



OH BURMA

Volume I
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OH BURMA, VOLUME I

a country abandoned - Myanmar or Burma

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INTRODUCTION: THE DYNAMICS OF A POPULAR UPRISING

It was early 1988 when the first reports came in that students had begun to protest against the Military Government of Burma physically and with conviction. This happens in many countries of course so these reports did not receive much attention until something happened that led to a string of events spinning out of control. The Bangkok Post and the Nation in rapid succession were documenting on what was happening day by day and the then existing Far Eastern Economic Review carried retrospective articles on the Ne Win regime, how it had come into existence and how it, with a iron hand, had been able to remain in the saddle since 1962, but in obscurity. Little was known about how the country was run, but what was known more or less was that the people were restricted. Burma in fact was practically sealed off from the world. Tourists could go in for a week and not a day more. Burmese were restricted to travel and if for a purpose they could, were kept under surveillance. After my first visit to Burma and learning about the magnificent culture of both past and present and the suffering of the people under a totalitarian military regime, there was little interest for articles; to publish the content was hard to check for validity. The efforts I put in not only to write stories on the human rights abuses, but to show the international neglect, proved to be futile. Only the photography on culture found its way into the magazines dealing with far flung places and alien culture. So, when Jerry and I were in Thailand trying to cover some interesting subjects regarding forestry and ecology we were taken by surprise when floods in the south of Thailand wiped out many houses and people, a devastating event that led to a total ban on logging. The other surprise was when while in Thailand the news broke that the students of Burma had voiced out protest against the Ne Win regime but were brutally gunned down. This news was spread over the English dailies of Thailand like the Bangkok Post in headlines like:

‘Student rise against Ne Win, military opened fire, hundreds

shot dead’.

This bloody backlash of a repressive regime finally reached the international community as something which cannot be avoided any longer and many journalists tried to get into Burma, but were denied access. So, it was embassy personnel and other foreigners present at the time, traders, who began to disseminate news. Soon after the bloodshed the shockwave of anger traveled through the Burmese population and hundreds of thousands rose to the occasion. They demonstrated openly now, they took to the streets and all sectors of society began to participate, from complacent Buddhist monks to civilians and even, when the demonstrations gained momentum, even military personnel joined in. Soon it looked like the demise of the Ne Win regime was at hand. In the midst of the head spinning turmoil prominent Burmese risked their lives by speaking out loud and clear that change in the Burmese society was imminent. Studying the reports in the newspapers of those days, 1988, the winds of change one could feel would clear the way for a new and democratic Burma. Or so it seemed.

A country abandoned Prelude Burma a democratic country abandoned and embraced.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRACY FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Burma, now called Myanmar by the military regime which does not want to abide by the will of the people after the democratic election it lost in 1990, has been living with a military regime since 1962. Ne Win, an army general, staged a coup d'état and since then the people of Burma live under a harsh rule. The first time I came to Burma was before the people's resurrection of 1988. That time visitors, tourist, could only get a non extendable visa valid for just one week. Because of this the country it was practically locked off from the outside world, also because whenever I was in Thailand, I felt being pulled towards that land that only allowed visitors to visit certain places; places like the capital still called Rangoon then, but also Mandalay up north, Taunggi near the lake and the splendid town of Bagan where 5.000 temples bore witness to a glorious Burmese Buddhist past. So, when I did have the time to visit I did not hesitate and went over to the Burmese Embassy on Sathorn Road in Bangkok and bought myself a visa. I had heard and read much about it by then that I though I knew it well already. Little did I know what was about to transpire.

First of all: to get a visa was a time stopper. It took three days, 4 photographs and quite a bit of money. Second: form to be filled in to state what would be brought in and what would be taken out: third a ticket had to be produced with the specific dates on it for arrival and departure. The feelings beforehand however could hardly match what was about to unfold, but first an interesting interlude for I was told that only one bottle of liquor and a carton of ten packets of cigarettes could be brought in. Now here is the catch which brought me to state of turmoil over the senseless bureaucracy I was to expect. Torn between economizing on money and feeling for the people who were to buy these things I followed the instructions of the people who had been to Burma recently namely:

“You must buy a bottle of Johnny Walker and only Johnny

Walker and a tray of triple five 555 English cigarettes. That way you will get the unofficial money that will give you ten times the amount you spent on it.”

