

Preface

The Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7/8, 1941, made a single conflict, World War II, out of what had been two separate wars—Japan against China on the one hand, and Germany and its allies against Russia and Britain on the other—in which the United States had so far played no official part. Pearl Harbor made the American participation official. Japan now had a limited opportunity for establishing a power base in Southeast Asia, and made brilliant use of it. French Indochina had no power to resist; the defenses of Malaya were misconceived and did not last long; Siam found it prudent to join the victors; and by January, Tavoy in the south of Tenneserim had been occupied by the Japanese.

Among those who felt themselves threatened by these developments was the author of this diary, U Sein Tin, a member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) and deputy secretary in the Ministry of Home and Defense Affairs in Rangoon. He reacted in two ways. First, he arranged for his wife, Daw Khin Than Myint, and their three small children to leave Rangoon for a place of safety in Prome—prudently, since his house was severely damaged in the first Japanese air raids on December 23–25. Second, he began to write a detailed daily account of his life in wartime Burma. Only a part of this journal, from January 5 to June 5, 1942, has survived. This was originally published in 1966, and a translation of it forms the body of this book.

The first part of the diary, which he began writing on December 8 with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and which consisted of some three hundred pages of foolscap, was lost when the family's possessions were carried off by a gang of dacoits in June 1942. When the part that has

survived of the diary opens, on January 5, 1942, Sein Tin is working in the Secretariat in Rangoon and living in the house of a colleague. His family has moved from Prome and is living in Ma-ubin, a small town in the Irrawaddy delta, fifty miles from Rangoon, where his wife's father and sisters are also living. He can make only brief weekend visits to them by the overcrowded and rather unpredictable steamer service on the river. During the week he has to attend his office by day and spend nights disturbed by air-raid warnings that call for hurried descents to the underground shelter, although since the Christmas raids the attacks have all been on the Mingaladon airfield, twelve miles north of the city.

The situation was essentially unstable—government offices were being dispersed in anticipation of air raids on Rangoon city, causing disruption of government business. Worse, before the end of the month Sein Tin's own hometown of Moulmein, south of Rangoon, was under siege and the threat of an attack by land on Rangoon was becoming very real. There was a growing likelihood that the city would have to be abandoned to the enemy and that the government would move to Mandalay in Upper Burma. This presented Sein Tin with difficult decisions about how best to provide for the safety of his wife and children. In his position he could make no move until he was ordered to, and when that order came it would probably be at very short notice. If his wife and children were in Ma-ubin when he had to leave, he would probably have no time to arrange for them to move with him; if they came to Rangoon so as to be ready to move, they would be exposed to the danger of air raids for an uncertain period.

On January 30 the news came that Moulmein was in the hands of the Japanese, so that Sein Tin was now cut off from his brothers and sisters. Singapore was on the point of falling, and it was becoming apparent that the government would have to leave Rangoon quite soon, but there was still no decision about the date. Sein Tin remained caught in his dilemma. Finally, on February 13, he did force himself to decide and traveled to Ma-ubin to bring his family back, to be ready to depart as soon as it became possible. In fact, it was a well-timed move; there was a break in the series of air raids, and on February 16 Sein Tin was ordered to leave for Mandalay at once.

From Rangoon to Shweibo

The party left Rangoon by road early on February 17 in something of a holiday mood. The car might be overcrowded, but they were at least getting away from the air-raid warnings and uncertainties of the last month. They were at Magwei on February 18 and had to halt there for nearly a week for repairs to the car, during which the news of the war became worse and worse. They were now being overtaken by a steady stream of cars leaving Rangoon. Resistance along the Salween had failed, and there was only the Sittang River between the Japanese and Rangoon. Everyone who could get away from the city was now moving away from the disorder of collapsing institutions and the coming battles. Among the refugees, Sein Tin found the head of his own department, U Kyaw, who told him that the city was being abandoned to the army. Refugees brought news of the chaos in the city; the jails and the lunatic asylum had been opened, and destruction and looting were widespread. Repairs to the car were completed, and the party left Magwei on February 25, reaching Mandalay on February 27.

