Girl Graduate from Manila

Filipino woman who is to receive her degree from Tulane tomorrow is fulfilling a pledge to her family

By JOHN FOSTER

BEFORE WORLD WAR II petite Alecia V. Sempio of Manila wanted to be a teacher. But, as she says, “War changes one’s outlook.”

Her outlook began to change when the Japanese columns marched into the open city of Manila on Jan. 2, 1942.

Miss Sempio, who is to receive her master of laws degree from Tulane University tomorrow morning, is the daughter of Antonio Sempio, Filipino author, dramatist and movie director. He possessed a law degree but had never practiced.

The Japanese wanted to give Sempio an important propaganda job but he refused to work with them. He was collecting precious firewood outside Manila in 1943 when a thunderstorm overtook him. He caught pneumonia and died.

Alecia’s older brother, Antonio Sempio Jr., was a law student. One night in 1944, a platoon of Japanese soldiers pounded on the Sempios’ door and marched him off blindfolded and at bayonet point.

“It was the first we knew he was a guerrilla,” his sister says. “A few weeks later he got a note out to us that he was at Fort Santiago. Shortly afterward the Japanese executed the prisoners. They burned them alive.”

With both father and brother gone forever from the field of law, Alecia made her decision. “I decided to take it up for them,” she says simply.

AT THE TIME of her father’s death, her mother—the former actress and opera singer Sixta Villanueva—began to go blind. During the long years of occupation, says Alecia, “we survived, that’s all.”

To buy food the Sempios had to sell their seven-room home in Sampaloc, a middle-class residential district in Manila, and move into the house of a friend. Pieces of real estate the family owned went, too. Finally they sold even personal possessions.

Miss Sempio remembers standing in line repeatedly from 3 a.m. until noon to get the rice ration. The Japanese had established their money as legal tender. “It took a whole bag of this Mickey Mouse money, as we called it, to buy one guna—about two pounds—of rice,” she says.

When the American First Cavalry charged into Manila on Feb. 3, 1945, Alecia was not there to see it. She was in the provinces, making a futile attempt to barter clothes for food.

By the end of the war, her mother was totally blind. Upon Alecia’s slight shoulders lay the support of mother, younger brother and two younger sisters.

She went to work as secretary for an American import-export firm, going to law school at Manuel L. Quezon university in the evenings. After five years—In 1950—she was awarded a bachelor of laws degree cum laude. She took her bar examination the same year. There were about 1300 candidates. Only 300 passed. Miss Sempio was fifth highest.

Her professor in civil law at the university, Jose B. Reyes, was associate justice of the court of appeals in Manila. Upon passing the bar she went to work for him as private secretary, a post equivalent to that of clerk in the United States. She continued with him as he became presiding justice, then associate justice of the supreme court of the Philippines.

During this time, Alecia helped her brother and sisters through college. All three are now in government work.

MISS SEMPIO, who lives with her mother and a sister in a home she bought from the government in a suburb of Manila, came to Tulane last September as a fellow student in the university’s Institute of Comparative Law. Says ICL director Ferdinand F. Stone, “She and her countrymen have done so well that we feel confident in bringing over another student from the Philippines next year.”

Tomorrow night, after receiving her degree, Alecia plans to fly back to Manila where she will continue to work for Justice Reyes. She hopes some day to be a judge herself.

What about romance, boy friends, marriage? She laughs. “I’m married to my profession.”