

The Retreat

(How the British-fleeing ruler fled from the British)

By U Thet Tun (Retired Ambassador)

Adipadi Ashin Mingyi Dr. Ba Maw who was consecrated by Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing at the Japanese-granted Burmese Independence ceremonial day on 1 August 1943, fled together with the Japanese army to Moulmein before British troops entered Rangoon. Hence, his follower Bandoola U Sein, in his book, lovingly termed his master as the *British -fleeing ruler*.

How the British-fleeing ruler fled from the British was written and published by Yuriko Nemotoo, the Japanese ambassador's wife and excerpts from it have been pertinently translated by Retired Ambassador U Thet Tun.

The Japanese military headquarters in Burma decided to retreat from the country during the extremely hot days before the start of the rainy season right after the Water Festival of April 1945. Mandalay had fallen into British hands and all the Japanese troops in northern Burma retreated haphazard to the south. The British troops advanced to the south more rapidly than was expected and should they reach Pegu at a distance of 80 kilometres from Rangoon, Japanese troops would lose their only exit to Moulmein.

Therefore, the Japanese military headquarters informed Prime Minister Dr. Ba Maw on 22 April they would be retreating from Rangoon. The starting point would be the front square of the Kimpetai headquarters on the night of 23 April. It required the big household of Dr. Ba Maw to prepare in less than 24 hours for a long and tedious journey. The whole night, they packed up their belongings and arrived the next day at the appointed hour and appointed place. The order for departure came from the Japanese ambassador Ishii Mura since the

commander-in-chief and his staff from the Japanese military headquarters had got away safely to Moulmein by plane and reached there within less than an hour.

Dr. Ba Maw commented furiously: 'These people have acted in a way that shows they have no regard for us'. His family shared seats in 2 cars. Other Ministers and families did the same in other cars. Several had to ride in the lorries. The convoy could leave Rangoon environs only during the hours of midnight. The military headquarters seemed to have second thoughts about not having arranged an air flight for the Burmese and so designated the Burmese government's military advisor Colonel Hira Oka as security chief in charge of the retreating Burmese government officials and their families. Captain Mawrita and a unit of Kempetai soldiers were given the task to protect the group. Among the long train of retreating officials was Japanese ambassador to Burma Mr. Ishii Mura and group. The fact that even the Japanese ambassador was not given a seat on the army plane displayed the irresponsibility of the military headquarters.

Amidst these inconveniences, Dr. Ba Maw's daughter Tinsa was well into her pregnancy and her parents were worried and anxious. A nurse friend came along to look after her thus enabling Tinsa to join the group. Although Tinsa's husband Bo Yan Naing was principal of Mingaladon military training school for cadets, he was Japanese-appointed Prime Minister Dr. Ba Maw's son-in-law and so leaders of Japanese opposition groups no longer trusted him. Even Aung San who was intimate with him, did not inform him in advance of the resistance plan of the AFPFL. Therefore, Bo Yan Naing had no option but to join his father-in-law and family. Tinsa's spirits lifted because her husband accompanied them. Dr. Ba Maw's brother Dr. Ba Han and his family also joined them.

Moulmein was 300 meters south-east of Rangoon. After going 80 kilometers north on the road to Mandalay, they reached Pegu and they took the

eastern road from Hpa-ya-gyi. The long car procession which drove without headlights, reached Pegu safe and sound. When they entered the passage-way to Moulmein, Japanese army trucks from around Pegu joined them. Some of the retreating Japanese army trucks and INA cars also mixed with the convoy.

The reason why they had to stop for one whole day at a small village outside Pegu was because the town was attacked by enemy bombers the whole of that day. The Prime Minister watched the flames rising from the town and heard the enemy bombs exploding and the sound of machine-gun fire. He described what he saw that day as follows :

A few Japanese soldiers could be seen trudging along on foot. They were the sick and wounded who were unable to keep up with the general retreat and so were left behind to follow as best they could. I witnessed this tragedy in an even more heartbreaking form when a group of army trucks started to leave in the evening and some of the abandoned men became so desperate that they tried to climb by force into them, whereupon the officers in the trucks pushed and even kicked them out. The most heartbreaking part of it was that not a single vehicle which passed by took the slightest notice of them. I do not know what their fate was eventually. I tried to draw the attention of a Japanese officer accompanying me to these unfortunate men but he replied that it was not his business to look after them.

