

RAMON DORADO, PETITIONER, VS. COURT OF APPEALS AND PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, RESPONDENTS.*G.R. No. 57744. August 31, 1987*

Ponente: NARVASA, J.

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Petitioner is before the Court on what might well be deemed the last chapter of a veritable twenty-nine-year odyssey which bears witness to his long struggle, against great odds, to prove himself innocent of the crime of taking another man's life. Prosecuted in April 1958,[1] together with his brother Henry Dorado and Leopoldo Barrios, for the murder of Manuel Villasis, Ramon Dorado went through a trial that dragged on for fifteen years and saw a succession of three Trial Judges sit and hear the evidence,[2] his co-accused Barrios discharged to become a state witness[3] and death overtake his brother, the other co-accused,[4] before judgment was finally passed.

Thus, petitioner stood alone in the dock when a decision was handed down on December 29, 1973 by a fourth Trial Judge[5] who had not heard a single word of testimony and whose findings could only have been based solely on the written record. He was found guilty of the lesser offense of homicide and sentenced to an indeterminate prison term of from 10 years of prision mayor to 17 years of reclusion temporal, to indemnify the widow of the deceased Manuel Villasis in the sum of P6,000.00, without subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency, and to pay the costs.[6]

Petitioner appealed to the Court of Appeals where he was represented by another set of lawyers.[7]

The Court of Appeals affirmed his conviction.[8] Refusing to accept defeat, petitioner went to this Court on a petition for review,[9] but his efforts to have his appeal heard and considered met only unvarying failure until less than a year ago. This, through what can only be regarded as a series of misadventures mainly due, as petitioner was later to claim, to gross neglect or lack of interest on the part of counsel who successively represented him. First, his petition was summarily denied for late filing and late payment of legal fees.[10] Then, having obtained a reconsideration on his own, partly on the plea that his former co-accused, Leopoldo Barrios had retracted in writing and under oath the testimony he had given at the trial, petitioner's new counsel, the Citizens Legal Assistance Office (CLAO) managed to mislay that document -- which petitioner claimed he had given said office much earlier[11] -- and could not produce it when the Solicitor General, directed by the Court to comment on said writing, manifested that he had been furnished no copy thereof. Worse, when the CLAO was served with notice of the consequent dismissal of the petition for review[12], said counsel opted to take no further recourse, leading to entry of judgment in the case[13] and remand of the records to the Court of Appeals.[14]

The CLAO, given another chance at petitioner's plea, still failed to submit the memorandum required by the Court. Undaunted, petitioner, through counsel,[15] made what he called "**** a final effort to draw the (Court's) attention *** to the injustices suffered by (him) ***", with only his innocence and quest for fairness propping (sic) his spirits." [16] The Court heeded his entreaty, and setting aside the entry of judgment, granted him a hearing.[17]

The parties, petitioner and respondents, were heard an oral argument on October 29, 1986.

Turning now to the facts and the record, it is not disputed that in the afternoon of April 7, 1958, the corpse of Manuel Villasis was found near a creek in Barrio Agdalipe, Municipality of Pontevedra, Capiz. The body bore various wounds, chief of which were eight (8) pellet wounds that penetrated the right side in the area of the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th ribs, six (6) incised wounds in the left abdominal area below the rib cage (hypochondrium) and a 2-inch long incised wound cutting through skin and subcutaneous tissue to the bone in the radial aspect of the wrist. There were other wounds involving the left ear (pinna) and the back of the left elbow and numerous abrasions, some of them sustained post-mortem. The Municipal Health Officer of Pontevedra, Dr. Ricardo Dasal, who conducted the autopsy, gave it as his opinion that the eight pellet wounds were the most fatal and could have caused death in thirty minutes due to massive hemorrhage resulting from injury to the internal organs.[18] Five shotgun pellets and blood-stained coconut husks were found on the front yard of the dead man's house, which also showed signs that some of its topsoil had been scraped off. A post of the front gate was smeared with blood.[19]

On the following day, April 8, 1958, petitioner Ramon Dorado, his brother Henry and Leopoldo Barrios were picked up for questioning by Philippine Constabulary soldiers, and two days later all three were charged with the murder of Manuel Villasis before the Justice of the Peace Court of Pontevedra.[20] There Leopoldo Barrios executed a sworn statement admitting involvement in the killing of Villasis and implicating the Dorado brothers as having had a direct part therein.[21]

All three respondents having waived their right to present evidence at the preliminary investigation conducted by the Justice of the Peace, the latter transmitted the record of the proceedings to the Court of First Instance. Thereafter the Assistant Provincial Fiscal of Capiz filed an information charging them with murder.[22] What followed has to a substantial extent already been recapitulated.

