

NO EASY ROAD



A BURMESE POLITICAL
PRISONER'S STORY
BY PAUL PICKREM

NO EASY ROAD: A BURMESE
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The Life of Thiha Yarzar

by Paul Pickrem

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Whenever I see unfortunate beings
Oppressed by evil and violent suffering,
May I cherish them as if I had found
A rare and precious treasure.

The Buddha

There is no easy road to freedom anywhere,
and many of us will have to pass through
the valley of the shadow of death again
and again before we reach the mountaintop
of our desires.

Nelson Mandela

PREFACE

August 2010

Thiha Yarzar and I have been close and have worked together in the struggle for freedom in Burma since 1987, when we were both students. We fought against the Burmese Socialist Government of Ne Win, which was very powerful at that time. Thousands of university students, including Thiha and me, started to protest against the government's actions. We knew only a little about politics, but we knew very well that it was unjust when the government announced the demonetization of large banknotes of Burmese currency in 1987. It was robbery of the people by the government.

From that time until now, every time we breathe in and out, we know ourselves to be revolutionaries who fight for justice, peace, and human rights in our motherland. The government crushed our demonstrations in 1987 and we were separated from each other when I fled to the countryside and Thiha was arrested and imprisoned.

At the beginning of the uprisings in 1988, we met again and helped organize new protests together. We were arrested while staging a students' boycott at Rangoon University. We were sent to Insein Prison, where we were interrogated and tortured. We promised each other we would continue to struggle to remove the Burmese dictatorship from power when we are released from prison.

We didn't see each other again for almost 18 years.

When I was in prison again serving a five-year sentence for pro-democracy work with the student underground movement, I was broken-hearted to learn Thiha had received the death sentence. I thought we would never see each other again.

Fortunately, I heard the good news that he was released from prison on 23 September 2008. At that time I was working with Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) as an undercover journalist. I was hiding and moving from one place to another in Rangoon because I feared being arrested because of the “Burma VJ” documentary, which other undercover journalists and I helped to make in 2007 about the Saffron Revolution.

Finally, Thiha and I met again in October 2008, while we both were hiding from the military regime. We decided to flee the country. In early December 2008, we secretly left Rangoon pretending to be businessmen going to Thailand.

Today, Thiha and I live in Mae Sot, Thailand. It is called by some “Little Burma” or “The City of Exiles”. We feel we are in another prison, because it is very difficult to leave Mae Sot, and we are under constant scrutiny by the Thai police and in danger from Burmese informants. We both hope to find a way to start a new life by resettling in a third country.

My comrade, Thiha, is a kind man. Innocent in many ways, he has the lion’s heart of a revolutionary and is still always thinking and planning about how to fight for justice, democracy, and peace in Burma, despite the high price he has already paid as a political prisoner.

Paul Pickrem is the right person to write about Thiha because he has taken so much time to understand the lives and struggles of ex-political prisoners and revolutionaries living on the borders with Burma.

This book is not only about Thiha, but about all political prisoners and their struggles on the long road to freedom.

Aye Min Soe (Andrew)

‘88 Generation Ex-Political Prisoner
Co-founder of Burma VJ Network,
Democratic Voice of Burma

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother,
Joan Dupree, who taught me by example
to care when others are suffering,
and to my children, Garrett and Lindsay.

It is also dedicated to the Burmese activists who
have suffered, and those who are still suffering
for the cause of freedom.

Paul Pickrem

INTRODUCTION

Nelson Mandela, a man who knows, has said: “There is no easy road to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires.”

This is the story of the hard road to freedom taken by Thiha Yarzar, the son of a former Burmese Army Colonel turned freedom fighter, who was sentenced to death by his own government for treason at the age of 25 .

During May and June of 2009, less than a year after he was released from almost 18 years of hard time in five Burmese prisons, Thiha and I met numerous times in Mae Sot, Thailand, also known as ‘The City of Exiles’.

We sat together for a series of interviews at ‘Aiya’, the restaurant owned by respected Burmese activist and fellow All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) soldier, Ko Myat Thu, and his wife A, a Thai human rights activist, who has also worked for the cause of freedom in Burma for many years. We also had countless informal discussions over many months.

When I met him a few months before we began the interviews, Thiha told me he wanted desperately to tell his story, but he didn’t know how.

I sensed he needed to gather his memories of those brutal years, and tell people what his decision to fight for human rights and democracy in Burma cost him and his family. And, I sensed it was a story which needed to be told because so many people across the world have never had to struggle in their lifetime for these ideals.

I had been in Mae Sot for several months at this time, and had learned this difficult road to freedom has been travelled for many years, and is being walked today, by countless other Burmese activists and political prisoners.

The words of the Buddha came alive to me in Mae Sot. I had begun to cherish these people who have been, and are being, brutally oppressed by evil and violent suffering. I recognized that they had become my rare and precious treasure.

That's because knowing some of them and their stories has changed my life.

I began to see that I am witnessing the self-devouring of humanity in Burma and on its borders. It breaks my heart, and has changed my view of humanity and the world to know that countless people can make a heroic commitment to struggle for decades for human rights and freedom against one of the most brutal regimes on the planet, passing again and again through the valley of the shadow of death, while most of mankind knows little or nothing of this courageous struggle.

I believe what is happening in Burma and the border area puts everyone everywhere in danger. One reason for this assertion is that many countries are rushing to do business with the military junta as it pushes the people off the land, creating an appalling refugee emergency. The military is selling off the rich natural resources of the country, making it profitable for them and for everyone to perpetuate the oppression.

When people ask me why I stay here, I say it is because what is happening here can, and may very well, happen anywhere.

I believe the international community's tepid response to the brutality of the junta sends a message to oppressive regimes everywhere that making war against their citizens for decades will be tolerated, especially if the oppressor shares the spoils.

To me, this is especially dangerous during this time when so many governments are taking an adversarial role against their people.

To me, we are all vulnerable as long as this affront to human dignity is allowed to continue.

My commitment to Thiha and to you was simply to help him tell his story. I am not an academic or an expert on Burmese history or politics, although I respect those who are. I hope I have resisted the temptation to make this volume larger than it should be.

I am simply a storyteller.

I am very grateful to Myat Thu for sitting with Thiha and me through every interview to translate for Thiha when he had to express his ideas in Burmese because it was too difficult in English.

As well, I wish to acknowledge and thank Garrett Kostin and Andrea Valentin for their significant contributions to the timeline included in this book, which is meant to put Thiha's life in context with the modern history of Burma.

Garrett also worked tirelessly as a proofreader and lent his talents as a graphic artist to design the book's cover, as well as compiling the lists of recommended books and websites.

I want to end by expressing my gratitude to the millions of citizens of Burma, from so many ethnic groups, who teach us how to bravely struggle against great odds for freedom.

You all have become my rare and precious treasure because you inspire me.

CHAPTER ONE

STANDING WITH THE LADY

Some protestors had tears in their eyes
as they chanted their mantras
“Free Aung San Suu Kyi!” and “Free Burma!”
loudly enough to be heard in Rangoon.

Late in the morning on May 27, 2009, a shouting throng raised its voice at the gate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees compound in Mae Sot, Thailand.

It was a determined army of about 100 protestors. Some were wearing red headbands with the yellow fighting peacock, symbolic of Burmese student activists in action, and almost all were wearing T-shirts and carrying placards emblazoned with the face of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

She is the revered, democratically-elected, and legitimate leader of Burma, who has never been allowed to take office and serve her people in government.

The crowd filled the roadway leading to the building, located just minutes from the border with Burma. At the same time, Suu Kyi was being tried for subversion by the ruling military junta in a closed courtroom in Rangoon.

The monks, student refugees, and former political prisoners passionately demanded her freedom and the freedom of all political prisoners in Burma, on the same day her most recent term of house arrest was due to expire under Burmese law. It was also the nineteenth anniversary of her party's landslide election victory, which the country's military regime has ignored.

Some had tears in their eyes as they chanted their mantras "Free Aung San Suu Kyi!" and "Free Burma!" loudly enough to be heard in Rangoon.

As one man stepped to the front of the crowd to address the assembled media, his eyes were lit by the flames of the fire in his belly and his clenched fist punched the sky.

Like many of the demonstrators, he knew from experience the life-choking depths of Insein Prison, where the Nobel Peace Prize-winning icon of the peaceful struggle for democracy in Burma and the world was being held.

He had been imprisoned and tortured there himself, more than once.

In fact, 43-year old Thiha Yarzar, the son of a former Burmese Army Colonel, had served almost eighteen years in five prisons across Burma for pro-democracy activity as a student leader, and for armed struggle as a freedom fighter.

CHAPTER TWO

DREAMING THE PRISONER'S DREAM

‘Prisoners often dream
about being released.
But we always are returned to prison
before waking up.’

Thiha's unexpected release from Mai Sat Prison, Shan State, near the Thai/Burma border, on September 23, 2008 was a turning point that made his leading of the protest in Mae Sot possible.

"It was a Tuesday," he said during one of our first interviews. "Prison officials woke me up at 4 a.m., because they had learned I was going to be released that day. I told them, 'Hey, don't tease me!', and I went back to sleep."

However, at 7 a.m. the prison's Chief Jailer woke him again and insisted he take a shower and change his clothes. Military Intelligence officials and Special Branch Police were waiting to speak with him.

Other prisoners provided him with new pants and a shirt, because he had no other clothes to change into.

"It was like a dream. It was unbelievable," he said of those first moments of realization that he was really going to be released.

"Prisoners often dream about being released. But we always are returned to prison before waking up. I had to convince myself I was not dreaming that same old dream."

Thiha Yarzar, the political prisoner, had dreamed that dream countless times in the seventeen years, six months and sixteen days leading up to that morning.

