

**PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF AND APPELLEE, VS.
FEDERICO SECAPURI, ET AL., DEFENDANTS. FEDERICO SECAPURI
AND CONRADO SECAPURI, DEFENDANTS AND APPELLANTS.**

G.R. No. 17518-19. February 28, 1966

Ponente: REGALA, J.

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REGALA, J.:

This is an appeal from a decision of the Court of First Instance of Iloilo in Criminal Cases Nos. 7616 and 7635 finding the accused-appellants guilty of the murders of Ceferino Eulogio and his son, Nestor Eulogio, and sentencing them therefor to suffer the death penalty.

These two cases were jointly tried.

The counsel for the accused-appellants narrates in his brief the background or circumstantial setting of the incident for which the said accused now stand convicted. The State does not question the truth of the narration, nor does it dispute its relevance to this proceedings. Our own examination of the records confirms the veracity and relevance of the same narration and for that reason, reproduces it hereunder for a fuller and clearer appreciation of the case under review.

"During his lifetime and for a period of 3 years prior to his death on June 27, 1959, the deceased Ceferino Eulogio was employed as the overseer of a pasture land held by Dr. Salustiano Mirasol of Iloilo City under a lease patent from the Government and which was situated in the Municipality of Miagao. (t.s.n., Sept. 2, 1959, p. 37; id., Feb. 12, 1960, p. 180) Prior to his employment by Dr. Mirasol, Ceferino Eulogio lived in Sitio Calinog, Barrio Suli, with his wife Luz Pig-ao and his two sons, Nestorio, age 3-1/2, and Eduardo, age 6. (t.s.n. Sept. 2, 1959, p. 37) Inasmuch as the nature of his work as overseer necessitated his continuous presence in and about the pasture land, Ceferino Eulogio established his residence in Ongyod, one of the barrios of the Municipality of Miagao, sometime in 1955, leaving his family behind. And it was only two and half years later, in October, 1958, that Luz Pig-ao and her two children followed to Barrio Ongyod, the entire family commencing to live thereafter in said barrio in a nipa hut (measuring 2 brazas or 4 meters in length from its door to the opposite wall (t.s.n., Sept. 2, 1959, p. 62) which was specially built for them by Dr. Mirasol (Id., p. 38). Among the residents, numbering nine in all, within the immediate vicinity of the house of the Eulogios (t.s.n., Sept 10, 1959, p. 141), were: Filomena Mujer, a widow with 4 children, whose house was located 5 brazas or 10 meters to the east of that of Ceferino Eulogio (t.s.n., Sept. 2, 1959, p. 68; t.s.n., Sept. 8, 1959, pp. 91 and 98); one named Rosal, whose house was located about 6 brazas away (t.s.n., Sept. 2, 1959, p. 68) ; Francisco Panes, one of the farmhands of Dr. Mirasol, whose house was 70 meters away (t.s.n., Sept. 8, 1959, pp. 117-118); the barrio lieutenant Luciano Frondoso, and others identified during the trial only by their first names, viz., Badong, Cleto (t.s.n., Sept. 2, 1959, p. 56) and Victor (t.s.n., Sept. 8, 1959, p. 141).

"At this juncture, it may be stated as an undisputed fact that the establishment of the ranch entrusted to the cam