From then on, the convoy could travel only from dusk till dawn. From the Sittang river bank near Waw to a little town on the opposite bank, it took some time for all of them to get across. The ferry boat could take only a few men at a time. Because it was a moonlit night, enemy warplanes could have sighted them and attacked them but they were fortunate. Only when they reached the little town, they were under constant machine-gun fire by the British planes.

The food provided there was not tasty at all. They did not care how the security officials got the food from the locals; they were famished and ate up everything. On 27 April, 5 days after the start of the journey, Tin Zar started having labour pains. When Kyaik-Hto villagers were requested for help, they took her to an unoccupied house whose owners were absent. Early morning of 28 April, Tinsa gave birth to a healthy baby girl (who was later named Yema Maw Naing). Among the security officers, there was an army doctor but he had no childbirth experience and was not of much help Tinsa jokingly remarked. After stopping in that village for 3 days and 3 nights, they reached Moulmein in another 3 days' time. From Rangoon to Moulmein, it took a total of 10 days. Because air raids were feared in Moulmein, they continued to move on to Mudon 30 kilometers south. After holding discussions among themselves in Mudon for a few days, they decided to divide themselves into three groups.

1. Although Japanese defeat was drawing near, the Burmese government was still in force and therefore Prime Minister Dr. Ba Maw, Bo Yan Naing, the Ministers and families were to stay in Mudon and await the outcome
2. Dr. Ba Han and family were to take refuge in Balu-kyun near Moulmein coast
3. Daw Kin Ma Ma Maw and family led by Colonel Hira Oka were to go by train to Bangkok and from there to travel to Cambodia by land route.

Therefore, four or five days after their arrival in Mudon, Dr. Ba Han and family left for Balu-kyun. Daw Kin Ma Ma Maw, Tin Zar and the rest of the family members took their departure from Dr. Ba Maw and Bo Yan Naing and led by Colonel Hira Oka, they left by way of Thanbyu-zayat 35 kilometers south of Mudon. They went along the Thai-Burmese railway track and after crossing the Burmese border, they reached Nompradauk 400 miles further. When they arrived in Bangkok, they took a few days' rest at a hotel. Bangkok was peaceful

and free from war hazards so they shopped and collected the things they would be needing for the ensuing journey.

After a while, they continued their journey by land and by sea and arrived in Kunpunchan city in Cambodia. How Colonel Hira Oka made arrangements beforehand was not known but they were taken to a big mansion in a spacious orchard outside the city. The mansion was built in a teak forest by a Frenchman who was captured by the Japanese. Nobody knew this man's fate. The community manager allowed the group to use the mansion. They were asked what food and utilities they were in need of. Tin Zar's younger brothers and sisters ran about in the teak forest, read books on the breezy verandah and enjoyed themselves. Tinsa also in her spare time read the French books left by the Frenchman. Apart from being anxious of her father and husband left behind in Mudon, Tinsa was able to pass her time peacefully with the remaining family up to the month of August when the Japanese surrendered.

Dr. Ba Maw and Bo Yan Naing who were left behind in Mudon, received news from the Japanese ambassador Ishii Mura about the retreat of Japanese troops and how they were losing out in battles along the Pacific coast. When August came, the question was whether the Potsdam declaration would be accepted or not by the Japanese. Later they heard the news of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Just about that time, a British airplane came and made an air-raid on Mudon for the first time. The day before, an enemy plane had flown low several times and gone back without dropping any bombs. Bo Yan Naing remarked that the British were trying to search and kill Dr. Ba Maw. They shot numerous times with machine guns and smothered the house they were staying in. Bo Yan Naing who had presence of mind had made Dr. Ba Maw dress up in feminine clothes and enter the bomb shelter so their lives were spared. The next day, ambassador Ishii Mura received directions

from the Japanese Foreign Minister stating ‘The Japanese government has decided to accept the Potsdam declaration so from now on, let the Burmese government fend for itself’. The ambassador consulted with the military headquarters officials (in name only) hiding in the jungles near Moulmein and urged Dr. Ba Maw to take refuge in Japan. At first Dr. Ba Maw refused to do as suggested and said he would stay on in Mudon but in the end, due to the ambassador’s persistence, he agreed to go to Japan.

On 14 August, it became apparent that Japan would surrender. Dr. Ba Maw who was no longer Prime Minister, headed for Thanbyu-zayat with Bo Yan Naing and some followers on 16 August before dawn. When they reached Thailand, Dr. Ba Maw asked Bo Yan Naing to join his family in Cambodia and on 22 August, he left for Japan. He must get to Japan before the 25th when the American air occupation of that country would commence and before the 30th when MacArthur would set foot on Japan soil. But Dr. Ba Maw, with permission from the Japanese army, took time to drop in and see his family in Kunpunchan.

Daw Kin Ma Ma Maw and family followed Dr. Ba Maw’s instructions and led by Colonel Hira Oka, they left Kunpunchan towards the end of August. They sailed the Mekong river to Phnom Penh. From there, they went by train to Bangkok. Colonel Hira Oka who had all along protected the family since their departure from Rangoon, placed them in a house in Bangkok and requested the Japanese embassy in Thailand to keep an eye on the family and then went back to Cambodia. While the family was looking forward to return to Rangoon, a British captain arrived, took Bo Yan Naing to the British army headquarters and held him in custody there. The family was warned not to leave the house. The official did not explain why. Two weeks later, two Burmese came and looked for Bo Yan Naing. They said they were Bo Yan Naing’s teacher and friend from Rangoon University. What was surprising was they asked where Dr. Ba Maw

was. One said 'Perhaps Dr. Ba Maw fled into the Burmese jungle'. They then left. They must have come to ask the question perfunctorily only because the British army asked them to. They seemed to sympathise with Bo Yan Naing. Soon afterwards, Bo Yan Naing was allowed to return and stay with his family. The entire family was eager to return to Burma. Towards the end of the year, an embassy staff came and delivered an order stating to the effect that Dr. Ba Maw's family be allowed to return to their homeland immediately. Two Dakota airplanes were put at their disposal. The family was allowed to buy and take with them commodities which would be scarce in post-war Burma. When they arrived in Rangoon, Dr. Ba Maw's residence on Hermitage road which had been previously occupied by the British army was handed back to the family.

On 22 August 1945, Dr. Ba Maw, accompanied by Kitazawa of the Japanese Embassy in Burma flew from Bangkok to Taipei and stopped for one night there. That night in his dream, his mother who had passed away many years ago pointed at a big wall clock. It showed the time as 12:30. On 23 August, the next day, while he was flying from Taipei to Japan, he began to think that perhaps his mother was trying to warn him he would die at 12:30 the next day. Their airplane had to fly close to the Chinese coast to avoid American airplanes. At the end of the terrifying journey, they reached Tachi Khawa airport safely at midnight 12.30. On 24 August, they witnessed the horrifying sights along damaged Tokyo roads en route to military headquarters by car. The Greater East Asian Ministry was no more so Foreign Minister Shige Mitsu said that from then on the Foreign Ministry would take charge of Dr. Ba Maw.

The next day, Dr. Ba Maw, accompanied by officials from the Foreign Ministry, went by train to Muikamatchi town in Niigata Prefecture. From there, they went to Yokushoji monastery in Ishiuchi village and stayed with the temple priest for the whole of summer and some months of winter. As a southerner, the

cold weather began to tell on him. But they kept their ears open for political news and they heard that MacArthur headquarters was issuing one order after another to the Japanese government. Dr. Ba Maw finally made up his mind not to stay in hiding any more and left for Tokyo during the last week of December 1945. He surrendered himself to an army colonel representing the British Occupation Forces. Things turned out very differently than he had expected. The British colonel treated him with courtesy and then made him over to the American authorities. Hence, he was imprisoned in Sugamo Prison with effect from 17 January 1946.

In the Sugamo prison, he was entitled to the same rations as an American officer, a weekly motion picture show and clean sanitary conditions as well as access to books and periodicals. But the cell was narrow and cold. At night it was too dim to read. He had to stay in Sugamo prison for 7 months. In the last month, he was made to wash the plates and trays and because he strongly objected to it, he was moved to solitary confinement in a cold little cell. The food was revolting and he had no chance to read. He was depressed. Towards the end of July 1946, the British colonel arrived and took him away from the prison to the British Embassy. The British Ambassador told him that the British government pardoned all of Dr. Ba Maw's wartime offences. From then on, the British colonel treated Dr. Ba Maw with courtesy as before. On 1 August 1946 (coincidentally the third anniversary of his becoming Adipadi), he arrived back in Rangoon. He reunited with his family awaiting him.

In the Sugamo diary in the translator's book 'The Viewpoint of Diplomats', the Retired Ambassador of Philippines to Japan Jose S. Laurel had made entries about Dr. Ba Maw as follows :

26-1-46 (Saturday) - Burma's Adipadi Dr. Ba Maw was brought here.

12-2-46 (Tuesday) - Ba Maw is still in solitary cell.

27-2-46 (Wednesday) - Ba Maw was allowed for the first time to eat with us. He chose us because the Filipinos resemble the Burmese. He was more talkative than Parliament Chairman Aquino. We learned that he had arrived in Japan earlier than us but had taken refuge in a Buddhist monastery in northern Japan.

6-3-46 (Wednesday) - Today I saw Ba Maw doing kitchen work (kp-kitchen patrol). Seems every national is given this sort of work. There are only 2 Burmese prisoners but ambassador Maung (Dr. Thein Maung) is too unfit to work. Actually, Ba Maw is a national leader in his own right and should be clearly exempted from such duty.

2-5-46 (Thursday) - No need to worry for Ba Maw. The British has no intention to send him to court.

6-5-46 (Monday) - The Tokyo newspaper says Subat Chandra Bose's Indian Independence Army officers and soldiers will no longer be put on trial. The same should go for Burma. A good situation for Ba Maw. How different the British are from the Americans.

31-5-46 (Friday) - The first-ever letter from Burma containing the following points was received by Ba Maw. (1) In Burma, no one is under trial. Everyone is free and Ba Maw's colleagues are back with the government. (2) All political organizations have demanded the freedom of Ba Maw. (3) His letter was not censored and was delivered personally by the chief representative of the British army in Tokyo. (4) Ba Maw's family members are all in good health.

1-6-46 (Wednesday) - Heard the news ambassador Maung passed away on the way home to Burma by searoute. If I am to state my views, Khami-o must have ignored Maung's ailment while in prison. It is evidently a crime of negligence.

4-7-46 (Thursday) - Received Philippines Independence Day greetings from Ba Maw and other prisoners. Because Ba Maw refused to go on kitchen patrol, he is under reproach. I was asked to replace him but I refused because it was independence day. Coincidentally, today is also the birthday of Tokyo Rose.

5-7-46 (Friday) - Ba Maw was secretly taken out from the Blue Section.

6-7-46 (Saturday) - No news of Ba Maw.

7-7-46 (Sunday) - Heard that Ba Maw was taken to the Red Section for reprimand.

12-7-46 (Friday) - The undaunted Ba Maw was brought back from the Red Section. He still refuses to do KP. Bravo! His case must have reached the ears of the British authorities who don't seem to like what the Americans are doing.

23-7-46 (Tuesday) - The Filipinos leave Sugamo prison (at about the same time as Dr. Ba Maw).