The death sentence he had received for High Treason in 1991 had been reduced to twenty years in 1993, when the government reduced all the death sentences in the country in an effort to improve their public image after the 1990 election upset by the National League for Democracy, the party led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

"I began to hope for release because Burmese politics seemed to

be changing,” he said looking back. “I became more politically active in prison, smuggling out information about the treatment of prisoners.”

However, the landslide victory by the pro-democracy party would never result in the massive change in Burmese politics that it should have. The military regime refused to allow a transition to power for the NLD that would have seen Aung Saan Suu Kyi lead the government, which is seen by many as her birthright. Instead she and most of her fellow NLD leaders were arrested. Since 1989 she has been made to serve three terms of house arrest, totaling nearly fifteen years.

When Thiha Yarzar’s death sentence was further reduced to ten years in 1997, prison officials told him he would be released by the end of 1998, because a ten-year sentence could be shortened to seven years under Burmese law. But, two days later, that hope was crushed when his sentence was changed back to twenty years. He was being carried along helplessly on the roller coaster of Burmese law, as interpreted by the military junta.

On the day of his release, in 2008, he was told the final two-and-a-half years would be rescinded, as long as he was not charged with any further crimes against the state.

“I thought I would die in prison,” he said, “or I would be over 50, if released at all, because they had changed my sentence so many times.”

CHAPTER THREE

SENTENCED TO DIE

The 25 year-old convicted terrorist
was driven by car to Insein Prison.
He remembered his thoughts about
how he would be executed during the drive.

Thiha's death sentence was handed down on March 7, 1991, after a one-day trial in a military court. He appeared before a panel of three military colonels, all in full-dress uniform. He stood before them in the filthy clothes he had been arrested in almost three months earlier.

There was no lawyer present to speak in his defense. He hadn't spoken to a lawyer since being arrested on January 17.

The prosecutor read the charges against him.

He was charged with undermining the country's peace and stability, and was convicted of High Treason.

"It was my country, but not my government," he said of the trial. "There was no legitimacy."

He decided that same day not to appeal the sentence.

"They were the terrorists, not I. I decided I would not give in and kneel before them. It was useless. I would be a laughing stock. I will maintain my dignity."

The 25 year-old convicted terrorist was driven by car to Insein Prison. He remembered his thoughts about how he would be executed during the drive.

"How would they kill me? Hanging possibly... But I'd rather be shot in the head. There have been many revolutionaries who have been executed by tyrants and dictators, who died calmly and with dignity. I'll do the same. Maybe it's my turn. I will follow them."

He said he thought about singing a revolutionary song at his execution.

"I had my relief. I was ready to die," he said. "I never thought about it again."

His arrival at Insein, in March of that year, was actually his third time being imprisoned there.

In September 1987, he was arrested for organizing student protests against the government's economic policies. As a 21 year-old, he and sixteen other student organizers had openly criticized the government for not consulting parliament before devaluing the country's currency.

"I was detained under provisions in the law which allowed me to be detained, but not charged," he said.

For almost five months he was held in the clothes he was arrested in. He described how he had to tear strips off his pants and shirt to clean his body after a bowel movement.

He was fed only rice and bean soup, with water to drink. He received a small piece of meat once a week.

The prisoners were kept in separate cells. He had no contact with his family or the other students. However, his mother arranged for food and cigarettes to be smuggled in to him by a Special Branch Police Officer.

Ominously, he was assigned to a cell on Death Row.

"I didn't know at that time I would actually be sentenced to death in 1991," he said.

It was also during his initial incarceration in Insein Prison that he first experienced the brutal interrogation methods Military Intelligence officers used on political prisoners.

He said he was beaten frequently in the first two months, during interrogations that sometimes lasted for days.

"They kicked me and hit me with their fists in the back, and slapped me in the face. Sometimes I was standing and sometimes seated on the floor. My hands were handcuffed behind me and my head covered with a hood."

He would speak more than once during our interviews about experiencing both white hot anger and agonizing terror while being tortured.

"It was like hell," he said. "I was very angry. But, I was scared at

the same time. I tried not to cry. I had to swallow the anger. I realized I couldn't do anything in prison. But my friends and I would do more when we were released. I knew they must release us sooner or later."

Even during this first imprisonment Thiha's resolve was beginning to grow.

"I knew we would have to do more to win democracy, to win freedom for my country."

He was released in February 1988, but not for long.

About one month later, two students were killed by police during a protest.

"It was the first student blood spilled during our time," he recalled.

In the next week over 200 students died at the hands of riot police and soldiers.

"All the universities were closed. But, we didn't go home. We continued to organize protests. For the first time we shouted the word 'democracy.' 'Down with the one-party system. Bring democracy!'"

On March 17, 1988 he was arrested with 140 other students at a campus residence.

"They beat me and all the students with clubs while they put us in the police vehicles. "

Their destination, once again, was Insein Prison.

"I was the only student who had been arrested and been held there before. For all the others it was their first time."

The jailers knew him from his last stay. He became a leader because of his previous experience.

But that also made him a target, as Military Intelligence officers brutally interrogated the students to get information about the leaders of the pro-democracy movement.

He said five students at a time were hung upside down with hoods over their heads for two-hour periods, three days at a time, with no food and little sleep.

He was also kicked while tied between two chairs.

"I felt numb when they hit me. So far as I can remember that went

on for about a week. There were constant questions about the leaders of the movement.

“They were afraid of the students because the Burmese people believed in the students. They believed them and relied on them in Burma.”

History shows that students have played a major role in Burmese politics since the end of colonial rule.

“The people looked to the students for leadership.”

His interrogators also tried to use his father’s position as an army colonel to change his mind about democracy.

“They told me, ‘Your father is an officer. You have everything. If there is democracy, your life would be destroyed.’”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COLONEL'S SON

'We had everything as a colonel's family.
At the time in Rangoon,
Father was powerful.'

Thiha said his family did enjoy a good life because of his father's position in the Army and the community.

"We had everything as a colonel's family," he said. "At the time in Rangoon, Father was powerful."

Colonel Ba Tway taught his children to use their advantages to help others too.

Thiha brought two poor young friends home to his father and mother, who supported them through university.

"He taught me you have to use your money to help your friends and those suffering, especially the starving," he remembered.

"He was always smiling. He taught me how to treat people. Everyone liked him. Everyone would say, 'He's a very kind man. He lives very simply.' He was never arrogant," Thiha said respectfully.

"My father was a very kind man. He spoke softly to everyone. He never showed his anger."

But, there was one exception. The Colonel was only a social drinker, who didn't smoke or chew the traditional Burmese betel nut. And he did not like to see young people under eighteen smoking, to the point where he was known to take cigarettes from kids he caught smoking.

Thiha remembered, "He would say, 'I take it. Next time I catch you, I will beat you!'

"That's why I never smoked before Death Row."

Thiha's father made sure he learned other valuable life lessons as well. He loved reading, and took Thiha to the library and taught him to read.

“He taught me everything about the world. We had a big wall map, and starting about age six he would ask me, ‘Where is Poland?’ I would point with my finger.”

His father also made sure Thiha was taught the stories of the heroes of wars and history, like William Wallace and Joan of Arc, from a book of children’s stories called *A Hero’s Tale*.

“Gradually, I became more interested in history and became a history major,” Thiha said.

Similar lessons about the heroes of history came from his mother, Daw Tin Lay Myint, a college professor, who made sure he learned about the “lady heroes”, as well as many other things.

She was a major influence in his life because the children spent so much time under her care while their father was away from the family on army business, sometimes as long as a year.

His father was a colonel, but Thiha described his mother as the family’s ‘drill sergeant’.

He remembered his father was quick to give whatever the children asked for, but his mother was not.

“For me, Father was an idealist. Mom was more practical. She taught me to think before I act and to make decisions. She said, ‘Do what you think is right. But don’t harm or jeopardize others by your actions.’”

He recalled her making a list of the “Five P’s” to put on the wall beside his bed in eighth grade.

Patience, politeness, perspective, persistence and pride in your country and your people were principles that he remembered and put into practice as an insurgent, and later as a political prisoner.

As a child, Thiha and his family moved frequently as his father moved up through the ranks of the Burmese Army after entering officer training at eighteen. They lived in Arakan and Shan States, as well as Taungoo Township, Pegu Division.

By age 15, he began to read books on socialism, dictatorship and democracy.

At that time the country was run by the Burma Socialist Program Party, under the control of General Ne Win. He remembers listening

carefully to the socialist leader's ideas on how to deal with the rampant poverty in Burma at the time.

However, he was also influenced by the foreign friends of his mother, who was educated at a missionary school in Rangoon.

Eventually, Thiha made a life-altering choice: Democracy was better for him, and for Burma.

"In the books, communism or socialism seemed very good," he said, looking back on his teen years.

"But we are not robots. We are flesh-and-blood humans with a brain and a heart. The freedom to think and freedom of expression became the most important things to me. Under democracy we would have the freedom to think, talk, write, criticize, and create. I decided our country would be better under democracy."

He remembers his father wanted Thiha and his brother, Tway Yarzar Kyaw, to join the army. But his mother wanted his father to resign from the military instead.

His father tried to do that at one point, but was threatened by his military colleagues, so he stayed.

He has vivid memories of one specific day when his father, then in his late forties, returned home from the military headquarters War Office.

"He came into the house silently. I saw he was upset with anger in his face. I said 'hello'. He just patted me on the head."

His father went into the bedroom and spoke to his mother.

Thiha heard him say, "I'm fed up with those guys. They don't know how to run a country or treat people. They just give orders and more orders. I said to my boss I want to quit the army. But my boss said, 'So do I. But it's not possible.'"

He remembered his mother said to his father, "Darling, I want you to be free. The time will come. We have to wait."

