

GUEST: TIN MYAING THEIN: DIFFERENT SHORES

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I think back and say, Wow, I really came to America, alone, on a plane, and not knowing anybody. Where did I have the guts do that?

Women's advocate, community organizer, and executive director of the Pacific Gateway Center, Dr. Tin Myaing Thein came from a homeland ruled by military force to a new home in America; next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou, and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Dr. Tin Myaing Thein is the quietly dynamic force behind efforts to improve the skills and economic development of Hawaii's immigrant refugee and low income population. Her empathy for the poor and disadvantaged harks back to the Christian values instilled by her parents during her childhood in Burma, also known today as Myanmar. One of her childhood friends grew up to be a Burmese Opposition leader, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi. They remain friends. During World War II, the infant Myaing, along with her three siblings and parents, moved from village to village to escape the Japanese occupation of the former British colony. At war's end, her family settled into more comfortable circumstances in the idyllic town of Kalaw, where the children attended British schools.

The weather was beautiful, just like Hawaii. It was on the hill, so it was not cold or too hot. We had the most beautiful pine trees in that area, and so, the environment was lovely. And we just walked to school and back, and it was a little town where everybody was safe, we all knew each other.

What did your parents do?

My father was an irrigation engineer. So, he stayed in the Dry Zone, 'cause he had to build dams. And his joke was, I'm a dam engineer. [CHUCKLE] And my mother was a social organizer, and she founded the YWCA after the war. They had to set up the institutions again, and then she also organized the Girl Scouts in Burma. At that time, outside of the United States, it's called Girl Guides. And she was very well known in the community, but it's all volunteer work.

And your father was mostly absentee during that time?

Yes and no. He was posted in different towns and different areas, and he would bring us home, because he felt that being with him, we would learn more about the country. So, we went all the way north to Myitkyina, down to the south, and we would go on boats. It was very well organized by him. And it was, for him, a time of teaching us about the country. So, we learned a lot.

So, were you close to your parents?

Yes. Well, we were a Christian family, and among the Burmese, they are very few Christians.

How did your family get to be Christians?

My father's side was the third generation Christian. My mother's side was the second generation. I think my grandfather from my mother's side somehow during the days of the kings, and the last king who had killed all his cousins so that they couldn't take the throne; well, he and his family ran away. And he never told us why. So, to this day, it's a mystery why he had to run away. And he and his father came down from Mandalay and onto the River Irrawaddy, which is the main river in Burma, and on a bamboo raft, pretending to be farmers. And they just came down until they reached the area where the British were. He then converted to Christianity. And my inkling - I mean, I don't know for sure, is that he was well looked after by the Christian community and saved by them, so that they wouldn't get into any more trouble with authorities. And I think because of that, he gradually accepted the Christian religion.

Do you have any inkling of what it was that made him run afoul with authorities? Did he question authority, or any idea?

In those days, when the king had power over you, life or death, it's not something you do, but who you are. So, he was related to some of the families that were in danger of their lives, because the king was getting rid of anyone who would have the power to, challenge him for the throne.

I see. Now, as one of the few Christian families in your village, did that make a difference in how you were treated?

No. We were friends with everybody, and of course, we were in the Christian community too. So, that was easy for us to do. And back home, we went to church five times. I mean, Sunday school, then the regular church, then Christian Endeavor, and then Youth Endeavor, and then Women's Group. [CHUCKLE] So, the whole day was spent at church. And later on, we would have a family gathering and have a meal together. Every night, we had Family Devotion before we went to bed. So, a lot of that, I still privately observe. My sister still observes that back home. My father was a very devout Christian who believed, in of course, reading the Bible and following what the Bible said about a rich man should give away all his riches and follow Him to the Kingdom of Heaven. So, when he retired, he called us and said, I have given you education, and you can now stand on your own two feet. And he planned to give away whatever he had. And he did. And we went from a well-to-do family to nothing. It was the hardest lesson for us. Because he did prepare us;

he said, You have to learn how poor people live. And when we went back to Kalaw every summer, we used to travel in the first class section of the train. And a couple of years before, he said, Go in the third class and see what people have to put up with. So, he was preparing us, but we didn't know, of course. And when you're traveling in third class and you're not comfortable, but it's only for a short time, you can bear it, right? So, after that, when we all graduated and he gave us this notice that he was giving everything away, we lost our chauffeur, we lost the car and I had to take the bus. And I remembered what he had done, and I thought, Oh, he was preparing us for what life would be like when we had to just do with whatever we had.

