

## **Myra Kawthoolei, a Refugee from Burma, Recounts Her Journey From the Jungles of Burma to Life in a Boarding House in Long Island City**

This past year, Myra Kawthoolei was granted asylum in the United States. Although she is now in her early thirties, Myra's recent asylum status marks the first time in her life that she has been able to claim lawful residency in any country. Myra was born to Burmese parents in Burma (now officially the Union of Myanmar), but her family's ethnic identity was not tolerated by Burmese government authorities. After being orphaned by fighting forces as a very young child and suffering many dislocations in Burma, Myra was forced to flee to Thailand where she lived for many years as an illegal refugee, before finally escaping to the United States.

Myra and her family were members of the Karen ethnic group. As one of Burma's largest minority ethnic groups, the Karen people have been targeted for armed violence and ethnic cleansing by Burmese government authorities for many decades. An estimated 200,000 Karen have been driven from their homes as a result of violent conflict, and over 100,000 Karen people now live in refugee camps on the Thai side of the border.

Myra doesn't know exactly when she was born. She guesses 1976. She remembers being told by her mother that she was born during the rainy season, and since the rainy season in Burma usually begins at the start of July, Myra has given herself July 3<sup>rd</sup> as her birthday.

Myra's earliest memory of her childhood is riding on the back of water buffalos in the irrigation canals on her family's farm in a small and remote village in Burma, where she lived the first few years of her life with her parents, her two older brothers and her older sister. Myra's parents were poor farmers. Her father also served as a Karen National Union soldier:

*Most of the time he would be at the front line, coming home once in a while, few times a year, but mostly he was in the front line.*

Sadly, Myra's clearest memory of her father is his death, and her not being allowed to attend his burial. He was shot and killed on the front line.

### **Hiding in the Jungle**

Most of Myra's early childhood involved constant moving, in and out of the jungle, with her family and other Karen families, hiding from Burmese government troops. When they felt safe enough for brief

periods of time to reside out of the jungle, Myra's mother found work as a farm hand. Myra has fond memories of helping her mother pick and box tea leaves on a tea farm. She also remembers having to help build, over and over again, the simple bamboo hut her family lived in:

*And if we're lucky we get to stay there for quite some time, but a lot of times the military troops came up, run into the village, burning houses and all these things, so if that is the case then we have to leave. Because a lot of times, after they burn the houses, they took away whatever they want to take. Then they planted the mines and all these things all over in the village, around the village, so we can't really come back, so we have to build up another village from the very beginning.*

When government troops forced them back into hiding in the jungle, Myra remembers some of what life was like then as well:

*All I remember was my mom carried me in a bag, a woven bag. The bag was woven by my mom and it's a white, big bag and I remember she carried me in the bag, hiding in the bushes, and I think sometimes, as far as I remember, sometimes they tried to tell me to be quiet. They sometimes literally shut my mouth, totally shut my mouth.*

*And I still remember we hide underneath the bush. And then oh, I don't know whether that is the Burmese army or the...which army. I don't remember who was dead anymore, but I have that little memory, a little bit. I don't really remember how old I was. That's all I remember, and I remember that we were starving a lot of times.*

*When we run, usually I don't know, all I see was a knife, a pot and some rice.*

*Yeah we were starving a lot of times. Sometimes we have very little rice. And for my siblings and I, we were a little too young to go to bed without food. So I remember my mom, my brother went to pick up very young bamboo shoots, and they brought it and then my mom make it into very tiny pieces and then she cooked it with rice and that's how we ate it. We ate a lot of bamboo shoots and a little bit of rice. And sometimes we really didn't get to eat anything. If we can come out from the bush, from hiding, then I remember my brother and my sister, they went down into a little lake where there is some kind of plant. I'm still looking for it until these days. I still couldn't find it. In the core, the marrow of the plant, there was like brownish paint. It looked so much like chocolate. And I remember it tastes, it tastes really good and I like it. That is what I'm still looking for it, until this day and I have no idea. I wish I could find that again. And yeah, I remember that is something that my younger brother and my sister fed me.*

