

A Tribute to Maung Thaw Ka

Remembering one of the heroes of Myanmar's democracy movement, who died a political prisoner—and a true patriot

By BERTIL LINTNER / YANGON

It is generally assumed that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's first public appearance was at the Shwedagon Pagoda on Aug. 26, 1988, when hundreds of thousands of people came to hear her speak. But she had actually appeared in public two days before that historic event. On Aug. 24, she stood on a makeshift platform outside Yangon General Hospital, made a brief speech and announced that a rally would be held at the Shwedagon. A photograph taken at the time shows her with a microphone in hand, some curious nurses looking out through a window in the hospital—and a tall man in a striped shirt and with a slightly bent back standing behind her. Beside her is a young woman, the famous film actress Khin Thida Htun.

The man in the striped shirt was Maung Thaw Ka, a well-known writer who, together with the journalist and editor U Win Tin and film director U Moe Thu, had persuaded Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to become involved in the movement for democracy. After the military had gunned down thousands of demonstrators on Aug. 8-10, the movement needed a leader, a voice that everyone could rally behind. Maung Thaw Ka, U Win Tin and U Moe Thu went to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. They knew Gen. Aung San's daughter was in town because they had seen her picture in the paper, laying a wreath on her father's grave on Martyrs' Day, July 19. They were not sure, however, that she could speak Myanmar. She had been abroad for many years and, in her native

country, few outside the immediate family knew her.

But it was worth a try and the three intellectuals ventured over to her house on University Avenue. It soon became clear to them that her spoken Myanmar was excellent. But she was not interested. She had come back only to nurse her ailing mother, Gen. Aung San's widow Daw Khin Kyi, she said. The trio persisted and paid a second visit to University Avenue. This time she agreed. She realized that as her father's daughter, she could not remain silent when the country was in upheaval. The rest is history.

U Win Tin is still active, writing, making speeches and giving interviews to journalists despite his advanced age. He will turn 85 on March 12. U Moe Thu is making a movie about Gen. Aung San together with Zagarnar. But Maung Thaw Ka passed away on June 11, 1991, shortly before his 63rd birthday. He was a dear friend of mine and I met him in Yangon when I was there in February 1989, my last visit to the country until my name was taken off the blacklist in 2012.

In the late 1980s, he had a small photo shop near the Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon, where he sold film and people could have Photostat copies made. We spent a couple of days together, and he gave me a vivid account of the massive demonstrations that had shaken Yangon less than half a year before. And he took me around Yangon in his car, a small pickup truck, to see the places where the killings had taken place.



We became good friends, and without Maung Thaw Ka's help I would never have been able to write my account of the uprising, "Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy."

Maung Thaw Ka was actually his penname. He was born Ba Thaw in 1928 in Shwebo. His other name was Nur Marmed. He and his family were Muslims, and that was not an issue when he, U Win Tin and U Moe Thu, two Buddhists, went to see Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in August 1988. It was before some fanatics began to try to drive wedges between people of different faiths.

In 1947, a year before independence, he joined the navy as a cadet. He was later promoted to commander of the Myanmar Navy's ship 103. That was going to change his life forever. While patrolling the southeastern coastline of Myanmar in November 1956, the ship sank. Lieutenant Ba Thaw, as he was then known, and 26 of his crew escaped in two rubber life rafts. One of those with nine men onboard was never seen again. The others were rescued by a passing Japanese ship 12 days later. By then, seven of the 18 men in Ba Thaw's raft were dead, and another died on the Japanese ship.



MIHAN ANKOS/PHOTO

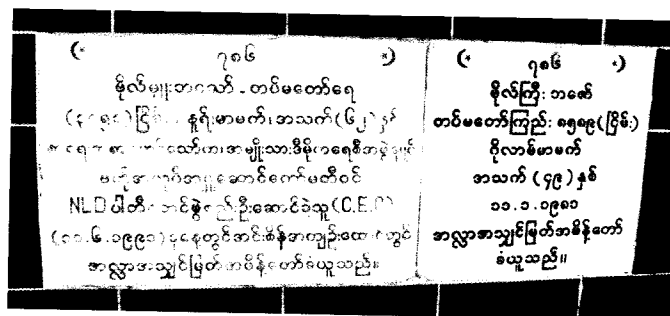


PHOTO: BERTEL LINTNER

Left: Maung Thaw Ka standing beside Daw Aung San Suu Kyi when she gave her first public speech on a makeshift platform at Yangon General Hospital on Aug. 24, 1988. The famous actress Khin Thida Htun is standing on the far right.

Above: Maung Thaw Ka's grave (beside his brother's grave) in the Sunni cemetery in Yangon.

After that tragedy, Lt. Ba Thaw left the navy and became Maung Thaw Ka the writer. The first book he authored was called "Taikyeyin 103," or "Battleship 103." It was a gripping account of the shipwreck and the crew's struggle to survive on the open sea. He wrote short stories and poems and translated Shakespeare, John Donne and Percy Bysshe Shelley into Myanmar. He was also the translator of William Cowper's "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk," verses about the Scottish seaman who was shipwrecked on an island in the Pacific, and on whose life Daniel Defoe based his famous novel Robinson Crusoe.

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Socialist Programme Party, he got away with it. He was after all a national hero because of his background in the navy and then, of course, Battleship 103. Some of his satires were collected as "Ya Ma Kar Lu Lin," or "The Alcoholic." What appeared to be the ranting of a drunkard were, in reality, biting criticism of the corrupt, established order. Sometimes he was blunter. In her "Letters from Burma," Daw Aung San Suu Kyi recalls: "On being told that a fellow writer believed in ghosts, Hsaya [teacher] Maung Thaw Ka riposted: 'He believes in anything, he even believes in the Burma Socialist Programme Party!'"

Maung Thaw Ka became one of the members of the Central Executive Committee of the National League for Democracy when it was set up on Sept. 27, 1988. And like all the other pro-democracy leaders, he was arrested when intelligence chief Gen. Khin Nyunt cracked down on the movement in July 1989. He was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment with hard labor. His "crime"? He had tried to "split the armed forces," the judge said. He had actually written a letter to his old friends in the navy asking for their support and urging them not to take part in the killings of unarmed demonstrators.

Maung Thaw Ka was badly beaten during his interrogation, which made his rather frail physical condition worse. He already suffered from spondylitis, or inflammation of the vertebra, which he had contracted while drifting around in that life raft in 1956 and had left him with a bent spine.

According to the official version, Maung Thaw Ka became "unwell" and was transferred to hospital, where he died. But one of his former fellow inmates in Insein Jail tells a different story. Maung Thaw Ka was already dead when his body was taken to hospital. He had been kept in a barren cell without food following his support for a hunger strike among the political prisoners in Insein. It would have looked very bad if a well-respected person like him had died on the concrete floor in his cell, so the authorities had to come up with a blatant lie. Maung Thaw Ka was, in fact, murdered.

Maung Thaw Ka was laid to rest in the Sunni cemetery in Yangon, beside his brother Ba Zaw, or Gholan Marmed, a captain in the infantry who had died from natural causes in 1980. The cemetery was swarming with military intelligence agents when Maung Thaw Ka's coffin was brought there in 1991. During my last visit to Myanmar, I went to Maung Thaw Ka's grave to pay my respects to him, a dear friend, a brilliant mind—and a true Myanmar patriot. ■



Bertil Lintner is a veteran writer on Myanmar.