For the time being, things seemed to be going well enough in Mandalay. There was an office building—even though it had to be shared with the Nestlé Company—and there was work to be done—even though it was, for now, only a matter of arranging the office furniture that had been sent up by train from Rangoon and dealing with staff salaries and allowances. But Sein Tin felt lucky to have been allotted quarters in a large house with a good garden for the children to play in, and all seemed well for the present. The future was dark, however, and Sein Tin notes that he must resign himself to accepting whatever comes to him—he has no say in his fate. Senior Burmese officials might well be coming to feel that they were superfluous. As the districts to the south fell to the Japanese, their deputy commissioners, Sein Tin's fellow officers, were beginning to congregate in the Mandalay area, and no one seems to have given much thought to how they might be useful. Six weeks earlier the administration had been shaken by the news that the elected prime minister, U Saw, had been caught making overtures to the Japanese enemy, and probably this all-too-rational move toward a separate peace had shaken confidence in the reliability

of Burmese officials. In his reminiscences of this time, Robert Mole says that generally Burmese deputy commissioners were not left in sole charge, but were provided with a European “additional” who was expected to handle the essential work of dealing with refugees and liaison with the army.¹ In Shweibo it was Webster, the additional district commissioner who arrived on April 20, who took charge of organizing the movement of refugees at Yei-u, along with Mole himself, and who closed down the administration at Shweibo on April 30. The regular district commissioner, U Htun Maung, apparently played no part in this. In fact, the interests of the British members of the ICS, who were liable for compulsory military service and internment by the Japanese, were now manifestly distinct from those of the Burmese, who were not. The centre of government was now in Maymyo, fifty miles uphill from Mandalay, and communications were becoming steadily more difficult as gasoline grew scarcer and as train services were cut for lack of coal and diversion of rolling stock to military use.

The stay in Mandalay lasted only a month, after which Sein Tin was told that he was to be transferred to Shweibo as deputy commissioner, in spite of an effort by U Kyaw, the head of his department, to keep him in place. The family left for Shweibo on March 30.

It was an uncomfortable change, although Sein Tin knew the place well, having finished a three-year spell there only a year before. The circumstances were now very different. Then he had been the senior official in the district, with full responsibility for the administration of the area. Now there was already a deputy commissioner, U Htun Maung, in charge. Sein Tin was told firmly that he was an additional deputy commissioner and that there were no specific duties assigned to the post. Apart from this, there were no good living quarters available in the town, and the family had to accept the very generous hospitality of Dr. Gyan Singh, the Sikh doctor. This meant spending the uncomfortable April heat of Shweibo in rather cramped and crowded surroundings, as the doctor had welcomed many other refugees into his house. All the family were suffering from coughs, colds, and fevers, and Sein Tin was depressed and frustrated. They were lucky to have avoided the heavy bombing raid on Mandalay on Good Friday,

April 3, but there was no other consolation. Later in the month the arrival of two more Burmese colleagues in Shweibo to be additional deputy commissioners further pointed up the irrelevance of their position. On April 24, after four weeks of sickness and frustration, Sein Tin telephoned a request to the commissioner to be allowed to go on leave. Now he had to decide what to do next.

From Shweibo to Ga-da

Shweibo was heavily bombed by the Japanese on April 26 and 27, which spurred on the decision, urged on them by Dr. Gyan Singh, to try to get to Myitkyina by train and hope for air transport from there out of Burma and on to India. Once there, he might be able to work for the Burmese administration in India. The railway was prepared to provide a wagon if it could be loaded the next day, but this produced more agony of indecision. Sein Tin's old friend and colleague U Saw Han had been with them in Shweibo all this time, and it had been assumed that he and his family would be with the party going to Myitkyina, but Saw Han now decided that the proposal was too risky; he would be joining the large refugee camp that had been set up outside Shweibo by local rice millers. Dr. Gyan Singh was set on going, and Sein Tin felt that he owed him too much to let him go alone. He opted for the train. A freight car was hurriedly loaded with their luggage on the afternoon of April 28, and the train started slowly on its way, picking up three further carriages at Shweibo, one of army nurses and the other of two English army officers and other officials, some of whom at least must have been railway engineers (perhaps Royal Army Service Corps) assigned to keeping the railway moving.