of the deceased Ceferino Eulogio spawned what developed to a bitter controversy between Dr. Mirasol and numerous small landowners in the Municipality of Miagao, portions of whose properties were claimed by Dr. Mirasol under his lease patent from the Government. Among those whose lands were affected by the establishment of Dr. Mirasol's ranch were the following; Teofilo Hermoso of Tigmarabo; Buenaventura of Barrio Agdum; Mariano Escubin, alias Marianing, one of the accused in Criminal Case No. 7616 (t.s.n. February 25, 1960, p. 323) ; the first cousin of Mariano Escubin, by the name of Juan and the latter's parents; Sincarpo of Tigmarapad; the appellant Federico Secapuri, whose land was situated in Sitio Ongyod (which, it may be mentioned, is different and quite a distance away from Barrio Ongyod proper where Ceferino Eulogio resided (t.s.n., February 25, 1960, p. 329); Rufina Popat (id., at p. 329); and countless others, whose exact number is however not revealed by the records of the case (id., pp. 3120313; 317-318). These small landowners regarded Dr. Mirasol as nothing more than a land-grabber and openly refused to recognize the boundary lines of Dr. Mirasol's pastureland under his lease patent. Toward the close of the year 1958, evidently in view of the defiance of the small landowners, Dr. Mirasol, upon the recommendation of the deceased Ceferino Eulogio, recruited two additional farmhands from Barrio Calinog, in the persons of the state witnesses Francisco Panes and Alejandro Juderial. Francisco Panes, the record discloses, was hired sometime in September of 1958 (t.s.n., Sept. 8, 1959, pp. 116 and 126), and Alejandro Juderial, in December of the same year (id. at p. 87)P With the aid of these two, Ceferino Eulogio, acting on instructions of Dr. Mirasol, proceeded in earnest with the task of policing the pastureland of his master with a view to preventing encroachment thereon, even going to the extent of pointing the shotgun with which he had been aimed by Dr. Mirasol, at persons innocently passing through the property (t.s.n., June 1, 1960, p. 306).

"In view of what they then considered to be a grave situation, the small landowners sent a written petition sometime in March of the following year, 1959, addressed to President Garcia requesting the latter's intervention in their land dispute with Dr. Mirasol. (t.s.n., June 1, 1960, p. 319) During the pendency of this petition, however, in the following month of April, 1959, the deceased Ceferino Eulogio, in pursuance of Dr. Mirasol's orders, commenced to stake the boundaries of the pastureland with barbed wire fences and it was as a consequence of this action of Dr. Mirasol, that the incident, stressed by the prosecution during the trial of the case, involving the two accused appellants took place. As was candidly admitted by him during the trial, upon noting that the fence constructed to separate his ricefield from the pasture-land of Dr. Mirasol-1 did not conform to what he believed (to be the correct dividing line, Federico Sacapuri, with the aid of his son Conrado, uprooted the said fence and transferred the same to the place where he believed it should properly be (id., p. 318). For their act in so moving the fence, a complaint for malicious mischief (Exhibit E) was filed by Dr. Mirasol against the appellants with the justice of the peace of Miagao in the same month (t.s.n. Sept. 8, 1959, p. 80). It may be mentioned in advance, however, that after the trial of the case for malicious mischief in the middle part of June, 1959, at which the deceased Ceferino Eulogio testified, the appellants were acquitted of the charge in a decision promulgated by the Justice of Peace at about the end of June of the same year (id., pp. 81-82 and 85).

"Following this incident, the smouldering dispute between Dr. Mirasol and the small landowners received the official attention of the municipal authorities, indicating the tenseness of the situation at the time. In the second week of May, 1959, a conference between Dr. Mirasol and the opposing landowners was called by the municipal mayor of Miagao in his office, (t.s.n. February 12, 1960, p. 205) While no specific evidence has been presented to show the result of the meeting, that no satisfactory solution or amicable settlement was reached in the conference is adequately proven by the violent deaths of Dr. Mirasol's right-hand man, Ceferino Eulogio, and the latter's 3-1/2 old son in the ensuing month at the hand of a person or persons unknown."

The incident for which the appellants herein were charged with murder happened in the evening of June 27, 1959, at about 10:00 o'clock. There was then a raging storm so that the night was moonless and pitchblack, except for

occasional flashes of lighting.

As the trial court has found, Ceferino Eulogio and his family—his wife Luz Pig-ao and his two sons Nestorio age 3-1/2 years and Eduardo Eulogio, age 6 years—had already retired and gone to sleep at the time of the incident. They had put themselves up on the floor of the sala of their shack in Barrio Ongyod, Miagao, Iloilo province. As Luz Pig-ao recalled the evening, it was about eight o'clock when they all took to their mat with Eduardo Eulogio nearest the door, Nestor next to him, Ceferino next to Nestor and finally, she beside Ceferino opposite the wall. They were lain parallel to the main door and to each other. Because the night was stormy, they had the windows and door shut.

