

Twilight over Burma

MY LIFE AS A SHAN PRINCESS



Inge Sargent



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With a foreword by
Bertil Lintner

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*This book is dedicated to the
memory of Sao Kya Seng,
the Prince of Hsipaw*



(Arthur Lord Lee photo)



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Last but not least, I must express my gratitude to the brave men and women in various parts of Burma, and to compassionate people elsewhere, who rendered assistance in our most desperate hours. It would not be prudent to name many of them here, but they know who they are. I shall never forget them.

KEY PERSONS APPEARING IN THIS BOOK

A FEW NAMES HAVE BEEN
CHANGED TO PROTECT
PEOPLE STILL LIVING.

- SAO KYA SENG. Saophalong, Prince of Hsipaw, hereditary ruler of the Shan state of Hsipaw. Often referred to as Sao.
- THUSANDI. Austrian-born wife of Sao Kya Seng; Mahadevi of Hsipaw, also referred to by her Austrian name, Inge, or Sao Mae (Royal Mother).
- MAYARI AND KENNARI. The daughters of Sao and Thusandi.
- MOEI. Shan maid and confidante of Thusandi.
- NAI NAI AND PA SAW. Shan nannies.
- KAWLIN. Shan butler.
- BUKONG, MEHTA, ZINNA, AI TSENG, AND BA AYE. Shan employees at the East Haw.
- NANDA. Shan cousin of Sao Kya Seng; Mahadevi of previous prince.
- U HTAN. Chief minister of Hsipaw State.
- SAO KHUN LONG. Brother of Sao Kya Seng.
- NANG LAO. Wife of Sao Khun Long.
- AMBASSADOR AND MRS. KOLB OF AUSTRIA. Headquartered in Karachi.
- PROFESSOR HANS HOFF. Austrian psychiatrist.
- U KHANT. Burmese friend; brother of UN Secretary-General U Thant.
- BO SETKYA. Burmese politician and businessman. One of the Thirty Comrades.
- U NU. Prime minister of the Union of Burma. Deposed and imprisoned by Ne Win in 1962.
- MABEL. British-born wife of Sao Hkun Hkio; Mahadevi of Mongmit State.
- PAULA AND BETTAN. Helpful friends in Rangoon.

NE WIN. Burmese Army general; leader of 1962 coup d'état and dictator of Burma since 1962.

MAUNG SHWE. Burmese Army colonel in charge of Eastern Command (Shan states).

TUN OUNG. Burmese Army colonel in charge of Hsipaw State.

COLONEL LWIN. Head of Military Intelligence (MIS).

BURMA

Showing cities, towns, and locations mentioned in the text



FOREWORD



ON A SUNNY SUMMER AFTERNOON in June 1966, a small Volkswagen Beetle made its way toward Schloss Laudon, a baroque castle operated privately as a luxury hotel in the 15th Bezirk, or district, of Austria's capital, Vienna. The iron gates to the estate were closely guarded by the Austrian police, who let the vehicle pass, since it carried official diplomatic identification from the Royal Thai Embassy in Vienna.

The Beetle chugged along the gravel road through the neatly trimmed garden that surrounded the castle and came to a halt right outside the building. A young European woman, her hair tied in a bun in Southeast Asian fashion, got out of the car and climbed the marble steps to the castle's main entrance. Two Eurasian girls, ten and seven years old, clutched her hands. They boldly entered the castle's round entry hall, which was furnished as an elegant lobby with rococo furniture and dark wooden panels.

The hotel guests, all of whom were Asians, stared in round-eyed wonder at the intruders. Still holding her two daughters by the hand, the lady quickly surveyed the hotel guests, spotted her target, and approached a woman in the party whom she addressed in fluent Burmese. "I want to see the general."

The Burmese lady glanced up a flight of stairs leading to a balcony on the second floor. The European lady's eyes followed hers, and she saw a tall Asian man on the balcony, hurriedly turning behind the balustrade and disappearing through one of the doors, which he resolutely shut behind him.

"Please be seated and have a cup of tea," the Burmese lady nervously suggested.

"No thank you. I have come here to discuss personal matters with the general," the other lady replied, holding her head high as the two little girls clung shyly to her hands.

"Er, he's resting. He's not so well, you see," the Burmese lady replied hesitantly.

"Not well? He seemed perfectly fit to me when he ran into that room upstairs," the European lady fired back.

The tall man who had vanished into the room on the second floor was, in fact, Burma's then military dictator, General Ne Win, who had seized power in a coup d'état four years before. The Asian lady was his wife, Khin May Than, who was also known as Kitty Ba Than, and they were on a visit to Vienna, where the general was receiving treatment for an undisclosed mental disorder. Accompanied by an entourage of nearly fifty high-ranking army officers and military intelligence agents, they had rented the entire Schloss Laudon while Ne Win went for daily consultations with one of Austria's most noted and respected psychiatrists, Dr. Hans Hoff.

The stalwart European lady who so boldly confronted the top echelons of Burma's ruling elite was Inge Eberhard. She was better known as Sao Nang Thusandi by the subjects of one of the most prosperous of the Shan states of northeastern Burma, in the valley of Hsipaw along the old Burma railway from Mandalay to Lashio. Her husband, Sao Kya Seng, had been the last *saopha*, or prince, of Hsipaw, and the two girls who were with their mother in Schloss Laudon in June 1966 were the young princely couple's daughters, Mayari and Kennari.

Inge first met Sao Kya Seng in Denver, Colorado, where both of them attended university in the early fifties. Throughout their period of courtship, Inge was unaware that Sao was anything other than just a student. They fell in love and got married in March of 1953.

Sao Kya Seng had assumed the title of Saophalong (Great-Lord-of-the-Sky) in Burma in January 1947, before he went to study in the United States. Inge was officially installed as Mahadevi (Celestial Princess) of Hsipaw on November 2, 1957, at the palace in Hsipaw. They became one of the most popular princely couples of the thirty or so Shan states, which

together constituted a semiautonomous region within the Union of Burma.

Aage Krarup-Nielsen, a Danish writer who visited Hsipaw in the late 1950s, wrote in his book *The Land of the Golden Pagodas* that "it was at first somewhat of a shock for the local people to get a young European lady as their princess and in the beginning many were apprehensive. But before long, their reserve melted and the Mahadevi today is admired and loved by the entire people of Hsipaw who regard her as one of them."

Soon after his return to Hsipaw, Sao Kya Seng, with his Western, American education, introduced new ideas to the old feudal system of his state. Perhaps the most radical idea he took back was to give all the princely family's paddy fields to the farmers who cultivated them. In addition, he bought tractors and agricultural implements that the farmers used free of charge, cleared land to experiment with new crops, and began mineral exploration in the resource-rich valley. He plowed the profits back into research and development, as he wanted all to share in the valley's wealth. Old Hsipaw hands still talk with nostalgia about the days of their young prince. Their living standard then was far higher than it is today, under the mismanagement of successive totalitarian, military regimes.

"He had the same spirit as the present king of Thailand," an old native of Hsipaw, now in exile in Thailand, recalls. "He worked hard and he was incorruptible and honest. In those days we always had good rice to eat. Not like now, when the people of Hsipaw have to eat low-grade rice from central Burma because the government demands the local crops for their own use."

So highly regarded were the princely couple that when my wife grew up in Hsipaw in the 1960s, it was still common in many homes to place the official wedding picture of Sao Kya Seng and Sao Thusandi beside Buddha images on the family altar.

Over the centuries, the Shans of the hill country in northern Burma enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. Their autonomy was abolished when the military, led by General Ne Win, seized power in 1962. He immediately replaced the country's old federal system of government with a highly centralized political structure. The new political structure gave no special rights or status to the non-Burman nationalities, such as the Shans.

