

Sharukh Afsheen - Early Years in Burma

Two brothers of the Khorasanee family, my father, Mohd Ameen and his elder brother, Mohd Ali, got married to two sisters of the Ispahany family. My mother Khorsheed and my aunt Shereen. They got married in my maternal grandfather's mansion in Sandwith Road, Rangoon in 1935. I was born in July 1936 and my cousin Enver was born a year later to my aunt and uncle. As fate would have it, Enver happened to be together almost throughout our lives. It seems to have happened without any deliberate planning. Moving from Burma to India to Karachi to Iran and finally to the west. In this journey together, we actually experienced several years of World War in Burma, insurrection and communal riots in India, a great revolution in Iran and finally a revolt against Mrs Thatcher in the West.

A couple of years before the start of the war in Burma, my father and his elder brother had planned to settle in Iran; they agreed that my father should go first and the families would follow once he was well settled. Mohd Ali the elder brother, who was teaching accountancy in a college, would look after the family that Mohd Ameen had left behind.

My father left according to plan. Iran had a system of a conscripted army; every youth had to serve for 18 months. A few people who went from Burma to Iran decided to avoid conscription by any means, my father, however, decided honourably to serve his country saying "I will serve my country" and dutifully served out his term. My father used to recite the lines:

'I would not love thee, dear so much,

Loved I not honour more!'

He told me that the army in Iran was run almost like a fiefdom; and it was not unusual for senior officers to use physical force to enforce discipline. Since he knew the English language well, his commander requested him to teach his wife English as part of serving his term. My father was a handsome man and who knows what temptations came his way during these years. However, since he was a poet he composed a sonnet apparently reassuring his wife:

Reassurance

They spoke to me of one with alien grace,

That like a moon afloat on dark clouds came,

And men drew near as moths approach a flame,

Content to lose this world for one embrace.

And I was told her eye-caressing face,

Her wayward laughter, and her fragrant name

Had helped her in the old, alluring game

Of making men run faster in the chase.

If she should play on me this ancient ruse,

And try with that same beckoning smile of hers,

To blur the memories of our mingled sighs,

I know that I should turn aside, refuse

Those lips that lure men, since my heart prefers

Your tender kisses and your trusting eyes.

The war had started in Europe and my father had to rush back to his family in Burma before it became difficult to travel out of Iran.

World War broke out in Europe in 1938; we in Burma were not affected. From 1940 we began to feel unease and were questioning the motives of the Japanese. There was a realisation that life would become difficult for us.

My maternal grandfather had passed away some years earlier. My grandmother's cousins, Mehdi Shooshtry and John Asghar called on her to discuss the situation about the impending war; they felt conditions were becoming too risky and that the Iranian community should be prepared for the worst. They had bamboo houses built for each family on a large field. This would ensure we would be all together in one place. My uncles knew some Shia Muslims in the town of Prome and suggested we rent a house and stay near them.

A few years earlier my father, his sister Shireen and my paternal grandparents had gone to Iran. Because of the unsettled situation in the subcontinent, they decided to return to Burma via Calcutta, as their younger children were still there. When they reached Calcutta our relatives there prevailed upon them not to proceed to Rangoon as the situation there was very grave. My father Mohd Ameen, nevertheless decided to go back to his family.

My aunt Shereen, wrote a few lines about those times, 'while memory serves':

"On December 3rd 1941, Ameen Bhai arrived from Iran after doing 2 years conscription. Khorsheed, Sharukh and Shahnaz's joy knew no bounds; he brought a big toy ship for Sharukh and a big doll for Shahnaz. All of us were equally relieved as there were many rumours of war breaking out. At last, on 7th December 1941, a day which I can never ever forget, war broke out

in Burma and the East. Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor! Lo and behold the war was on our doorstep now. I felt sorry for Ameen Bhai who had come home with hopes of a good rest.

We and Ameen Bhai and family left our Sandwith Road house for Prome; as the car started to leave the house, I turned to have a last look at our house where we had lived for 41 years and felt in my bones that we'll never return to this house again. My soul will always be in that house."

Throughout this period, several months before the war started, a cloud of gloom hung over our community and probably over the whole Rangoon society. The administration of the city had broken down. This fear of war had a very distressing effect, especially seeing our elders in such a state, the situation was out of their control; it was very debilitating for us younger children. I, for one, would get a frightening dream of an overpowering, huge, all consuming entity coming towards me; this dream would terrify me - a feeling of being pulled into a frightful nothingness. For a long time I couldn't sleep properly at nights. Many years later whenever I felt stress, this dream reoccurred.

The Japanese bombed Rangoon on the 24th and 25th of December 1941. Things in Burma were taking a critical turn and the Japanese marched into Burma.

We immediately made preparations to leave Rangoon for Prome, where Shia families came to receive us and helped us to disembark. We spent Ashura Day in Prome and these very poor Shia people of Prome prepared a delicious meal consisting only of chutney and rice.

When Rangoon was invaded by Japanese troops, the people of Prome advised us to join our own people in Langwa, where Mehdi Shooshtry and all our community had gathered. The people of Prome were planning to evacuate to the hills and felt the newcomers wouldn't be able to stand such hardship.

We had to organise ourselves for evacuation urgently. We took what we could; mainly clothes and some essentials like a few pots and pans, the little money we had and the family jewellery.

The jewellery was placed in a narrow strip of cloth and wrapped around the waist, a task undertaken by the women folk.

The Japanese were getting the upper hand over the British in Burma. Each time the British were beaten back they would announce 'retreating according to plan'. The cities were being bombed incessantly by fighter planes. This spread panic among the public and subsequently all administration in Rangoon was in disarray. The Japanese army finally pushed out British and occupied Burma.

Just before the Japanese entered Rangoon, around 1942, some of our community went to Mandalay and then on to Calcutta. Others like our family decided not to leave Burma but to set up camp in small villages in the hinterland to escape the bombing. This was also because my maternal grandmother didn't want to travel to India. I was pleased because my cousin Enver stayed back with us