

# The Story of Nan Saw Kyi

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Nan Saw Kyi (နန်းစောကြည်) was born in 1922 in Mogaung (မိုးကောင်း), south of Myitkyina along the Mandalaya-Myitkyina railroad. Mogaung is an old town, the name of which supposedly dates to the 12th century. Having once been under the rule of one of the Shan Sawbwa(s), it became a crown administrative unit during the Konbaung dynasty when King Badon implemented the *myowun* administrative system. Nan Saw Kyi was the child of prosperous

middle-class parents who encouraged their daughter's education and often assertive ways. Nonetheless, they were traditional enough to insist on an arranged marriage, though Nan Saw Kyi was already 30 years old when she married. Her husband would become a member of the Do Bar Mar Association, and prefixed the honorific Thakin to his name. As strong-willed as his bride, and the prosperous manager of a rice mill, he became a prominent activist in the independence movement who tolerated and encouraged his wife's political and social work. Two children were born to Nan Saw Kyi, a boy and a girl who, during the war, given their parents' multiple involvement, were cared for by Nan Saw Kyi's elder sister.

As a young woman, Nan Saw Kyi was active in the anti-colonial movement, eager to participate in the struggles to attain her country's independence, but also relishing the unsettled times enabling her to assert her own independence. While a pupil, she met a girl who was a year or two older than herself. The two became intimate friends, promising each other not to marry before the country gained independence. The friend was Khin Ohn Mya (ခင်အုန်းမြ), later known as the Florence Nightingale of Burma, a title bestowed upon her by the world Red Cross Society in 1963. She was the first Myanmar person to achieve this distinction, given to her in recognition of her dedication and the medical treatment she offered to Allied and Japanese soldiers (all victims of war in her view). She eventually became a military nurse in the Myanmar Army, retiring with the rank of a major in the Burmese Army and senior advisor at the Military Hospital 1 of the Myanmar Army.

Both girls were familiar with the Red Cross organization and wished to form a similar organization in Mogaung. They invited other girls to join, one of them Set-Nyunt (စက်ညွန့်). Childhood friendships were transformed into deep personal and associational bonds, encouraged by the girls' spirited dedication and their society's sudden and unprecedented needs. Nan Saw Kyi no longer remembered the others who joined the enterprise, for it was all so long ago.

For their training space, the group used the first floor of Khin Ohn Mya's house. While Khin Ohn Mya's parents were at work, the girls practiced basic military training drills. By 1940, they had formed a team of Red Cross volunteers and were recognized as such by the townspeople.

By 1942, British and Indian refugees arrived at Mogaung by train from Mandalay. Nan Saw Kyi and other Red Cross members provided them with fresh water, fruit, vegetables, and other foodstuffs. Refugees were also suffering from diarrhea and smallpox, for which they were also treated by the team's members. The Red Cross girls built shelters for the new arrivals wherever space allowed, even under the trees, and helped organize rest houses to serve as public stay places. That same year, the Burma Independent Army (BIA) arrived at Mogaung. A young lieutenant, Phone Myint (ဘုန်းမြင့်), became leader of the girls' Red Cross team. What became of Phone Myint is unknown. But the assignment of an army officer to head the Red Cross team constituted official recognition of the group's importance. It transformed what had been a voluntary and unofficial undertaking by a group of friends into an organized unit under the army's umbrella.

When the Japanese occupation commenced in 1942, five or sometimes eight members of the original Red Cross team continued their activities, aiding all those in need, regardless of whether the casualties were sick civilians, Burmese fighters for independence, or Japanese soldiers. The better-organized Japanese army opened a Japanese military hospital on a nearby hill called U Man Taung (ဦးမန်းတောင်), east of Mogaung about three miles away from Pinhme (ပင်မိ) village. The latter was turned into a Japanese stronghold. The hospital was composed of four sections: a dispensary and outdoor patients unit, a medical ward, an operation theater, and an infectious diseases ward. Everything was brought in to equip the hospital, including patients' beds, medicine, bandages, food, and staff.

