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by David McNeill

[The beautiful half of one of the 20th Century's most notorious dictatorships, Imelda Marcos has spent two decades fighting attempts to jail her and trace a reputed hidden fortune of billions. On the 20th anniversary of the revolution that swept her and Ferdinand Marcos from power in the Philippines, she talks exclusively about her wealth, legacy and that infamous shoe collection.]

Imelda Marcos, once ranked as one of the ten richest women on the planet, is broke. Or so she says. "I am poor not only in material things but in the truth. But I believe the truth will prevail. The truth is god and if you are on the side of truth and god, who can stand against you?"

We are sitting in the 34th-floor suite where the former first lady of the Philippines lives in one of Manila's most exclusive apartment blocks. Outside, the city's smoggy landscape stretches far into the distance; inside, the walls groan with original art works: a Picasso here, a Gauguin there. A Michelangelo bust peers over a collection of photographs on the piano showing Imelda in her prime with the great and the good: disgraced US president Richard Nixon plays the piano, Chairman Mao kisses her hand; Japan's Emperor Hirohito stands stiff and helpless beside her retina-burning allure.

Oil paintings even hang in the toilet. "I love beauty and I am allergic to ugliness," she sniffs, as a half-dozen servants in white coats scurry around ministering to her needs. "Beauty is god made real." Her lawyer Robert Sison explains: "You have to realize that when Mrs. Marcos talks about being poor, she does not mean poor like you or I. She is being relative, compared to the life she used to lead before."

The woman once dubbed the steel butterfly, the beautiful half of the sticky-fingered conjugal dictatorship that ruled the Philippines for two decades of chaos and plunder is now a doughy 76. Although the famous jet-black bouffant is still stubbornly in place, the beauty that charmed everyone from Henry Kissinger to Pope John Paul II has faded, replaced by a sort of flinty, hard-worked glamour; the once sultry topaz eyes now rheumy and guarded.



Imelda greets Pope John Paul II

It is now twenty years since she fled Manila's Malacanang Palace, with her ailing husband Ferdinand carried 'like a sack of rice' under the arms of a US Marine on March 25, 1986 and the jeers of a million Filipinos ringing in her ears. Imelda though remains enraged at her subsequent treatment. "We found ourselves in Hawaii, penniless, homeless and nameless," she says, slapping the table for emphasis. US Customs records showed the family arrived with nearly \$9 million in cash, jewelry and bonds.

When Ferdinand died in 1989, Imelda found herself alone fighting in what she calls the 'trial of the century' in New York on graft charges. After enjoying the backing of five US presidents and the close friendship of Ronald and Nancy Reagan (with whom she shared an interest in astrology), the shock of America turning on her was profound. "They did this to me when I was alone, widowed and orphaned," she says, on the verge of tears. "Even the bible says there are special places reserved in hell for those who persecute widows and orphans. And it was not individuals who did me in, it was governments and superpowers."

Though acquitted, she was left to face the humiliation of being ditched by the White House, lampooned in the media and chased across the world by prosecutors who accused the pair of plundering the Philippines of \$10 billion or more. But showing the irrepressible energy and brazenness that made her a legendary force in Philippine politics, Imelda bounced back, returning to Manila in 1992 and winning a senators seat in 1995 after a failed bid for the presidency.

Today, she is again the matriarch of a minor political dynasty. Her son and daughter both hold political office, her nephew sits in the congressional seat she vacated and her brother is mayor of Tacloban City. She has been acquitted several times on domestic charges of corruption and extortion and, of the 901 separate cases she claims were filed against her family she is now down to the last three. Considering her regime was recently ranked as the second-most corrupt (after Suharto's Indonesia) of the late 20th century, it is not a bad end to a life. "I am still standing up at 76, fighting superpowers."

Still, there remains the question of the origins of that mind-boggling wealth in a country where 8 out of 10 people live in grinding, \$2-a-day poverty. Tales of Imelda's bacchanalian extravagance could fill a telephone book: her five-million-dollar 1983 shopping spree in New York, Rome and Copenhagen, or the time she dispatched a plane to pick up Australian white sand for the opening of a new beach resort, or her reputation as the world's largest collector of gems. And then the final Marie Antoinette moment, when joyous Filipinos raided her palace closets after she fled to find bullet-proof bras, gallons of perfume and 3,000 pairs of shoes.

Imelda dismisses criticisms of her extravagance, saying it was her "duty" to be a star for the poor. "You have to be some kind of light, a star to give them guidelines," she once said. She is adamant that there was nothing ill-gotten about her wealth. "My husband was rich before I met him," she protests, dismissing claims that she raided the treasury, squeezed businesses and pilfered World Bank loans to finance their lifestyle. "He was a gold trader. He had a mountain of gold when he entered politics in 1949." By the late 1950s, Marcos had a personal fortune of 7,500 tons of gold, she claims. "This is the first time I'm telling anyone this." In the 1970s, after gold went up to 800 dollars, the Marcos family she says was worth a staggering 35 billion dollars when Bill Gates was still a dropout software developer.