Luz Pig-ao testified that while their children were both asleep already about 10:00 o'clock that night, she and her husband, Ceferino Eulogio, were still awake and conversing. They were then facing each other so that Luz had her back to the wall facing the door while Ceferino had his back to the door facing Luz and the wall. Suddenly, they heard the report of gun fire from the direction of the closed door some 8 or 9 shots by Luz' recollection. In this moment of surprise and fear, Ceferino rolled to rise, wincing in pain. He fell back complaining of an unbearable pain. Not much later, he expired.

Aside from Ceferino, two other fell victim to the attack. Nestorio, his 3-1/2 year old son, sustained four wounds from which he succumbed. Eduardo Eulogio, the other son, was wounded in his right thigh and grazed by a bullet on his left ankle. Luz Pig-ao suffered very minor injuries only.

In handing down the judgment of conviction under appeal, the lower court relied on the testimony of three witnesses who allegedly saw the two appellants herein, together with one Mariano Escubin, a co-accused of the appellants herein who, up to the time of the trial, remained at large, loitering- in the immediate premises of the victim's hut soon after the incident. These witnesses were: Luz Pig-ao, Alejandro Juderial and Francisco Panes.

According to Luz Pig-ao, right after the shooting, she admonished her 6 year old son Eduardo to keep quiet lest "they * * * return to shoot us again" and the latter dutifully obeyed. In a short while, she noticed that the main door was being slowly slid open and as she watched, she saw framed against the opening the figures of three men standing beside each other. She saw them from the waist up. She identified two of them as the appellants herein.

Alejandro Juderial, on the other hand, testified that he was sleeping in a hut some 10 meters away from where the shooting occurred on the night of June 27, 1959. It was owned by one Filomena Mujer who was then there also with her five children.

Juderial recounted that as a storm was raging that night, the windows of their shack were shut. At about ten o'clock, he was awakened in his sleep by sounds of gunfire, about 5 by his recollection during the trial. He, therefore, stood up, went by a window, slid a small opening and peeked to discern the persons of the two appellants herein and Mariano Escubin. He was positive in his identification because, according to his account, the three lingered under a "sirguelas tree" near the house of the victim for almost an hour and he watched them there all during the time. After the appellants and Escubin had left, Juderial said he simply sat by the wall of their hut to wait for the morning. All during the night after the shooting, he admitted never having bothered rousing Filomena Mujer or any of the other persons then sleeping in the shack.

Finally, Francisco Panes testified that when the shooting happened, he was sleeping in his house located some 70 meters away Ceferino Eulogio's hut. On hearing the shots, it occurred to him to suspect at once that the Eulogios were being attacked by the appellants herein because he had heard Ceferino previously express such an apprehension to him. Intending to come to the succor of Ceferino, Panes said he went down his house, slowly and cautiously walked his way in the dark into Ceferino's place but stopped some 5 brazas away to observe. From this

distance, he hid himself among a clump of "Mirasol" plants and from this hiding place, he clearly saw the appellants herein and Mariano Escubin, armed with rifles, lingering about the "sirguelas" tree near the victim's house. For a full half hour, Panes said, the three armed men stayed there doing nothing but move around the sirguelas tree so that all the while, he could identify them from the occasional lightning- flashes. After the three men whom he was watching had left, Panes said he went back directly to his house and returned to sleep. Despite the implications and unusualness of the occurrence, however, Panes confessed he never woke up anyone in his household, much less pursue his original intention to help the Eulogios as was his determination when he first stepped out of his shack after hearing the gunshots.

Upon instruction of Luz Pig-ao, Juderial and Panes reported the following day to the Philippine Constabulary unit in Miagao that Ceferino Eulogio "was killed and he is dead and he was shot." The officer-in-charge, Cpl. Carlos Sombria, however, advised them to render the said report to the main headquarters in Iloilo City where they then proceeded. Both at Miagao and in Iloilo City, neither Juderial nor Panes confided ever knowing the assailant or assailants. AM they reported was that "Ceferino Eulogio died in Miagao."