Nan Saw Kyi, Khin Ohn Mya, and two other members of the group, all by then about 20 years old, volunteered as nurses. This they did despite the objection of their families

and acquaintances, who tried to prevent them from helping the Japanese. But the girls persevered in acting upon their convictions in spite of societal disapproval. In so doing, they disregarded parental injunctions to avoid the hospital, asserting their own judgments and inclinations against their parents' advice. Nan Saw Kyi's father and mother were concerned that their daughter was trading the relative safety of her domicile for the frantic and often unsafe conditions of the hospital. Furthermore, the Japanese occupiers by then had acquired a bad reputation for their treatment of locals, from rudeness to unimaginable cruelty. But Nan Saw Kyi persevered, convinced that her solicitude and skills were needed, and that all patients, no matter which side they were fighting on, deserved care. By doing so, she applied, seemingly seamlessly, traditional Myanmar medicine and what she had by then learned about Western medicine. The former she learned at home, the latter on the job.

In the first week of June 1944, the Allied ground forces attacked Pinhme village. The hill where the hospital was located also came under heavy shelling as artillery and air bombing rained over the village and its surroundings. The hospital was badly damaged, as Allied infantry units breached hospital defenses and overcame resistance even from sick Japanese soldiers lying in the hospital beds. Many patients were killed in the Allies' attack, but also when they turned themselves into suicide bombers in a desperate and futile attempt to stem the Allies' offensive.

What was left of what had once been the hospital was moved south by the Japanese to another village, Taung-paw (တောင်ပေါ်). Four of the original volunteer nurses remained on duty and resumed their routine activities. But non-stop bombings, air raids, and constant machine-gun fire made their work impossible and the four volunteer nurses abandoned their posts. Nan Saw Kyi returned home to Mogaung, moving subsequently with her parents to Ye-shin (ရှေ့ရှင်) village north of Mogaung. The village was occupied by the Allies and became a safe haven for native refugees. Khin Ohn Mya moved to Lwe-law (လွဲလော) village. Where the two

other nurses ended up is unknown. An Allied hospital hastily opened in Ye-shin, but Nan Saw Kyi did not work in it. Meanwhile, the entire region was in terrible disarray as people fled their villages seeking safety. Nyaung-dauk-gyi (ညောင်ထောက်ကြီး), Ahtet-ye-shin (အထက်ရှေ့ရှင်), and Auk-ye-shin (အောက်ရှေ့ရှင်) villages were all affected by the fighting. This prompted refugees to flee south from Mogaung to Man-pin (မန်ပင်), Lwe-law (လွဲလော), and Kya-inn-taung-paw (ကြာအင်းတောင်ပေါ်).

By 1945, Nan Saw Kyi was working as an assistant nurse at the Myitkyina hospital, all the while continuing her participation in the struggle for Burmese independence. She organized the Maternal and Child Care Association at Mogaung in 1953, and served as secretary or president in the association until 2004. She was also a faithful participant in the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs—the activism of her youth and the wartime having transformed into more peaceful but equally significant interventions in later years.

Now at the age of 93, she is honorable patron of Mogaung Township, the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, and the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs. In 1991, she received a medal of honor from the Myanmar Red Cross. Another medal for Outstanding Performances in the Social Field (Third Class) for the year 1999 was conferred upon her by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in April 2000. Her life has been continuously dedicated to fostering the welfare of her townspeople, especially the women and children of Mogaung regardless of social standing or wealth, and encouraging young women to do benevolent work on behalf of their fellow citizens.

As indomitable and strong as ever, Nan Saw Kyi continues to participate in local activities, supporting social work and contributing her valuable advice, grounded in a lifetime of experience under the most trying circumstances. She is also a leading patron of the primary, middle, and high schools, as well as of the town's Buddhist associations. The latter is a reflection of a lifelong affiliation, begun in the early years when bedtime stories at days' end were invariably derived



from the tales of the Buddha's many lives. The crucible of the war years that fostered Nan Saw Kyi's generation left its imprint on their postwar lives. Their experiences sustained their professionalism, activism, and societal involvements in traditional and non-traditional women's spheres. Nan Saw Kyi's biography is the story of how calamitous circumstances evoking non-traditional behavior broadened the parameters of female endeavors when the heroines of Myanmar's struggle for independence adjusted to the changing life circumstances in postwar Myanmar.

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