

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

By Peter Martin

Personal Reflection

I had known that there was some sort of war in Burma. I visited the border town of Mae Sot like any other tourist. I had sat on the bus and been through the checkpoints where men with large guns would prowl down the aisle of the bus slowly, examining people and checking them for their papers. The people who flee Burma don't face a happy welcome in the neighboring country of Thailand. Many are simply shipped back. Others end up in refugee camps. Many are sold into slavery, sex-slavery, or are forced to work in thankless jobs by bosses happy to exploit the low-wage labor.

When a friend suggested that I research Aung San Suu Kyi, I said, "who?"

I didn't want to know. I had avoided the issue. I did not want to contemplate a country that could produce such suffering. I didn't want to research a situation that seemed so hopeless and so sad. I checked out a book and before I knew it, I was thirty pages in and I knew that I would have to write this.

It's just an essay. It says nothing of the smells and textures of life in South Asia. It shows nothing of the markets, the people, the heart and soul of a place. So all I can do is recommend strongly and with heartfelt honesty the books listed in the bibliography. Read Daw Suu Kyi's writing. She shows in her writing a beautiful country and people. True it is afflicted—the military regime has inflicted one of the worst wounds a country could ever bear. It has rewritten the past and suppressed its voices in the name of stability.

Our world is poorer because of it.

Biography

Her friends call her Suu, short for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Most of her friends were sent to prison and tortured. Many of them died in prison. She herself has been under house arrest, intermittently, for nearly fifteen years. Her children grew up and became adults thousands of miles away. Her husband died in the late 1990s, far away. Armed guards patrol the gates outside of her house. When the army hasn't blockaded her street, tourists appear outside of the walls, attracted by curiosity. Twenty years ago she was an academic, a mother to her children, the loving wife to her husband. Now she is a political prisoner, and the symbol of hope for her country.

Her country, Burma, is ruled by arguably one of the most repressive and brutal regimes in existence. Funded by unscrupulous foreign investment and the heroin trade, the military government of Burma has been compared to George Orwell's 1984. Employing one of the largest, most invasive intelligence apparatuses ever known, every citizen lives in fear of disappearing in the middle of the night.

Hope can be an elusive thing in this country, but in hushed conversations, "The Lady" as she is called, is one of the few hopes that people cling to. Without Aung San Suu Kyi, the international community would have arguably forgotten Burma. But her writings, her struggle and her party, the National League for Democracy have not let this happen. This strange relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Government is only really understood when you take into account who she is. She is a great General's daughter, and bears a striking resemblance to him. Had she been any other political dissident, she would be unknown—locked far away in the walls of Insein Prison.

Suu Kyi's father Aung Saw, rose to prominence in Rangoon University as the editor for the local newspaper dedicated towards the notion of Burmese independence from the British. Later he became a general, helping the Allied liberation of Burma. After the war, Aung Saw's negotiations with the British for their independence left an indelible mark on Burmese history—and it is why he

is Burma's George Washington. But he never lived to see the fruits of his labors. Just six months prior to Burma achieving its independence from the British, a rival general assassinated him. The day he died, July 19th was commemorated annually as Martyr's day. Aung San Suu Kyi was only two years old when this happened.

In the following years, her mother, Daw Khin Kyi raised her daughter as a Buddhist while her own father, a converted Christian, would read the New Testament to Young Aung San Suu Kyi. Her upbringing molded Aung San Suu Kyi into a truly rare individual who exhibited an almost supernatural grace, poise, and thoughtfulness in how she dealt with life. Suu Kyi's presence was commented on by Barbara Victor, who cites Ann Pasternak Slater, quoted in *Freedom From Fear*: "Suu's tight trim longyi (the Burmese version of the Sarong) and upright carriage, her firm moral convictions and inherited social grace, contrasted sharply with the tatty dress and careless manner, vague liberalism, and uncertain sexual morality of my English contemporaries."

Despite the indomitable character she was growing to become, tragedy was not done with her family. Trouble had been brewing in the new Burmese democracy since its very inception. Ethnic groups rebelled and the troubled, new democracy that Aung San Suu Kyi was growing up in was surrounded by the threat of military coups from any number of fronts. By 1958, the democracy was in serious trouble of being overthrown militarily. General Ne Win; the new leader of the provisional, caretaker government, took control of the government civil services, private enterprises such as banks and factories, and consolidated every facet of government into the military. In 1962 Daw Suu Kyi was fifteen years old and her mother, Daw Khin Kyi held the esteemed position as the Burmese ambassador to India. Ne Win seized power and the two flew to India. Considering Ne Win's reputation, this move very likely saved them both from imprisonment or worse. Daw Suu Kyi wouldn't return to live in Burma for twenty-six years.