Eventually, Thiha became a history and philosophy student at Rangoon Arts and Science University, where he studied western philosophy and world religions.

After graduating in 1986 with a BA in history, he began a Master's degree in history.

But his story would unfold in an unexpected way as his passion for democracy came face-to-face with the political turmoil in Burma at the time caused by the military government's brutal treatment of the people.

The 141 students were finally released on July 7, 1988.

"That was a red-letter day for Burmese students," he said. "It was the anniversary of the day General Ne Win demolished the Student Union Building at Rangoon University in 1962."

More than half of the 141 student activists met ten days later at the Shwedagon Pagoda, in Bahan Township, a sacred landmark for Burmese Buddhists.

"We decided we would do everything for democracy. We students knew we had a responsibility. Burma was our motherland."

They agreed they would organize demonstrations all over Burma.

However, the nationwide anti-government uprisings that would take place less than a month later would put them on a collision course with the military government that would change the course of history for Burma, and for Thiha Yarzar, forever.

CHAPTER FIVE

STUDENT ACTIVIST TO ARMED REVOLUTIONARY

“Shooting could be heard all over the city.

“I said, ‘I need to be in the crowd
leading the people.’

They said, ‘Look at your right leg.’”

By August 8, 1988, Thiha Yarzar, the twenty-three year-old political activist and student leader had been appointed secretary of the National Student Union.

On that infamous day the people of Burma confronted the ruling military with a nationwide public demonstration.

Thiha led the people of Thingangyun Township, where he lived, on a seven-mile march to downtown Rangoon, carrying anti- government placards.

The national and international media hovered to see what would happen. What they witnessed that day is marked indelibly in the minds and hearts of the Burmese people and pro-democracy activists everywhere, forever.

Thiha recalled how the throngs of demonstrators walked into a wall of police and soldiers not long after they reached the area of the government offices near downtown.

“They blocked the road with military vehicles, including a tank,” he said.

When the people saw the soldiers they slowed down, until they eventually stopped. The soldiers jumped from their trucks and aimed their German-made automatic assault rifles at the demonstrators. Then, without any warning, they fired at the people from about 60 meters.

He remembered the crowd on the left of him was in chaos after about seven people fell to the ground, shot.

People started running toward the soldiers, some out of anger, but others out of fear.

They continued shooting, even as the media watched.

He said he had climbed on top of a car and was shouting through a bullhorn to the soldiers to stop shooting.

As the crowd panicked and started to run away from the soldiers in all directions, they stopped shooting and ran back to their vehicles.

They left the area when the people dispersed.

“Several friends pulled me off the car I had climbed on and pushed me into another vehicle, which drove away quickly.

“Shooting could be heard all over the city.

“I said, ‘I need to be in the crowd leading the people.’ They said, ‘Look at your right leg.’”

Only then did he realize he had been shot in the leg and was bleeding. He lifted his pant leg, during an interview, to show me a small scar on the right knee, where he said the bullet grazed the knee, but did not damage it.

He and his comrades returned to a student office in a secret location.

“Some of my friends cried. Lots of people had died,” he said.

“I told them beforehand I knew the soldiers would shoot. I told them we would have to continue the demonstrations until the government fell.”

Though it is estimated that thousands of demonstrators were shot by the military across Burma that day, the demonstrations continued to grow in size nationwide.

General Ne Win tried to calm the widespread public unrest through a series of transfers of power, eventually to a figurehead leader, Dr. Maung Maung.

However, forty days later, on September 18th, General Saw Maung took control of the country through a military coup, promising free and fair elections, and that the military would hand power back to the people through an elected party.

Thiha and his fellow students remained in hiding, however, because they didn't believe the new rulers.

"We didn't trust them," he said. "We knew that after the coup we would be arrested. We could guess what would happen."

Two days after the coup, Thiha met with his family to discuss what they should do.

He urged his parents to publicly disown him through a newspaper announcement. It was a plan used by many student activists to protect their family members from harassment and retaliation from the government.

They announced they would have no further contact with their son.

"It was my idea, to protect them if they were interrogated by the police. I knew my parents loved me. My mom did not want to do it. She said, 'Whatever happens, we will face it.' But, I said, 'No Mom. It is the best thing to do.' So, my mother cried.

"But, I said, 'Don't cry. I won't die. Nobody can kill me because I have lots of friends.'

"Father told me not to raise a gun. 'As a student you should be a politician,' he said.

"But, my mother spoke to my father, saying, 'He was right not to join the army when we asked him after the tenth grade. But now may be the time to use a gun, if he wants to. He needs to decide for himself, in his own time.'

"Father said, 'You do have to make your own choice. But you have to accept the consequences, whatever happens. You may die or you may live. But, whatever happens we are proud of you. So, you decide what you must do.'"

He said he didn't tell them at the time what he was going to do.

"But they knew that most students who fled would choose to become part of the armed struggle for democracy."

He hugged and kissed his father, mother, and sister.

His sister said she knew her husband, an army captain, would be dismissed because of Thiha's involvement in the protests. But she said she didn't care because her husband did not want to continue his army career.

"I felt very sad, because even though my parents and family supported me, I had to leave because my actions would put them in danger," he said. "They knew I would flee to Thailand."

Eventually, his father and brother-in-law would be dismissed from the military. His mother also lost her career as a teacher at a government college.

It would be almost two decades before he would see some of the people he hugged that day again, face-to-face.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE RUN

‘I wouldn’t join the army
as a high school student,
although I was the son of a colonel.
But now I was in uniform anyway.’

The next day, he and several fellow student activists crossed the Andaman Sea to Kawthung, on the southern tip of Burma. Two days later, they illegally crossed the border into Thailand at Ranong.

Thiha Yarzar had left Burma behind, for the first time in his life.

“I kept thinking about my parents and the people in Rangoon,” he said. “Some of my friends cried. I didn’t cry in front of them, but I was worried. The situation was very complicated and confusing.”

He stayed with a family member of former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant after arriving in Bangkok.

He recalls at that time that Bangkok and other cities and towns across Thailand became havens for Burmese student leaders, as Thai police “looked the other way.”

When the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) was founded in December 1988, Thiha joined and entered a two-month Officer Training Course and was trained by agents of foreign governments, including Israel, France, and the United States.

He also received two months of military training from the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB).

“This was a very strange turn of events,” he said. “I wouldn’t join the army as a high school student, although I was the son of a colonel. But now I was in uniform anyway.

“As a student, my hobby was singing and playing guitar. Now, I held an M16 and a pistol instead of a guitar.”

Soon he was chosen for a special mission by the DAB. He and two other former students would be sent into Burma to photograph mili-

tary targets in Rangoon, including a war office, military archives, and military headquarters.

The team crossed the border into Karen State in September, 1989.

“I was afraid of being caught, but I wanted to see my family too.”

After reentering Burma, Thiha had two secret meetings in 1990 with his mother at the pagoda in a township near to the family home.

He said he apologized to her because he knew she worried about him joining the armed struggle.

“I have become a rebel,” he told her.

She said, “It’s okay. I taught you to think before you act. So do what you think is right. I don’t want to see you with a gun. You have become a rebel, but I support you. It’s okay. We don’t have much time, Son. You do what you think is right. You know better than I do about the students and the student movement. I won’t criticize you. Keep fighting for what you believe in.”

He did.

For the next three weeks Thiha and the other students stayed inside the country, taking photographs, investigating troop movements, and carrying documents and letters to activist leaders.

He was deployed on two other missions in 1990, narrowly escaping capture both times.

In May, he lied his way out of being arrested with the wit and skills of a seasoned spy while he carried grenades hidden in a basket of betel nuts. He said a soldier at the checkpoint actually put his hand on the basket.

When other travelers in the vehicle got out and went to the office to show their identification and travel documents, Thiha remained behind. The officer asked him to show his identification, but Thiha told him his wife had already taken it to the office to show it.

When the woman returned to the vehicle, Thiha asked her in front of the guard, “Did you show your documents?”

When she said she did, the officer thought she was Thiha’s wife and had shown his documents too.

“During training they told us to make eye-contact and show no

fear,” he said. “I was afraid, but determined to complete the mission, no matter what the risk.

“I had planned well and was well-prepared and believed in my heart that I would be successful and not be arrested.”

He said the government had published his photo in a propaganda magazine, and an informer had told police he was inside the country, so he was a wanted man in Burma.

He knew from intelligence gathered from double agents that the government was searching for him, but so far hadn’t been able to catch him.

On that mission, he talked his way into the confidence of police at a checkpoint, who warned him not to proceed on the road he had been traveling. Three people were later captured in the same area and accused of a bombing they had nothing to do with.

They are still in prison today, he said.

In July, he was smuggling three single-use M72 rocket launchers in two bags of peanuts on the roof of a truck, and carrying a pistol, when a border guard noticed the bags looked strange, but didn’t bother to climb onto the roof to check the bags.

“I was prepared to shoot any soldiers or police who discovered them,” he recalled.

Later that night, he used an illegal taxi to transport the weapons because there was no regular taxi at the bus station.

He said he had to use extreme caution when he found out the talkative taxi driver was an off-duty policeman.

“When he asked what I did, I told him I was in the timber business.”

He left the weapons at a monastery in the care of a monk he knew. They were picked up the next day by his comrades.

While on one particular mission inside Burma, Thiha developed a relationship with the eldest daughter of a politician who hid him in his home.

The twenty-four year-old freedom fighter married nineteen year-old Htway Htway Oo on his birthday, December 25th, 1989.

On October 1, 1990, she gave birth to their daughter, who was given the name Tone Tone by the family.

However, the diverging roles of a soldier in the armed struggle for democracy and a father to Tone Tone would eventually create a tension inside Thiha that would cause him great turmoil for many years.