They did not get very far. Five stations down the line, the train stalled on a gradient and the railway men in the special carriage, after looking at the situation, decided that it was overloaded and that some carriages would have to be dropped off at the next station, Kanbalu, to make sure that the line was not blocked. Sein Tin and his family found themselves set down with no transport at Kanbalu. It could have been much worse. He had old friends and colleagues in the area who could help. The civil administration was still more or less in place,

and the area was so far not yet afflicted with the bandit gangs that had appeared in other areas. Kanbalu seemed quite a good place to sit out the chaotic time until someone—probably Japanese—could reestablish order. It proved to be not quite so good, being on the line of retreat of the defeated Chinese army, which requisitioned food and cattle and carts as it came through, and set up its own sort of disorder and incomprehension.

Sein Tin's family joined with other displaced official families in moving out to a forest rest house in the small village of Ga-da, ten miles off the beaten track from Kanbalu. Life there for the month of May sounds almost idyllic. The rains came to cool the summer heat. The new crops were growing, and the trees of the forest were turning green with new leaves. There is, however, an unexplained gap in the diary from May 8 to May 25. Possibly Sein Tin did not write anything during that time, but it is more likely that the pages were lost at the time of his death. At some time in that period the Japanese army administration moved into Kanbalu, but Sein Tin does not tell us just when that happened, nor anything else that happened in those days. There was probably some disorder for the Japanese to deal with. There were now gangs in the area that claimed, justifiably or not, to be "Thahkins," members of Aung San's Burma Independence Army, and were demanding money and supplies from the villages. When the diary resumes, the Japanese are already in place and dealing ruthlessly with such demands.

All seemed well. Railway transport was being reestablished, and a new civil administration was being set up, shared between the Japanese and Aung San's people. The party at Ga-da was beginning to plan for returning to their homes in Lower Burma. The diary ends on a note of tragic irony. The first days of June are happy—the rain has come and brought coolness—the trees are green again—order is being restored, even though this is through a new foreign conqueror—Sein Tin has a prospect of going back home to Lower Burma by train with his family, which has survived everything. On June 5, Sein Tin notes, "Today is my birthday" and that eight years ago an astrologer friend had forecast that up to his birthday in this year there would be difficulties and

dangers to be met, but that once the birthday was past the future was bright. Early in the morning of June 6, however, the rest house was attacked by a large bandit gang. There are varying accounts of what happened, perhaps the best of which is the one given to Ludu U Hla by his unnamed informant, who claimed to have been present, but all that is certain is that four people were killed—U Sein Tin; U Ba Than, the subdivisional officer, and his wife; and U Sein Tin's driver, Maung Nyunt Maung—and that the property of the party, including the first part of the diary, was looted. The diary pages that survive were scattered on the floor of the rest house, from which they were rescued. After the war, some of the gang were identified and arrested and some of the property recovered, but, although the leader was known, he had made himself useful to the Japanese kempetei police and managed to disappear.

Civil order in Burma seems always to have been extremely fragile, and in spite of the tenets of Theravada Buddhism, violence has been endemic unless strongly controlled. In addition to their fear of the bombing and their worries about their own country being invaded by the Japanese, Burmese in government service had to worry about extreme disorders occurring as government broke down and the administration disintegrated. Sein Tin makes frequent reference throughout the diary to his fear of the breakdown of law and order and to the dangers the family might have to face from violent criminals—almost as if he knew how his life would end. Almost two months before his death, he wrote in his diary—the following is the passage as it appears in the text:

In this present crisis, what everybody is afraid of is not so much the Japanese enemy as the criminals among our own people. They are quite right, too. What I hear generally is that in every area to which the enemy has come, it is the thieves and robbers among their fellows whom people have to fear and who are the chief cause of their distress. In other countries, if this sort of crisis occurs, I think that people only have to fear the enemy, not their own fellow countrymen.