From the Iloilo PC headquarters, Juderial and Panes proceeded to the residence of Dr. Salustiano Mirasol whom they informed of the killing. After about an hour and accompanied by the said doctor, the above-named witnesses returned to the Iloilo PC headquarters where they then revealed for the first time the appellants herein as the assailants.

Upon the above information a PC detail was dispatched to pick up the appellants herein for questioning. The group, however, was unable to bring back to the headquarters their suspects because the appellants were not home when they got there. When Federico Secapuri returned late that same afternoon, Jovita Napilda, a housemate informed him of the soldiers' visit so that early the next day, June 29, 1959, Federico passed by his son Conrado, and together, they proceeded on foot to Iloilo City. On the way, they met some PC soldiers who had been sent back to pick them up. Giving themselves up to this group, they were then brought to Miagao for a brief interrogation and later transferred to the main headquarters in Iloilo City where they were questioned more lengthily.

The information against appellant Federico Secapuri was filed on July 9, 1959; the one against his son, Conrado Secapuri, on July 21, 1959.

The accused-appellants interposed the defense of alibi. According to Federico Secapuri, on the day of the incident, June 27, 1959, he was in the poblacion of Miagao from about 7:00 in the morning to about 4:00 that afternoon when he returned to his house in Barrio San Jose, a village some five kilometers away from where the killings happened. At around 4:00 o'clock that afternoon, Mariano Escubin, the co-accused in this case who has not been apprehended, to this time, came to his house to borrow his .22 caliber rifle. Escubin, according to the said appellant, was drunk at the time and was already carrying a carbine of his own so that Federico Secapuri said he inquired of his visitor what he needed another rifle for. To the query, Escubin allegedly gave the answer that he and some others were going out to have a showdown "with the man of Dr. Mirasol." The above appellant claims he denied the request for his rifle by Escubin and tried to dissuade the latter from carrying out the plan. In due time and with-out being able to get the rifle he was borrowing, Mariano Escubin left.

Upon his visitor's departure, Federico Secapuri claims he slept until about 6:00 o'clock when he woke up to have his supper. At around 7:00 to 7:30 that evening, and after his supper, he went to the house of the barrio lieutenant, Juan Baladhay, which was just some 100 meters away from his hut. Here he stayed up to around 10:00 o'clock exchanging pleasantries and the usual after dinner banter with the said barrio official. Thereafter, he left for home, meeting aalong the way two barriomates who were themselves going home. Upon reaching home, he slept until

6:00 o'clock the following morning when he woke up, took his breakfast and set out for his farm as usual. A housemate of the appellant, Jovita Napilda, testified that during the night, she was certain Federico Secapuri was home because at one instance she had seen him rise to cover one of his children with a blanket.

On the other hand, Conrado Secapuri was residing in Barrio Belan, about 6 to 7 kilometers from the scene of the crime, when the incident occurred. With him in the said house were his bride of one year, Concepcion Napaton, his parents in law and two brothers-in-law. According to this accused, he tilled his farm practically the whole day of the 27th of June, 1959. Finishing his farm chores at about 6:00 o'clock that evening, he repaired to his house to have his supper. After supper to about 9:00 o'clock, he engaged himself in the customary evening chat with his housemates and some friends after which he retired and went to sleep.

As earlier mentioned, the trial court gave full credence to the testimonies of Luz Pig-ao, Alejandro Juderial and Francisco Panes that they actually saw the appellants herein in the immediate vicinity of the victims' premises soon after the shooting, armed and obviously the doers of the attack. The said court rejected the appellants' plea of alibi and ruled that upon the above-named eyewitnesses' Recount, the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt had been fully established.