*Oh yes, I remember sometimes we were, we didn't really get to the place where there is little stream or anything like that, but sometimes there was a little spring. And it was quite dirty, and sometimes animals pass by, walk by or so it's quite dirty. So a lot of times we just pick some kind of leaves, and then we try to collect the water into the leaves, let whatever dust sink underneath and then we drank the water. But sometimes we were quite lucky to get to a place where we can cut down bamboo, so what we can store some water, so that's how we store water. So we have bamboo and then we have the leaves, and we try to collect water little by little like that until the bamboo is filled, or sometimes we have time to fill it up so we fill it up and we try to sip it.*

*Rainwater we did have sometimes, too, and if it is raining, it was good at one point that we get water. But then it's not good for sleeping because we don't have any place to sleep. It's totally jungle, and there's another thing that I'm still trying to figure out how to call it. It's like big long plastic that we use to cover ourselves while we walk in the rain. It's not umbrella. We had no idea about umbrella. So it's like totally a big piece of plastic, but should have a specific name which I don't know. But so that is what we're using. So a lot of times we would try to sleep, one we put underneath on the ground, and we go on top of it. And then another one we put it on top of our body. For me, I was very tiny and short so it covers me, the whole body. But with older people, they have longer legs and the plastic wasn't even long enough to cover the legs so the head part is covered, but then the bottom part is wet.*

*So usually what we did was that when we, sometimes when it is sunny, people would go down to the river, and they would wash their clothes very fast and then they put it in the sun and then they stay in the water all day. Because it is embarrassing, it is embarrassing to come out, so they were in the water all day, and try to check okay if the clothes are getting dried as much as it could be and then they came out and they put it on, and then they go back in.*

### **The Long and Arduous Journey to a Safer Place**

After years of hiding and struggling to survive, Myra's mother finally decided to try to meet up with her husband's brother—Myra's uncle—who was then living on the Burmese/Thai border. Their journey to the uncle's home took many months:

*We travel at night, we stay in jungle and a lot of times we cannot really go because the enemies, the armies, are somewhere close by the route where we're going to go. So we have to stop a few days. Most of the time I was carried in the bag.*

*And it was rainy season. And it was really hard. As far as I remember, we barely get to see people. I mean villages. Mostly we were on the ground all the time, grabbing some kind of leaves here and there, some kind of roots. I don't remember having nice meals. As far as I remember, I think there was only two places that we go to eating in a real hut, but on the floor. Literally. I don't know how long it was. But eventually hiding, walking around, wandering around, waiting to get to another village, it took us forever.*

*I believe there was some soldiers who accompanied my mom, and I also believe probably my uncle sent someone to help us out. That is why I believe he has some kind of connection because my uncle is also some kind of commander in the Karen National Union Army, so I believe he had some kind of connection. That is why he sends someone to help us out. To take us through the whole journey.*

*A lot of times I was carried in the bag also because of the landmines. The soldier who go before us, he would know what would be on the road. So a lot of times he would say, "Okay, step on my footprints. Exactly my footprints." It was quite hard for my siblings because they were quite young, especially my sister, she couldn't really make such big steps. She couldn't really make it. So I remember a lot of times, the soldiers or those who travel with us had to carry her too. And we have, I think we have few other children that were in that journey. But I have no idea who they are anymore.*

*And if the soldier saw something unfamiliar or there might be a landmine, he made a mark so that we, the people of the group, could understand it, but nobody other would understand it. So it's like a secret code. I remember they put on little sticks, sometimes in shape of cross, sometimes triangle, sometimes like a whole ball of leaves. I don't know what do they mean, but those who have connections, they do understand what does that mean. Sometimes they put on the sign which says that the enemies is close, so turn that way. All those kind of codes.*

*A lot of times we were hiding, we couldn't go anywhere, so my brothers and my sister, we go down to the little lake, if they find it, and then would pick me those little brown plants.*