A series of events was about to unfold that set him on a path that led back to Insein Prison's Death Row, for what prosecutors hoped would be the last time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAUGHT

“I knew I would face horrible torture
and I might die. I could guess what they
might do to me. I was lucky I didn’t go mad
the last time they tortured me.”

When the baby was just over three months old, Thiha led a team of insurgents that attacked a military barracks next to a media outlet in Rangoon. Eleven government troops were killed in the attack, and two rockets destroyed the building.

The team was ordered to flee to Thailand. One of the three insurgents left first, while Thiha and the remaining man were to attempt to take a different route.

They had actually boarded a bus and taken their seats on January 10, but Thiha received a last-minute telephone call from his commanders directing him to remain behind to make contact with another freedom fighter in Mandalay.

The third man, who stayed on the bus, made it safely to Thailand.

Thiha didn't know when he got off that bus he would not leave Burma again for nearly two decades.

For the next week, he waited for more direction from his bosses who were setting up the meeting in Mandalay.

During that time he was contacted by his fifteen year-old brother-in-law, Myo Aung, who wanted a recommendation from Thiha so he too could join the insurgency, to fight in the jungle.

"I refused to recommend him because he was too young," he said.

"He was just in the tenth grade. I worried I would be blamed by his parents if something happened to him. He was the apple of their eye; the youngest child and everyone loved him."

But the determined boy left home with four other young men after

making other contacts in the underground.

He was given sensitive documents outlining insurgency activities in the area by a man Thiha knew. But Myo Aung was not aware the documents included a letter which contained Thiha's code name.

On the way to deliver those documents, the boys accidentally met another popular activist, who was under surveillance by Military Intelligence.

They were all arrested that evening at the main bus station in Rangoon.

The boys were tortured during interrogation, giving information about the insurgency and the name of the man who gave them the documents. That man, Bhamin Dhit, was arrested that night as well. He was brutally tortured and gave the authorities Thiha's real name and location.

On the afternoon of January 17, 1991, Thiha was hiding in a safe house in South Okka Lepa Township, in Rangoon, waiting for further orders.

He was very ill with malaria, which he contracted during one of his first missions inside Burma.

He recalled that a government official from the local neighborhood came to visit him around 3 p.m. Thiha sensed he was in grave danger, but was too sick to move quickly.

"He seemed to be afraid of me. He was pale.

"Suddenly, the house was raided by six army soldiers and the man scurried away quickly."

The house, which had been completely surrounded, was soon full of soldiers and plainclothes police.

"They warned me not to try to run, forcing me down to the floor. When they handcuffed my hands behind me, they lifted me to my feet.

"My head was pounding from the malaria and I was shivering. They teased me that I was shivering from fear. But I had a tempera-

ture of 102 degrees!”

They placed a black hood over his head and led him through the crowd gathered outside the house into a waiting car.

“I thought about how I could escape,” he said. “But I could do nothing.

“I knew I would face horrible torture and I might die. I could guess what they might do to me. I was lucky I didn’t go mad the last time they tortured me.”

Thiha Yarzar was twenty-five years old.

He arrived at an interrogation centre about 4:40 PM.

They placed him in a line of thirteen others waiting to be processed by police.

As he looked at the others ahead of him in that line, he recognized his fifteen year-old brother-in-law Myo Aung, as well as Bhamin Dhit, the colleague who had given away his location to police.

Bhamin Dhit was still bleeding from his head because of the torture. His face and eyes were bruised, his lip was swollen and his nose looked like it was broken.

“I understood very well. No one could stand up in that situation. I knew very well about the torture. I sympathized with him.”

Thiha said he saw a message in his colleague’s eyes.

“He apologized with his eyes, as if saying, ‘I couldn’t help it.’

“I slowly nodded to him and saw a very little smile.”

Eventually, the young boy and the other man who gave him the documents both received the death sentence.

Myo Aung was released in February 2009.

Bhamin Dhit is still in prison.

The three just looked at each other in the lineup.

Then, Thiha’s hands were freed momentarily while being processed. The police had laid out a number of weapons seized from in-

surgents on a table nearby. He thought for a moment about grabbing one of those weapons and trying to escape.

“But I worried about the safety of the boy and my colleague, and whether or not the other prisoners would help by joining the escape attempt.”

The moment was gone.

Thiha and his fellow freedom fighters had just entered hell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PAIN BEGINS

“I will protect myself—
my mind, soul and spirit—
because I can’t protect my body.”

After being photographed and videotaped, the prisoners were separated.

Thiha was blindfolded and taken to a room where he sat across the table from a man who asked him in a quiet voice to reveal the location of weapons they suspected him of hiding.

He told the man he had no weapons. He said he had left them behind in the forest in Karen State.

He denied knowing the location of any weapons three times.

“Okay, take him to the dark room,” the man said to other officers in the room after Thiha’s third denial.

He was removed to another room where he was examined by a doctor because of his high fever.

“He won’t die from malaria,” the doctor told the officers, although he had a temperature of 102 degrees.

He was handcuffed by the left arm to an iron ring about waist high on the wall in the dark room.

“They all left. I was alone, sitting on the floor. It was completely dark. I didn’t know if it was day or night,” he remembered.

“I was thinking about my three month-old daughter and Pa and Ma and my friends. But I knew it was no good to think. I had to face the torture.

“I will protect myself—my mind, soul and spirit—because I can’t protect my body.

“If I give in to fear I will lose my reputation. So, I will resist, or my daughter and my family will have to live knowing that their father and their son was a traitor, and they would suffer because others would be

arrested and tortured because of me.”

He said he was left in the dark room all that night and until the evening of the next day.

“They had not fed me since I arrived at the interrogation center. I was thirsty, so I kicked the door and asked for water.

“They led me blindfolded and handcuffed to a small toilet down the hall. They opened the door and pushed me in, saying, ‘You can drink all the water you want.’

“I had no choice but to drink the water in the toilet.

“From that day onward, for more than a month, whenever I was thirsty they took me to drink from the water in the toilet.”

Later that night he was interrogated.

He was tied by his hands to a steel pole in the standing position while blindfolded.

He recognized the voice questioning him as being the man with the gentle voice who interrogated him the first night.

For more than two hours he was questioned about the names of relatives. There were no questions about weapons this time.

“He patted me on the shoulder and said in Burmese, ‘Your future will not be very pleasant. You really do not have a future.’”

Thiha was taken back to the dark room for another sleepless night.

On the third day, he was finally given a small cup of rice soup. He was also allowed to drink more toilet water.

That night the torture began.

He was tied again to a pole in the standing position. His head was covered by a hood. Three or four Military Intelligence officers beat him for about an hour.

“At first they hit me with their fists on my face and in my ribs and stomach. When they untied my hands, I was bleeding from my nose and mouth.

“I was filled with tension from rage. They were cowards.

“Let me see you! I want to know who you are,’ I screamed at them. ‘It’s not a man’s work to beat somebody blindfolded.’

“They laughed at me.”

They untied his hands. But then he felt a stick strike him across the shins and he fell to the floor.

“They kicked me all over, in the chest, back, hips and stomach.”

He was then taken to another room where he was seated on a stool with his hands handcuffed behind him. He was asked more questions about the locations of weapons and his comrades.

He said he told them he didn’t know where any weapons were, and all his comrades were back in Thailand.

They kicked him off the stool on to the floor and beat him and kicked him all over his body, before taking him back to the dark room.

“I thought, ‘Do humans act like this?’ They treated me like an animal. But, they were the animals. Are they human?”

He said he was losing his sense of time in the dark room, but could hear guards talking to each other out in the hall and could deduce if it was night or day.

“It was like a nightmare. After being beaten, I was numb. I didn’t know where I was.

“My mind was numb too. I didn’t go unconscious. I felt like I was floating in the air.”

The next morning he was taken to another interrogation center in a different location. He was fed rice and a boiled egg, and given more toilet water.

That night they began to question him for about twenty-four hours, non-stop, with interrogators working in pairs for two hour shifts.

The questioning once again centered on weapons and comrades.

He was given no food and drank only toilet water.

“By that time the toilet water seemed very delicious because I needed water. I was in the same clothes I was arrested in. They were filthy. My whole body was sticky and sweaty and dirty.”

That night he learned about the torture method called “the cradle”.

He was suspended horizontally between two poles about waist-high. He was blindfolded and faced upward toward the ceiling.

One Military Intelligence officer stood beside his head, pouring water on his face and slapping him in the face. Meanwhile, two others took turns kicking him in the side and legs.

“I was choking. I could not breathe. And I swung back and forth between the two kicking me, like I was in a cradle.

“I wanted to scream, but I controlled myself. I did not want to show them my fear and my rage. I swallowed my voice. I did not want them to think of me as a coward.”

He recalls using Buddhist meditation techniques to control his mind and to deal with the pain.

“It lasted about two hours, but I didn’t give them any new information. I only told them things they already knew.”

He said he drew on his previous experiences being tortured.

“I knew how to answer them. But there wasn’t as much pain to deal with as the first two times. I knew if I gave them any information at all it would be worse for me because they would only torture me more. It’s better not to give them any information at all.”

He also benefited from the experience of other pro-democracy activists who had been tortured by the government before his time.

He said some of the politicians who were interrogated and tortured after the death of former UN Secretary-General U Thant in 1974 talked to him about it.

“They told me stories about how they were tortured when I was young. Now, it was my turn.”

During the torture, the guards sometimes talked about him most likely being given the death sentence.

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to get a death sentence and die in the end, or, maybe they will kill me here while they torture me.

‘I am going to die in the end anyway, so I’ll fight and die with dignity now. I will not answer them.’”

He recalls hearing the guards trying to restrain each other because if they went too far with the torture and killed him, they would not get any information.