In this appeal, the counsel for the appellants vigorously questions the credence and reliance placed by the lower court upon the testimonies of the said witnesses. In the premises, it is charged that the aforesaid testimonies are inherently incredible and improbable tested against the following queries:

1. As the night of the incident was admittedly stormy, moonless and pitchblack, and there was no illumination outside the house of the victim, how could the witnesses have seen or identified with certainty the appellants herein?
2. Was it not highly improbable that, as Luz Pig-ao testified, their 6 year old son Eduardo obediently kept quiet when she admonished her not to make any sound considering that the latter was only a child and was painfully wounded on both legs?
3. Was it not incredible that the assailants should loiter and linger purposelessly under the sirguelas tree for a full hour for everybody to identify them? Shouldn't they have, normally and accordingly with their instinct for self-preservation, taken every measure to preclude their identification by the neighbors of the victim?
4. Similarly, why should the appellants deliberately open the closed door of the victims to allow Luz Pig-ao, as the latter testified, to identify them?
5. Was it not incredible that Alejandro Juderial, despite the most unusual occurrence of the shooting, failed completely to wake up the members of his household to inform them that the house of their close neighbor had just been shot? Was it not strange that having seen the assailants loitering- for a full hour in the premises of the victim's sirguelas tree, Juderial never even woke Filomena Mujer and warn her of the tense and threatening condition of the evening?

6. Too, was it not unnatural that Francisco Panes, after being so bold as to go down unarmed to help the Eulogios, should not even have the natural instinct to inform his household, after he returned, of what he witnessed? How could he have simply slept the incident off? Especially so as he testified that even when he woke up the following morning- he did not investigate the incident of the previous night.

The appellants further maintain that the testimony of Francisco Panes should not have been considered at all since, subsequent to his having- taken the stand, or on July 7, 1960, he retracted the same and confessed to its falsity.

7. If, indeed, Juderial and Panes did see and identify the assailants on the evening' of the incident, why did they not so inform the Philippine Constabulary when, the following morning, they went there to report that "Ceferino Eulogio died in Miagao?"

8. If appellants herein were indeed the assailants, would they have voluntarily heeded the invitation of the PC to come over to the headquarters for investigation? Would they not have, rather, fled as Mariano Escubin did? The appellants insist that they were afforded every opportunity to escape which they disdained precisely because they were innocent.

This Court finds no error in the judgment appealed from. After a thorough and careful review of the records of this case, we are satisfied that the guilt of the appellants has been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

We find no substantial merit to the appellants' claim that the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses were incredible and untrustworthy. Time after time, this Court has declared that the matter of assigning values to declarations at the witness stand is best and most competently performed or carried out by the trial judge because the latter, unlike appellate magistrates, can weigh such testimonies in the light of the declarant's demeanor, conduct and attitude at the trial. (People vs. Refuerzo, 82 Phil. 576; People vs. Federico, 83 Phil., 569; People vs. Aquino, L-12123, July 31, 1958; People vs. Romawak, L-19644, Oct. 31, 1964). Of course, this rule admits of exceptions as when patent inconsistencies in the statements of the witnesses are ignored by the lower court or when the conclusions arrived at are clearly unsupported by the evidence. The appellants herein, however, have not established the existence of any such exception in this case.

The appellants insist that the three prosecution witnesses who claimed to have seen them at the scene of the crime soon after the shooting could not have really made any positive identification because the night was stormy, moonless and pitchblack. This reasoning, however, ignores the fact that while the evening of the incident might have indeed been dark, there were at the same time occasional flashes of lightning from the raging storm which invariably illumined the place. The claim, therefore, that it was physically impossible for the said witnesses to have actually seen and identified them that evening may not earnestly be entertained.

The appellants also contend that the government witnesses could not possibly be telling the truth when they testified that they saw the appellants stay at the scene of the crime for over half an hour after the attack. They maintain that it would have been very unnatural for them to have so lingered aimlessly if they were indeed the assassins as then their first and overriding impulse would have been to flee with haste to avoid identification.