*And I remember, I don't know when that was, but all of sudden, raining season was over. And then we reached another village, which has a big, green rice field. And in a little hut, we were given some food, and there was very nice fresh water. All I remember was that the water was so clean.*

*And then I remember we were on the road again, traveling to the border, and I have no idea how did I get to the border. And I have no idea how did I get to my uncle's place. All I remember was that I was on the boat, and then there is my uncle's place.*

*So yeah, here we are. And I remember when was my first arrival, and my uncle bathed me in a big basin. And then I was given a little dress. I don't remember the color, but I was given a little dress.*

Life for Myra and her family was, for a time, much better:

*Eventually my mom has her own little house, but of course, she couldn't afford to have a wooden house. So again, we go back to bamboo house, but bigger, with two little rooms and then a little open space for sitting, and then a little kitchen. Of course everything was still bamboo again. And yeah those kind of houses could last about three years.*

*She worked. She worked on the farm. Mostly everyone in the village would help each other. You go to my farm, I go to your farm, we help each other until the whole thing is over and so that's how my mom, that's how we survived, that's how my mom did for the years when she was there. She was helped by others and she helped others.*

Life changed again for Myra when her mother decided to go visit her parents, whom she had not seen for a long while:

*All I know was that she went to visit my family's, I mean her relatives, her siblings back home in the village, and she was shot on the way. And she was brought back to my uncle, and we buried her. But I wasn't allowed to see. I mean I've got to see her face, but her face was fine. But I don't know where she was shot. I don't know which part of her body.*

### **Myra's Village is Burned to the Ground**

After her mother was killed, the situation grew worse for everyone in the village where Myra and her siblings lived along with their uncle. Government troops were approaching. The village elders decided that everyone would be wise to go into hiding:

*After my mum died, I was still with my uncle for a little while and, the situation I remember someone came and a man came over and said, "We're not safe over here. We have to move—we have to go further." So I remember walking for several hours. I remember we were going up a big, high hill and then down and then there were another valley. There was a valley where we set up a little camp. And we had quite a lot of people, but a lot of men stayed behind to bring over whatever they can bring from houses. So mostly men, at least one man in the family would stay behind and carry over stuff. Food or anything that we need.*

*And we were camping like that for days, but then eventually other men came over to our side. That was the very serious time. And, yes, eventually the army troops reach out to the camps, took whatever they want, they can, and then burned down the houses.*

*We were in that place for about two weeks. And I remember we cannot really cook during daytime because when we cook the smoke go out, and it goes really high. And then over there they know, the army, they could figure out where we were, and they can always shoot because they have bigger guns, stronger guns. So they can always shoot.*

*Especially during the time of fleeing, you forgot almost everything. So yeah, we were camping like that and, ah, all I remember was that older people they talk about how the houses will burn. And they were like, oh probably they might be taking everything already. Oh probably they might leave landmines behind. And actually they did.*

*Then everything seemed to be calmed down, we got some kind of news. So we came out from the camping. And I remember my aunt who recently got married. She went back to the village with her husband, and many other people. There was a land mine, and she was hit. So the whole left side of her leg was totally got into pieces and then she was really, really bleeding. And then she bled a lot, and then she was taken to the nearest village hospital. But then she lost too much blood, so she died before she got there. So that was the first death after that incident.*

*The whole village was burned down, nothing was left. I mean the animals that we had were shot, and they would just die all around over the ground and everything. Then later on they figure that no, this is not a safe place for the villagers to come back because the mines are around a lot especially children, because you don't know exactly where the mines are. So you have no idea what is going to go on, and who is going to get killed.*

*So eventually we didn't get to go back, and they tried to bring back many things as they can. They picked whatever they can. And so eventually I remember we had to start from scratch from the very beginning.*

*I don't even remember where were my siblings. I think my brother, my oldest brother, he went back to the village where I was born. And I think he got married. So, he didn't come back. So only one of my brothers and my sister were there, but I have no idea where was my brother and my sister. I'm pretty sure they were in the crowd, but I really don't have an idea.*

*Mostly I would stay with my uncle's family. They took care of me, and they fed me and all these things. But I didn't really view them as parents, I viewed them as my uncle and my aunt.*

### **Myra Goes to Live with her Grandparents in Thailand and Goes to School**

Eventually, Myra was taken, along with one brother, to live in her grandparents' home in the village of Pawpwaybawlu, in a remote region of Thailand near Manerplaw, where a Karen community was located at that time. Myra's sister was sent to live with other relatives in Burma and her older brother remained in Burma as well.

As Myra recalls, there was always a large number of children living in Myra's grandmother's home. In addition to Myra, her brother and several cousins, there were always 10 to 15 other children of different ages living there as well, many of whom were child soldiers. The Karen National Union was sending them to school until they were old enough to fight at the front.

Myra was thrilled to win a scholarship to continue her schooling. The scholarship was made possible through the efforts of some missionaries working on behalf of orphans who arranged for her to be "sponsored" by an American living in the United States. Myra never knew the identity of her generous benefactor, but she will always be grateful for the 2,000 to 2,500 baht she received each year in scholarship money (equivalent to roughly \$20) that made her schooling possible.

*I was with my grandma and by using my little money she bought at least a big bag of rice for the whole year and the rest of the money was for me. So it would be for my clothing, for my books, my school fees and all these things and also for my medical. I could live very easily for the 2,000 baht per year during those days.*

Myra fondly recalls the school uniform she wore every day—a white shirt and blue skirt. She sewed the uniform on her own, after her grandmother cut out the fabric for her. She received this annual scholarship money for eight years.

*It was about eight years and that is such a big help. It was such an amazing thing when I think about it. It was really amazing. And yeah, I went through it year by year like that.*

Myra always wanted to be a teacher.

*I loved to be a little teacher since I was a little girl. I remember being a Sunday school teacher since I was 13 years old. I worked with children, six- and seven-year-old children. I love telling stories, and*

*sometimes I run out of story and I just made it up myself. It was so funny. A lot of times my grandmother, my aunts, my uncle would tease me. Like, look she really wanted to be a teacher. And I thought about myself as a teacher during those days. And so if I were asked who I wanted to be, I wanted to be a teacher.*

### **Children Help Protect the Community**

Myra loved school, but her time as a student was often interrupted. Like all Karen youth in that region, she was expected to be of service to the Karen National Union. Like all able-bodied children, Myra was expected to help with the protection and security of the community. As summer approached and the risk of attack by Burmese government troops increased, all the children were marched off to the top of a nearby mountain to help fortify defenses and dig trenches, and to prepare food to be delivered to KNU fighting forces. The sides of the mountain were swathed in barbed wire and planted with land mines.

Myra still remembers narrowly avoiding being hit by bombs dropped from an airplane flying directly above her on one of these assignments. The older kids helped with trench digging, and the younger ones carried away and deposited the soil in buckets. The trenches they dug were long and deep—maybe eight or nine feet deep. One day, with the trench almost completed and after the children were told that they could head home, Myra and a friend heard the drone of a plane. They stopped their walk home to listen. It grew louder and louder, and then louder still. And then they could see the plane, low in the sky, approaching in their direction. Myra and her friend froze. And then both of them instantaneously broke into a run, back to the trench they had been digging. The plane grew louder. Myra and her friend both leaped into the trench.

The explosion that immediately followed was massive. Myra and her friend were buried in debris that was hurled into the trench. Myra's friend had to be reassured that she was still alive. "Of course you are still alive," scolded Myra, "You can hear me, can't you?"

*It was very hard years for all of us, for the families in the village. I mean not only our village, but many other villages who were close to us. And it was the time [summer] when the army, the Burmese troops, start their movement. They started their movement for coming out to the border and reaching out to us and fighting us. They tried it every year actually. That is why a lot of times I remember that I did not get to do my final exam. Because the situation at the front line was so serious so people were needed to go to the front line to carry rice, to carry food, to carry weapons for the soldiers, because soldiers have to fight and they don't have time to carry.*

*And so then we, the girls, we also have to get up and go to a certain point where, not really up to the front line, where we have to cook rice, we have to pack, put the rice into the bags or fold the rice into the leaves with some fried chili and fried fish paste. That's all that they have. Most of the girls must do this. Only those who were sick, or those who were not capable, not healthy enough, not strong enough. Those who were strong, we were always sent off. I remember three times that I had to go to the front place like that.*

*We slept on the ground on the leaves and little blanket.*

*And sometimes I try to cook rice, but the pots are really big and if you don't know the way of how to cook rice, then you can destroy the whole pot and it was very valuable. So a lot of times we were not allowed to do it. Only the older people who know how better.*

*Many times we were afraid, but then I think we worship a lot, and we really do believe that we were protected. And that was a great thing. And also—I mean for sure Karen soldiers were at the front line fighting, protecting. So if something happened, someone will run back to us and tell us what's happening over there so that we can run.*

*We do have few soldiers that protecting us. Yes. Not only from the enemy, from the army, but also from the animals, wild animals. We do afraid of snakes. We do get scared of animals. And a lot of times snakes visited us, and many people try to kill, but I was always running away. I think that is the most dangerous animal for me. I couldn't even look at it. It's kind of dirty.*

*Or if we do need to have someone carry very, very heavy stuff where we can't really do it, then the soldiers do it. The men and the male students, they go back and forth between us and the front line, because they have to carry food. We're not allowed. Women never get to do that sort of job.*

Myra lost friends in the summer fighting, including a special friend named So Happy:

*We played together a lot when we were young, when we were children, and we grew up together. We were in the same class almost every year. And his name was So Happy. And he was always happy, that's the thing. He was always happy. And we were in, I believe I was in grade eight, and it was summer and we couldn't finish school. So he went to the front line, and he was gone for only a few days, not even a week. And then I got the message he was brought back from the front line. It was like a dream. So then I went to the Karen National Headquarters where we usually have the soldiers or whoever fall in the front line—the bodies were brought back into the headquarter and we buried them. So a lot of people would*

*come—families, friends, relatives, whoever would like to come. And we went to the funerals, and we went to prepare flowers and all these things for the funerals. A lot of people came. My girlfriend and I went. It was pretty emotional, and then the most horrible thing was that we couldn't even look at the body. The body was all apart. Separate different pieces. We didn't really get to see his face. So we don't know what happened, but all we know was he was in pieces. A lot of horrible stuff happened.*

### **Back to Burma for High School—But Not for Long**

Through pluck and determination, Myra won still another scholarship to attend a missionary school called the Seventh Day Adventist School in Burma for high school. It was viewed as the most prestigious high school one could ever hope to attend. Myra left her grandmother's home to become a boarder at this school, a considerable distance away. Her life there was good, but also exhausting. Myra slept with all the other girls in one big room on the floor. There were no mattresses, but they were given blankets. In addition to a full class schedule and hefty nightly homework, students were expected to attend morning and evening devotion and to work in the school's vegetable garden every afternoon.

Myra was also thrilled to be given a teaching position at her school upon graduation. But this second happy interlude in her life also proved short-lived. One day the school headmaster hurried everyone together and explained that nearby government troops were set to attack the school and surrounding village, requiring them all to flee again back into Thailand.

*It was almost the middle of January 1995. Then the situation at the front line got much worse. So eventually we were told that we had to get ready. If we have to run we have to run. We had to carry whatever that has been packed up from school down to the river and then put stuff on the boat and then we have to go over to Thai side and then drop it off somewhere over there. And we packed church supplies, the hymn books, anything we have in the church, including the piano, the big piano. We started moving people. In boats again.*

*But I didn't go on the first day with everyone. I don't know, I don't know why I always want to be a hero. And I was still with guys trying to help and moving. And I packed all those things and I still remember we went down to the river with the big piano and it was on the 29th of January, and it was about 5:00 p.m. And we got on the boat and it was my last time being in my country.*

Myra escaped with a small backpack containing her two most valuable possessions: her Bible and an English dictionary. From the top of a mountain she and others climbed to seek further protection away

from the vulnerable riverbank directly across from Burma, Myra watched as her beloved school and the village church were burned to the ground.