They were frustrated by his silence.

The torture continued for about a month as Thiha was transferred to various Military Intelligence and Special Branch Police interrogation centers.

“It was like I was a ball, kicked from one place to the other.”

The game ended when the ball came to rest on Death Row at Insein Prison on March 7, 1991, following a brief trial.

CHAPTER NINE

DEATH ROW AGAIN

Life was about waiting to die
for those on Death Row.
No one had any idea how long
they would remain there
or when or if they would actually be executed.

Thiha Yarzar was housed in cell 51, in a cell range of sixty white concrete cells with iron bars for a door. There was nothing inside but a thin bamboo mat for a bed and two ceramic bowls for a toilet.

Out of 140 Death Row prisoners, five were political prisoners with death sentences. Three of those were Thiha, his fifteen year-old brother-in-law Myo Aung, and Bhamin Dhit, the man who gave Thiha's name and location to the police after being tortured.

Four more political prisoners, who did not receive death sentences, were also jailed there as a form of mental torture.

Three other Death Row prisoners had been students with Thiha.

"How did it come to this? We just wanted to study peacefully. None of us wanted to take up arms. But we had to fight for democracy and human rights instead. And now to end up this way... not only me but the others as well.

"Who is responsible? It is the fault of the tyrants, the military leaders. I was angry.

"But, we had no regrets. We were satisfied we had done the right thing. We were at peace.

"I was in prison. But, I was really free in my mind. I encouraged other prisoners on Death Row not to be afraid."

Life was about waiting to die for those on Death Row.

No one had any idea how long they would remain there, or when or if they would actually be executed.

At least the filthy old clothes he had worn since his arrest were

finally gone. Thiha and the others now wore a prison uniform made of a white, short-sleeved shirt with a collar and a white longyi, or sarong.

Every Friday he was allowed two visitors from his family. His wife and mother and sister would try to comfort him.

“They cried and encouraged me. But I said, ‘I’m okay. You be careful.’”

His wife was arrested once after visiting him.

His wife’s family eventually had to sell the small pickled tea shop they operated because people were afraid to buy from them.

His wife was a student. She was supported by her parents and his family as well. Some sympathetic politicians secretly helped the family financially.

Inside, Thiha had his share of challenges too.

He and other prisoners were caught smuggling information to BBC Radio about the conditions inside the prison. They were sent to live in punishment cells with military dogs housed on-site.

He remembers they were kept in shackles and heard the sounds of other prisoners being beaten every day, but they made the best of their predicament.

“After a week, we and the dogs became very friendly. So, we could eat their meat. The dogs had better food. We only had rice to eat.”

Thiha recounted how prison food was usually so bad, he tried not to eat it.

Guards were sadistic and brutal.

Prisoners were forced to shout, “I am not human. I am just a prisoner!” while being punished.

He said prison staff organized prostitution and sold drugs to make money.

Female prison staff had sex with prisoners for money.

Child soldiers who had tried to desert but were recaptured and

sent to prison were sold to other prisoners and staff for sex by guards eager to make extra money.

Thiha wanted those conditions changed and he and others used money given by outside supporters to bribe guards to buy a shortwave radio and two cell phones they used to pass information about the conditions inside the prison to the outside world.

“Everyone has a responsibility for democracy and human rights, even me as a prisoner. I was still young.”

CHAPTER TEN

TAUNGOO, KALAY, AND TAUNGGYI

“I cried. It was easier
to deal with the torture
than the malaria.”

In June of 1994 he was transferred to Taungoo Prison, Pegu Division, after three years in Insein Prison. The transfer came just before other prisoners were caught with the cell phones and radios and received lengthy sentences.

Four years later, he went on a hunger strike to protest the authorities' decision not to release him early, after they had said they would.

He was forced to receive nourishment from a glucose IV, and was transferred to Kalay Prison, in northwestern Burma, near the Indian border. The weather was known for its extremes of hot and cold. It was also a malaria area.

"Political prisoners who caused problems in other prisons were transferred to Kalay. It was a bad situation.

"Almost every prisoner and staff got malaria frequently, and both prisoners and staff died from the disease."

Thiha said he got malaria in Kalay nearly thirty times in four years—almost monthly. He was hospitalized three times.

He recounted the periods of suffering through bouts of high fever, chills and shivering, aching bones and body, vomiting, weight loss, and terrible headaches.

"I was losing my mind. I had a fever of 106 degrees. I felt alone, isolated, and suffered terribly with the disease.

"I cried. It was easier to deal with the torture than the malaria. It was terrible."

During one interview, he showed a copy of a document stating the Red Cross visited him in Kalay Prison on March 29, 2000 and December 12, 2001.

He said local doctors and Red Cross officials recommended his transfer to a prison with a permanent physician and a hospital. Military Intelligence refused.

“They said, ‘Let him stay and die here in Kalay.’”

At that time he joined in a hunger strike with ten other prisoners, including his friend Khun Myint Tun, a Member of Parliament-elect from the National League for Democracy who was never allowed to take office, who is today the Labor Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, the government-in-exile formed by members of the National League for Democracy.

“Our demand was to release all political prisoners unconditionally,” he said.

“It was as if we had no rights. We were treated like animals, not like human beings.

“I was full of anger. I was becoming mentally ill...crazy.”

He and Khun Myint Tun went twenty-one days without food, eighteen days without water.

On day twenty-one, they went unconscious and were given an IV and flown to Taunggyi Prison in Southern Shan State.

Twenty-five days later, Thiha was sent to Mai Sat Prison, in Eastern Shan State.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAI SAT

“I wanted to talk to my daughter.
I talked with the bugs in my cell
and talked with the stars about her.”

He was covered with a hood and beaten upon arrival at Mai Sat Prison. He was dragged to solitary confinement and put in a concrete cell with no furniture and no mattress.

His personal belongings were stolen.

At night guards threatened him through the door, constantly waking him up to deprive him of sleep. But still, the spark of activism had not died out completely, even after all this time and suffering.

He wrote a letter about the conditions in the relatively small prison, which held three hundred male and female prisoners. He then tried to bribe a staff member with clothing to carry it out of the prison.

The staff member took the clothing. He did not deliver the letter.

“But, just writing it was satisfying,” he remembered. “I was trying.”

“They could destroy our body. But, they couldn’t control our mind, our soul, or our spirits in prison. The oppression only caused us—forced us—to fight back.”

Thiha did fight back, but not only for his own cause.

One morning he overheard guards mistreating a prisoner in another section of the prison he could not see.

The prisoner was forced to kneel in the hot sun for two hours, while shouting, “I’m not human. I’m a prisoner!”

His crime was stealing some vegetables.

“Thiha shouted back from his cell, “Hey! Stop it! I am also a prisoner, but, I am human.”

He continued his protest until the prison’s Head Jailer came and spoke to him, to quiet him down.

The Jailer told the guards to stop the practice.

But during his six years of isolation in Mai Sat Prison, Thiha also had to find ways to fight against gnawing depression.

During the daytime he could see a mountain in the distance if he leaned against the wall a certain way in a standing position.

He still remembers how beautiful that mountain was to him.

“It was green, with lots of trees. I loved those trees. I imagined strolling in that forest under the shade of those trees. I touched them and hugged them. I ran like a child amongst them.”

His imagination acted as a magic carpet.

“Sometimes I couldn’t sleep day or night, for three or four days. Then, I would sleep for twenty-four hours, with no food. Sitting on the bed and leaning against the wall, I imagined the wall in front of me was a cinema screen. I saw my life. I saw my friends. I imagined watching Sean Connery as 007 and Jean-Claude Van Damme. I saw lots of movies on that wall.”

When bored, he sat with his legs through the bars of the cell door and hugged the bars with his arms.

He remembers looking up at the sky and talking to the insects and sharing rice with the birds.

“I wanted to fly like a bug,” he said.

“At night, the stars and the moon were my companions. But, my sky was very small because of the size of my window. I could just see thirteen stars. But, those thirteen stars were my best friends. I could not survive without the stars, the moon, the bugs and birds, and those trees on that mountain.”

He asked favors of his companions, the bugs and the birds.

“Talk to me. Say, ‘Hello’, to my daughter,” he remembers asking them.

“Sometimes the situation was so depressing. I wanted to talk to my daughter. I talked with the bugs in my cell and talked with the stars about her.”

He recounted the experience of being isolated for so long.

“The sameness—the routine—is depressing. I had only the present. No past and no future.”

He remembered, “I sang at night to comfort myself.”

He used pain killers and diarrhea pills as chalk, to write poetry on the floor and walls.

“My best poem was for my daughter,” he said, passing me a handwritten copy of the poem. It is entitled, “Perfect Moment”:

Just a drop of love
Spilt from my beloved daughter’s heart
Makes the whole world full of celebration.

I walk in the clouds.
The drum in my chest is
Beating itself aloud.

The breeze is giggling.
The trees are waving their hands.
Even the rainbow
Becomes a bridge of gold.

Wow!
She calls me Daddy.
I believe that
Tonight will be starry.

Just a drop of love
Spilt from my beloved daughter’s heart
Makes me feel happiness that I have never had.

The poem was written on Tone Tone’s sixteenth birthday as his present to her. It was also the day he received a letter from her in which she called him “Daddy” for the first time.

She was three-months old when he was arrested and Thiha was worried they would never be able to make up for all the lost time.

But some of Thiha's friends, who were also student activists and political prisoners, including the prominent student leader, Min Ko Naing, who had just finished serving a sixteen-year sentence, intervened to help him begin to develop a relationship with her.

He said they wrote to him and said, "Don't worry. We will take care of your daughter. We will care for her as if she were our own."

"They were worried she had no feelings for me," Thiha said. "They explained my story to her and encouraged her to contact me. They gave her money and a school uniform. They helped a lot. They helped me cure my mental illness about my daughter."