Burman writers, and some Western writers as well, usually accuse

SHAN STATE

Showing cities, towns, and locations mentioned in the text



the British during their period of rule of having conducted "divide-and-rule" tactics by deliberately isolating the Shans and other minorities from mainstream Burmese politics. While that may be true, it is also true that the various hill peoples in central Burma's periphery have throughout history tended to perceive the Burmans as arch-enemies and untrustworthy. The British did little more than take advantage of this already existing, centuries-old animosity.

Burma is a country where many different nationalities reside—Kachins, Karens, Kayahs (or Karennis), Chins, Pa-Os, Palaungs, Mons, Myanmars, Rakhines, and Shans. Burma, as we know it with its present boundaries, is a British creation rife with internal contradictions and divisions. Northern Burma has experienced civil wars among the multitude of ethnic nationalities. It has suffered invasions by the British, the Japanese, and Chinese warlords, causing dislocation and the growth of insurgent militia throughout the hill country. Every Burma leader over the past two centuries has been confronted with but unable to control the various conflicting forces in Burmese society that constantly challenged its authority.

The Rakhine (or Arakanese), the Chins, the Kachins, the Lahus, the Lisus, the Akhas, and some smaller groups are of Tibeto-Burman stock. The origin of the Karens, the Karennis, and the Pa-Os is disputed, while the Mons, the Was, and Palaungs speak Mon-Khmer languages. Sao Kya Seng's people, the Shans, on the other hand, are not related to any other ethnic group in the country. They comprise 7 percent of the population according to the 1931 census, the last proper census taken in Burma. The word *Shan* is actually a corruption of Siam or Syam, and is the name given to them by the Burmans. The Shans call themselves "Dtai" (sometimes spelled "Tai" or, across the border in southwestern China, "Dai"), and they are related to the Thais and the Laotians, whose borders they share.

The origin of the Tai peoples, as they are collectively called, is still a topic of academic controversy, but the emerging consensus among scholars in many fields is that, they most likely were among the highly diverse groups living in the monsoon regions south of the Yangtze River, especially in Kwangsi and Kweichow provinces, before the expansion southwards of the Chinese empire in the 2nd century B.C.

In subsequent centuries, as China's southern border fluctuated with the ambitions and weaknesses of succeeding dynasties, some Tai groups were absorbed, some achieved semi-independence under Chinese suze-

rainy, while others emigrated mostly south and westwards to set up newly conquered independent principalities and kingdoms of their own in a wide arc from the island of Hainan in the east across northern Vietnam to present-day Laos and Thailand, upper Burma and as far west as the upper valley of the Brahmaputra river in Assam.

A western group, later referred to as the Shans, descended from southern China along the Salween River into the vast high plateau of northeastern present-day Burma. They settled in the valleys between the ridges on both sides of the river and established an abundance of principalities that varied in size and importance. The smallest, Namtok, measured 35 square kilometers (14 square miles) and was inhabited by a few hundred peasants scattered in two or three tiny villages. The largest principality, Kengtung, encompassed 32,000 square kilometers (12,000 square miles), larger than the state of Maryland. With 11,890 square kilometers (4,591 square miles), Hsipaw was one of the largest states, roughly the size of Connecticut. Most Shans were hard working, relatively prosperous cultivators who grew rice, soybeans, vegetables, and fruit.

Politically, however, the Shans were never effectively united, but for a short while after the fall of the Burman Pagan dynasty in 1287, the Shans overran most of upper Burma and established rule over the other ethnic groups. According to U.S. Burma scholar Josef Silverstein, "The Shans were direct political rivals of the Burmans for control over the entire area from that period until 1604, when they ceased resisting and accepted indirect rule by the Burmans."

But despite increasing pressure from the Burman kingdoms in the central plains, as well as the Burman military presence in some of the Shan principalities, the Shan hereditary chiefs, or saophas (*sawbwa* in Burmese), managed to retain a large degree of sovereignty. Neither Burma nor China was ever able to achieve effective conquest of the fiercely independent Shan princes and their states. Like their Thai and Laotian cousins, the Shans were Theravada Buddhists, with their own script, history, and centuries-old literature.

Their political status, however, underwent drastic changes in the nineteenth century, when Southeast Asia became an arena of competition between the two main colonial powers at that time: the French and the British. While Burma was being conquered by the British, the French had

extended their sphere of influence over present-day Laos in the east. In between French-controlled Laos and British-controlled lower Burma lay the wild and rugged Shan hill country, with its abundance of principalities and local rulers. Sir Charles Crosthwaite, British chief commissioner of Burma from 1887 to 1890, described the situation in this manner:

Looking at the character of the country lying between the Salween and the Mekong, it was certain to be the refuge for all the discontent and outlawry of Burma. Unless it was ruled by a government not only loyal and friendly to us, but thoroughly strong and efficient, this region would become a base for the operations of every brigand leader or pretender where they might muster their followers and hatch their plots. . . . To those responsible for the peace of Burma, such a prospect was not pleasant.

To avoid the possible emergence of an uncontrollable buffer zone between the two colonial powers of the time, the British extended their area of conquest in Burma to include the Shan states, which were "pacified," with the considerable expenditure of Shan lives, over the years 1885 to 1890. Another reason why the British decided to preempt the French and keep them at bay on the other side of the Mekong was that the trans-Burma trade routes to China passed through the northeastern border areas of the Shan territory. Several envoys sent by the East India Company to Burma during the period 1700–1824 had reported on the extensive and profitable China trade from upper Burma and the Shan states.

The present boundaries of northeastern Burma are, in other words, a direct outcome of nineteenth-century rivalry between the French and the British and the struggle for control of the lucrative China trade. The Shan people, and the numerous hill tribes who inhabit the mountains surrounding their valleys, are today found on all sides of the borders in the region—in all parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos, China, and even in northwestern Vietnam.

The thirty or so Shan states of the northeastern Shan plateau achieved a status different from that of Burma proper, which was a directly administered British colony. They became protectorates and the British recognised the authority of the Shan saophas, who enjoyed a status some-

what similar to that of the rulers of the Indian princely states. Each saopha was responsible for administration and law enforcement in his state; he had his own armed police force, civil servants, magistrates, and judges.

In 1922, the British created the Federated Shan States, and for the first time the Shan area gained a governing body common to all the principalities. The Federated Shan States' Council was established, comprising all the ruling princes and the British governor in Rangoon. The council dealt with such common concerns as education, health, public works, and construction. Due to the efforts of this political body, peace and order were established in the Shan states for the first time in many centuries.

Partly because of their separate administrative status, the Shan states were never affected by the pre-war nationalist movement, the Dohbama and other organisations, that swept central Burma at the time. The colonial machinery was also tenuous in the Shan states: The British presence was confined to a chief commissioner in the administrative center of Taunggyi, and a few political officers in the more important key states. On the other hand, very little was done to exploit the rich natural resources of the area and uplift it economically. The major preoccupation of the British in Burma was to develop the lowlands into a granary and rice exporter for India, its prize possession. For the Shan states, the colonial epoch meant peace and stability—but it was also a period of economic and political standstill. Even the China trade had plummeted following the anarchy that broke out in Yunnan in the 1930s as rival Chinese warlords battled each other for control of their own fiefdoms—and more lucrative undertakings such as the opium trade. Yunnan, not Burma, was the world's most important source of illicit opium before World War II.

The sleepy and stagnant Pax Britannica in the Shan states came to an abrupt end when the Japanese overran and occupied most of Southeast Asia in 1942. In the Shan Hills, fierce battles were fought between the Japanese Imperial Army and Nationalist Chinese (Kuomintang) units, invited by the British and dispatched by Chiang Kai-shek's warlord commanders in Yunnan. The Allies and the Japanese each in turn bombed Shan towns, leaving the hill country destroyed and in chaos.

After creating the nominally independent Burma on September 25, 1943, the Japanese ceded all but two Shan states. Kengtung and Möng Pan were transferred to the new puppet government of Siam (now Thailand). By 1944, branches of the East Asiatic Youth League and other

nationalist associations were established in the Shan states. The institutional change of linking the frontier areas with Burma proper also resulted in a political change. It was from this period that the awakening of the various peoples of the Shan states can be measured.