I could not believe it so I asked:

“Why would people want to pay that much for something?”

“Simple,” was the answer, “the country is locked off, many things are smuggled in, you cannot do that, but you may bring these two items. There will be many outside the airport waiting for you and they happily pay in kyats which will lead you to an almost free stay in the country. **DO NOT CHANGE ANY MONEY IN A PUBLIC BANK!!!!**”

“So one could go around for practically nothing, living of the blood sweat and tears of the people there?” I asked in disgust.

“Ha,” came the answer rapidly, would you rather support an oppressive regime, one that uses all that tourist money to prop up their army? If you really want to see Burma then you will not go to the hotels where you can only pay in dollars for then you will hardly meet anyone. Go to the pension houses which are not required to take money in greenbacks, but in kyats, the Burmese currency.”

“So, I will contribute better to the ordinary people when I do things unofficially?” I asked to confirm if I really had understood it well.

“Exactly,” was the dry answer.

Knowing that I would be torn still I arranged a ticket and headed for the embassy.

Landing in Burma is an event. Once alighted from of the plane of Burma Airways I was escorted to the terminal by soldiers of the Burmese Army. First on payment of a few dollars, I got myself a form I was to keep with me at all times on this form all official transactions would have to be recorded. One was required to officially change \$100.- too. That beginning amount was stamped on the form and all expenses from then one would be followed up. Should the balance be over and above what had been changed then the difference had to be changed again when leaving the country.

When the expenditure was not matching the required amount then the leftover kyats could be changed back. So, even if only the equivalent of 50 dollars was spent there one could get the Burmese currency changed back at the official rate up to the official money spent as balance. Yes it was complicated but when one would be prudent one could live on it the entire week, hotels included for about 50 dollars or less. And the first unofficial money would be from the cigarettes and whiskey.

“That money can take you all the way to Mandalay, young man,” said an old Englishman to me in the arrival hall when we were getting registered as official tourists.

“Do you know Mamyo? Have you heard of it?” he asked.

“Never heard of it,” I admitted.

“Well it is a hill station, or rather was. I served in the British Army and would love to see Candagraig again. I hear they have transferred this officer’s retreat north of Mandalay into a lovely hotel. With that Johnny Walker and the triple 555 you can get there. You only need to pay for the train ride officially.”

“Interesting,” I answered. Can anyone go there? I heard you cannot go further up than Mandalay.”

“Right,” he smiled. That is as far as you can go. Even if you could go further up say to Kachin land it would be impossible for you to return in just one week. So, either way, it would be impossible. You need at least two or three weeks.”

“So you would advise me to go and see Mamyo?”

“Oh yes, but do Mandalay and the other places first please. I do not think you can see them all in the just the one week you have. It is my third time now. Come with me to the Grand, which is an old English hotel as well. You will sense it. And, you can pay in kyats, funny don’t you think?”

“I do not know if it is funny. It is my first time here.”

“You will see!” he said with strong conviction and with a laugh that made him slap himself on the knees. Then he opened his wallet to show some of the notes I was to become familiar with.

“Here is one of 45 kyats and here another with the value of 90. Have you ever seen anything like it?” he asked. Truly amazed by these notes with their peculiar values we talked about why on earth the Burmese authorities would do such thing, issuing notes with quite irregular values and difficult to count with.

“Perhaps it shows their stubbornness, stubborn in setting their own tune, deviating from the international community,” I said looking at the odd figures on the notes, “it is difficult counting with these figures. I wonder why would they make it more difficult for the ordinary people!”

“Yeah,” he reacted, “I know the Burmans as amicable people, but this is crazy. What has come over the military junta is beyond me!”

Chapter one Rangoon the capital

“Alright,” I said to the Englishman when we were finished being scrutinized by immigration and customs. Though the men in uniform acted like they were studying our passport and showed me a face like was an enemy of the highest order, customs took a lot more time than immigration.