He remembered his excitement when she wrote him the first time.

"I am now sixteen-years old," she wrote. "I am a tenth grade student. Take care of yourself."

"I read it again and again," he said.

She wrote again, three months after he replied to that first letter.

"Take care. I am okay. Now, I am learning about computers," she wrote.

But it was the word "Daddy" in her third letter that was like a miracle drug to Thiha.

"I kept it in my shirt pocket and read it again and again," he said. "That night I wrote the poem."

However, he began to worry about his inability to care for Tone Tone, even if he were to be released some day.

"I started to worry about my relationship with my daughter. She said she wanted to go slow with the relationship. But when would I be released? And what would I do for a living? Could I even pay for her education?"

That worry intensified when his friends, who had been so helpful to him and his daughter, were arrested again during the Saffron Revolution in the fall of 2007.

Thiha once again lost all contact with Tone Tone.

But now, barely a year later, Thiha Yarzar listened carefully as Burmese military and police officials told him he would soon be on a flight to Rangoon, where he would be reunited with his beloved daughter and the rest of his family, nearly twenty years after he left his parents' home as an exiled freedom fighter.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PRISONER'S DREAM COMES TRUE

“She asked me, ‘Are you Dad?’
I said nothing.
I had no strength to speak.
I had no words.”

“It was like a dream,” he remembers of the night he was driven in a taxi to his sister’s house.

Was this that old prisoner’s dream, and would be returned to prison just before waking up?

He got lost because the city streets and the neighborhood had changed so much while he was in prison. Two police cars followed the taxi as he tried to find the house he had spent so much time in as a child.

But he didn’t wake up in his cell. Instead, he finally stood at his sister’s door.

When his sister, Daw Khin Mar Win, answered the door, they just stared at each other. They had not seen each other since she visited him in Insein Prison in 1992.

“She shouted, ‘Hey! This is Thiha!’ She came running to meet me, crying.”

“Mommy is here,” she told Thiha.

Thiha stared in amazement as he watched an old woman come out of the house.

“It was my mother. But I didn’t recognize her at first,” he said.

Daw Tin Lay Myint was now 68 years-old. He remembers her hair had turned white. She was thin, but looked healthy.

“She just stared at me, as she moved slowly toward me,” he recalled.

“This is Thiha!” his sister shouted.

“They thought I was dead,” Thiha said, explaining that they had lost track of him since tracing his whereabouts to Kalay Prison.

“Mom touched me, my hair, my face, my shoulder,” he remembered vividly.

They told him the family had made plans to make a contribution to a monastery in his memory just days before because they thought he was dead.

“Then, my sister asked me if I had escaped,” he remembered.

“What did you do?” she asked. “There will be a problem.”

But, Thiha eased their concerns by showing them his release documents.

That evening, Thiha learned of his father’s death in 1996, the year before his wife died.

He also learned how his father lost his rank in the army and was forced to retire.

“I’m very sorry,” Thiha told his mother and sister. “It was because of me.”

But, they told him, “It’s not your fault.”

“Thiha, I’m very happy to see you alive again before I die,” his mother told him.

They told him they didn’t hold out much hope to see him alive again because so many prisoners had died in prison.

“I had seen so much death and so many families destroyed during my prison term,” Thiha said during our interview. “And I should have died in prison. Many others suffered so much loss on the outside and then died.”

The next day, Saturday, September 27, 2008, was the day Thiha feared might never come. He went to his wife’s parents home to meet the daughter who had grown up without him.

He recalled it took him more than two hours to find the house. Again, he got lost on the way because the city had changed so much during the years he was in prison.

When he finally arrived, his mother-in-law, Daw Shwe Yu, was sweeping leaves inside the family compound.

“Finally, Thiha is here!” she exclaimed when she saw him.

“Come and see who is here,” she called to his daughter.

Tone Tone came and stood in the doorway.

“She asked me, ‘Are you Dad?’” he remembered vividly.

“I said nothing. I had no strength to speak. I had no words.”

His mother-in-law came to him and hugged him tightly.

Then he walked to where Tone Tone was still standing in the doorway.

“I touched her hair and I touched her face, just like my Mom had done to me, the night before. I remember thinking, ‘She is lovely, just a lovely young girl’.

He tried to hug her.

“She was cold,” he said.

“She had gotten used to not having me in her life.”

He knew then, it would take time for her to accept the fact that he was alive.

“I was disappointed, but I also understood her reaction. I was very confused in my mind. But I was just happy see my daughter.”

In time, Thiha tried to explain his actions in light of the political situation in Burma to his daughter.

“But she was not interested,” he said.

““Because of this I had no father during my childhood. Because of this you were imprisoned for so long. How can you understand how I feel about it all?”” she asked.

“But eventually we began to understand each other’s feelings a little more,” Thiha said, looking back.

The struggle to understand others and to be understood has become an issue in most of Thiha’s relationships since his release. He said the survival instincts that kept him alive in prison make it difficult to trust people and communicate outside.

“I felt like—and still feel like—I came from another planet. This planet is not my home,” he said, with frustration.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LIFE ON ANOTHER PLANET

“The world, as I knew it,
no longer exists.”

“It’s like a different planet now. The world, as I knew it, no longer exists,” he said.

“It’s difficult for us, my family, to understand each other. It is very difficult to communicate. I don’t know why.

“I ask myself, ‘Are you crazy. Are you mad?’

“There is something wrong in my relationships with other people. Nobody can understand me and I can’t understand them. I’m oversensitive. I find it hard to relax and trust people, to trust their motives. Are they making fun of me, laughing at me, being sarcastic?”

He also said he feels people distrust his motives because he is an ex-prisoner.

Even still, since his release he has not been quiet about his strong feelings regarding the continuation of the armed struggle for freedom inside Burma.

“The armed struggle has not been successful, but we have time to change things. We can’t win against the military government because we can’t defend ourselves.

“Armed struggle, as well as political and economic pressure, will force the generals to negotiate peace. Organized armed struggle is a necessity, along with other diplomatic, political, and economic means.”

He said he sees a decline in support for the Burmese pro-democracy movement since September 11, 2001, and he calls on the international community to supply the “tools for an armed struggle”, such as technology and weapons.

“There has been reluctance by the international community to get

involved in the armed struggle in Burma, despite the obvious injustices.”

He bristles at the accusation that he and his fellow insurgents are terrorists.

“Terrorists and freedom fighters are quite different! We are freedom fighters. We do not harm innocent civilians. We are fighting against the real terrorists—the military leaders. We fight for democracy, human rights, and justice in Burma.”

Thiha is critical of larger nations, like China, with economic interests in Burma.

“It is like they feed the poisonous snake,” he said. “And the international community and the United Nations have all allowed the SPDC (the Burmese State Peace and Development Council) to tighten its hold on the country.

“We have tried many means to end injustice in Burma. Armed struggle is a continuation of that. It’s not fair to brand us as terrorists because we continue to fight with guns.

“We are on the revolutionary way. In any country when people attack dictators, there will be bloodshed. We can’t avoid that. We chose military government targets, not civilian targets.

“We have to create revolution to get rid of the unjust military dictators.

“I am not a killer. I still wish I had a guitar instead of my pistol. I didn’t want to kill anybody. I had an order from my headquarters. We were in a battle, fighting for democracy and human rights.”

During one interview he used the analogy of the American use of nuclear weapons to bring an end to the war with Japan.

“The important thing is to win. In the battle there is not justice or injustice. We have to bring change, bring freedom and democracy ourselves. We are at war! They are very cunning. Armed struggle is necessary for us. There is no fair or unfair in war.”

Within a few days of his release, Thiha was approached by his

old enemies, representatives of the military authorities, who sought to take advantage of his money problems. He said he was offered a job with the SPDC propaganda wing and he was offered money to be an SPDC politician.

“They offered me money daily for two weeks. My family members were afraid.”

He said he was also followed and was attacked by members of the pro-government USDA (Union Solidarity and Development Association Party).

“That’s when I fled to Thailand,” he said.

But life in Thailand has not been without battles either.

On December 3, 2008, Thiha crossed the Moei River illegally by boat, at Myawaddy, Karen State, entering Thailand at Mae Sot, Tak Province.

On February 1, 2009, he was detained by Thai police and forced to pay 4,000 baht (Thai currency, approximately \$125US), to buy his freedom.

“It’s difficult to survive in Thailand without legal documents,” he said.

He was told by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and several NGOs (non-governmental organizations assisting refugees) to go to a refugee camp. So, in February 2009, he went to Umphiem Mai Refugee Camp, near Mae Sot.

“At first I thought I was free in Thailand, and the UNHCR would protect me from Thai police, and I would be invited to be resettled in a third country. But, no help from the UNHCR. They appear to do nice work. But no action.”

Soon, he moved back to Mae Sot where he now lives. It is known by many as “The City of Exiles” as the streets and shophouses are filled with migrants and those who have fled poor conditions in Burma.

But Thiha’s dream of a new life through resettlement has not died.

“Resettlement will help me obtain a legal identity and financial stability,” he said. “And I can help organize Burmese and help the cause from another country by telling the Burmese story, and my story.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FREE BURMA!

“I will do whatever I can
to continue my fight
for democracy and human rights.”

The decision made by Thiha Yarzar, the young history student at Rangoon University, to pursue and defend the cause of democracy in Burma because it is the better way, and his willingness to pay the steep price to secure it, has not waived despite long years of imprisonment and torture and suffering to him and his family.

“I did my duty and I will continue to do my duty. Every Burmese has a responsibility to struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma,” he said.

“I’m free, and I’m getting strength from the fact that I’m a free man. I will do whatever I can to continue my fight for democracy and human rights.”