The struggle to survive in the jungle again in the months that followed was very hard on Myra:

*And I was like, okay, what am I supposed to do? I really didn't have anybody, no relatives. I couldn't think about these days. I would have no idea how to make my way, how to survive.*

*It's not a village. It's totally bushes. Jungle. Ground. That's it. It on Thai soil, and it's a very, very remote area. We found ourselves a spot right on the little stream where there is a little bit ground where we can sleep.*

*I would say it was more than 200 people probably, but we spread out here. We sleep in open air. We cut the leaves off the trees, put them on the ground, and that's it. It was quite cold. Well, I mean, end of January. It is still quite cold. I guess I was too tired. I could fall asleep very easily. That's a good thing. A good thing my books were my pillow, and I wrap myself around my sarong. Put it all the way on top of my toes to my shoulder.*

*It was so confusing Everything was all over. Everything was all apart. Everything was so confusing. I mean, there was a lot of emotional....But I guess the thing was that I was too busy. I was too busy working on—I don't know—all I know was that I just live my day-to-day life, that's it. Just do whatever I see, whatever that is in front of me and whatever I can do, that's all.*

*We all cooked together. We brought over some pots with us and, of course, we had to go into the bushes, grab some wood for firewood and then bring over some big stones and then put three of them in order to have the fire underneath it and then to put the pot on top of it. And we cook rice and we just go down to the stream, naturally grab some leaves that are edible. I mean, we do have some kind of natural knowledge what we can eat, what we cannot eat.*

*At the very beginning, we had to go anywhere to use the bathroom. But, of course, not very, very close by where we sleep. Of course, we can't stand the smell. But then later on we try to dig the hole where we can make it into the restroom, and we can use it.*

### **Myra Learns How to Fire a Gun**

Myra continued teaching children even during this time. The parents of the children shared their food with her, and Myra felt blessed, and never as hungry as in the earlier days of her childhood in the jungle.

Even though they were now in Thailand, Myra and the others were still afraid. The river separating them from government soldiers in Burma wasn't that wide, and the hike from the riverbank to their encampment was only a two hour walk:

*Here's another serious thing. When because from the riverbank to us there were only two hours away, and then the river wasn't that big, especially during the summer—when it comes to summer I can always swim across the river. So you never know when they're going to get to us, and so the security was really tight. Yes. Yes. We were afraid. I mean they could come at any time. It's only two hours away. They can always swim across the river. They don't even need a boat. And if they swim across the river, nobody knows. You don't even hear the sound. They could swim across the river come in and catch us. So the security was very tight.*

*All the men, all the men had to stay up all night. We do have some guns. Of course, we do have knives. And yeah, a lot—several different kinds of tools that we brought with us from the village, but then, of course, since most of the families were soldiers' families, so we did have some guns. But the thing was that we didn't have enough men. And so I mean the leaders were like, well, if women want to start working along with us that's fine, and I was one of them. And at first, every time that I carried gun, whoa it's so heavy!*

*Well, they show me how to take out the magazine and all these things, and I think there was one time that they took me to a totally isolated place where they tried to teach me how to shoot. And I shoot only one time, and I was like, oh my goodness. The gun—because the thing was that when you shoot you have to put the gun on top of your shoulder and I'm right-handed person so I have to put it on my right side of my shoulder and then try to look through the little—I don't know how to call it—in order to target whatever that is in front of you. Forget about it, I'm not going to be able to shoot anything! But anyway at least I should know how to shoot. And the gun really—when I tried to shoot—the gun really pushed me back. I literally fell on the ground. It was pretty strong.*

*And I also did no sleeping.*

*We had one nurse, luckily. When we fled there was a nurse among us so, but then we have like 200-300 villagers so we didn't have enough nurses. Well, all kinds of sickness. Cold, cough, headache, malaria.*