Why did the man who professed to love his countrymen 'like a father loves his children' not give this wealth to the people he ruled? "You can't just give money, you know," explains his wife. "Henry Ford II told me it is hard to make money properly, but harder still to spend money properly. First, he had to make institutions and introduce freedom, justice and democracy."

Marcos' contribution to freedom, justice and democracy was to declare martial law, lock up his opponents and close the few newspapers not run by his cronies. "The Communists were in the streets and in the gateway of the palace," cries Imelda. But analysts say martial law made radicals out of thousands of ordinary Filipinos. Washington looked the other way, content that Marcos protected US bases and businesses; in 1981, then US Vice-President George Bush toasted Marcos at a reception, saying: "We love you, sir, we love your adherence to democratic principles."



Ferdinand Marcos declares martial law in 1972

Where did it all go wrong? Certainly the Marcos greed did not help. In the 1980s, the president decided to take over the country's mines, a decision taken, claims his wife, for the sake of 'the people.' "He said to me, all of these mines I am not entrusting to anyone except a foundation that will ensure it belongs to the Filipino people to serve as a guarantee for all development programs unto infinity," says Imelda, displaying the curious blurring of the public and private that was a hallmark of their regime. "When he was president there was no distinction between him and the country and the world in general because he had three visions: [for him], for his people, for his country. He said: What is good for all is good for me."

Sitting atop his mighty mountain of gold, Ferdinand sent Imelda shopping for New York real estate in the 1980s. After rejecting the Empire State Building (which was going for \$750 million) as "too ostentatious," Imelda bought the \$51-million Crown Building, the \$60-million Herald Centre and two more prime slabs of Manhattan. All were subsequently seized and sold, as were much of her jewels and the bulk of the art she had collected over the years. She still has a glossy catalogue of what was taken – 175 pieces; more Michelangelo's, Botticelli's, Canelletos.

"They sold them for a song," she laments, flicking through the catalogue pages, eyes again brimming with tears. "Why? I had already placed them in a museum. They took it all, including my shoes. But that was my No.1 defense because when they went to my closet they found no skeletons."

Many of the famous shoes are now on display in the Marikina City Footwear Museum in Manila, which she opened in 2001 in another example of her breathless chutzpa. "The shoe industry of Marikina which was worth about half a million dollars is now worth 100 or more million. The shoe industry I supported is a symbol of gratitude." Has she cut down on her shoe consumption? "I probably have more now. Everywhere I go, the people give me shoes. I'll end up having more than what they stole from me. I am such an optimist. I believe I'm in heaven."

As proof of her optimism she outlines her pet projects: a plan to build a tunnel across the center of the country, and the development of hydrogen water power. The seas around the Philippines, she says, have the world's highest concentration of heavy hydrogen – deuterium. "Our problems are temporary. All I am waiting for is for my lawyers to end these cases against me and I will bring about a new economic order." On the wall, a poster shows a triangle superimposed over the Philippine archipelago with Gold, Oil and Deuterium at each corner: GOD.

She is bounding around the apartment now, pointer in hand, with the energy of a woman twenty years younger, screening a power-point presentation 'proving' that the Philippines was one of the most democratic countries in the world during the Marcos reign. The presentation begins with a mythical Filipino version of Adam and Eve and concludes with a beatific portrait of she and her ex-husband. She ends with a flourish: "The bigger we are as human beings the more greedy we become," she says, again slapping a table for emphasis.

It is not difficult at times like this to imagine the young, naïve fun-loving Visayas beauty dazzled by the ambitious senator Ferdinand Marcos and the jet-set life he promised; much harder to put this tearful, almost childish woman together with the picture painted of her in many biographies. Did she really offer her archrival Benigno Aquino a million dollars to stay in US exile then order his assassination in broad daylight and in front of the world's press when he returned? Would the money that she and her husband embezzled really, as many say, pay off the entire Philippines foreign debt?



Ferdinand and Imelda in diplomatic array

And the biggest mystery of all: why have the people who threw her out accepted her back? "Some people look at the chaos now and think things were probably better then under Marcos," says my driver Mike Avila. "He was strong and kept people in line. Things don't seem to have improved much since they left."

Imelda has no doubt that history will be good to her, despite the enormous odds against it. "Why is Mrs. Marcos still accepted by the people? The truth is coming out; the best test for the truth is time. My philosophy in life is that the only things we keep are those we give away. Long after I'm gone, the hospitals I built, the cultural centers, the hotels, the this, the that; many of these things were not built with government funds. It was my creativity. And they will be there after I'm gone."

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