As the crowd pressed the gate at the UNHCR compound in Mae Sot in May 2009, demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma, Thiha showed his words are not just activist bravado.

When someone was needed to lead the way by speaking up for freedom despite concerns of retaliation from Thai authorities, he stepped to the front with fire in his eyes, lit by the flames of the fire in his belly, his clenched fist punching the sky, and shouted, “Free Burma!”

APPENDIX I

TIMELINE

OF MODERN BURMESE HISTORY WITH EVENTS FROM THE LIFE OF THIHA YARZAR

19 July 1947

General Aung San, leader of the colonial independence movement, and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, is assassinated along with many members of his cabinet.

4 January 1948

Burma achieves independence from British colonial rule and U Nu becomes the first democratically elected prime minister.

2 March 1962

General Ne Win leads Burmese army troops in a successful coup, overthrowing the government of Prime Minister U Nu. Many government leaders are arrested or forced into exile.

3 March 1962

Ne Win dissolves the 1947 constitution, which guaranteed democracy and limited federalism for an independent Burma, and announces that he and his revolutionary council, made up of senior military officers, are now ruling the country.

July 1962

The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) is established by the military, with an agenda called the “Burmese Way to Socialism”. Ne Win’s ideology leads to Burma becoming a police state.

7 July 1962

Following student protests, the military destroys the headquarters of the All Burma Federation Student Union at Rangoon University, and brutally puts down further student demonstrations by killing, wounding, and arresting many.

August 1962

The government begins censoring the media through the newly established Press Scrutiny Board.

23 February 1963

The government nationalizes the private sector. Everything is owned and regulated by the military.

4 March 1964

All political parties are banned, except the government-run Burma Socialist Programme Party.

25 December 1965

Thiha Yarzar is born in Rangoon.

11–12 December 1974

Martial law is imposed and schools are closed after students and monks demonstrate against the government's lack of respect for Burmese hero, UN General Secretary U Thant, on the day of his funeral.

1 October 1976

Student leaders are arrested and sentenced to death after public demonstrations against the government.

1986

Thiha graduates from Rangoon University with a BA in history. He begins studying for his Master's degree in History.

5 September 1987

More students are arrested after protesting against the government's move to demonetize all large banknotes.

During September, Thiha, now a student activist, is arrested for the first time and is imprisoned for nearly five months.

March 1988

Riot police kill two university students during a protest. The next week, 200 students are killed during clashes with police. Unrest continues.

17 March 1988

Thiha is arrested for the second time with 140 other students and is imprisoned for more than three months.

April 1988

In order to care for her ailing mother, Aung San Suu Kyi returns to Burma after living in Europe for many years with her husband and two sons.

23 July 1988

General Sein Lwin, known as the “Butcher of Burma” following his role in the brutal killing of student protesters, takes power after Ne Win resigns in an effort to quell unrest.

August 1988

Thiha is wounded while leading demonstrators from his township near Rangoon in a nationwide uprising known as “8888”.

More than 3,000 peaceful protestors are killed by government troops over four days. Many others are wounded and arrested. In an attempt to calm the nation, General Sein Lwin resigns after only eighteen days in power, to appoint a moderate civilian, Dr. Maung Maung, as president.

26 August 1988

Several hundred thousand people attend Aung San Suu Kyi's first public speech at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon.

18 September 1988

The military, led by General Saw Maung, responds to continued civilian protests by brutally cracking down on demonstrators. Martial Law is imposed and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) is established to run the country.

20 September 1988

Thiha meets with his family before fleeing to Thailand.

23 September 1988

Thiha leaves Burma for the first time in his life.

24 September 1988

Aung San Suu Kyi helps found the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military government arrests people attending NLD events through the imposition of a ban prohibiting political gatherings of more than four people.

December 1988

Thiha begins four months of military officer training in Thailand with the newly formed All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) and the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB).

27 May 1989

The military regime unilaterally changes the name of the country to the Union of Myanmar, and also changes the names of many cities and divisions.

20 July 1989

Aung San Suu Kyi is put under house arrest for the first time for defy-

ing the ban against giving speeches to large audiences.

September 1989

Thiha returns to Burma on a mission for the DAB to photograph military targets in Rangoon.

25 December 1989

Thiha marries 19 year-old Htway Htway Oo, on his 24th birthday, while on a mission inside Burma.

January 1990

Thiha leads a rocket attack against a military barracks in Rangoon. Eleven Burmese Army soldiers are killed.

27 May 1990

While she is under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party wins 392 out of the 485 seats in the General Assembly in an overwhelming election victory. The junta responds by nullifying the election results, disallowing a transition of power to the newly elected NLD and arresting many of the party's leaders.

1 October 1990

Thiha's daughter Tone Tone is born.

17 January 1991

Thiha is captured by Military Intelligence officers in Rangoon.

20 January 1991

Prison and Military Intelligence authorities begin to torture Thiha for several weeks.

7 March 1991

Thiha is sentenced to death for High Treason and imprisoned on Death Row in Insein Prison. He is 25 years old.

10 December 1991

Students are arrested and universities closed as students demonstrate to free Aung San Suu Kyi after she is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

June 1994

Thiha is transferred from Insein prison to Taungoo Prison, Pegu Division.

July 1995

The junta releases Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, but imposes tough restrictions on her movement and bars her from political activities.

July 1997

Burma becomes a member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

16 November 1997

SLORC is renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) upon the recommendation of an American public relations firm hired to improve the regime's image internationally.

May 1988

Thiha is transferred to Kalay Prison, near the Indian border.

June 2000

International Labor Organization (ILO) decides to take punitive action against the Burmese junta for the widespread use of forced labour.

21 September 2000

Aung San Suu Kyi is sentenced to a second term of house arrest. The SPDC says it is for her own protection, to defend her from being used

by ‘criminal and terrorist elements’.

June 2002

After a 21-day hunger strike Thiha is transferred to Mai Sat Prison, Shan State, where he is placed in solitary confinement for six years.

6 May 2002

Aung San Suu Kyi is released from the second term of her house arrest.

30 May 2003

While traveling to meet supporters in Mandalay Division, Aung San Suu Kyi’s motorcade and entourage are brutally attacked. Nearly 100 NLD members and supporters are slaughtered in what will become known as the “Depayin Massacre”. Aung San Suu Kyi is placed under house arrest for the third time. The official reason given by the SPDC is once again that the detention is for her own protection.

August–September 2007

Politically active Burmese monks lead a national uprising known as the “Saffron Revolution” to protest steep increases in fuel prices and to call for democracy. Again, the military regime reacts with brute force. Thousands of monks and demonstrators are beaten, arrested, and imprisoned. Others are murdered or disappear. Many monks flee the country.

2 May 2008

Cyclone Nargis makes landfall in the Irrawaddy Delta, leaving at least 138,000 dead or unaccounted for, and more than 2.3 million affected in its wake.

10–24 May 2008

While declining offers of international assistance for the victims of the cyclone, the regimes chooses to go ahead with a planned refer-

endum on a new constitution which guarantees ex-military officers 25% of the seats and veto power in both parliaments, regardless of any future election results.

27 May 2008

Aung San Suu Kyi's third period of house arrest is extended for another year, which is illegal under both international law and Burma's own laws.

23 September 2008

Thiha is released from Mai Sat Prison after serving seventeen years, six months and sixteen days as a political prisoner.

26 September 2008

Thiha sees his mother for the first time in nearly 20 years.

27 September 2008

He sees his daughter, Tone Tone, for the first time since she was a newborn.

3 December 2008

As a result of unrelenting harassment from Burmese authorities, Thiha flees to Thailand.

1 February 2009

Thiha is detained by Thai Police in Mae Sot, Thailand, because he is in the country illegally.

10 February 2009

Thiha moves to Umpiem Mai Refugee Camp.

20 April 2009

Thiha moves back to Mae Sot as an illegal migrant. He is given some aid from the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

3 May 2009

American John Yettaw swims across Inya Lake to make an uninvited visit to Aung San Suu Kyi.

13 May 2009

Aung San Suu Kyi is arrested for violating the terms of her house arrest because she had allowed Yettaw, who pleaded poor health and exhaustion, to stay in her house for two days.

27 May 2009

Thiha leads a demonstration at the UNHCR compound in Mae Sot, calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners in Burma.

11 August 2009

After putting her on trial for violating the terms of her house arrest, the junta extends Aung San Suu Kyi's current period of house arrest for an additional three years, which is immediately reduced to 18 months by SPDC Senior General Than Shwe, on the condition of her showing "good behavior".

7 November 2010

The first elections in 20 years are scheduled to be held without the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi or the National League for Democracy, the winners of the previous election. Approximately 2,100 political prisoners remain jailed.

At this time, Thiha is working towards resettlement and asylum in a third country, while continuing his struggle for democracy in Burma.