*Yes, a lot. Always bitten by the mosquitoes, now we are sleeping right in the open. Mosquitoes are very happy. Ha, ha. Yeah, all sort of things but then more than—worse than malaria and all these things we have—how do you call it—hepatitis? The yellow skin? The yellow fever and all these things.*

*And we have diarrhea, we have all these stuff. So yeah, that is another step when I start having interest in helping the nurse in the—just a shed where we have some medicine and some thermometer, some the thing that you take the blood pressure.*

*Well, I started off going around with her because we don't have a certain place where people can come so we have to go from one place to another, but we're not really that far from each other. So if someone is sick and then the family member would come over and then to tell us that the person is sick or with fever or whatever like that so we would go to see the person. And then before we finish with one person, another person coming, so it's all the day round. I don't know, I find it odd. I love it though. I started off taking the temperature, doing whatever I have to cool the person down if the fever was too high. Eventually I knew how to give injection.*

*And yeah I took blood pressure and all these things. I don't know, I learned so fast during those days. I couldn't even remember how did I do it, but it was pretty fast. Everything was so fast.*

In the months and years that followed, Myra's new life in Thailand continued to involve episode after episode of flight and survival, with no family member and often no friend to help her, and only her wits and ferocious determination to draw upon for survival. Myra slept for months at a time in the open air in Thai wilderness, enduring hunger, thirst and other deprivations.

### **Myra Gets a New Job—and a New Name**

Eventually, Myra found employment as a domestic servant. A young American missionary couple met Myra while she was visiting a refugee camp in Thailand. Impressed with her English and her obvious intelligence, they asked Myra to come work for them as a babysitter for their six-year-old twin sons. She agreed, and boarded a plane for the first time in her life to accompany them to their home.

The American couple ran an orphanage in Thailand. Myra worked hard for them, from sunrise until well beyond sunset, cleaning their home; cooking their meals; doing their laundry; and caring for the very rambunctious boys, for whom she felt fondness. But she felt like a slave.

Up until this point in her life, Myra's name had never been Myra. But the American family found it too difficult to pronounce her birthname, and so they insisted on giving her a new name that was easier on the American tongue. Myra was given the choice of Mary or Myra. She went with Myra. It took her several weeks to get used to it. The boys grumbled when they called out "Myra! Myra!" and she didn't respond, because she kept forgetting that she was now Myra.

Myra grew lonely in this chapter of her life. There was no one around who spoke her language. She could not risk going out on her own if she ever had time off, for fear of being identified by authorities as Burmese, and thus apprehended, incarcerated and deported back to Burma, where she would likely be put to death.

The American family let her accompany them to church sometimes. Through the church, she met another couple who also ran an orphanage in a neighboring village, and this couple spoke her native language. Over time, she developed something of a friendship with them. Later, she mustered up the courage to quit her job with the Americans, and go to work for them instead. But she was always called Myra after that.

In some ways, Myra's new position at the second orphanage was better. She still worked from sunrise to well beyond sunset, cleaning the family's home; cooking their meals; doing their laundry; and caring for their newborn child. But she was also asked to give beginning English language instruction to some of the orphans, and through this interaction she became friendly with some of them, and began to learn from them how to speak Thai. There were anywhere from 50 to 80 orphans living on the premises, and she enjoyed their company. Several of them were orphaned children of Burmese refugees, and with them she could speak freely and fluently.

But in other ways, her new position was fraught. The understanding Myra had with her new employers was that she would work for them in exchange for them procuring Thai identity papers for her. Such papers were costly and difficult to obtain. But not having them was risky, because Myra could be "outed" and taken into custody at any time for residing and working illegally as a Burmese in Thailand. Her employers claimed to have the connections and know the channels for getting these papers. Myra was eager to have legal papers, and was willing to trade months, and then years, of unpaid labor, to obtain them. But despite promises and excuses for the delay, the identification papers never materialized.