In those twenty-six years, Daw Suu Kyi studied, first in India and then England. It was in Oxford that she met a brilliant intellectual, Michael Aris—the man who fell instantly and madly in love with her and who eventually, would be the husband and father of her children.

While Daw Suu Kyi was studying politics, specifically the doctrines of nonviolence and Mahatma Gandhi, General Ne Win flew to China and became enamored with Chairman Mao. He closed Burma off from the rest of the world, took complete control of all of its institutions, and plunged the country into ruin. Ironically, the armed conflicts with the ethnic groups only increased in those years. His military apparatus grew as his opposition grew—both in part fueled by the international market for heroin. When later confronted with Ne Win's legacy, Daw Suu Kyi's formative years and the influence of Gandhi are clear. *"In building up the NLD our chief concern was to establish a close, mutually beneficial relationship with the general public. We listened to the voice of the people, that our policies might be in harmony with their legitimate needs and aspirations. We discussed with them the problems of our country and explained why, inspite of its inevitable flaws, we considered democracy to be better than other political systems. Most important of all, we sought to make them understand why we believed that political change was best achieved through non-violent means."* (Aung San Suu Kyi, *Letters From Burma* p. 121)

Daw Suu Kyi worked for the United Nations in New York City, and then as an advisor to the government of Bhutan after marrying Michael Aris. Their courtship had been a long one—and the letters that they exchanged foreshadowed the events to come. *"I am beset by fears that circumstances and national considerations might tear us apart"* she writes, *"just as we are so happy in each other that the separation would be a torment. And yet such fears are futile and inconsequential if we love and cherish each other as much as we can while we can. I am sure love and compassion will triumph in the end."* (Barbara Victor, *The Lady* p.51)

She and Michael moved to England where she had two children and studied English Literature. In 1985, she flew to Kyoto where she had accepted a fellowship at Kyoto University—and she began researching her father's life and his involvement with the Japanese military during World War II.

1988 was witness to a strange concurrence of events. General Ne Win changed the entire currency from a "10" based system to a "9" based system. The whole of Burma lost their life savings in one evening. Demonstrations began filling the streets and a national strike was declared. By July, the unrest could not be ignored any more. In a strange turn of events, General Ne Win announced his retirement. Another military man, Sein Lwin was appointed to the ruling chair, and he had a very different idea. He had all demonstrators shot. In one infamous day, his soldiers opened fire on a crowd of unarmed, peaceful protesters, killing 3,000 people. The day—August 8th, 1988 lives on as a symbol of democracy. Sein Lwin was immediately removed from office and replaced with another Ne Win Loyalist.

Meanwhile, Daw Suu Kyi had quietly returned to Burma to take care of her dying mother. She had followed the events from the house on the Lake tending to her mother. Rumors had spread that the Great General Aung San's daughter had returned to Burma. Ex-general Tin U and other democratic activist leaders approached her, and shortly after the massacre she published a letter to the Burmese Government, proposing the establishment of a non-military council to organize democratic elections in the country. The rumors had been confirmed—the general's daughter was back in Rangoon and there was hope for democracy.

Just weeks later, in September, Aung San Suu Kyi stood up and addressed a crowd estimated at half a million people. "Her message was simple: nonviolence, human rights, and democracy," writes Barbara Victor. (78) After the event, she returned to the house to take care of her mother. The military government reacted violently and swiftly in a series of moves that plainly showed the world that they had little intention of letting Burma become a democracy. Soldiers began shooting protestors by the hundreds in the days that followed. The SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) was founded. The country's name was changed from Burma to Myanmar. The military government proceeded to ban all public political gatherings. Nonetheless, in line with the new multiparty regulations, Aung San Suu Kyi, along with General U Tin U and Colonel U Kyi Maung, founded the National League for Democracy party. The house on University Avenue, already transformed into Daw Khin Kyi's private hospital, became the center for the pro-democracy movement." (Victor 86)

Daw Suu Kyi fought back. She denounced Ne Win by name and gave rallying speeches to crowds of Burmese protestors. She railed against the SLORC, arguing openly that the SLORC should answer to the people. In one incident which quickly became legend, she stared down six soldiers who had been issued a countdown to shoot her and the crowd that she had been addressing. As the countdown had begun, she walked away—so that the soldiers would shoot her, and only her. The officer who had been counting down stopped, not willing to create a martyr.