His fears were too true.

Sein Tin and His Place in Burmese Literature

Sein Tin, more usually known in Burma by his pen name Theippan Maung Wa, was an influential prose writer in the thirties and very early forties whose influence continued in Burma throughout the second half of the twentieth century, largely because his sketches of the life of a district officer were made into a school textbook in the 1960s. He wrote prolifically, using different pen names for different styles of writing; as many as fifty-seven names have been recorded for his short plays, critical essays, letters addressed “to the editor,” and partly fictional tales or sketches based on his life as a government official. He was a leading member of the modern literary movement that developed at Rangoon University in the 1930s under the guidance of Professor Pe Maung Tin, who had recently introduced Burmese literature as an academic subject. The professor named the new movement “Khitsan sa-pei,” “literature to test the age, an experiment for the times”—that is, literature that tested readers’ reactions to a new style of writing that more closely reflected current life and current affairs. As a member of the Indian Civil Service, Sein Tin served in the British administration from 1929 to 1942. When the Japanese invaded Burma in 1942, he moved with the government from Rangoon up to Mandalay. As he tells us in this war diary, he at first contemplated fleeing to India with his family, but when this became impossible, he and some colleagues withdrew farther up-country and took refuge in a forest rest house. Here, just when the new Japanese-led administration was taking over control, the group was attacked by dacoits, and on June 6, 1942, Sein Tin was shot dead in cold blood together with several others in his party.

Sein Tin was born in Mawlamyaing (Moulmein), Lower Burma, in 1899, into a middle-class family. His mother died while he was still young, and he was brought up by his grandmother; his love of Burmese literature was nurtured by his grandfather. He first attended a local Burmese lay school, followed by a period at a nearby missionary school run by St. Augustine’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, where he was taught in English and Burmese. For his final two

years of schooling he moved to the Maha Buddhaghosa School, from which he matriculated, at age twenty, with credits in both Burmese and Pali literature. In December 1920, the University of Rangoon opened, independent at last from Calcutta, but just when Sein Tin was ready to attend, the Burmese student body went on strike in protest against what they considered an unfair requirement for a probationary year of study. The strike movement spread from Rangoon to all government schools, including some aided Anglo-vernacular schools, and Sein Tin joined other politically active students in teaching at a newly established National Central School in Rangoon. The strike movement petered out in 1923, and Sein Tin rejoined the university. In 1924, Pe Maung Tin, freshly returned from studying for his BLitt in England, was appointed head of the Department of Oriental Studies. In 1925, he opened a new honors degree course in Burmese language and literature and asked Sein Tin to join it.

Under the British administration a post in the ICS was highly sought after, with its good salary and social prestige, and a mastery of English was an essential qualification. Sein Tin's fellow students suggested to him that an honors degree in Burmese would only qualify him to become a Burmese language teacher; nevertheless, he chose to study Burmese literature, which he loved. In 1927, he obtained a first-class BA honors degree in Burmese and Pali, the first graduate of the new course. After working as a college tutor for five months, he was selected to join a two-year Indian Civil Service training course in England in Oxford, where he lived as a student in Christ Church.

The service that he joined on his return to Burma in 1929 was still, like Burma itself, administered from distant Delhi as part of the Indian empire. The chief commissioner was subject to control from Delhi, and his executive council was appointed, not elected. All this was to change quite shortly. Discussions were already in progress about the future government of India and Burma. Its reorganization was laid down in the end under the Acts of 1935, which took effect in 1937. Seven years after Sein Tin's return from England, he found himself responsible no longer to a chief commissioner, but to a political government of elected ministers.