Coming now to petitioner's plea before this Court, which in essence is that he was convicted on the strength of testimony either later recanted or impeached by the record itself as false and unworthy of credence, it appears that the prosecution's case against petitioner is almost wholly built upon the declarations of two persons: his co-accused Leopoldo Barrios who turned state witness, and the victim's widow, Millie (Mely) Bisnar.

According to Leopoldo Barrios, who claimed that he was the live-in servant of Ramon Dorado at the time that Manuel Villasis was killed, the killing arose out of Dorado's unsanctioned use of the victim's carabao. He declared that on April 6, 1958, Dorado had ordered his other houseboy, one Miguel, to catch that animal and use it to plow his (Dorado's) field. Miguel did so, and when Villasis saw his beast being thus employed, he took it back forthwith. Learning of this, Ramon Dorado vowed to get even with Villasis.[23]

The following morning, Ramon's brother, Henry, came to his house. The two conferred briefly and then Ramon told Leopoldo to get a bolo and a revolver and come along with them. They proceeded to the house of Villasis and upon reaching his front yard, Ramon called out: "Manuel, come down because this is now your time." Villasis came to the front door holding a scythe. Ramon ordered him to drop the scythe and raise his hands. Villasis obeyed and went down the stairs, but his feet had barely touched ground when Ramon fired at him with a shotgun. Then Henry grabbed the bolo from Leopoldo and thrust it into the right side of Villasis' abdomen where Ramon's shotgun had previously found its mark. Again Henry thrust the bolo, this time into the victim's left side. Then with his hands he retrieved the shotgun pellets imbedded in Villasis' stomach and threw them away. At Ramon's orders, Leopoldo and Henry carried Villasis' body to the nearby creek, with Ramon following, carrying the scythe. They laid Villasis and his scythe on the ground and Henry once more struck the body with the bolo, hitting it in the left ear and the right wrist. Then the three returned to the victim's yard. There Henry scraped with a spade the soil where the dead man's blood had been spilled. The scraped soil was placed in a basin and dumped into the

creek.[24] This done, the three men went back to Ramon's house and at the latter's orders, Leopoldo hid the firearms and the bolo at the foot of some banana plants growing not far from the house, covering them with dried banana leaves.[25]

For her part, Millie Bisnar testified that while at home with her husband in the morning of April 7, 1958, she heard Ramon Dorado shouting: "You are accustomed to that. Come down Manuel because the time has come for you." She went near the door from where she saw Ramon and Henry Dorado and Leopoldo Barrios, the first holding a shotgun and the other two each with a revolver. She also saw her husband go down the stairs and heard a gunshot. Certain that the shot came from Ramon's revolver because she had seen him aiming it at her husband and fearing for her life because she heard Henry Dorado shouting that he was going to kill everyone in the house, she jumped from the kitchen to the ground and fled to the house of her cousin, Loreto Buenvenida, in Barrio Binangig, to whom she related what had happened. Loreto, who was a PC soldier, accompanied her back to her house. They found it deserted, her trunk ransacked and clothes scattered all about. Loreto then returned to his house, while she went out in search of her husband whose dead body, bearing several wounds, she found near the creek[26]

No other witness was presented by the prosecution to testify about the events of that fatal day. The only other testimony of any significance concerned the recovery of what were claimed to be the weapons used in the killing of Villasis from the place where Leopoldo Barrios said he had hidden them at the instructions Ramon Dorado.

