First Family in exile

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CANADA

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Since a popular uprising drove them from Manila's Malacañang Palace on Feb. 25, 1986, ex-Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda, have been living quietly in Hawaii. The new government of President Corazon Aquino has sequestered many of the ex-leader's lands and companies in the Philippines and has moved to recover his properties abroad which it claims belong to the nation. Correspondent Peter S. Greenberg recently visited the first family-inexile.

The small estate in Honolulu's exclusive Makiki Heights is indistinguishable from the other houses on the secluded road. It is separated from the street by a large metal chain link gate covered by green fibreglass, high hedges and shaded by large trees. Two T-shirted ex-Philippine government secret service agents keep watch. For the occupants of the house, former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda, each day brings the same ritual. Late-model American cars come and go, running quiet er-

rands for the occupants, who almost never leave. Other cars, carrying visitors bearing gifts from roast pigs to videocassette players, arrive at the gate.

Marcos, 69, walks slowly into the living room to greet his visitors. He wears an ill-fitting three-piece blue

4My greatest hopes are to return to my country, but my greatest fear is that when I get to the airport I will be shot dead'

suit. Aides hover nearby, including a public relations adviser. "It has not been easy living here," Marcos says. "Everything has been taken from me, and so money has become a large problem. I have been reduced to penury and borrowing from my friends to be able to live here and to pay my lawyers."

Marcos does not like to talk about his reputed wealth, much of it frozen

in Swiss bank accounts, or the civil, state and federal lawsuits by a variety of plaintiffs including the Philippine government pending against him. But it is the lawsuits that consume much of his time. He has patterned his daily schedule around conferences with his attorneys and frequent phone calls to and from supporters in the Philippines. “I only have two dreams,” said Marcos. “One is to return to my country. The other is to settle all this mess, but if I can simply go back home that will be enough.”

Marcos claims that when he calls the Philippines—usually collect—he has to be be careful. “I must watch what I say because the phones are tapped,” he explained. There has been no decision on Marcos’s status in the United States. He carries a small white card allowing him to stay until Aug. 26, 1987. He does not know if it will be renewed, or if he wants it to be renewed. “If I could talk to [Ronald] Reagan today, I would ask him why we can’t come to an understanding to allow me to take a commercial airline back to the Philippines, and I’ll be met by my own people. But that’s what Cory [Philippine President Corazon Aquino] is afraid of. She doesn’t want that outpouring of support. So I suggested an alterna-

tive — suppose I come back with security and I won’t bring out the crowds. They won’t agree. They say if I get killed at the airport that they will be blamed.”

A small red-carpeted bedroom at the side of the house has been converted to Marcos’s office, his tiny headquarters of a government in exile. Crammed into the room are two desks, a facsimile machine, copying machine and typewriter. Framing the

window are the two remaining formal symbols of the Marcos regime: on one side a large Philippine flag, on the other the blue flag bearing the presidential seal.

There are physical appearances that indicate continued medical problems for the former leader. He walks slowly and tentatively. He is often assisted up steps. His cataracts bother him. He has trouble reading and suffers from vertigo. But Marcos seems to have lost none of his alertness or political shrewdness. He seems to know everything that is happening in the Philippines almost as it happens, down to the last detail.

In the early afternoon, while Ferdinand rests, Imelda sometimes changes clothes and tends her garden. She appears in a blue and black

top, black pants and matching blue shoes. An aide hands her gardening shears. “Look at me,” she says smiling. “I bought the top for $3.99 at the Holiday Mart store, the pants for $9.99 from J.C. Penney’s and the shoes for $12.99. Don’t I look nice? I went by myself to buy these. It just goes to show you that even I can look chic on a budget.”

Imelda Marcos is a woman with time on her hands. In the late after-

noon, she lectures visitors about her view of the world, and how she is convinced that the geopolitical centre of the action has to be the Philippines. “When I visited with Mao Zedong in China,” she recalls, “he took me aside one day and showed me a map of the world. Tmelda,’ he said, ‘y°u can change leaders, you can change politics, but you can’t change the map.’ And he was right. Americans don’t realize how truly important the Philippines are to the world. The whole ball game is right there. With the Philippines as an ally, the sun will never set on the U.S.”

Imelda is critical of the woman who replaced her husband. “Cory Aquino scares me,” she said, “the way she is giving things away to the Communists. But can she really be a

world leader? Can she really deal with other leaders in the way I did?” Ferdinand sent Imelda to meet with Moammar Gadhafi in Tripoli in 1976. Gadhafi was suspected of supplying weapons to the Communist rebels in the Philippine island of Mindanao. “I knew how to deal with him,” she said. “He’s just a frightened momma’s boy.” Imelda spent 15 days with the Libyan leader. “Gadhafi had a messianic obsession with

trying to find God because of his subservience to his mother. A few years later, CIA chief William Casey visited me in New York. He wanted me to brief him on my time with Gadhafi. There was even a rumor that I had slept with Gadhafi. It is laughable.” In the early evening, Imelda visits friends, but admits that some of her closest acquaintances have abandoned her. “What I discovered about our life in the Philippines was that we were really living in a snake farm,” she says. “But I have learned not to have bitterness in my heart.” Both Marcoses plead poverty. “In Manila, I used to order in McDonald’s burgers to the palace. They were such a fine snack,” she says. Now, Imelda occasionally goes out and has one at the local McDonald’s, but “it’s so dif-

ferent when you no longer consider the McDonald’s a snack. It is now a meal for me.”

Imelda says that she is busy writing her autobiography, The Right to Be Human. “People have offered me book deals and movie deals,” she claims, “but I think I’ll do a musical.” Indeed, she has been asked to star in a local Hawaiian production of a Broadway musical called Aloha. “There are many beautiful songs for me to sing. I get to wear my hair long. But the most wonderful thing about the play is that my first public appearance on stage will be wearing a beautiful grass skirt and,” she laughs, “I won’t be wearing any shoes. I really enjoy that part.”

The Marcoses still smart from what they say are unjust charges that they squandered the nation’s wealth and that Imelda left behind

3.000 pairs of shoes at the Malacañang Palace. “At least I left shoes in my closets, and not skeletons,” she says. “And besides, I didn’t have

3.000 pairs of shoes. I had 1,060. At least I’ve gotten to the point where I can laugh about it, too.” She registers surprise and shock when told of the hundreds of

pornographic videotapes found at the palace. In her 20 years at the palace, she insists, she maybe saw 10 movies—all "regular ones."

But the stories she dislikes most are those that depict Ferdinand as a dictator and herself as a dragon lady. "He brought them democracy and they call him a dictator," she protests, beginning to cry. "He's a humanist and they call him a tyrant. I understand the world. After a leader has fallen everyone calls him a crook. [Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio] Somoza, then the Shah [of Iran]. Now, we're the SOBs, and we've been crucified. America doesn't thank us for being their ally against the Communists. Well, history is not done with us yet. God is on our side, and sooner or later goodness will prevail." Her husband chips in: "My greatest hopes are to return to my country. But my greatest fear is that when I get to the airport in Manila I will be shot dead by hired killers."

Imelda claims that she has had a spiritual reawakening and is also "raring to go back." She says: "I may be broke but I could go back to Manila today with only five pesos and make billions of dollars for my people, because I understand human resources. I pray to God for this chance. I know God has something in mind for me. I have a clear conscience."

-PETER S. GREENBERG in Hawaii