

Story of those who stayed back in Burma

By Sharukh Afsheen

We, our immediate family comprising of my parent, my grandmother, my uncle and aunt and their child, who decided to stay back in Burma, had to flee Rangoon into the interior, having to travel on bullock carts and sailing boats in search of suitable and safer villages – across the paddy fields, over the hills and sometimes into the jungles.

Whenever it became unbearable to stay in one village due to consistent bombing or threat of dacoits and bandits, we had to seek out other township and hamlet, where we felt it would be safer; we had to move, as they say, lock stock and barrel like gypsies.

First we went by train to a small town Prome near Mandalay where we had a few of our relations; we stayed there for a short period and then had to leave for Langwa village; there we found the Japanese had chosen to camp near the village, which made it an easy target for the dive bombers, so soon we had to leave that village; from there by sail boat, almost as small as 'sampans', to a township called Daway-in; from Daway-in we went on bullock carts through dirt lanes back to Langwa; in each of the villages a number of our relatives died due to malaria, typhoid and jungle fever; but in Langwa we faced much more tragic deaths – we lost some 22 members of the community – mostly the young.

While in Twante village, about over two hundred planes flew over us, going towards Rangoon, which was across the Twante River. The allied planes were bombing heavily and we could feel the tremour all night across the river where we were. One day in Twante we were feeling very low and depressed. That night again, from across the river we heard heavy bombing. The next morning we were taking a walk along the river and suddenly we saw several boats full of people coming towards us. All the folks in Kamayut Camp had undergone torrential bombing the previous night and so swiftly they all decided to evacuate to Twante. Foreseeing what would definitely be required, we had rented a wooden house just for such an emergency. We had to accommodate our cousins' families; among them was our elderly aunt; she had lost two strapping young 17 and 18 years old sons from malarial fever.

One of the villages we went to was Langwa; we journeyed to Langwa by a Rangoon-Mandalay train, and then travelled by bullock cart. We went there to get the help and support from a prominent Indian Muslim gentleman who was known to the community.

Sardar Sahib; he and his family had been settled there for a long time. Sardar, during the conflict between the British and the Burmese, Sahib's grandfather and brother had captured the Burmese King; therefore Queen Victoria presented them with sizable acres of land in Burma and

honoured him with a title of 'Sardar'; he ruled like a king there and had built a house which looked like a castle.

Sardar Sahib, a most compassionate soul! He kindly provided us with a plot of land on his grounds, and helped us build our bamboo huts with thatched roofs; the huts were built on stilts about four feet high to avoid flooding, and to protect us against animal, snakes and scorpions creeping in; once when my uncle was in the toilet a small snake crept in; he froze with fright and sat still without breathing, and the snake moved stealthily over his feet and moved on. We came to know about it when we heard a most frightful scream from the toilet.

The hut had a long passage with a few rooms on each side of the passage; there was a small cubicle of a room that was used as a toilet, with a hole at one end for doing 'poo'; and the hole was directly above a bucket on the ground. Of course we had to use 'Machardani' mosquito nets which were put over the rough mattress laid on the floor.

A little distance away from the camp we dug two deep wells to be used as septic tanks to throw human wastes.

Some members built enclosures under the houses between the stilts to breed hens – mainly to eat fresh and free eggs for breakfast; I clearly recall the most appetising and delicious aroma of fresh and uncontaminated organic taste of newly hatched cooked eggs; to this day I have been unable to get such fresh taste in eggs; was it the illusive taste found only in the appetite and palate of youth? That was the small mercy of luxury!

I remember every morning my father made me go down to check if there were any eggs laid; if there were none, I was then to test the hen by putting my finger into their butts to examine as to how long it would take to lay the eggs. I became quite an expert in predicting how many more minutes we would have to wait for the delivery; and then start our breakfast.

In the villages we had about 13 separate households; 13 individual bamboo huts comprised our 'Camp'. The huts were built on a rectangular plot: with about 30 yards open space in the middle; three or four huts on each side and a passage at one of the corners – a muddy route to the main road.

We built bomb shelters: long rectangular 'trenches,' behind each hut; about five and half feet deep, covered with corrugated tin sheets or bamboo covered over with foliage as camouflage; the entrance was at one end of the trench with steps leading into it. The trench was always damp and cold, and smelt of wet earth; old rugs provided as ground cover. Some kept lanterns inside their trenches. Each household always had ready a bundle containing their bare necessity,

including a set of clothes, just in case the house was bombed or one had to do a run for one's life; prepared not for fight but flight!

Every now and then the eerie siren would scream alerting us of one oncoming air raid. It was frightful, and as usual we all rushed and scrambled into the trench. Once we were in the trench, all the women folk and a few men would start praying; and the closer the planes came the louder the prayers. We would put our hands on our ears, and when it got very bad we would shiver with fright and put our heads between our legs in despair, just waiting for the bombs to land and blast. How we looked forward to the all clear signal! Even till today if I happen to hear a sudden siren screech, I will initially get a little edgy, or even if a tyre burst I would jump.

Once in the middle of the night when the siren sounded my parents ran into the trench; my mother shouted that they had forgotten the children; so my father rushed back to the hut and grabbed both me and my sister and quickly ran back; in his haste in the dark he banged his eye against the door; for a moment he went blank but then got up and took us into the trench. Since then he developed a cataract in the injured eye.

Having left one's home and hearth and the security of normal times, we felt very vulnerable and helpless in these alien surroundings; I remember once we were in a desperate situation, I have forgotten what exactly it was, but I felt we were in despair, and in that state of anguish I told my father "what about Sardar Sahib for help?". It is such a consolation to know that there is someone to turn to for solace, guidance and help when needed. He had resources and would invariably solve our problems.

At that time the magic insecticide DDT was discovered, and we managed to lay our hands on some cans and sprayed it around the hut to kill mosquitoes and cockroaches; the dead cockroaches were being eaten by the cats, and the cats would get poisoned and die; the reduction in the cats population would increase the production of mice. You cannot win!