For the defense, the Dorado brothers and several other witnesses testified. Petitioner himself swore that in the evening of April 6, 1958, he had gone to Barrio Bahit to attend a despedida party for Maria Dillera who was to leave for Manila the next day. The following morning, at about 4:30 o'clock, he had accompanied Dillera to the railroad station, and after she had boarded the train he had gone back to her house for his cane which he had forgotten to bring. He had left at about 7:00 o'clock and arrived home in Agdalipe between 9:00 and 9:30 o'clock. He had eaten lunch, napped and gotten up at about 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon to work in his garden. He had known nothing of what befell Manuel Villasis until late in the afternoon when he heard the sounds of crying from the latter's house and having gone there to find out what was wrong, had been told by Millie Bisnar that Villasis had been killed during a drinking spree.[27]

Ramon Dorado also denied that Leopoldo Barrios was ever employed by him, declaring that it was his mother whom Barrios had worked for in 1948 or 1950 and that he had dismissed Barrios from his mother's employ for stealing chickens.[28] He disclaimed any motive to harm Villasis, asserting that he and the deceased were on good terms, and that political harassment lay behind his prosecution or the latter's death.[29]

Testifying for the defense, Cadelaria Demalata, a neighbor of Villasis couple, that in the late afternoon of April 6, 1958, she had seen Manuel Bisnar, father-in-law of Manuel Villasis, and Loreto Buenvenida, the soldier-cousin of his wife Millie Bisnar, pass by her house on their way to the house of said deceased. The two fetched Villasis, who left with them for a destination not known to the witness. After the three had left, Millie Bisnar called her over to her (Millie's) house and asked if she could have Candelaria's husband gather tuba from the Villasis' coconut trees. Candelaria's husband acceded and delivered all the tuba he was able to gather to Millie at about sundown. This, Millie then sold. Manuel Bisnar, Loreto Buenvenida and Manuel Villasis returned at about 10:00 o'clock in the evening with a fourth man whom Candelaria did not know. Villasis went up to his house, changed to shorts and undershirt, slung his scythe on his waist and prepared to gather tuba for his guests to drink. It was then that Millie told him the tuba from their trees had already been gathered and sold by her. This enraged Villasis, who reproached her for causing him embarrassment with his guests and proceeded to slap and kick her. At that point Manuel Bisnar broke in to defend his daughter, accusing Villasis of want of respect for maltreating her in his presence. The latter retorted: "Here you are. Everytime we have a small quarrel with my wife you

intervene. I am going to kill you all." Then he entered a room and came out cocking a gun. He went down into the yard and challenged his father-in-law to follow, which the latter did. Loreto Buenvenida intervened and wrestled with Villasis for possession of the gun. As this transpired, Millie Bisnar jumped down from the kitchen and ran away, Candelaria following suit and running to her own house where she found her husband with whom she then proceeded to the house of Manuel Bisnar. At the Bisnar house they found Millie, her sister Delia, her children, her mother and another younger sister. Candelaria and her husband spent the night there.[30]

Alipio Bayhon, an old man of Agdalipe whose occupation was hook-and-line fishing in the creeks of the barrio, testified that on the night of April 6, 1958, he was at the stream near the house of Manuel Villasis. He had heard voices, one of these in a challenging tone, followed by the report of a gun. Turning to look, he had seen three persons walking on the temporary bridge across the creek whom he recognized as Leopoldo Barrios, Manuel Bisnar and Loreto Buenvenida. Leopoldo and Loreto each carried a gun while Bisnar held a bolo. When Leopoldo, who was in the lead, reached the end of the bridge, he asked: "Manong Loret, is he dead or not?" Loreto answered: "He is dead." That was between the hours of 10:00 and 10:30 in the evening. Later, at about 1:00 o'clock a.m., the witness had seen Barrios and Buenvenida return, re-cross the bridge and proceed in the direction of Ramon Dorado's house, still carrying their guns. They came back at about 2:00 o'clock a.m. without the guns.[31]

Matias Baselonia was, by his own account, drinking tuba in the house of Manuel Villasis on that evening of April 6, 1958, when Villasis, Manuel Bisnar, Loreto Buenvenida and another person arrived there. His testimony about the incidents occurring thereafter substantially replicates that of Candelaria Demalata. He told the Trial Court of how Villasis had slapped and kicked his wife in a fury over the sale of the tuba, how Bisnar had come to the defense of his daughter, the altercation that ensued and Millie Bisnar's flight from the house. Before he himself fled from the scene, he had witnessed the scuffle between Buenvenida and Villasis for the possession of the gun and seen Manuel Bisnar draw his bolo.[32]

