jr., and his son’s wife Curn Domingo, sat beside him. Nemesio Jr. founded the Alaska Cannery Workers Association (ACWA) with Gene and Silme. Not an actual union with membership and collective bargaining agreements, the ACWA was established to investigate and file lawsuits against the industry for race discrimination.

Their sister Evangeline, or Vangie, was raising a family in Arizona. The youngest Domingo sibling, Lynn, sobbed quietly on one of the waiting room chairs. Kids were sitting nervously on the couches. Friends and family waded through the foyer to offer their hope and condolences.

Dave Della, the KDP activist who had found Gene’s body that afternoon after showing up at the union hall late for the meeting that never happened, entered the waiting room with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He cleared his throat. “Hi, everyone. I know things are tough, but I wanted to let you know that the police believe Silme may have named the people who shot him. I talked to them after...after I left the union hall.” He was visibly shaken, eyes hollow and expressionless, his face ashen.

“That’s amazing. How…….who……” The murmurs went through the room.

“They didn’t give me the names.” Dave explained. Silence.

“Where’s Baruso?” Terri asked no one in particular.

Several people looked around. “I have no idea” Ade stated. “Maybe he was working at Boeing and doesn’t know yet.” In addition to his work at Local 37, Baruso maintained a job at Boeing as a production line manager.

Before anyone could answer a nurse, Daisy Mae, appeared at the ER doorway, putting all thoughts of Tony Baruso out of mind. Silme’s family leaned forward as she looked calmly and apologetically around. “Silme’s still in surgery and will be for at least a few more hours. We will let you know when the surgery is over. In the meantime, get as many folks as you can to the blood bank on Madison.”

“Thank you,” Ade said, standing and looking around. “Is there a smaller room where we can get further updates on Silme? This waiting room reminds me of a political convention.” People laughed, though the sound was hollow and humorless. The nurse nodded and showed the immediate family, along with Elaine and Emily, to a side room.

“Dave will turn out folks to the Blood Bank. The word is out on the street about the shootings, and we need them there now, not here.” Terri’s voice and hands were shaking, but she stayed in control. “Has anyone notified Mike Withey?”

Elaine nodded. “Kozu went to El Centro to track him down. They’ll head down to the union to find out what they can and make sure none of the sensitive KDP papers that Silme kept in his briefcase are taken.” Elaine said.

Terri buried her face in her hands and massaged her eyelids with her fingertips. “Yeah, he was working on a theoretical piece on Racism and had all of the KDP plans. But he also has the names and contact information on all of our political comrades. Don’t want that to get in the wrong hands.”