When British rule was restored after the war, Burmese nationalists continued their struggle for independence. Although more politicized than ever before, frontier minorities nevertheless developed a movement that differed considerably from mainstream Burmese politics. In November 1946, the leaders of the Shans, the Kachins, and the Chins initiated a conference at Panglong, a small market town north of Loilem. The first Panglong conference decided on a common plan for the reconstruction of the war-devastated frontier areas. In addition, the Supreme Council of the United Hill Peoples was founded to safeguard the interests of the frontier peoples.

The decision to join Burma and ask for independence from Britain was taken at the second Panglong conference in February 1947. The leader of the Burmese nationalists, General Aung San, and the leaders of the frontier peoples (except the Karens and the Karennis, who later resorted to armed struggle) signed the historic Panglong Agreement. This is the key document in post-war relations between the frontier peoples and the central Burmese authorities in Rangoon. The day on which it was signed, February 12, has since then officially been celebrated in Burma as Union Day, a national holiday.

The Shan saophas also asked for, and were granted, the right to secede from the proposed Union of Burma after a ten-year period of independence (that is, in 1958), should they be dissatisfied with the new federation. This right was also ensured under the first Burmese constitution.

On paper, everything was ready for the declaration of Burma's independence from Britain—which was to take place on January 4, 1948—when an event occurred that was as unexpected as it was tragic. On July 19, 1947, the Burmese nation was shocked by the news that Aung San had been assassinated, along with several other state leaders, among them Sao Sam Htun, the Shan saopha of Möng Pawn.

The state of affairs in Burma when it achieved its independence in 1948 could hardly have been worse. The country had suffered some of the most severe air strikes in Asia during the war; the countryside was ravaged and the political infrastructure was almost destroyed. Burma's inner circle

of competent political leaders had been murdered even before independence had been proclaimed. The new leader and independent Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, was a talented, intellectual politician, but he was heavily criticized for not being the strong statesman Burma desperately needed during its first difficult years of independence. With a central government perceived as weak, army units rose in mutiny; the Karens, the Karennis, and the Mons took up arms; and the powerful Communist Party of Burma (CPB) went underground to organize guerrilla forces.

In an attempt to forge national unity, Shan leader Sao Shwe Thaiké had been given the ceremonial post of first president of the Union of Burma. But events along the Chinese border in the Shan states thwarted further attempts to placate possible opposition. In late 1949, Kuomintang (KMT) forces from southern Yunnan, unable to withstand the attack of the victorious Chinese Communist army, crossed the international frontier into Shan territory. Led by wartime hero General Li Mi, they invaded Kengtung state and sought refuge in the Shan hills.

The KMT recruited soldiers from the border areas, and the number of KMT soldiers swelled from about 1,700 in early 1950 to 4,000 by April 1951. The Burmese Army was sent to the Shan states to rid the country of its uninvited guests, but was unsuccessful. U Nu then raised the question in the United Nations General Assembly, which on April 22, 1953, adopted a resolution demanding that the KMT lay down their arms and leave the country. Ignoring the UN resolution, the number of KMT soldiers in the Shan states increased to 12,000 by the end of 1953—and civil war was raging across the Shan states.

It was at this pivotal time in modern Burmese history that Inge and her Shan husband arrived in Burma. Hsipaw was not directly affected by the KMT incursion, but the situation was becoming tense in other parts of the Shan states. The traditional way of life in the peaceful, fertile Shan valleys was being changed by the distant turmoil along the Yunnan frontier.

The KMT was conducting a reign of terror from its strongholds in the Shan hills. On the other hand, the years up to 1955 saw a great influx of Burmese troops into the Shan states to rid the country of the uninvited intruders. The southern Shan states had been placed under military administration in September 1952 with the aim of suppressing KMT activities there—but the outcome was that the Shans saw their autonomy undermined. For many Shan peasants, it was the first time in history that they

had come in direct contact with any Burmans, and their encounters were, in most instances, frightening, and often deadly.

The KMT invasion, combined with the government's inability to repel the intruders, meant that the Shans became squeezed between two forces, both of which were perceived as foreign. The result was a strong Shan nationalist movement. The central government viewed this development with uneasiness, due to the constitutional right of the Shan states to secede from the Union in 1958.

Authorities tried to suppress the fledgling movement by using the army and its Military Intelligence Service, but the outcome was counter-productive: Groups of young people moved into the jungle, where they organized guerrilla units. By 1959, bands of Shan guerrillas were ambushing Burmese Army camps and raiding isolated outposts in search of arms. The guerrillas even managed to capture the garrison town of Tang-yan and hold it for a few days.

While these violent activities were going on in remote frontier areas, members of the Shan State Council in Rangoon initiated a legal movement to preserve the Union by strengthening its federal character. On April 24, 1959, all thirty-four saophas formally gave up their positions at a grand ceremony in the Shan states' capital of Taunggyi. The Shan states became Shan State, administered by an elected state government. Rangoon, at that time controlled by a military caretaker government, probably viewed it as a victory over the "feudal chiefs" who had "surrendered their powers," while the Shans saw it as the formal finalization of a movement that had begun several years before: The saophas did not hand over power to Rangoon, but to the elected Shan State government. Many of the more modern saophas, including Sao Kya Seng, also stayed on in politics, usually as members of the Shan State Council and the House of Nationalities, or Upper House, of the then bicameral Burmese Parliament.

The war, and the massive concentration of government forces in the border areas as a direct outcome of the KMT intervention, had effectively undermined efforts to create a more democratic system in Shan State. The Shan insurrection, small and insignificant as it might be, was another concern. Several Shan leaders were caught in a dilemma when many of their subjects were rising in rebellion against the central government in Rangoon. Hsipaw, especially, supplied the ranks of the Shan rebel army with many fighters and cadres, most of whom at that time were separatists.

It is said that one of the early Shan rebel leaders, Hsö Hten, who also was a native of Hsipaw, secretly visited Rangoon in 1961 to contact Sao Kya Seng. The intermediary, a Shan student in the capital, asked the Hsipaw prince whether he would like to meet a representative from the rebels. Sao Kya Seng then brought out the Union Constitution and read out the oath of loyalty he had sworn as a member of the House of Nationalities.

Sao Shwe Thaike, Sao Kya Seng, and other Shans began to organize more concerted efforts to solve the widespread rebellion by political means. They reasoned that by restructuring the federal system, the Union would survive, and the fledgling insurgency would be undermined. In 1960, a democratically elected government, again headed by U Nu, had returned to power in Rangoon, and the prime minister was sympathetic to these ideas.



IN 1961, ANOTHER REBELLION broke out in northern Burma: The predominantly Christian Kachins rose up in arms to protest the decision to make Buddhism the state religion of Burma. There were other grievances, and taken aback by the sudden outburst of violence, U Nu's government in 1962 convened the Nationalities' Seminar in Rangoon in order to discuss the future status of the frontier areas (or the Constituent States, as they now were called) and, if necessary, loosen the federal structure of the constitution. All the government ministers, members of Parliament, heads of the Constituent States, and their state ministers attended this seminar.

On March 2, 1962, before any decision had been taken, the commander in chief of the Burmese Army, General Ne Win, staged a coup d'état and detained all the participants of the meeting. Sao Shwe Thaike was among those arrested, and his seventeen-year-old son was gunned down on the night of the coup when, according to the official version, he "resisted arrest." The former president himself died in jail eight months later, presumed extrajudicially executed.

The army claimed that it had to intervene to "prevent the disintegration of the Union." Other analysts argued that the army had grown in strength because of the civil war, and especially because of the fight against

the KMT. It had been an uncontrollable state within the state, and became the state itself, with General Ne Win in power.