Ludovico Distajo was the barrio lieutenant of Agdalipe at the time of the incident. He testified that he knew Millie Bisnar and that on the evening of April 6, 1958, he had seen and talked to her as she was passing by his house. When he asked her where she was bound for at so late an hour, she replied that she was on her way to her father's house because her husband and her father were drunk and she was afraid of them.[33]

Rexime Olivare, a member of the Pontevedra Police Force, was among those who went to where Villasis' body had been found after its discovery was reported. He declared that on his way there he had met a grieving Millie Bisnar carrying a scythe, (presumably that found near the body of the deceased). He and Millie, together with another policeman, Celestino Boliber, had gone to where the body lay.[34] Boliber had queried Millie as to how and why her husband died. She had replied that she did not know because she was in Binangig when it happened.[35]

Also introduced in evidence was an entry in the blotter of the Pontevedra Police Force[36] identified by Police Sergeant Pepito Manalad, tending to show that instead of being present, as she claimed, when her husband was shot in their own home, Millie was in fact in her father's house in Binangig when told by her sister of her husband's death. Said entry records a statement attributed to Millie Bisnar when she reported the killing to the police and written down in the vernacular by Sgt. Manalad,[37] and an English translation thereof, which was entered into the record of the Trial Court as Exhibit 8-A, reads:

"I Maria (sic) Bisnar came to the police department at about 10:00 to inform what happened to my husband Manuel Villasis that my younger sister Delia told me while I was in the house of my father Manuel Bisnar at Binangig, Panay, Capiz, that my husband was shot by Ramoning (steno note) and his companion was Poldo. And that was the reason why I went to our house and tried to investigate and I did not find my husband." [38]

No part of the foregoing array of evidence appears to have made any impression on either the Trial Court or the Court of Appeals, the former limiting itself to appraising favorably and in some detail the evidence presented by the prosecution and rejecting Ramon Dorado's proffered alibi; and the latter dealing mainly with the twin questions of whether a trial judge who had not presided over any of the hearings of a case could legally render a decision on the merits thereof, and whether Dorado's co-accused, Leopoldo Barrios, was properly discharged from the indictment in order to testify for the prosecution. There is no doubt that these questions were correctly resolved, i.e., that alibi is an inherently weak defense, that a regularly appointed and qualified trial judge labors under no legal impediment to decide a case simply because others before him had heard all of the evidence therein, and that the discharge of Leopoldo Barrios was proper and in accordance with the law and rules on the matter. That is, however, not the point here. What is a more significant consideration is that in assessing the question of petitioner's guilt or innocence, either or both of said Courts appear to have ignored or failed to take into account circumstances of weight that ought to have tipped the scales in his favor.

Harking back to the testimony given by Leopoldo Barrios and Millie Bisnar, it is a fact that only one of them, Barrios, claimed to have been an eyewitness to the killing. Millie Bisnar did not see her husband actually shot; she only heard the report of a gun after which, in fear of her life, she jumped from the kitchen and fled to her father's house.

Soon after the killing, while Barrios was detained with the Dorado brothers in the municipal jail of Pontevedra, Capiz, he wrote a note that he feared for his life from being detained in the same cell with the Dorados because he had falsely declared that they were the ones who killed Manuel Villasis. Said note[39] reads;

"DAPAT MAHIBALOAN SANG TANAN:

Aco Leopoldo Barrios naga pangabay sa mga PC ngamabuliban nila aco coma acusado dili aca gusto nga isulod aco sa carcel nga upod cami ni Ramon Dorado cag ni Henry Dorado. Guina pangabay co ini cay aco naga to-o nga aco may piligro san acon cabuhi tongod nga nag sugid aco nga sila ang nag patay sa cay Manuel Villasis can ini nga guin sugid co indi mato-od.

Ini nga pangabay acon guin himo na acon caugalingon nga cabobot-on nag wala sing nag todlo o nag olog-olog sa acon.