Timeline compiled by Paul Pickrem, Garrett Kostin, and Andrea Valentin

Timeline Sources:

- Soe Myint, *Burma File: A Question of Democracy*, 2002
- Zoya Phan, *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West*, 2009
- Whitney Stewart, *Aung San Suu Kyi: Fearless Voice of Burma*, Second Edition, 2008
- Justin Wintle, *Perfect Hostage: Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma and the Generals*, 2007

MAP OF BURMESE PRISONS

SHOWING 44 PRISONS, INCLUDING FIVE
THAT HELD THIHA YARZAR



APPENDIX III

20 RECOMMENDED BOOKS

FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF MODERN BURMESE HISTORY AND ISSUES CONFRONTING BURMA TODAY

Aung San Suu Kyi, **Freedom From Fear**, 1995
essays: history, culture, politics

Aung San Suu Kyi with Alan Clements, **The Voice of Hope**, 1996
interviews: modern history, politics, spirituality

Charney, Michael, **A History of Modern Burma**, 2009
colonial/WWII history, modern history, current events

Connelly, Karen, **The Lizard Cage**, 2005
fiction, politics, political prisoners

Fink, Christina, **Living Silence in Burma**, 2009 (second edition)
colonial/WWII history, modern history, politics

Ganz, Nicholas, and Elena Jotow, **Burma: The Alternative Guide**, 2009
modern history, politics, travel information

Khoo Thwe, Pascal, **From the Land of Green Ghosts**, 2002
autobiography, modern history, ethnic minorities, migrants

Koehler Johnson, Bernice, **The Shan: Refugees Without a Camp**, 2009
memoir, ethnic minorities, migrants, travelogue

Koetsawang, Pim, **In Search of Sunlight: Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand**, 2001
refugees/migrants, essays

Larkin, Emma, **Finding George Orwell in Burma/Secret Histories**, 2004
colonial history, modern history, travelogue

Larkin, Emma, **Everything is Broken**, 2010
Cyclone Nargis, Saffron Revolution, Naypyidaw

Lintner, Bertril, **Land of Jade**, 1996
modern history, politics, ethnic insurgencies, travelogue

Marshall, Andrew, **The Trouser People**, 2002
colonial/WWII history, modern history, ethnic minorities, travelogue

Mawdsley, James, **The Iron Road/The Heart Must Break**, 2001
memoir, activism, ethnic minorities, political prisoners

McClelland, Mac, **For Us Surrender Is Out of the Question**, 2010
memoir, politics/activism, ethnic minorities, refugees/migrants

Mirante, Edith, **Burmese Looking Glass**, 1993
ethnic minorities/insurgencies, travelogue

Phan, Zoya, **Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West**, 2009
autobiography, ethnic minorities/insurgencies, refugees, politics/activism

Thant Myint-U, **The River of Lost Footsteps**, 2006
autobiography, colonial/WWII history, modern history

Thornton, Phil, **Restless Souls: Rebels, Refugees, Medics and Misfits on the Thai-Burma Border**, 2006
ethnic insurgencies, refugees/migrants, travelogue

Wintle, Justin, **Perfect Hostage: Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma, and The Generals**, 2007
biography, colonial/WWII history, modern history, politics

APPENDIX IV

RECOMMENDED BURMA-RELATED WEBSITES GET INVOLVED/GET INFORMED!

CAMPAIGNS and RESOURCES

Burma Partnership
www.burmapartnership.org

U.S. Campaign for Burma
www.uscampaignforburma.org

Burma Campaign-UK
www.burmacampaign.org.uk

Burma Campaign Australia
www.aucampaignforburma.org

Canadian Friends of Burma
www.cfob.org

Thai Friends of Burma
<http://fobcm.wordpress.com>

Burma Gateway - Australian Burmese Network
www.burmagateway.org

Burma Action Ireland
www.burmaactionireland.org

Women's League of Burma
www.womenofburma.org

Open Society Institute Burma Project
www.soros.org/initiatives/bpsai

NEWS and INFORMATION

The Irrawaddy
www.irrawaddy.org

Mizzima News
www.mizzima.com

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)
www.dvb.no

Burma News International
www.bnionline.net

Burma Net News
www.burmanet.org/news

ALTSEAN-Burma
www.altsean.org

The Best Friend Library
www.thebestfriend.org

Burma Daily
www.burmadaily.com

Burma Digest
<http://burmadigest.info>

Online Burma Library
www.burmalibrary.org

Kachin News Group
www.kachinnews.com

Independent Mon News Agency
<http://monnews.org>

Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)
www.shanland.org

HUMAN RIGHTS

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners - Burma
www.aappb.org

Amnesty International
www.amnesty.org

ExPP-ACT
<http://borderlinereport.blogspot.com/>

Network for Human Rights Documentation - Burma
www.nd-burma.org

Burma Lawyers' Council
www.blc-burma.org

Burma Media Association (BMA)
www.bma.co.cc

Burma Voices
www.burmavoices.com

Burmese American Democratic Alliance
www.badasf.org

Human Rights Watch: Burma
www.hrw.org/asia/burma

Free Burma Rangers
www.freeburmarangers.org

MAP (Migrant Assistance Project) Foundation
www.mapfoundationcm.org

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation
www.rohingya.org

Chin Human Rights Organization
www.chro.ca

Karen Human Rights Group
www.khrg.org

Karen Women's Organization
www.karenwomen.com

Human Rights Foundation of Monland
<http://rehmonnya.org>

Shan Human Rights Foundation
www.shanhumanrights.org

Shan Women's Action Network
www.shanwomen.org

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Salween Watch

www.salweenwatch.org

EarthRights International

www.earthrights.org/burma

Burma Rivers Network

www.burmariversnetwork.org

Arakan Oil Watch

www.arakanoilwatch.org

Arakan Rivers Network

www.arakanrivers.net

Project Maje

www.projectmage.org



Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB) is a federally incorporated non-governmental organization working for democracy and human rights in Burma. Established in 1991 by a network of concerned Canadians and civil society organizations, CFOB has tirelessly raised awareness among Canadians on the situations in Burma, successfully launched campaigns and educational outreaches, and constantly encouraged the Government of Canada to support the Burmese Democracy Movement and the ethnic struggles in Burma.

Recent accomplishments include:

- Government support for a UN 'Commission of Inquiry' into human rights abuses in Burma,
- Continuous humanitarian and capacity-building support on the borders of Burma,
- A 'toughest' economic sanction against the repressive Burmese military regime,
- Honorary Canadian Citizenship for Burmese democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi,
- a historic meeting between Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Burmese exiled leader Dr. Sein Win,
- divestment campaigns (e.g., Ivanhoe Mines), and
- various actions and campaigns, including calling for the release of all political prisoners in Burma

Contact address: Suite 206, 145 Spruce St., Ottawa, K1R 6P1, Canada

Tel: 613.237.8056 • Fax: 613.563.001

Email: cfob@cfob.org • Website: www.cfob.org



ExPP-ACT: Ex-Political Prisoners - Assistance, Counseling and Training is an organization founded mainly by former political prisoners from Burma now residing in Thailand.

The Mae Sot-based organisation supports former political prisoners who have fled to Thailand to escape further persecution by the Burmese military junta. According to our budget, we provide psycho-social and legal assistance, shelter, training in language and computer skills, vocational training, and support publications on Burma.

Thiha Yarzar is ExPP-ACT co-founder and joint secretary.

If you want to contact us please write to exppact@gmail.com.
You can also contact us at the Mae Sot office in Thailand:

Thiha Yarzar, Joint Secretary, +66 (0) 806824274
Bo Htway Lwin, Vice Secretary, +66 (0) 806824274
Aye Min Soe, Spokesperson, +66 (0) 822259968
andrewsaisai@gmail.com

or the Berlin office in Germany:

Markus Baude, Founder, Project Coordinator
+49 (0) 30 26376288, +66 (0) 8 45315317 (Thailand)

Please follow us on our blog: www.borderlinereport.blogspot.com,
soon: www.exppact.org.

မိတ်ဆွေကောင်းစာကြည့်တိုက်

THE BEST FRIEND LIBRARY

Mae Sot • Chiang Mai

The Best Friend Education Project was founded in 1999 by two Burmese monks in Mandalay. At one point, The Best Friend operated fifteen free libraries inside Burma, providing access to uncensored information and literature, free language and computer classes, and meeting places where people could discuss issues freely.

Following the Saffron Revolution in 2007, several members of The Best Friend were arrested, and many others were forced to flee from Burma.

From its current base in Thailand, The Best Friend operates three libraries along the Thai-Burma border and continues to run education programs to support migrants and refugees from Burma.

The Best Friend works for positive change in Burma through a combination of educational initiatives, activism, migrant/refugee support, and awareness-raising activities. Our libraries and events encourage people from around the world to learn more about Burma and become more active in the struggle for peace, freedom, and democracy.

စာကြည့်တိုက်အဖွဲ့ ဝင်လျှင်စာအုပ်များအခမဲ့ငှါးနိုင်သည်။
အင်္ဂလိပ်စာ ကွန်ပျူတာသင်တန်းများ အခမဲ့တက်နိုင်သည်။

Please visit our libraries in Mae Sot, Chiang Mai,
and Nu Po Refugee Camp, and also online at

www.thebestfriend.org

e-mail: ashin@thebestfriend.org, chiangmai@thebestfriend.org



THERE IS NO EASY ROAD TO FREEDOM ANYWHERE,
AND MANY OF US WILL HAVE TO WALK AGAIN AND AGAIN
THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH
BEFORE WE REACH THE MOUNTAINTOP OF OUR DESIRES.

— Nelson Mandela

In September 1987, twenty-one year old Thiha Yarzar, the son of a Burmese Army Colonel, was arrested in Rangoon as one of the leaders of a group of university students protesting against the military regime's economic policies. He was held at Burma's notorious Insein Prison for almost five months.

Four years later, following continued political activity and a sham one-day trial, Thiha was sentenced to death for High Treason and returned to Insein, believing he would die there.

No Easy Road: A Burmese Political Prisoner's Story
chronicles Thiha Yarzar's nearly 18-year journey on the long road to freedom, first as a political prisoner jailed and tortured in five different Burmese prisons, and then as a political exile in Thailand.

I thought to myself, 'I'm going to get a death sentence and die in the end, or, maybe they will kill me here while they torture me.

I was choking. I could not breathe. And I swung back and forth between the two kicking me, like I was in a cradle.

I wanted to scream. But, I controlled myself. I did not want to show them my fear and my rage. I swallowed my voice. I did not want them to think of me as a coward. — Thiha Yarzar



250
BAHT

EX-PAACT
LOGO?