Whatever the form of government, however, Sein Tin's chief passion was writing. Even before graduating, he had been an assiduous letter writer to friends and teachers and had tried his hand at writing magazine articles. Now, during his ICS training, he found time to write and send to Burma for publication in *Thuriya Nei-zin* (Sun Daily) a series of some seventy articles entitled *Myanma Sa-peí akyauṅ* (On Burmese literature), using the pen name Theippan Kyaung-tha Maung Mya Thwin. This series appeared from 1928 to 1930. Another series, *Myanma Hmu* (Burmese culture), under the same pen name, appeared in the *Sun Daily* from 1930 to 1932. His *Auṅsahpo Tetgatho* (Oxford University), published in 1938, is an amusing and very detailed account of life in England, written, as he says in the introduction, for the benefit of other students who would be coming to England. He returned to Burma in the autumn of 1929 and was immediately sent for his practical training, first to Sagaing in Upper Burma and then to Meikhtila, until November 1930.

The work for which Sein Tin is best known and admired is the series of tales or sketches, part autobiographical accounts, part fictional stories, called in Burmese *wuthtu hsaung-ba* (story-articles), over 150 in number, describing and arising out of his work. As a government servant in the ICS, he served in towns throughout Burma, first as a trainee, then as a subdivisional officer, then as a deputy commissioner. All the sketches, written between 1929 and 1941, were first published in Rangoon, under the pen name Theippan Maung Wa, in monthly literary magazines, mostly *Dagon* and *Ganda Lawṅka* (The world of books). There was already a well-established tradition in Burma of writing under a pseudonym, and, as a civil servant, he could not write under his official name. His work first appeared in a book in 1934, in a collection entitled *Khitsan ponbyin-mya-1* (Experimental tales), selected and introduced by Professor Pe Maung Tin; it contains work by five of his Burmese literature graduates, including eleven pieces by Sein Tin. The professor's introduction defends the offering of this newer, more modern style of Burmese writing to the reading public "as part of a search for a new direction in Burmese literature, and in the belief that it will help it to flourish and develop." Pe Maung Tin also explains

that he has chosen the term *khitsan* (experimental) to describe these innovative stories and sketches because he wants to try them out on the reading public to see its reaction; they are a sort of experiment. And he has called them *ponbyin* (tales) to indicate that they are tales about ordinary everyday events, to distinguish them from traditional stories based on Buddhist *jataka* (birth stories) and *vattu* (narratives in the Buddhist scriptures). He asks readers to enjoy the best things in the book and to judge it benevolently. Traditional scholars did in fact raise strong objections to the new simpler, less florid style, with its shorter sentences, but most readers approved.

A second collection of forty-one of Sein Tin's own tales, *Khitsan ponbyin-2*, chosen and introduced by the author himself, was published in 1938. He tells us that he no longer expects the same storm of protest that greeted the first collection; that all the stories are based on his own experiences; and that the events described occurred when he was in Sagaing (Upper Burma), Salin (Central Burma), or Nyaungdon (Lower Burma). Further tales followed until December 1941. A few stories from both collections were translated into English in the *Guardian Magazine* (Rangoon) between 1960 and 1963. The titles give a taste of their nature: "Luxury" (Si-zein), "In the Evening" (Nya-nei), "Inwa" (Ava), "Eve of Election" (Maywei-mi), "The Back of Beyond" (Pyitsan-dayit), "Our Village" (Do Taw-ywa), "Shwedagon Pagoda."

Throughout his life Sein Tin had always been not only a diligent letter writer and essayist but also a diarist. From the diary that he managed to keep until his sudden murder by Burmese dacoits in June 1942, we learn how he felt about the war and what happened to him during the six chaotic months of the British retreat. This account of the disintegration of the government of Burma as the Japanese advanced describes the confusion caused by the bombing; the desperate attempts by the administration to cope with the floods of refugees fleeing to India; the evacuation of the secretariat to Upper Burma; and his personal dilemma—should he take his wife and three small children to India or remain in Burma? This question was decided for him when the train they were on had to be lightened by relieving it of three carriages, which included Sein Tin's, and he and his family were

turned off. The diary shows him to be a sensitive observer of people and events, with great concern for the suffering of all those less fortunate than himself. More than once, he remarks in the diary how distressing it is to find that in the general breakdown of law and order there is more to fear from his fellow Burmans than from the Japanese.