Any resentment about it?

No. One, it was his money; two, it really taught us what people have to go through. It was a lesson that I won't forget. I did realize that it was very hard to be poor. Very hard. And you have less resources to fight whatever life throws at you.

In 1948, Burma gained its independence from Britain, and years of nation building followed. A fledgling democracy could not be sustained. In 1962, the military took over the reins of government. Tin Myaing Thein attended Rangoon University at the time, and was vocal in her criticism of the government's repressive policies. She was strongly encouraged by her mother to accept a grant to study at the East West Center in Honolulu. Twenty-six years would pass before her return home.

1962, March 2nd, the army took over in a coup, and they changed a lot of rules. It was difficult for people to speak out. There was martial law, and there was curfew, and also, people were not allowed to leave the country anymore. And then, they closed the country, and people were not allowed to come in. They gave, at that time, twenty-four-hour visa, one day; that's all you could come, and you had to leave. Pan Am was flying in at that time, so with the plane routes, you only got sixteen hours in the country if you wanted to come in. The newspaper was censored, and they nationalized all the banks. And we even had a joke that the Nationalist Chinese government who nationalized their bank, their bank was nationalized by the Burmese government. [CHUCKLE] And so, it was a time of tense work and some of the people who were my friends and very outspoken, were disappearing in the night, never to be seen again. And some of our other friends who were against the government were speaking out against the coups, because we had a parliamentary democracy before that. So during that year, I was in the psychology department, and they were watching the psychology department. I don't know why. And we were having little rallies and so forth and so on, and my mother was very worried that I wouldn't keep my mouth shut or I wouldn't be able to control myself.

Weren't you fearful after your friends left forever, with no notice?

You never think it would happen to you. You think, Oh. And sometimes you say it because of the moment, because it's something you feel unjust and uncalled for. So, there was a huge uprising by the students, and I was in the department at that time. And by the student union, they were all gathering, and shouting slogans and -

They, and you?

The students. No, I was in the psychology department. They were like, way by the gate to the university. And so, the general came down, the one who had, you know, taken over, and he was watching to see what was happening. And the students, they're very naughty, and they spotted him and started directing their comments at him. And they would say very unkind things like, Your mother is a peanut seller. [CHUCKLE] And you never passed the exam, you don't have the right to put a foot inside university property because you haven't passed the exams to be a university student. I mean, that's true.

So, was that bravery, or foolishness? I mean ...

I think a little bit of both. And so, the general ordered them to be shot. And so, at that time, there were like three thousand students who were shot.

They were shot?

They were shot, and then the army came and took their bodies away in the trucks. It was very, very terrible. So, that's why 7/7/62 is what we remember as the day, the infamous day. And then, he blew up the student union, 'cause they were all converging in the student union. And so, I think by that time, my mother was very worried, and so she started looking for ways to get me out. And she probably knew that the psychology department was being watched, 'cause they felt that psychology had something to do with the West, and we were using Western methods, and so forth.

And when you said you spoke out at times, do you remember what you spoke out about?

Well, it was to get people released. My friends who were in jail that had been taken and people who had disappeared. Around that time, my brother disappeared. It's something that the family never talks about.

Your brother disappeared. I mean, was he sleeping in the house and then, you didn't find him in the morning?

No; he left early to go to work. And we didn't ... to this day, we don't know what happened.

Had he spoken out?

I don't know. [CHUCKLE] He may have, at work, anywhere. We do know that at that time, there were an atmosphere of fear, and you couldn't trust each other. You didn't know who was gonna tell on who.