Acon ini guin pangabay sa mqa PC sa pag obra sini nga afedabit a dili aco mica hibalo mag sulat."

On the strength of that note, the prosecuting fiscal obtained an order of the Justice of the Peace of Pontevedra placing Barrios in the custody of the Philippine Constabulary.

As early, therefore, as even before the filing of the information, there were already indications that should have given pause about placing full and unqualified reliance upon the word of Barrios. This notwithstanding, he was later discharged in order to testify for the prosecution. And while said discharge traversed no law or rule as already stated, the fact remains that his note or letter just referred to, the authenticity and authorship of which have never been impugned and, indeed, have been recognized by the note being made the basis for a motion to transfer Barrios to PC custody, introduces not a little doubt of the truth of his earlier written statement and subsequent testimony, i.e., that Villasis died at the hands of the Dorados. The doubt is deepened by Barrios' affidavit of retraction[40] wherein he recanted the testimony he had given at the trial and substantially confirmed the version given by the defense witnesses of the events that transpired in the house of Villasis in the evening of April 6, 1958.

The solicitor General does not question the authenticity of the affidavit of retraction, but dismisses it as undeserving of credence because executed 23 years after the killing, after the case had been decided by the Trial

Court and said decision affirmed by the Court of Appeals, observing that "**** (t)ruth does not take that long to surface." [41] Again, that is not the point, however. The point is whether or not said retraction, coupled with Barrios' earlier admission that he had lied about imputing the killing to petitioner and his brother, warrant taking another long hard look at the evidence for the defense which, consisting of the mutually corroborative testimony of at least three witnesses, furnishes a reasonably credible alternative to the prosecution's theory and version of the death of Manuel Villasis. The Court is of the considered view that they do, particularly as the credibility of the other principal prosecution witness, the victim's widow, is also eroded by recorded testimony and evidence already adverted to tending to belie her claim that she was present at the scene when her husband was shot and that she knew who shot him. Indeed, her statement that she saw petitioner aim a revolver at her husband and thereafter heard a shot -- clearly implying that the latter had been shot and killed with a revolver -- fails to square with the clear physical evidence that the only gunshot wounds sustained by said deceased had been inflicted with a shotgun.

It is also of no small significance that the prosecution's version of the killing fails to account for some of the injuries found on the body of the deceased at the post-mortem examination. According to the medical examiner, some of the wounds could have been inflicted by a stick or a rough object, and the numerous post-mortem abrasions could have resulted from the body being slid over a rough object after death. Said injuries find no adequate explanation in either the testimony of the prosecution witnesses or in the other physical evidence.

The evidence for the defense, in offering a reasonable alternative hypothesis that the victim met his death at the hands of other persons impelled by motives at least as plausible -- if not more so -- as that attributed to petitioner, engenders equally reasonable doubts of the latter's guilt. Moreover, shorn of the testimony of Leopoldo Barrios which, in view of both his ante litem plea to be sequestered from the Dorado brothers while in detention [42] and his subsequent retraction, must now be regarded with a good deal of skepticism, the case against petitioner becomes wholly circumstantial. It is well-settled that circumstantial evidence in order to warrant conviction, must fairly exclude every reasonable hypothesis of innocence [43] and that where evidence manifestly relevant to any decisive issue has been disregarded or overlooked, this Court may properly exercise its power to review the findings of fact of the Court of Appeals as an exception to the rule making such findings binding upon it. [44]

The Court is not oblivious to the fact that its decision to hear and favorably consider petitioner's plea after previous adverse rulings might suggest that suits brought before it may initially receive less than the close attention and careful study that this highest tribunal, as the court of last resort, is expected to give every case without exception. This is not true. Here, the initial rulings were based on procedural faults which did not go into the merits at all. In practical effect, what the Court has done was simply to reconsider, on what the pleadings and the subsequent oral argument demonstrated to be good and valid grounds, a first denial of the petition on the merits.

The Court has thus not been deterred by the possibility of criticism for what may unthinkingly be viewed as inconsistency in its actions from preventing for correcting a miscarriage justice, especially where it is personal liberty and honor that hang in the balance. Withal, it must be stressed in no uncertain terms that as it has so often demonstrated in the past, this Court will reconsider actions that it has taken only for grave and important reasons and when in its view the interests of justice imperatively require it. What has been done here should offer no precedent or furnish encouragement to those who may come to believe that the Court can be worn down by successive and repeated pleas whose only merit lies in the persistence of their advocates. Let it be made clear that the Court will not brook or regard with leniency any attempt to impose on its time and patience or trifle with its processes, but will deal appropriately with all patently dilatory, frivolous and unmeritorious pleas.

WHEREFORE, the petitioner's Motion for Reconsideration dated August 15, 1986 is granted. The appealed

Decision of the Court of Appeals is reversed and petitioner is acquitted on reasonable doubt, with cost de oficio.

SO ORDERED.

Teehankee, C.J., Cruz, Paras, and Gancayco, JJ., concur.

[1] In Criminal Cases No. 2652 of the Court of First Instance of Capiz, Branch II.

[2] Judges Ignacio Debuque, Jose A. Aligaen and Silvestre Br. Bello.

[3] CFI Record, p. 21.

[4] CFI Record, p. 544.

[5] Hon. Pelayo v. Nuevo,

[6] CFI Record, p. 676.

[7] Attys. Miguel Albar and Alfonso Dadivas, Jr.; in the Trial Court petitioner had been defended, originally by Attys. Jose Torres and Jose Belvis and later by Attys. Alfonso Dadivas, Jr. and Francisco Fimalino.

[8] On September 24, 1980 in CA-G. R. No. 17810-CR; Rollo, p. 118.

[9] filed September 21, 1981; Rollo, pp. 11-18.

[10] Resolution dated October 5, 1981; Rollo, p. 66.

[11] Rollo, p. 198.

[12] Resolution of December 12, 1984; Rollo, pp. 181-182.

[13] on January 11, 1985; Rollo, p. 189.

[14] on March 25, 1985; Rollo, p. 191.

[15] Bello Abiera and Associates.

[16] Motion for Reconsideration with Petition for New Trial dated August 15, 1986; Rollo, pp. 404-412.

[17] Resolution of September 11, 1986.

[18] Trial Court's Decision; Appellant's brief, pp. 29-33; Rollo, p. 46.

[19] Decision, CA-G. R. No. 17810-CR; Rollo, pp. 118, 122.

[20] CFI Record, p. 1.

[21] Id., pp. 12-18.

[22] Id., pp. 39, 52-53.

[23] TSN August 10, 1962, pp. 342-343.

[24] TSN August 10, 1962, pp. 343-348.

[25] Id, pp. 349, 360.

[26] TSN April 23, 1962, pp. 226-243.

- [27] TSN September 29, 1971, pp. 379-387.
- [28] TSN September 29, 1971, pp. 387-391.
- [29] TSN September 29, 1971, pp. 391-396.
- [30] TSN February 15, 1965, pp. 772-784.
- [31] TSN July 3, 1963, pp. 614-625.
- [32] TSN August 12, 1963, pp. 667-674.
- [33] TSN July 22, 1969, pp. 836-839.
- [34] TSN July 2, 1963, pp. 489-491.
- [35] *Id.*, p. 490
- [36] Exhibit 2.
- [37] TSN July 2, 1963, pp. 525; 540-542; 567-568.
- [38] TSN October 1, 1971, p. 458, 462.
- [39] Exhibit "1-Dorado," p. 32 CFI Record.
- [40] Rollo, pp. 216-217.
- [41] Rollo, p.. 246.
- [42] Exhibit "1-Dorado", *supra*
- [43] *People v. Orpilla*, 110 SCRA 53, citing 4 *Jones on Evidence*, 5th Ed., pp. 1860-61; *People v. Modesto*, 25 SCRA 36, citing *People v. Ludday*, 6 Phil. 216, 221-222.
- [44] *People v. Cruz*, G.R. No. 71462, June 30, 1987, citing many cases; *People v. Bernal*, 131 SCRA 1; *People v. Chavez*, 121 SCRA 806, citing *People v. Santos*, 94 SCRA 277; and *People v. Padirayon*, 67 SCRA 135, and cases therein cited.

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