“I could do with a man of experience. The Grand sounds wonderful.” I answered.

“Shall we share a taxi; it will be cheaper for us,” he asked, “the taxi driver will try and get your goodies for a low price, like his taxi fare, but we will go to town where many are waiting for us. We will find out the going rate for both our goodies.” he smiled.

I followed him outside and we were immediately besieged by drivers who wanted our business and were quoting prices. The Englishman pointed to their vintage cars parked in a row. These cars were at least 30 years old but were in good order, old American cars. The Englishman negotiated his way to an acceptable fare and we got in. The driver, all smiles, began to inquire about what the Englishman persistently called ‘goodies’ but in a manner like we were conspiring.

“This he does,” the Englishman explained, “because he wants to make us think it is illegal what we do, but it is not. If we think it

is illegal we will get less for it of course.” And he told the man that we had already promised someone else, so it was futile to pursue this point. The driver, clearly not amused, stepped on the accelerator to make the journey a swift one. Judging his face it seemed he had bad luck. At least that is what he said when we arrived in the center of Rangoon near the one of the arms of the Irrawaddy River. Too many things were happening and I was feasting my eyes on the scenery and people which were completely alien to me. Already I was flabbergasted by the vehicles passing by when we approach; completely outdated vehicles like trucks and buses I remembered from the sixties but were running smoothly on roads and streets. We passed statesmanlike buildings that once must have been the pride of the nation but were now in decay or decaying. The Englishman saw me watching and said:

“Those are the old British buildings, from colonial times you know.”

And then changing the subject he asked:

“Have you heard of the SchweDaGon Pagoda?”

“I have read about it, yes,” I replied.

“Go and see it, do not forget that, it is important. Also go and see the temple in the heart of Rangoon. It has seven entrances. You will learn about Burma, you will catch the feeling, you will find it fascinating. Do it! I will leave tomorrow by night train. You have to plan a route too. Mind you, you have just one week.”

“Good advice,” I said and thanked him.

We entered the Grand together, really a beautiful hotel, but also a building in disrepair. The Englishmen showed me the ball room hall after checking in, which was now used as a restaurant.

“Beware of the women!” the Englishman warned, “during the evening there will be some in the lobby or even outside. They are nice and do not cost much, you can hire them too through the reception desk. Some have a room here, the classy ones of course. I just say beware, for you do not know the men who are behind them. I would not do it if I were you but have it your way.”

The lobby breathed the atmosphere of colonial times. One could almost feel it. Coupled with the dilapidating building and the feel of the city and especially the cars, it felt like time had stood still here in Rangoon. It felt intrigued, but had no time to let that work in on me. We checked in and I was surprised that this hotel had spare rooms and considering what we were paying in kyats it was deadly cheap. The Englishman just smiled and behaved like a real Englishman, almost colonial in that respect as well.

“I believe you have seen the breakfast room,” said the receptionist who took in the slips of paper we filled in showing particulars like passport and name “so you can have your breakfast there up to ten sharp. It is included gentlemen,” he said in conclusion and handed us the keys. We walked up the stairs and while in front of one of the rooms and before the Englishman went into his room he said:

“I have to do few things but if you like we will get the ‘goodies’ out of the way right now, so you will have some cash. After that I will be gone. I need to secure my ticket and with Tourist Burma this is not an easy thing, so you better go and get acquainted with Rangoon.”

I went into a room which in style was beautifully old fashioned and it had windows overlooking the busy street. A large room it was and with a big bed. The Englishman knocked on the door and after I let him in he said:

“We will go now, it is only a few minutes from here and you can go around after that.

“It is just late morning and I could do with a discovery stroll,” I answered and took the ‘goodies’ with me. Outside we walked into a side street which led to another street of stone houses, of olden English times too, where lots of people were outside. Not surprising perhaps because it was a hot, like it was practically very day; after all this was the tropics, but the houses were not. As soon as we entered the street men followed us and were requesting us to sell, they openly quoted prices and the more we walked further into the street the higher were the prices we heard. And, indeed they