Sao Kya Seng had attended the Parliament in Rangoon the day before the coup and then flown to Taunggyi to visit his terminally ill sister. Unaware of what had taken place in Rangoon, he left early that morning to catch the plane to Lashio, the airport serving Hsipaw. But at Taunggyi gate, on the road to Heho, the military had already put up a roadblock, and Sao Kya Seng was stopped. He was last seen being led away into captivity by armed soldiers.

Inge was left alone in Hsipaw to deal with the complexities of Burmese politics. She tried desperately to find out what had happened to Sao Kya Seng—but all she got was a mangle of conflicting statements, prevarications, and outright lies from the new military government in Rangoon and its representatives in Taunggyi. Subsequent events forced Inge, Mayari, and Kennari to leave their homeland in May 1964. They went to Austria, where she managed to get a job at the Thai Embassy in Vienna—and where she also continued her relentless efforts to shed light on the fate of her husband.

During the brief encounter Inge had with Kitty Ba Than in Schloss Laudon in June 1966, she was told nothing more than that her husband was “well and treated as a detainee in Rangoon.” Earlier, however, military authorities had said that Sao Kya Seng had never been arrested. All this had actually been contradicted in 1964 in Rangoon, shortly before Inge left the country. Bo Setkya, a veteran Burmese politician with solid high-level connections, had told her that Sao Kya Seng had been executed by the army in Ba Htoo Myo camp north of Taunggyi soon after his arrest.

Inge, Mayari, and Kennari left for the United States later in 1966, where they settled down as private citizens. Family tragedies of this nature are not isolated cases in military-ruled Burma, where thousands of people have vanished without a trace over the past three decades. The story of the Hsipaw prince, here told beautifully by Inge herself, is an unusually well-documented one. It is a story of human bravery and courage. It also relates the brutality of a military regime that has tried to control the country by forcefully suppressing the population, and by eliminating even in a physical sense any prominent opponent to its rule, without realizing how ineffective these methods are. With the coup, the 1947 Constitution was abrogated, and the right to secede from the Union was declared null and

void. Predictably, the outcome was utterly counterproductive: Rebellions flared anew in Shan and Kachin states, as thousands of young people took to the hills. Hsipaw has continued to supply the Shan resistance armies with young fighters ever since the military takeover in 1962.



INGE STILL WEARS HER WAIST-length hair braided in the traditional Shan fashion and has not forgotten her years in the fertile valley in the northern Shan states. She has shared these happy memories with her daughters over the years as they grew up in the United States. Each year Mayari and Kennari still write to the military authorities in Rangoon, inquiring about what happened to their father. There has never been a reply.

Bertil Lintner

One



THUSANDI KNEW BY THE strange sounds that broke the silence of the tropical morning that their dream was over, that the moment they had expected for years had come. She carefully opened the screen door to the balcony, making sure not to awaken their daughters, who were asleep on her husband's side of the bed.

From the balcony she saw that the compound of their residence, the East Haw, was surrounded by hundreds of armed Burmese soldiers. The massive stone wall enclosing the Haw grounds had turned into a living monster. Rows of men in green helmets and uniforms jutted out from behind the stark wall. The sound of rustling boots in the dry underbrush seemed to follow short orders barked into the solitude of this early morning. For a few seconds, Thusandi felt disbelief and utter loneliness. She straightened up and took a few deep breaths before she was ready to meet her followers and her enemies. Thusandi had to be strong and optimistic to safeguard the lives of her husband, the prince, of their two young children, and of their Shan people.

Bukong, the head of their trusted bodyguards, and two dozen followers were in the foyer when Thusandi went downstairs. He confirmed what she instinctively knew: The Burmese Army had taken over the country, and their troops wanted her permission to search the East Haw. Her people were now waiting for her decision, and she was deeply moved by their faith in her. For a split second, the idea of an armed response appealed to her inner rage, but she had to act honorably, in the spirit of her husband. It was clear to Thusandi that from now on she alone, the foreign-born princess, would have to provide strength, support, and comfort for the Shan

people of Hsipaw. Above all, she had to protect her two little daughters and wait for their father. She hoped desperately that he had gotten away; maybe he had left Rangoon early and was on the way home.

Thusandi prepared herself to face the Burmese colonel and his troops. With her Shan followers standing behind her, she stepped outside the East Haw and took charge. Dozens of green-clad soldiers stood next to and behind their officers. Their stance was threatening, and they appeared ready to use the Sten guns in their hands. With authority Thusandi demanded an explanation for the intrusion. When she received none, she lectured the officers on the impropriety of using military force against a woman and her children. The colonel and his men were speechless. They had expected tears and desperation from a foreign-born woman, not a tirade in fluent Burmese.

Once the children were in the care of their nannies and sheltered from most of the upheaval, Thusandi had no choice but to give the Burmese officers permission to search the residence. She did not let the searchers out of her sight as they went from room to room, and she became more agitated as the hours passed. They paid special attention to her large bedroom suite on the second floor, emptying the carved teak wardrobes, rolling up the silk carpets, and knocking on the teak parquet floor as they moved back and forth on their knees. In the marble bathrooms, they examined every tile, apparently looking for loose ones. What could they possibly hope to find? Bukong had already handed guns and ammunition over to them, and they did not show any interest in the contents of the private office. They looked under beds, in closets, on balconies, behind bookcases, even inside mattresses. A zealous sergeant poked a four-foot metal rod into every mattress. In the children's room, he thrust his metal stick into every stuffed animal perched on the shelves. His comrades found it humorous when the children's giant teddy bear split open and spilled its stuffing over the other wounded toys.

Finally, Thusandi understood why they were there. The colonel's question at the end of this first of eight searches confirmed her suspicion and the hope she had not dared to nurture: "Can you tell us where we can find Sao Kya Seng, the prince?"

Thusandi folded her arms, looked straight at the colonel, and slowly counted to ten before she answered, "My husband is in Rangoon attending Parliament."

"He is not there. Our troops could not find him," the colonel said angrily.

"Well, you ought to be convinced by now that he is not hiding here either," she said as she walked away, a sense of superiority mingling with her relief.

Thusandi looked for her children. In their company she could express her joy at what she had heard. He was free, not in the hands of his adversary, General Ne Win, and he was alive. That meant everything would be all right again; they would be able to continue their lives and their work together. Some of Sao's responsibilities that needed immediate attention flashed through her mind: The Tai Mining Company expected its first major shipment of machinery, the salt production in Bawgyo was ready to start, the experimental coffee plantation in Loikaw had to be expanded, and the Hsipaw Sawbwa Foundation had to select more students for studies abroad. Thusandi herself was needed to administer the trilingual Foundation School, the Hsipaw Maternity Home, and the Child Welfare Society, as she had for years. She cared for the development and welfare of the Shan people of Hsipaw State and hoped all these projects would continue. She was Mother-in-the-Land to so many, and Mother pure and simple to her own little girls.

It was only eight o'clock in the morning, but this day in March 1962 already seemed endless. The dawn trauma had passed, and things seemed quiet and normal—almost. The Shan bodyguards who used to guard the gate had been replaced by a Burmese contingent. The uniforms of the gatekeepers had changed from khaki to olive green, and the faces of the new men were two shades darker. When the cook returned from the bazaar on his bicycle, the soldiers at the gate searched his basket and indicated that members of the household were discouraged from leaving the East Haw. Thusandi considered this development irritating rather than alarming. She turned on the radio, only to hear the regular morning program of contemporary Burmese tunes. No special news bulletins came over the air, and the daily newspaper had not yet arrived. Thusandi tried the phone. It worked and the operator connected her with friends in Rangoon who hosted Sao whenever he attended Parliament. Their friend Jimmy's voice came through faintly, and it seemed rather shaken when he said, "Our house was thoroughly searched this morning. Burmese soldiers turned everything upside down trying to find Sao."

"What did you tell them, Jimmy?" Thusandi shouted into the receiver as the phone connection got worse.

