Excerpt from a new ebook *Burma My Mother: And Why I Had To Leave*

by Sao Khemawadee Mangrai

(Sao Khemawadee Mangrai married Sao Hso Hom in 1959 in a big wedding attended by all the chiefs of the Shan states in the north of the country, called Burma at that time. Here she describes what it was like for her, a young mother of two, when her husband was taken away to prison without warning, for a period which would last five years.)

In 1960 at the age of twenty-five, Hom was elected by the Shan state council to represent the Shan state of Mong Pawn in the Chamber of the Nationalities. He was also a member of the Shan state Legislative Council which held its meetings in Taunggyi, in the southern Shan state. That same year he was chosen by the Chamber of Nationalities to study federal government systems and attend the United Nations Assembly to hear an address to the Assembly by Cuba's leader, Fidel Castro, which lasted six hours.

Hom's uncle, Sao Hkun Hkio, was the head of the Shan state, and Hom's brother Kai served as private assistant to his uncle. At an all-states conference in Taunggyi in 1961, Hom became a member of a constitutional reform committee.

Our second baby was born in January 1962 at the same SDA hospital where my first child Seng had been born. The name of our second daughter, Sao Orawan, translates as 'beautiful heart'. But we called her 'Ouie' at home as she was a plump baby. She weighed 6 lbs and would grow to be a chubby little girl with a fringe and two little plaits. But when she was only three months old, her father was taken away to be placed under detention.

On 2 March 1962 there was another coup d'etat when General Ne Win took over through force of arms the rule of the country from the former legally elected parliament. It called itself a 'revolutionary' government. All Shan ministers, members of parliament and the heads of various departments of the Shan states were arrested and placed in detention as 'honoured guests of the government'. The ministers and MPs from all fourteen divisions had come down to Rangoon, the capital at that time, for a parliamentary session. The general had given orders for his officers to round up all the ministers and MPs from the various places where they usually stayed when there was a parliamentary session. A total of forty-three men were taken to Ye Gyi Aing, an improvised interrogation centre where several buildings were secured by barbed wire. Later they were transferred to Insein, Burma's largest correctional prison, where two long, double-storey buildings surrounded by barbed wire had been built to house them.

The political prisoners were assigned to live inside the annexe next to the prison in those two long buildings as well as a building furthest from the main gate which had previously housed criminals sentenced to life imprisonment. Each long building housed twenty-two prisoners. There was a house in between the two buildings where the first Burmese president after the country gained independence, Sao Shwe Thaike (who was also the chief of Yawng Hwe and had become the speaker of the house), was placed on the upper floor to live alone. There were another two specially built small houses where the Burmese foreign minister, Sao Hkun Hkio, who was Hom's uncle and also head of the Shan states, and the chief of the Karreni state, Sao Wunna, were incarcerated for six years. After Hom's uncle was arrested, within seven days his English wife Mabel was ordered to leave Burma for England by the military government.

My father's third-youngest brother who was the police chief for Kengtung state, and my mother's cousin, Sao Kyar Zone, who was Shan state secretary, were also among those imprisoned.

After about a month interrogating the Shan members of parliament and others imprisoned, the military intelligence decided to come for Hom. He knew they would come sooner or later. Two military intelligence officers

came in a Volkswagen 'Beetle' which was minus a door. The two approached me and said they had come to take Hom away for questioning, and I told them he was seeing my aunt off at the central station. They replied that they could wait until Hom arrived home. They also said I should pack a bedroll and some clothes and toilet requisites for him. I was so upset I didn't know where to begin. We were so used to travelling that we had a canvas bedroll at hand. So, together with a blanket, a pillow and towel, I packed singlets, shirts, underpants and *longyis* (sarongs worn by Burmese men similar to Indian attire) for Hom to take to prison. I had fried some dried prawns and chillies which I put in an empty jar. Another jar was used for roasted Shan tealeaves. I don't normally get flustered, but I felt very anxious. The officers said Hom would be away for a while. I couldn't have known that 'a while' would mean five years!

Hom was placed in the back seat of the car. He didn't show any emotion as he was led away. He just went along quietly; he didn't even look back, perhaps thinking that he'd be away just a few days.

My elder daughter was aged two years and three months and my younger daughter just three months old when Hom was taken away. They couldn't understand what had happened to their father. Towards evening, friends and relatives had heard about Hom's arrest and came over to visit me and offer some comfort. My sister-in-law came to stay with us, bringing an overnight bag with her. She was single and still studying at the university. Hom's younger brother Kai also came over to stay, and my younger brother Bunny was already staying with us. The next evening John Watson from the Australian embassy and Joan Frank from the British Council library stopped their car at the top of our road and walked down our little lane, carrying a box of tinned provisions and a carton of books on their shoulders so that I could send these to Hom.

In the beginning we were allowed to send food and books. Later on, books were prohibited. *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines were provided for inmates in the gaol. At first the detainees were given breakfast, mid-morning drinks, lunch and dinner. But after a month or so, the government ordered that all prisoners, regardless of whether they were political or criminal, would be

treated in the same way, and only two meals were to be dispensed. However, we, the wives of the detainees, were allowed once a fortnight to write letters and send our husbands money (worth about $25 in Burmese currency at that time). We would also give them toilet requisites or whatever small items the prisoners had asked for in letters. My two girls and I would walk to the war office carrying some money, a letter and whatever Hom had asked for in his last letter. With the money that I sent, Hom would ask the lance corporal in charge to buy pork, bananas and vegetables.

Hom learnt how to cook, taught by an older MP who was a vegetarian. The lance corporal would make a list of the food items needed and would go to the market nearest the gaol to buy them. He eventually married the bazaar seller who thought he was rich, being able to buy so much.

Every fortnight when I went to the war office, my girls, Seng and Orawan, would come along. I would say, 'Let's send these letters to Hpa Hpa' (the name meaning father and chief). One day the sergeant who accepted the letters was not there, and Orawan said, 'Hpa Hpa is not here.' She didn't know who her father was. I felt sick when I realised it.

Excerpt ends. 1312 words