As a news reporter here, I've covered families who've lost a family member, likely to homicide, but the body was never found. They just never knew what happened, who did what, or anything. And it's a very difficult thing to live with, that unknown. But you say your family never spoke about it, even to each other?

Yes; to each other, yes, we did. My sister did, and then each of us have our own take on it. My parents never accepted it, that he would be dead. My brother did. My sister waited for him, so did my mother, for a long, long time. And I think we have accepted the fact that he may have passed on. We have rumors that he was seen in the border area, that he was in Malaysia, that he had fathered a child with this woman and that they were living in Penang. I mean, we tried to follow up, but nothing. It would have been just as easy to slip a letter or word of mouth to the family that he's okay. But not having had any, and it's over, a long, long time.

Do you seem so composed because this happened a long time ago and you've just had to integrate it into your life, or were you always accepting of ... this terrible unknown?

I think it's because of the time. You learn to live with certain things. Time does heal, or rather, time lets you learn how to live with it. And that's why.

Any advice to people about how to live with something terrible that's happened?

You can dwell on it, and you can try to make the best of those memories, but you do have to move on. But you never let go. I still look.

When you're back home, you hope you see him walking in -

No; because the rumors were that he was crossing the border in Thailand and Malaysia, when I was in Malaysia for an East West Center conference, I was looking. In Thailand, when I go, and the plane stops there, and even at the airport, I'm looking. Still.

What a tough way to live. You seem so calm about it. Were you calm at the time?

I was ... foul-mouthed at that time. [CHUCKLE]

And no fear of mortality.

Yeah, I wasn't.

Yeah, I guess teens don't think about mortality.

Right. And so, my mother said, There's a wonderful chance for you to go to the East West Center, and also to get a PhD degree.

She didn't say, Let's get you out of here?

No, she didn't. She was very subtle. But she did say, I think it's time for you to leave, and grow some more. So ... that's what I did.

She meant, learn some discretion.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

Or learn a better way to approach this situation.

The situation. Yeah. She was actually sending me to another place where I would be able to utilize all my skills that I had learned from her. Organizational skills, you know, community organizing, learning to speak up for other people. That's something I think all of us can relate to. It's so much easier to fight for somebody else. My grandfather, the one who ran away from Mandalay, put education as a very, very important value for our family. Every single one of us must have a degree, a baccalaureate at the lowest level.

And did you want that for yourself?

You know, Leslie, in those days, I just did what I was told. And my mother saw in me a different person. And coming to America and going to the East West Center really changed my life, and for the first time, I found, I had to make my own decisions.

How old were you?

Twenty. I think back and say, Wow, I really came to America, alone, on a plane, and not knowing anybody. Where did I have the guts do that?

Exactly.

I don't know. [CHUCKLE] I think it probably came from my grandmother, but the other one was my mother. And I think that this experience at the East West Center, finding other friends from other countries, relating to them inter-culturally was a great awakening for me. And my personality really came out after that.

And who did you find out that you were?

My mother. [CHUCKLE]

An organizer, and a speaker for justice?

Yes. My mother and my grandmother.

Tin Myaing Thein's years at the East West Center provided the very foundation on which she has built her life's work. In Hawaii, she formed a profound appreciation for the diversity of cultures here, and the strength found in common bonds. She also forged a life partnership with future husband, Jack Reynolds.

When I first arrived, there was a cultural clash. And in Burma, we don't have dating. So, when young men would ask me out, I didn't know it was a date that I was going on. And I felt very bad. We have this feeling where you don't want to refuse anybody anything, so I would go out on dates. I was having a hard time keeping up with my schoolwork as well. And there was one time when the gentlemen were asking me to a movie, and I said yes, and I saw The Sound of Music eleven times.

Because you didn't want to say no?

Yeah. And I didn't want to tell them that I've seen it before. [CHUCKLE] But my future husband, he's the only one who caught on. He said, You've seen this movie before, haven't you? 'Cause I was already mouthing all the lines. [CHUCKLE] And he said, Okay, something's going on. But he was a Peace Corps volunteer. He was the first group to go with the Peace Corps in Thailand, and uh, he somehow understood what was happening with me. And so, he helped me and he strategized to go to the study hall every day with me. And so it, in effect, got rid of all the other guys, 'cause they saw me with him all the time. But he helped me to study, and I got my grades back. There are some other stories. Like when you first came, you didn't know how to turn the faucet on. Oh, my god, how do you - and I didn't believe that washing machines really washed clothes.

What did you think they did?

I don't know; it wouldn't be clean. It wouldn't be clean enough.

And you were living at the East West Center dorms?

Right. And I had to watch other girls washing to say, Oh, it really did clean, [CHUCKLE], before I could believe it.

Yeah, there are so many things people must assume, that you didn't.

Right.

How could you?

Yeah. And we didn't have elevators too, in Burma at the time I came. So, I didn't know how to get out of the elevator. It was so funny. 'Cause I went to the boys' dorm, and the ninth floor and down were boys' dorm. And then, if we had meetings, it was above the ninth floor, so we were going up to the floor. And I got into the elevator, but then there was nothing that said ... how to get off, right? And the buttons that says, push to stop, and pull to run. So, we come from the British English where run is really operate. Right? So, I said, Okay, where do I run? I didn't know that the word run meant operate here. So, I was thinking, Okay, I guess you push-pull it, and you run out when you get to the floor that you want. And every time I tried to do that, the elevator would go up, and then down again. So, I would pass that floor. So, I was riding up and down the elevator like three times, until somebody came, and then I watched. And the person just pushed the number nine, and then got off. I said, Oh, okay. [CHUCKLE] That's what I had to do.

How were your English skills when you got here?

It was fine. I went to the Methodist English High School, which was British-run, and of course, we were not allowed to speak Burmese in the school. So my English was okay.

So, going back to the East West Center. You said that was a life-changing experience. In what other ways did it change your life? Obviously, you gained American skills, and you met your husband.

Yes. I learned that they valued you for all the different skills you had. And I was taught classical dance, which my father didn't approve, but my mother did. So, I knew how to do the classical dance, and when we got here, there were people who were asking about what Burmese dance was like. So, I was able to dance and show them, and my mother had made the dance outfit for me, and so forth. Back home, you have a certain bias against entertainers and performers, and so, I wasn't allowed to do that. And all the dance lessons were done in the kitchen, where my father wouldn't see me. [CHUCKLE] But here, you were valued for that skill. And also, I was able to organize groups and teach people about cooking the food in Burma, and so forth. And I think that really opened my eyes, that you know, people here are valued for anything that you can do.

And when you grow up anywhere, you tend to have stereotypes about other cultures. What were some of the conclusions you made, based on the people you met? What changed in terms of your thinking about other cultures?

Well, that we all had commonalities. We all like similar things, and we can enjoy each other based on those, even if there are differences. And some of the differences are so minor that it didn't matter. Yeah.

Appreciation for the skills set that each individual can contribute to the community is felt every day in Chinatown at the Pacific Gateway Center, as this nonprofit organization guides and nurtures participants. Under the award-winning leadership of Dr. Tin Myaing Thein, the Pacific Gateway Center assists Hawaii's immigrants, refugees, and low income residents with opportunities to realize their own dreams of success. In an upcoming episode of Long Story Short, we'll learn about Dr. Thein's lifelong friendship with Burmese Opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi. Thank you, Tin Myaing Thein, for sharing your long story short. And thank you for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou, 'til next time. Aloha.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org.

Well, Burma has a very strange shape; it's like a kite with a tail. And it's right next to Thailand, south of China, and on the west we have India. So, we are squeezed between the giants. And we were under the British for about a hundred years, and then the Japanese came, and we were under the occupation of the Japanese for a number of years. And then, the war ended in 1945, which meant that, life would return normal. And up in the Shan Plateau, there was a hill station which the British had occupied and set up schools there. So, we went to live there; my grandfather was the mayor of that town. And so, I think the happiest memories of our lives were in that town. It was called Kalaw.