As the elections drew nearer, the army arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of NLD members. Daw Khin Kyi, Daw Suu Kyi's mother, died. Although the funeral of this National Symbol was not marked by violence, immediately afterwards many of the dignitaries who had attended were immediately arrested and sent to prison for many years. (Without trial). A special day was to be commemorated: Martyr's day. "Daw Suu Kyi delivered a speech in which she dared categorically to brand the SLORC liars, charging them with having no intention of ever transferring power to a civilian government, regardless of the outcome of the elections. Exacerbating an already volatile situation, she also announced her intention to lead her own demonstration to pay tribute to her father and his fallen colleagues." (Victor 81)

A spokesperson for the SLORC justifies what happened next with the following: "Had we ever formally charged Aung San Suu Kyi, it would have been with treason, which automatically carries the death penalty." (Victor 95) The trucks and the soldiers blockaded the house. They went inside and rifled through its contents. The sentries were posted. Daw Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest—a detention that would last until today—interrupted only once after the first six years when

she was released. The soldiers who guarded her had to be changed often—she talked to them through the gates and too often, they grew to like her and sympathize with her.

With elections, Daw Suu Kyi was announced to be ineligible to hold public office because of her detainment. Nevertheless the NLD won 80% of the electorate. The SLORC back-pedaled and announced that the elections hadn't been to elect leaders of government, but to appoint committee members for the discussion of the drafting of a new constitution. In other words, the SLORC ignored the results of the election and it was business as usual in Burma.

The SLORC to this day maintains that Daw Suu Kyi is free to leave Burma—but if she leaves, she is never to come back. The SLORC would love nothing more for her to leave. She is the only political prisoner out of the many thousands who has garnered national attention. If she left, sadly and truly, she would be an exiled speaker of national interest, but would lose a measure of gravitas—of influence. She would be a celebrated speaker on the international circuit—one more frustrated voice on the outside, looking in.

This is the heart of the dilemma. From the outside looking in, such a choice, if in fact the SLORC was being honest in its proposition, would be an easy decision. The cold observer could very easily tell her to leave—what difference would it make? *"This is the eighth winter that I have not been able to get into bed at night without thinking of prisoners of conscience and other inmates of jails all over Burma. As I lie on a good mattress under a mosquito net, warm in my cocoon of blankets, I cannot help but remember that many of my political colleagues are lying in bleak cells on thin mats through which seeps the peculiarly unpleasant chill of a concrete floor"* (Daw Suu Kyi, Letters From Burma, p. 49)

Among the Burmese, DawSuu Kyi is admired less as a political figure than as a much-loved heroine who allows them to forget the harsh realities of life under the SLORC - the Lady admired as a symbol of their dreams and aspirations. (Victor 38) Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, Daw Suu Kyi writes, has published a number of books about Burma, and holds meetings with the NLD—The National League for Democracy. A sad pattern has emerged where the members of the NLD disappear in the middle of the night, often times dying behind the walls of Insein Prison. But her continued defiance has had its impact. While the international dialogue has been sparse, the scrutiny remains. Daw Suu Kyi has been released and imprisoned again time and again. For example, in 2000 she was placed again under house arrest, back to the house on University Avenue. She was released again in 2002—but then just over a year later, she was re-arrested after clashes between government-backed mobs and the NLD. On it goes, and the symbol lives on.

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Time Line

1945: Daw Auug San Suu Kyi born

1947: Father, Aung San, assassinated

1948: Burma becomes independent

1950's: Democracy marked by factional disputes

1960: Goes to India with mother

1962: Ne Win seizes power.

1964-67: Studies at Oxford University.

1972: Marries Michael Aris, student of Tibetan civilization.

1973: Birth first son in England. Michael teaches at Oxford University.

1988: Ne Win announces retirement. Sein Lwin replaces him. Aung San Suu Kyi returns to Burma. National League for Democracy is born; Suu Kyi is general secretary.

1989: Suu Kyi faces down soldiers. Aung San Suu Kyi wins 80% of the electorate. Is placed under first house arrest.

1990: NLD wins landslide victory in general elections despite Suu Kyi's detention. Military junta refuses to recognize results of election.

1991: Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Did not attend award ceremony. Is represented in Norway by her sons and husband.

1999: Husband dies of prostate cancer in London. Burmese authorities did not allow him to visit Suu Kyi one last time.

2000: Placed again under house arrest.

2002: Released in 2002

2003: Re-arrested.

2005: Continued extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention.