

MY HERITAGE

I was born in Rangoon in 1932 where my father was on the Board of the Customs & Excise, when Burma was part of the British Empire. My mother had a dressmaking business which she operated from home employing some dozen Indian tailors.

The surname DIEKMANN derives from German origin as my paternal grandfather was a construction engineer who went to Burma in the early 1800's to build roads, bridges and railways. On the maternal side my great grandfather was Italian named MARINO and he also went to Burma in the 1800's and set up a printing press publishing the daily RANGOON GAZETTE. He was the sole proprietor and as the business prospered he became a benefactor and built schools and churches for the Catholic community. This feat was recognised by the Vatican and he was awarded the honour "Papal Knight of the Order of St. Gregory".

My mother's father was Alfred Gardner who hailed from Glasgow who worked for a Scottish trading company called Whiteway Laidlaw who had establishments throughout Southeast Asia and in 1881 he was sent to Rangoon to set up a department store- Rowe & Company often referred as "Harrods of the East", where he was the General Manager.

So I often think of my origins are somewhat of the "Heinz 57" variety!!

MY JOURNEY

I attended a primary school in Rangoon and at the age of ten was due to be sent as a boarder to St. Joseph College in Darjeeling-India run by the Jesuit Order.

However these plans were dashed due to the Second World War in the Far East. Japan attacked Pearl Harbour on 8th December 1941 and three days later we experienced our first Japanese air raid on Rangoon. I can recall being on the verandah of our house watching the formation of planes flying over the city, whilst sirens sounded alerting everyone of the imminent danger. To me this was exciting, as prior to this the only aircraft I had ever seen were flying-boats of British Imperial Airways, landing and taking off in Rangoon harbour. My grandmother who was widowed lived with us, and I remember her dragging me downstairs in to our open air trench in the garden and within minutes a string of bombs were released with one dropping no more than 20ft away, resulting in us being showered with dust and rubble, and of course, all the windows and doors of our house being shattered. As most of the houses were built of timber-bombs would ignite fires leaving properties in piles of ashes.

The early months of 1942 were filled with anxiety as the war in the Far East intensified with the fall of the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore. News bulletins over the radio asked British Subjects not to panic as reinforcements from Britain, America, Australia and India were on the way to defend the region. In spite of this advice Rangoon was now under continual bombardment with many British Subjects fleeing to either India or Australia.

By March 1942 life became intolerable with daily air raids on Rangoon, so my father decided we should move to our holiday home in the hills near Mandalay – a town called Maymyo where each year we would decamp for six weeks during the hot season when temperatures averaged 42°C in Rangoon.

We packed a few suitcases, shut down the house and with our two loyal Indian servants travelled by barge on the Irrawaddy river to Mandalay, then by bus to the hill station of Maymyo, some 44 miles north of Mandalay.

At the end of April '42 news came through that Rangoon had fallen into Japanese hands and their

advancing troops were moving north in a three pronged attack along the valleys of the Irrawaddy, Salween and Chindwin rivers. So in May'42 we were on the move yet again by boat and bus during the monsoon season to the most northern town called Myitkyina on the border with Assam.

This town was a staging post for the Allied Forces with an airstrip operated by Dakota aircraft bringing in military supplies and returning with wounded soldiers back to India. Our home at this point was under canvas and life was very basic to say the least.

My father did his utmost to persuade the military authorities to evacuate us on one of their returning flights to Calcutta as we were British Subjects, but this proved to be a vain hope as all flights ceased after two weeks, as news came through that Japanese troops had captured Central Burma and were now only 90 miles away.

The only option left to us was to leave Burma on foot and trek across mountains and valleys to Assam, a treacherous route of some 340 miles through dense jungle and swamps.

As my grandmother was in her late sixties my father felt it would be unfair to undertake this arduous task. Many families and friends who undertook this trek died along the way, and those who survived arrived in India emaciated, ill with dysentery and malaria.

Our abode at this point was a bamboo shack on stilts where we first encountered face to face Japanese front line troops who had no respect for life, torture and rape was commonplace.

I vividly remember my parents living under great stress never knowing what to expect, but my elderly grandmother was a wise old lady who was a calming influence over them, as she had great faith that God would look after us.

After four weeks all refugees were rounded up and transported by train in cattle wagons south to Mandalay. From there we made our way back to Maymyo hoping to move back into our brick built holiday home only to discover that it was now being occupied as a Japanese HQ building, so once again we were forced to live in a bamboo shack on the edge of town.

Life was one of improvisation, discarded 100 gallon oil drums were cut in half to cover food being cooked over a wood fire and this would act as a makeshift oven. whilst the other half was used to collect water from an artesian well. There were no such luxuries as piped running water or electricity, so for light a small piece of rag dipped in kerosene oil, gave light similar to that of a candle, and this also kept mosquitoes at bay during the night.

During the occupation the local currency, the Rupee- was no longer of any value, but we were fortunate that both my mother and grandmother had jewellery in the form of Diamond, Sapphires, Rubies & Emerald rings, bracelets, bangles, earrings and necklaces which in Eastern culture was the norm. My father buried these items to avoid confiscation.

So from time to time an item of jewellery was used as barter in exchange for bare necessities such as rice, cooking oil, sugar, flour meat ect; from the village Headman. To eke out our food I was allowed into the paddy fields which had standing water to a depth of 18ins where I would catch whitebait using my vest as a fishing net.

My father acquired a few chickens and ducklings which we reared and this helped sustain the staple diet of rice. So again, our surpluse chickens, ducks and eggs was used as barter for other items of food.

In October 1943 we were issued with a 'Rounding Up' order, detailing the following requirements:

1. Owing to the exigencies of war it is necessary to round you and your family up and imprison you in a camp.
2. You and your family are accordingly ordered to prepare and remove yourselves to the camp immediately
3. You are directed to lock up your house which will be looked after by the village headman.
4. You are permitted to bring with you the following articles
 - a. Cooking materials such as rice, onions, potatoes, and other vegetables
 - b. Clothing
 - c. Kitchen utensils and other tablewear

d. Sleeping and washing articles

Signed: Commander of Maymyo and Neighborhood

Rider: I will punish you severely, in accordance with war trial law if you don't obey this order.

(I have this original document)

This concentration camp was our home with other British Subjects from October '43. During this period we had no news of the outside world as to how the war was progressing either in the West or East. The Allied Forces must have known of this as they dropped leaflets by air giving updates, but we were unaware if this information was merely propaganda.

The camp was heavily guarded at all times with Japanese troops at the entrance and the perimeter fence, however in March 1945 we noticed the Sentry box was empty and there were no guards about to be seen.

There was great jubilation within the camp when we realised that we had been liberated by the Allied Forces after some 42 agonising months under Japanese rule. Subsequently we moved back into our holiday home.

On the reoccupation of Burma my father was selected by the Chief Civil Affairs Governor to take up the post of CEO for Maymyo Municipality to restore essential services in the form of communications, transport, electricity, water and refuse. He served in this capacity until March 1946 when the Customs & Excise Service resumed operations in Rangoon.

Back to the capital Rangoon in April 1946, the city was unrecognisable from the one we left in 1942 and of course, our house in Sandwith Road was completely demolished resulting in the loss of all our possessions.

Whilst the country was slowly recovering from the war stricken years, there was no sign of schools reopening, so my father felt it was essential for me to catch up on my education as I was 14 years old and had missed 4 years of schooling.

The only form of transport out of Rangoon was by troopships which were repatriating battalions of soldiers back to the UK.

Due to our plight and what we had gone through the Military Authorities granted permission for my grandmother and me to travel with 12 other civilians among fifteen thousand troops on board MV Reina Del Pacifico. We set sail from Rangoon on 17th May via Colombo, Aden and Suez where more troops joined the ship which eventually docked beside the Liver building in Liverpool on 11th June 1946.

Within days of arrival I was fortunate enough to be accepted as a boarder at the Salsian College-Farnborough through catholic contacts in Rangoon. Apart from the normal curriculum I was having extra tuition in order to make up for the years of schooling that I had missed. I spent four years at Farnborough and managed to attain the School Certificate and ended as Head Boy when I left in 1950 at the age of 18.

Meanwhile, when Burma gained independence in 1948 my father resigned from the Customs & Excise Board and came to England with my mother and set up home in Twickenham.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my wonderful caring parents and grandmother who sacrificed so much for me. They weren't rich, but in pre-war Burma they enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, employing a cook, butler, cleaner, gardener and driver.

I find it so sad that for the past five decades Burma – now Myanmar- has been ruled by a Military Junta, it is the second largest country in Southeast Asia, rich in minerals, Oil, Teak, Emeralds, Rubies and Rice.

I remember the people as warm and gentle with permanent smiles, the landscape is dotted with golden Pagodas, giant statues of Buddha, shaven headed Monks in their saffron robes, lush forests, rivers and lakes that are molten red at sunset, with market stalls featuring a blaze of colour selling spices, with a wide variety of fruit and vegetables.

So for me Burma must remain a distant memory. Terence Diekmann