"I told them that Sao left the city yesterday, but they just didn't believe me." Then the connection was lost.

That was all Thusandi needed to hear. She knew that Sao had planned to visit his dying sister in Taunggyi on his way home. He was still four hundred miles away, probably having breakfast at his brother's house. There was no phone connection with Taunggyi, the capital of the Federated Shan States, and Thusandi decided to drive to Lashio and meet the Tuesday plane from Rangoon, which came via Taunggyi and Mandalay. Perhaps he or somebody with news of him, possibly his secretary, would be on it. She did not need to leave for the airstrip for another three hours; the biweekly plane was not due until one o'clock.

Thusandi planned to have breakfast, walk the children to school, and spend some time there. Her daughters were oblivious to the events of the early morning; she smiled, for the first time that day, as she watched them. Their dark hair, graceful movements, and smiling black eyes reminded her of their father. They also resembled her with their light skin and European features. Carefree and happy, the girls were busy chasing the puppies around the tamarind trees; they did not seem to notice that the uniforms of the gatekeepers had changed.

With Sao away, breakfast in the formal dining room was a lonely affair. The french windows invited rays of the morning sun to dance on the polished table, which was large enough to seat twenty. Thusandi sat down at the oval table by herself, acknowledging the attentive service of the butler, Kawlin, with a grateful nod. He wanted her to eat and smile and not be discouraged by this morning's events. After all, his lord was protected by birth and office; he was invincible and nothing harmful could ever befall him. Kawlin himself was tattooed from scalp to ankle in order to ward off evil spirits. Only the skin of his face, his throat, and the palms of his hands was not covered with black bands of circles, wavy lines, and other symmetric designs. Kawlin's faith was contagious, and Thusandi managed to nibble from the fruit plate. She was about to spread guava jelly on her toast when she heard several jeeps pull up in front of the East Haw. Sao couldn't possibly be home yet, and her secretary had only one jeep. Thusandi's internal alarm system struck a note of shrill warning. They must have come again.

She was right. The circular driveway in front of the residence was teeming with heavily armed Burmese soldiers. Three officers ordered Bukong to assemble all bodyguards and drivers. Thusandi quickly ordered the nannies to walk the children to school, a building just outside the gate. Then she had to witness the soldiers handcuffing her bodyguards and drivers, and brutally hitting them with their rifle butts. Although her men endured these blows without flinching, Thusandi could not bear to witness such brutality any longer.

"Stop that! You can't do that to my people!" she shouted. In response, the captain said in his most authoritative voice, "I have orders to take these suspects into protective custody. We are also taking most Hsipaw State officials, your secretary, and your mechanic to headquarters for questioning."

Thusandi did not dignify this pronouncement with a response. Instead, she turned to her followers and said, "Do not worry about your wives and children. I will take care of your families as if they were my own."

But the captain had not finished with his orders. Thusandi ignored him, until he started speaking again.

"It is my duty, Mahadevi, to read you the following restrictions, which my highest commander has ordered for you."

She stared at him and waited without uttering a sound.

"You may not leave the East Haw without special permission from the colonel. You are not permitted to receive any visitors, or make phone calls. And all your mail must go through the local army unit."

"Anything else?" she asked in a chilly voice.

"No, Madam," the captain said meekly. Thusandi walked into the East Haw with her head held higher than usual, already planning to break every one of these ludicrous rules. Only when she was alone, in the privacy of her bedroom, did she allow the tears to flow freely.



IF SAO DID NOT SEE THE GUARDS through the bamboo matting of his hut, he heard them. They were posted at all four corners of the one-room prison, pacing back and forth. He knew

he could not get away; any such attempt would give his captors a perfect excuse for murder. Yet he had to find a way to freedom, a way to return to his wife and children. The morning would bring hope and maybe his release. By then the prime minister would have heard about his illegal arrest and would insist that the army abide by the law of the land.

It was night now, a time to gain strength for tomorrow. He stretched out on the bamboo mat, but sleep did not come. Mosquitoes were buzzing around his head, and Sao wished he had not given up smoking awhile back. He tried to meditate, which had always released his stress before. Tonight was different; meditation did not work. He was imprisoned, without charges, without even knowing why. Over the years Sao had had a few collisions with the Burmese Army, always on matters of principle, but that was not enough to explain soldiers stopping his car today and forcefully taking him to this desolate army camp in Ba Htoo Myo. He knew he would find no answer that night, not from the unresponsive guards outside the bamboo walls.

His thoughts turned to Thusandi. She had followed him to the Shan hills from her native Austria and had been his wife for ten years. She was probably asleep now, with their two daughters on his side of the bed. He could picture her tall and slender body nestled in damask sheets, and her knee-length chestnut-brown hair braided for the night. He was sure that nobody would bother her. He felt satisfaction when he imagined the contempt and fury with which she would receive the news of his arrest. He loved her for so many reasons, but at that moment, he loved her most for that strong will, that determination to do what was right. For the first time on this horrible day, he felt a smile spreading over his face.

He remembered her most recent crusade to rescue a fish. The cook had resigned when a local salmon, intended for the dinner table, ended up thrashing back and forth in the blue waters of the swimming pool. Thusandi closed the pool until the captive fish had recovered its strength and could be returned to the folds of the Namtu River. The children were upset but she had prevailed in her rescue effort, and he loved her for it.

Sao felt strongly that she was safe, but he was not sure if he would ever see her again. He wondered if they would again trek through the jungle together, he in search of minerals, she on the lookout for orchids and wildlife. They had slept in bamboo huts then, not unlike the one confining him now. Their huts had been surrounded by their own bodyguards, to keep tigers out, not to keep him inside. And they had been sheltered by a

mosquito net that kept away buzzing insects and gave them an extra sense of privacy in their togetherness. How he missed her physical presence, how he longed for her laughter and her warmth. He wondered if she would find a way to cheer him now; he knew that she never failed him when it counted.

He sat up, startled; somebody was inside the hut, right next to the mat, where he must have gone to sleep a few hours ago. Otherwise the night was still—he could not hear the guards any more. The presence next to him belonged to a man in uniform, that much he could perceive in the dark hut. Was it someone trying to hurt or to help him? He had to keep still and remain very alert.

"I am one of your guards, sir, but I belong to the Kachin tribe. My uncle was in your police force many years ago," whispered the man in Burmese with a noticeable accent.

"Why are you telling me this?" Sao asked suspiciously.

"My comrades have fallen asleep, and I want to help you, sir."

"Can you get me out of here?" Sao asked.

"No, sir, that is impossible. But I can deliver a letter to your Mahadevi in Hsipaw."

There was no doubt in Sao's mind that he should take this chance. He felt quite certain that nobody knew where he was, and a message from him could be the key to freedom. And if this was a setup, he did not have much to lose. On a page torn from his pocket calendar, he wrote a message to his wife, dated March 2, 1962. It read: "Liebling, I am in the army lockup at Ba Htoo Myo. I am still OK."

The Kachin guard lit a cheroot, a fat Burmese cigar, which provided a flicker of light. He also offered to supply an envelope and somehow get the note to the East Haw in Hsipaw. The soldier refused to accept the 100-kyat note Sao offered him; he said he took the risk not for money but because he too belonged to an oppressed hill tribe.

After the soldier stole away, Sao was alone again. This episode had raised his spirits and given him more hope than he had felt since he was ordered to step out of his brother's car at the Taunggyi gate and taken into the army checkpoint station. He was wide awake again and his mind was racing, going over the day that had started with a routine breakfast at his brother's and ended in an army lockup.

His sister-in-law had mentioned that his brother had been called away at four that morning to a meeting of the Shan Security Council.

Despite the unusual hour, nobody had felt alarmed. After breakfast, Sao and his driver had started off to Heho airstrip in his brother's car. There had been a lot of military personnel on the streets of Taunggyi that morning, but it had not interfered with traffic until they had arrived at Taunggyi gate, where all vehicles were stopped at an army roadblock. Several Burmese officers had rushed up to the car and asked if the Saophalong of Hsipaw State was present.