And in the mean time, Myra had a new problem on her hands. The husband of the family she now worked for had always had an eye for her, which made her uncomfortable, but now he was becoming more aggressive in his interest. Now, he took advantage of every opportunity when in her company to fondle her and try to force himself upon her. She avoided him however she could, by spending as much time as possible with groups of orphans and with his child and wife. But he was shameless. Myra had no separate bed. She was expected to sleep with the baby at the foot of her employers' bed. Sometimes, he would try to take advantage of her in this arrangement, and she would kick him off her.

One day, when she could take his advances no longer, she protested loudly and bitterly. As a result, she was thrown out. What followed was a very scary time for Myra. Homeless again in a hostile foreign country, with no money. If accosted by local authorities, she could be shipped back to Burma and killed.

In what she still regards as a miracle, at just this time Myra ran into a friend from her days as a student in Burma. The friend happened to be back in Thailand on a visit from Australia, where she had some years earlier become a resident and citizen with the help of relatives living in Australia. The friend had returned to Thailand to try to arrange help for other Burmese family members who were still trapped illegally inside Thailand. When the friend heard what had happened to Myra, she took her under her wing.

### **Life in Bangkok**

She insisted that Myra go to Bangkok, where some of her relatives lived. She was sure that these relatives would let Myra stay with them. She paid for Myra's bus fare, and accompanied her on the four-hour trip.

Myra spent three or four months with her friend's relatives in Bangkok. Including Myra, eight or nine adults and two small children lived together in a tiny one-room apartment. The apartment had a small bathroom, but no kitchen at all. Everyone slept side by side on a hard wooden floor. Only on the rarest occasions did any of the apartment residents venture outside. It was too dangerous to be out in the streets. Bangkok police were always on the lookout for Burmese refugees residing illegally in the city, and could be expected to demand bribe money, which was beyond their means.

The family lived on rice, which was provided to them by International Rescue Committee (IRC) staff members who had been stationed in Bangkok to help Burmese refugees. They cooked the rice in a rice cooker plugged into an electrical socket in the room where they slept. They sat inside the apartment, all day, every day, waiting for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to complete paper work on their behalf which might permit them to resettle in another country. Myra was extremely grateful to this family for taking her in.

It would take many years longer for Myra to secure identification papers for herself. And in the mean time, she remained at continuous risk—dodging Thai police and enduring the mistreatment of various employers who could turn her in to authorities at any time if she displeased them in any way. And it would take still many more years of great fortitude and initiative on her part—and considerable good

luck as well—for Myra to manage to fly to New York City on her own on a student visa, and begin her life anew.

### **A New Life in New York**

These days, Myra works full-time for a small humanitarian organization in New York City dedicated to bringing world attention to the plight of the Karen people still living in Myanmar and as refugees in Thailand. When Myra is not in the office, it is because she is attending one of her classes at Hunter College, or because she has returned to her small rented room at a boarding house in Long Island City to work on her homework.

Every Friday evening, Myra heads over by bus to one or another of several small towns in New Jersey, where Burmese refugees continue to arrive for resettlement. Myra is intensely aware of the hurdles these refugees, who are invariably destitute and unable to speak English, must overcome to survive in their new country. She spends each weekend going from family to family, helping them organize and rebuild their lives and a sense of community, before returning back to her home in Long Island City late each Sunday night. Uninterrupted sleep is unknown to Myra—she is always “on call” for these refugees, who turn to her for advice and assistance as they contend with crises and emergencies.

Myra hopes one day to be able to return to Thailand to help her countrymen there more directly. She also hopes one day to see her sister again, who remains trapped in a refugee camp in Thailand, earning next to nothing as a teacher and certainly not enough to adequately provide for her children and the orphaned children of her brother who are now also in her care. Surrounded by guards and barbed wire, and barred from ever leaving the camp’s premises, her sister has known nothing but squalid confinement for many decades now.

It is Myra’s fervent wish that in recounting her story, others will also be inspired to help Myra’s sister and thousands of other Burmese refugees who remain in dire need of assistance both in Thailand and the United States.

Lynn Savarese

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