While there is some measure of validity to the above observation of the appellants, still it is not completely unbelievable that they could have done just that. A number of reasons are suggested by the records of this case as to why they could have really risked their presence under the victim's sirguelas tree long after the shooting. In the

first place, the appellants had no way of knowing for certain the results of their attack. They simply shot up the house of Ceferino Eulogio from the outside and they could not really have determined how many or who among the occupants therein fell victim to the volleys. Unless of course they went up the house, which they admittedly did not. They may have decided to stay nearby, therefore, to wait for some clear indication that Ceferino Eulogio had not survived. Secondly, the evening was dark and stormy. The appellants, therefore, could have somehow convinced themselves that their identities would not be revealed even if they tarried in their escape. Thirdly, the appellants could have been prevented from a prompt and hasty escape by the raging storm. With hesitation and perhaps even against their impulse to leave at once, they may have been forced to seek shelter first under the sirguelas tree by the heavy rain and wind of the night storm. This would even explain their presence under the said tree.

Whatever else may be the reason, the fact remains that several plausible explanations may be gleaned from the evidence to show that the appellants could have delayed their stay at the scene of the crime. Whether or not they did, however, is essentially a factual issue the resolution of which, as we have earlier said, should be left to the office and judgment of the trial court.

Neither do we find incredible the testimonies of Juderial and Panes that they did not awaken their housemates on the night of the incident. Juderial testified that he must have presumed that some members of his household were themselves awake because while he was peeping through a small opening in their window, he saw Filomena Mujer and some of her children move. Panes on the other hand, explained that he was so afraid then that the armed men might also seek him out, considering his close acquaintance with Ceferino Eulogio, that it did not occur to him even to wake up his companions in the house. This may not be the best explanation but it should be realized that the atmosphere then was so tense and fraught with danger that perhaps, indeed, Francisco Panes failed to act as he should have.

Admittedly, the testimonies of the above witnesses suffer from a few flaws and inconsistencies. But on the whole, such variance and defect pertain only to minor matters of the incident. In relation to the incident itself, and to the identification of the appellants herein as the participants thereof, the testimonies of Luz Pig-ao, Alejandro Juderial and Francisco Panes are consistent, relevant and convincing.

It is true that Francisco Panes later retracted his testimony and confessed to having perjured in his previous statements in the stand. Even discarding this, however, the details related by Luz Pig-ao and Juderial would still sustain the decision under appeal.

The voluntary surrender of the appellants merits credit only as a mitigating circumstance and not, as they argue, as a conclusive indication of their innocence. The wilful and free submission to authorities is not irreconcilable with the fact of guilt, and it is precisely for this reason that the criminal code assigns to it the value of a mitigating circumstance.

The appellants' defense of alibi cannot prosper on account of their positive identification by eyewitnesses (U.S. vs. Oxiles, 29 Phil. 587; U.S. vs. Pascua, 1 Phil. 631; People vs. Dalmany, 63 Phil. 188). Besides, the short distance between the appellants' residence and the house of the victims, a mere 5 to 6 kilometers, render completely unreliable the former's claim that they were home during the incident- For that defense to succeed, it should be shown to the satisfaction of a prudent mind that the distance between the places where the accused claimed to be and where the crime was committed are such that it would have been clearly impossible for him to be at the latter at the time of the crime (People vs. Palamos, 49 Phil. 601; People vs. Rosabal, 50 Phil. 780).

Finally, the appellants herein had an axe to grind against Ceferino Eulogio. It should be recalled that as a result of the said appellants' land dispute with Dr. Salustiano Mirasol, the latter filed against them a case for malicious

mischievous with the justice of the peace court of Miagao. In this case, Ceferino was Dr. Mirasol's principal witness. The appellants, therefore, had strong motives for wanting him harmed.

The crime committed was murder, qualified by treachery the victims having been attacked during the night with consummate surprise and suddenness which precluded any effective defense upon their part and the slightest danger upon the aggressors. The existence, however, of the mitigating circumstance of voluntary surrender would reduce the penalty to the minimum of that imposable under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code.

Applying the Indeterminate Sentence Law, the accused appellants are hereby sentenced to suffer ten years and one day of prision mayor to seventeen years, four months and one day of reclusion temporal.

Wherefore, and with the foregoing modification, the decision appealed from is hereby affirmed, costs de oficio.

Bengzon, C.J., Bautista Angela, Reyes, J. B. L., Barrera, Dizon, Makalintal, Bengzon J.P., Zaldivar and Sanchez, JJ., concur.

Judgment affirmed with modification.

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