The pages of his diary, *Sit-atwin nei-zin hmat-tan* (War diary), were rescued from the floor of the rest house by his wife and published much later, in 1966. In the same year, a friend and fellow writer, Ludu U Hla (1910–1982), published *Thu sa-mya-ka pyaw-ge-de Theippan Maung Wa akyaung* (What his writings tell us about Theippan Maung Wa), a collection of Sein Tin's writings together with all that U Hla knew personally of the author and the information that he had been able to gather from family and friends. U Hla was a left-wing journalist and editor, founder of the *Ludu Newspaper* and *Kyi-bwa-yay* Press in Mandalay, and before the war the editor of an influential magazine in Rangoon, *Kyi-bwa-yay* (Progress). His collection includes a vivid eyewitness account of Sein Tin's brutal murder by dacoits on June 6, 1942. Several times in the book, U Hla notes that many readers will have been quite unaware that the by now very well-known Theippan Maung Wa, author of the *Khitsan* tales, had written so much under so many other names. From 1934 onward Sein Tin wrote regularly for *Kyi-bwa-yay* under a variety of pen names, though not under the name Theippan Maung Wa, which he reserved for his tales. For example, each month from February 1934 to June 1935 a short playlet by Tin Tint (a woman's name) appeared. Not written to be acted, these were intended to highlight contemporary social problems. A series of twenty-four letters, addressed to the editor, Ko Hla, from a certain Maung Than Chaung appeared between October 1934 and September 1936; these were essays on literary and political topics. The last of these informs the editor that the writer has decided to become a monk and thus will write no more letters. In fact, Sein Tin had decided to change the style of his contributions. In 1937, he sent in two long articles comparing the two main newspapers of the day, the *New Light of Myanma* and the *Sun Daily*, writing under the name Maung

Hteip-pyaung (Master Bald Pate). In 1939, articles on early novels, painting, music, and films appeared under a further four pen names.

Because it is the corpus of over 150 semiautobiographical, semifictional tales written under the name Theippan Maung Wa for which Sein Tin is best known, they deserve a more detailed mention. Unlike earlier Burmese short stories, which were usually written to earn money, Sein Tin's seem to have been written from a love of writing and a compulsion to record all that he experienced and observed. He has a sympathetic interest in ordinary people, and his tales, often in lively dialogues, paint a detailed but unsentimental picture of village life with its many social and economic problems, usually with a touch of humor or sarcasm; the humor is directed equally at himself and at the foolishness of the villagers he is administering. After about the twelfth tale, he introduces the character of Maung Lu E, a young subdivisional officer, an easygoing, level-headed person who observes what happens around him without becoming too involved—a portrait of Sein Tin himself. From this point on, Maung Lu E appears in all the tales, in different situations and environments. Frequently Sein Tin describes problems of law and order, which become more pressing toward the end of the 1930s, as in such stories as "Htaung-pyei" (Escaped prisoner), "Thabon Angwei" (The aftermath of the rebellion), and "Lu-pyan-pei" (Kidnapping). One can follow the change in Sein Tin's outlook from an inexperienced district official to a law officer responsible for maintaining order during the time of the Saya San rebellion in the early 1930s, and then to someone less and less in sympathy with the growing independence movement led by the Thakhins in the late 1930s. Taken together, the tales provide a humorous commentary on current events from the point of view of an educated and sympathetic administrator, and one who was not working to attain independence from British rule. Other tales, especially some of the later ones, are purely personal, concerning the early death of his first wife, how he met and fell in love with his second wife, and his pride in his firstborn son. Sein Tin's death at the early age of forty-two was a tremendous loss to Burmese literature.