"Yes, I am Sao Kya Seng—what is this all about?"

"Please step into our guardhouse for a few minutes, sir," one of the officers had said and opened the car door for Sao. As he entered the guardhouse, Sao had turned around and seen an officer motioning to the driver to head back to Taunggyi, with his master's luggage but without his master.

Now, sixteen hours later, he was confined within Ba Htoo Myo Military Academy grounds in the southern Shan states, knowing no more than he did when all this had started. Whatever had happened to the Constitution of the Union of Burma if the army could detain a member of Parliament, even for a day? The day's events did not bode well for the Constitution's future.

Sao could not allow himself to dwell on this subject any longer. Some additional sleep was necessary before he faced a new day, which would bring more stress and more danger, and maybe more hope. He directed his thoughts to his wife and children—to their laughter and to the happiness he felt when he was with them. He had to overcome this nightmare and find a way back to freedom.



SAO AWOKE TO A CONCERT OF jungle fowl greeting the very early morning. It was four-thirty, and the nightmare was still with him: the same army camp, the same bamboo hut, no windows, a door barricaded from the outside. He was still at the mercy of his jailers.

At that moment Sao had one overriding desire: to go home, pack up his family, and move to the little mining town in the United States where he had spent the most carefree years of his life.

When he got out of this predicament, he would immediately search his files for the job offers that now and then still reached him from the placement office of the Colorado School of Mines. He was now ready to pursue what his friends had long advised for his own personal safety and what his enemies had tried to promote for their own advantage: his departure from Hsipaw, even though it meant leaving the people who wanted and needed his leadership.

The sound of boots approaching his miserable hut brought Sao Kya Seng back to reality. The door was opened cautiously, finally allowing the first light of day to enter his dark room. A Burmese officer of the dreaded Military Intelligence unit, a smirk on his face, appeared inside the door. Sao knew he had seen him before, a year ago, after four village headmen from the Hsipaw area had died while being tortured with electric current. When the commanding officer had explained to outraged local leaders that the rebellious Shans had to be taught a lesson, this officer had been present.

"I am Captain San Lwin, and I would like to ask you a few questions, sir," he said as he stood with his legs squarely planted on the matted floor to assume an intimidating posture.

"As a member of Parliament, I demand to see Colonel Maung Shwe, the officer in charge of the army's Eastern Command," Sao said calmly.

After an awkward moment of silence, the Military Intelligence captain said, "That won't be possible until you answer some of my questions. I want to help you. Please trust me. But first, you must give me the information we need."

"I have made my request and do not plan to make any further statements," Sao said, turning his back to the captain, who was visibly annoyed. Having to return to his superiors without any answers guaranteed a loss of face.

"You will regret this," said the captain as he turned around, swinging the bamboo door shut. It was dark again save for some thin rays of light that broke through the matted walls here and there. Sao heard footsteps disappearing into the distance.

Sao sat down on the mat that had served as his bed and made a serious attempt to meditate. He shut his eyes and concentrated on his breath as it streamed through his nostrils—on the cold sensations as he inhaled it, and the warmth as it was forced out again. His efforts must have been suc-

cessful, as he was startled when he heard a male voice next to him saying, "Sir, I am alone on duty till our replacements arrive in a few minutes. As I told you during the night, I am a Kachin soldier and I am loyal to my people, not to the Burmese in whose army I serve. We Kachins respect you very much, and I wish I could help you."

The door was a few inches ajar, so that Sao could clearly see the man, squatting on the floor next to him. He had taken off his boots, apparently in keeping with the tradition of showing respect, and his gun was nowhere in sight. His features, especially his long, sharply defined nose, confirmed his claim that he belonged to the hill tribe.

"What do you think you can do for me?" Sao asked.

"I could forward another letter to your Mahadevi by a different route than the note you gave me in the night," the soldier said. "She must be anxious to have news of you."

Without hesitation, Sao wrote a more detailed message on one of the pieces of paper he found in his pocket: "Liebling, I am writing this secretly. I am being locked up in the Army lockup at Ba Htoo Myo at Lawksawk. Please ask Khin Mg Chone to request Tommy Clift to use his influence to get me out. There is also Ko Hla Moe. Millie can help here. Miss you all. Conditions here are not clean. Hope to see you all again soon. Cheer up yourself! I am still OK. Love, Sao Kya Seng."

On another piece of paper, Sao hurriedly wrote a similar message to his friend Jimmy Yang in Rangoon, asking him to contact Prime Minister U Nu with a request for help.

"Will you have these two letters delivered for me?" he asked the soldier as he handed him the addresses, scribbled on a page torn from his pocket calendar.

"I give you my word of honor, sir. And one more thing, sir. Please be careful. Do not trust your captors. They are evil." With that, the Kachin soldier quietly backed out of the bamboo jail, shutting the door behind him.

A few minutes later, Sao heard that his guards were changed. One soldier, marching away, carried with him the only hope Sao had of communicating to the outside world what had happened to him after he left his brother's house twenty-four hours ago. He had no choice but to wait, meditate, and see if this mission would succeed.

Two



ONLY HOURS HAD PASSED SINCE life in the East Haw had changed in a way that was incredible, yet horribly easy to believe. Thusandi needed to be alone to work through her emotions and consider her future course of action. She chose the east terrace as her refuge. From there, she could see the jungle-clad hill she liked to call Lookout Mountain, the green Namtu River now and then allowing a dug-out canoe to disturb its mirror surface, and a sea of wild yellow sunflowers insisting on their right to bloom in the company of hundreds of red poinsettia bushes. A large flock of parrots had just descended on the sunflowers, filling the air with such loud chatter that any attempt at conversation would have been futile. They drowned out the ever-present chirping of crickets and the shrill chitchat of the resident mynahs. The disruption provided by these messengers of nature had the unlikely effect of calming her.

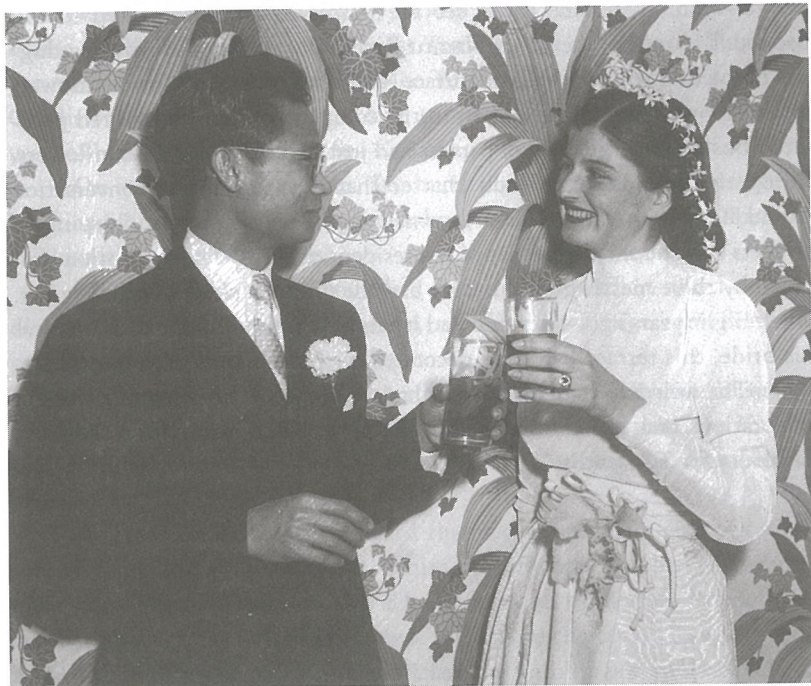
Eight years ago, when Sao had brought Thusandi home to Hsipaw as his bride, this terrace had been decorated with thousands of fragrant blossoms. The welcome at the East Haw had been the culmination of a week of celebrations that had commenced in the port of Rangoon with a shocking discovery for Thusandi.



IN EARLY JANUARY OF 1954, THE SS *Warwickshire* was gliding toward Rangoon, ready to deliver its load of cargo and the two dozen passengers who were assembled on deck, eager for

arrival. They were under the spell of the symbol of Rangoon, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, whose golden rays had caught their eye when they were still thirty miles downstream. Most of the passengers, including Sao and Inge, his Austrian bride, were mesmerized by the brilliant splendor of this 326-foot bell-shaped *stupa*, which was plated with solid gold and tipped with diamonds, rubies, sapphires, and a huge emerald to catch the rays of the sun.

As the ship approached Rangoon harbor, Inge's excitement grew. She liked the low white buildings framed by swaying coconut palms that lined the right-hand side of the river. Somewhere around the next bend, she expected to see tall buildings of a harbor front not like New York, she thought, but perhaps like Genoa or Lisbon. But the ship did not go around another bend; it prepared to dock next to two freighters that were loading rice. The pace seemed casual and unhurried, and Inge noted the absence of loud thumps and shrill whistles that she remembered from the large ports



Sao and Inge were married on March 7, 1953, in Denver, Colorado. (Arthur Lord Lee photo)

in the West. Only her ship's own loud horn disrupted the tranquillity of its arrival in the harbor.

The expected skyline of the city of Rangoon did not materialize; even the golden Shwe Dagon Pagoda was no longer visible. Instead, a number of small boats caught her attention. As they approached the SS *Warwickshire*, Inge saw that they were filled with people dressed in brilliantly colored garments: red, blue, yellow, pink, green. She had never seen so many colors in clothing before, and she stretched to see more. A light breeze playfully twisted colorful parasols and large banners saying "Welcome Home," and smiling black-haired women were tossing flowers into the glistening river. These boats with their exotic passengers approached as if to welcome someone important on the SS *Warwickshire*. Everyone on deck seemed delighted, if puzzled as to who on the ship warranted such an unusual welcome. Everyone, that is, except Sao Kya Seng.

"I wonder what this is all about," said Inge to her husband as she marveled at the spectacle. "Somebody very important must be on board."

Looking very uncomfortable, Sao said, "There is something I have to tell you, my dear."

"Can't it wait? I'd really like to watch the welcome," she said, peering over the side at the decorated boats as they came closer.

"No, it can't, believe me!" Sao said emphatically, catching her hand and drawing her away from the railing.

An unusual urgency in his voice alarmed her. "If it's that important, go ahead, dear," she said.

Sao took his wife by the hand and led her into the deserted dining room. He waited a moment as if unsure where to begin. When he removed his wire-rim glasses to polish them with his handkerchief, Inge knew that he was nervous. But as she took a critical look at her husband, she could not see why. He looked very elegant, impeccably dressed in a beige suit that complemented his brown skin and black hair. Although he was slender and of the same height as she, Sao stood out by his regal bearing and always appeared tall and distinct. Putting his glasses on again, he looked at her with his kind and lively eyes, which always seemed to see beyond the surface. With a glint of apprehension he began, "I neglected to tell you something about myself."

"Don't tell me you've got a girl waiting for you here," she said, half joking, half alarmed.

"Oh no." He laughed. "But I've kept something from you. I hope you will forgive me."

"What is it? Please don't keep me waiting."

"The welcome out there is meant for us," he said, nodding his head in support of this statement.

"Oh, very funny," Inge said. "Why would they welcome a mining engineer like that?" By now she was beginning to suspect that Sao had been keeping some major secret from her, and she found herself breathing rapidly.

"I am much more than that here." He paused. "I'm the Saophalong—the prince—of a whole state, a Shan state."

Her eyes were wide. She was shocked.

"It's a big place, Liebling—the size of Connecticut, or four times the size of Luxembourg, if that makes more sense to you. Those people out there, they're my people. They've come all the way from Hsipaw, eight hundred miles. You'll have to get used to it. There'll be a lot of celebrations when we get back to the Shan states."

Inge stared at her husband in disbelief; then she lowered her eyes to inspect the handwoven Austrian dress she was wearing. She muttered desperately, "You should have told me . . . I'm not dressed right . . . I could have changed my dress."

"Please forgive me," he said again, putting his arms around her and pulling her close to him. Sao felt awful. He had always prided himself on being fair, but he had not been considerate of her. He admitted to himself that he was wrong to wait this long to tell her.

"Why didn't you tell me before we were married?" she demanded, twisting away from him.

"I wanted to be absolutely certain that you married me for the right reasons. But it was stupid of me—I'm sorry."

She did not respond right away and avoided looking at him. She was hurt that he had lacked the absolute trust in her that she had always felt for him. But she realized this was not the time or the place to make it an issue.

"Let's go and enjoy the welcome," she said. She reached out to him as he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

They went on deck, hand in hand, and waved to those Shans and Burmese who had ventured out in the brightly decorated boats. The ship docked, the gangway was lowered, and a group of officials rushed on board

to extend a warm, yet respectful welcome to Sao and his bride. Inge tried to appear calm and collected, although she felt anxious and insecure. She wished she had been able to prepare herself for the role awaiting her at the other end of the gangway. For the first time since they were married, she felt resentful toward her husband.

The honored couple was immediately escorted past the immigration and customs stations, away from their stunned fellow passengers. On the pier, hundreds of cheerful and enthusiastic relatives, students, and officials from the Shan states celebrated their arrival, accompanied by rhythmic music from a small band of gongs, drums, and cymbals. Inge was charmed by the beautiful women, who presented her with bouquets of exquisite flowers: fleshy red lilies, perfumed white jasmine, and many delicate blossoms she could not name. Through the flowers in her hand she took a close look at the young woman next to her: a slim and graceful figure, clad in a colorful silk *longyi* and a crisp white *aingyi*, which was held together by five dazzling jewelry buttons set in gold. Her face bore a radiant smile, and her jet-black hair was pulled back into a knot and framed a delicate light brown face. Inge had seen a few female students from Burma in the United States, but they bore little semblance to these beautiful women in Rangoon harbor. In American universities they were disconnected from their surrounding, struggling to keep warm in heavy overcoats and leather boots. Now, for the first time, she saw women of Burma in their own land, competing in beauty with the tropical blossoms they wore in their hair. Many men also wore sarongs of muted colors and designs; a few were dressed in wide, flowing Shan trousers. Their "bath-towel" turbans distinguished the Shan men from the Burmese, who wore a *gawngbaung*, a form of molded headgear.

Overwhelmed and confused, Inge tried to prevent tears from blurring her vision. The intense midday heat and emotional strain combined in making her feel very uncomfortable. She cast a grudging glance at Sao, wishing she was dressed more appropriately. This was her first encounter with the people who would be her family, friends, and, perhaps, enemies. They looked so much more foreign and mysterious than she had imagined, and she wondered if she would ever be able to understand what lay behind their smiles, let alone understand the melodious language they were speaking.

A distinguished-looking lady, a foot shorter than Inge, stepped out

of the crowd and presented her with a bouquet of flowers, saying, "Welcome, my little sister. I am Nanda and I will look after you until you feel comfortable on your own."

This surprised Inge. She knew her husband's only surviving sister by a different name, and there was no resemblance between this lady and the photos she had seen. But she appreciated Nanda's warmth and her flawless English. She would not have to rely on the few phrases of Burmese she had learned while crossing the Indian Ocean. Later, as well as Burmese, she would also have to tackle the Shan language for life in bilingual Hsipaw. Next to her, Sao was speaking one or the other of these languages with half a dozen important-looking men. Despite feeling excluded from the conversation, she was reassured by their happy laughter.

Nanda caught Inge's attention as she ushered up three teenage girls, who were fair-skinned and shy. "These are your little sisters Daisy, Grace, and Ruby," she said as the girls giggled. "You must teach them English and good manners."

Inge's interest was aroused and she was about to try to find out how many sisters she now had when Sao gently tugged at her arm.

"We have to move on and get out of the hot sun," he said. "I have invited our welcoming committee to meet with us at the Strand Hotel. There I will introduce everyone to you." He took her hand and led her to a waiting car.

"What about our luggage?" she asked, suddenly remembering the responsibilities of traveling.

"We don't need to worry about such things any more. The secretary will take care of everything."

Inge was startled. Throughout her life, traveling had meant lugging suitcases onto trains, buses, and ships, worrying about baggage claim and customs inspection.

They had barely settled into the back seat, drawing close to each other, when he said, "One more thing, Liebbling. You can't call me 'Sao' in public any more. You see . . . it's not respectful enough."

"So, what do you want me to call you?"

"It's not what I want you to call me, it's what my people consider proper."

"Okay, just tell me what I should call you." Her exasperation was beginning to show.

"You'll have to call me 'Saopyipha' when others are around."

"Saopyipha? What does that mean?"

"It means 'older-brother-who-is-the-ruling-prince,'" he said as they both burst out laughing.

"And I can't call you 'Inge' anymore," he continued. "The Shan name given to you by our astrologer is 'Thusandi.'"

She wanted to ask what that meant, but the excitement and the heat had exhausted her so much that she decided to postpone asking any of the many questions on her mind. She was hoping that the Strand Hotel was very far away so that she could rest her eyes and her overwrought emotions. Her wish was not granted; the drive took only a few minutes. Foreign street scenes filtered through Inge's half-closed eyes: bicycle-drawn passenger carts, orange-robed Buddhist monks, buses constructed of wood, women carrying huge baskets on their heads. In their midst a white-coated policeman was attempting to bring order to the traffic melee.

The Strand Hotel, a white colonial building, exuded the splendor of a time past. It was an island of cool, British tranquillity amid the gay, bustling life of Rangoon. Some of that teeming Asian life was invading this sacrosanct space as they arrived with their entourage. Barefoot Indian attendants ushered them into a meeting room, where at least fifty people were already assembled. Thusandi sat through three incomprehensible speeches, feeling that every pair of eyes was subjecting her to a thorough inspection.

Confused and apprehensive, she wondered if she had made the right decision in leaving her family and her friends. She doubted if she would feel at home in this sunny, unfamiliar land. She wondered if she would be able to fully believe Sao after today's surprises. But her doubts were not fears, and she was determined to give her new life a chance.

The next five days in Rangoon were filled with an endless process of introductions, receptions, informal social calls, and lessons from life about a new culture and its sensitive politics. Thusandi enjoyed the whirlwind of activities and postponed any serious soul searching. The first morning in Rangoon included breakfast with Sao Hkun Hkio, foreign minister and head of the Shan State central government, at his residence; shopping at Rowe and Company, the most exclusive English department store in Rangoon, for hundreds of yards of curtain material, Wedgwood china, and lamps for the new home Thusandi had not yet seen; a reception at the

Strand Hotel for all students from Hsipaw State currently studying at Rangoon University; and a short visit to a woman astrologer at Sule Pagoda in the center of the city. She was one of several astrologers whom Sao had consulted before he went to the United States, and Thusandi wanted to meet her.

Although Ba Maung, the English-speaking secretary, accompanied Thusandi everywhere she went, she felt most comfortable when Nanda joined her. She was actually Sao's first cousin, not a sister by European definition. Thusandi learned on her first day in Burma that different standards applied, and absolutely everybody they met was addressed as a member of the family; younger people were sisters and brothers, older ones were uncles, aunties, grandfathers, and grandmothers.

Nanda had been the Mahadevi of Sao's predecessor until she left him and his court in Hsipaw for a man in Mandalay. After she had endured hardships and official banishment from Hsipaw, Sao had brought her back to the family. She was now in a unique position to help introduce Thusandi to her new life. Nanda knew proper etiquette, she could interpret from Shan and Burmese into English and vice versa, and she was invaluable in suggesting what to purchase for the East Haw, the residence in Hsipaw State.

The three teenage girls, Daisy, Grace, and Ruby, turned out to be Sao's half-sisters. They giggled a lot and were enjoying their first visit to Rangoon. They had been given their English names by the nuns at the convent school they attended in Maymyo.



"YOU WILL LIKE LIVING IN THE Shan states," many people in Rangoon said to Thusandi. But the Burmese seamstress who sewed the first longyi and aingyi for her warned of witchcraft, powerful spirits or *nats*, and headhunters descending to the Shan valleys. She sighed as she adjusted the length of a sky-blue silk longyi on Thusandi, finally giving her new look a wink of approval; the longyi, a long wraparound skirt, accented Thusandi's shapely figure; the sleeveless white aingyi appeared crisp and cool. For the sake of completeness, the seamstress had even managed to find a pair of Burmese velvet slippers—in

a men's size. Thusandi beamed at her mirror image. She liked what she saw and how she felt in her new clothing.

"Poor lady," the seamstress sighed. "So young and so pretty and going to the Shan states!" She continued in Burmese, according to Nanda, with a Buddhist prayer for Thusandi's safety.

"I'll come and see you next time I'm in Rangoon," Thusandi said with carefree laughter. "I think it's safer in the Shan states than in the city. I'll prove it to you." But her comments had not convinced the seamstress, who did not laugh.

Most Burmese she met acted as if the Shan states were a foreign country; some even considered it a dangerous place beyond civilization. They alluded to fierce hill people in pursuit of lowlanders, to headhunters in search of well-fed victims, and to Shan maidens who bewitched and destroyed their hapless suitors. Very few bearers of such news had ever been there or indeed planned to see this mysterious Shan land for themselves.

Thusandi was puzzled that people so close to the Shan states knew practically nothing about life there. Her source of information was Sao, and she trusted him implicitly. His honesty had always disarmed her, and his failure to disclose his princely position to her had not shaken her faith in him. When he laughed heartily about the rumors she had heard, she dismissed those too.

While in Rangoon, Thusandi's curiosity about the Shan states grew by the hour. She believed she would be happy there with Sao, even though it sounded like the end of the world. It pleased her to share with the people she met what she had learned about that part of the Union of Burma.

The Shan states covered approximately one-fourth of the country's hills in the northeast, bordering China, Laos, and Thailand. The three million Shans living in that area, together with dozens of hill tribes, were much more like the Thais than the Burmese. They had originally come from China and migrated south to conquer Thailand and Burma after the Tartars destroyed their kingdom, which was called Nanchao. But their conquest of Burma did not last, and three centuries later the Shans were driven back into the hills. Unlike the Burmese, they had no king. Instead, the Shans were ruled by hereditary princes and chiefs who, at times, were forced to pay tribute to the Burmese. When Britain annexed Burma, the Shan states had become part of the British Empire, though they enjoyed

special status. Burma's monarchy had come to an end, but the Shan princes retained their feudal powers and a large measure of independence.

Thusandi remembered that Sao had told her about his land and his people when they were hiking in the Rocky Mountains. Nothing he had said alarmed her, and she expected no difficulties in adjusting to life in such a distant culture. However, when Thusandi was lying sleepless in their luxurious suite in Rangoon's Strand Hotel, she began to wonder if she had made the right decision. She wondered if she would ever see her home in Austria again. Hanni, a girl from her hometown, had ended up a virtual prisoner in a Middle Eastern harem, and she considered for a moment that the same fate could await her. She remembered how secure she had always felt in Austria, even when bombs destroyed their home during World War II. And how privileged she had considered herself when she wore her first ball gown made out of old curtains, or when she had slept in a youth hostel on her first trip to Salzburg. Now here she was in the most exclusive hotel in Rangoon, surrounded by the luxuries of opulent silk, shiny silver, and attentive servants, and she found herself longing for that secure and confident feeling of her growing years in Austria.