

# The Princess Who Walks Among Us

## A Retired Teacher's Journey From Burma to Boulder

By Molly Page

**In the 17 years Inge Sargent taught** junior high and high school students in Boulder, a few may have wondered about her penchant for putting her hair up in a double bun. They might have questioned the man-eating tiger hide or the python skin hanging on her walls. But until she published a book about her early adulthood, no one realized she'd been a bright star in Burma's dark history.

Inge, now 75, had once been to Burma what Princess Di was to Britain.

Born in Austria, Inge studied in the United States where she met her husband-to-be. She was one of Austria's first Fulbright scholars and he was a Burmese engineering student at the Colorado School of Mines. They'd been married a few months before moving to Burma, but it wasn't until moments before docking in Rangoon in January 1954, where throngs of devotees were waiting to greet someone important, that she learned her husband Sao Kya Seng was the Prince of Hsipaw. Hsipaw (pronounced "sea po") is about the size of Connecticut in the northern region of what was then known as Burma, since renamed Myanmar (although the new

name isn't universally recognized). The country is in Southeast Asia between Thailand and Bangladesh near neighboring India and China. After 62 years of British dominion, Burma had become self-governing in 1948.

Inge had not only arrived at a hopeful time in the nation's history, she also arrived as a princess. Officially her title was Mahadevi of Hsipaw, which roughly translates to "Celestial Princess." The title is still valid, but Inge no longer uses it.

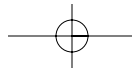
"What's the use of being a princess? No crown, no gown, no money, no nothing," she says with a laugh.

Sao Mae or "Royal Mother" is what Burmese nationals in Thailand call her these days.

### **Ruling For the People**

Long ago in Burma, after getting over her immediate shock, Inge grew into her role. Over the next eight years, she worked with the prince to bring economic prosperity to the people of Hsipaw, a province home to the Shan ethnic group.

"The two of us were like a little Peace Corps before the Peace Corps became fashionable," she says.



One of the first things they did was give Sao's familial paddy fields to the farmers who had been cultivating them. To improve agriculture, they implemented modern farming techniques and experimented with crops. They saw a need for giving children a better start, so they established a maternity and child welfare program along with a school. These initiatives and others earned them the respect and love of their people. Along the way, they had daughters, Mayari and Kennari.

But the couple's dreams came to an abrupt end on March 2, 1962, when the Burmese Army, led by General Ne Win, staged a coup d'état. The prince was taken into custody and the princess was put under house arrest. Democratically elected leaders were imprisoned or killed. The constitution was abolished along with most civil liberties. It was the beginning of a repressive regime, a military junta that even after Ne Win's death still rules with terror to this day.

### Fleeing From Horror

Inge tried to find out what happened to her husband, but other than two letters penned in his first days of custody, she heard nothing more than rumors. She tried to keep her spirits up. But guards

watched her every move, documented her visitors, censored her mail and listened in on her phone calls. Two years after the coup, she had a premonition that she should try to leave the country.

"The society there is much more open to supernatural events. There's nothing wrong with people saying 'I had this strange vision' or 'I've been to this place before.' When things like that occurred, I accepted them."

Acting on that feeling paid off. She and her children—after two years of house arrest—escaped Burma, leaving behind jewelry, photographs and valuables.

Inge arrived in Austria penniless. She didn't even have money to call her parents from Vienna. Although she was free from the oppressive military regime, Inge discovered her home country was not the refuge she'd hoped.

"It was impossible almost to get the guardianship of my own children," Inge remembers.

For two years, the Austrian government insisted she couldn't be named guardian unless she produced either her husband's death certificate or a letter from him that gave her permission to care for the children. And without legal guardianship, she couldn't take her daughters out of Austria.



## NOVEL IDEAS &gt; INGE SARGENT

"Do you really think the [Burmese] government will give me a certificate and say, 'Yes, we assassinated him?'" Inge recalls saying.

It took a friend pulling strings to get the guardianship papers, and with those, Inge decided to leave.

"To me, it was natural to come back and raise our children where Sao and I had been very happy and that was in Denver," she says.

Inge went back to school, remarried, and became a teacher. Her second husband, Howard (Tad) Sargent, adopted her daughters. Her life in Burma seemed far away, but she kept abreast on developments there. Even today, she refuses to call the country Myanmar, saying the people weren't asked about changing the name.

### Seeing the Downfall

While Inge's daughters grew up and she taught the youth of Boulder, Burma continued in its downward spiral.

In 1987, it was named least-developed nation by the United Nations. It gained a reputation for being one of the world's top suppliers of opium and amphetamines. Journalists were handily booted out before they could spread unflattering stories and tourists were confined to "green zones" far from the realities of oppression. AIDS, largely ignored, grew to epidemic proportions.

In 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi won 82 percent of the vote in a democratic election, but the military regime put her under house arrest and refused to let her lead. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, Suu Kyi remains in captivity. Even a plea for her freedom by former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan failed to produce results.

There hasn't been an election in Burma since 1990. Fundamental human rights were stripped: there's no freedom of the press, or of assembly; killing, torture, rape and forced labor are common; technology, health care and education are minimally funded. Uprisings

have occurred, but the regime—renamed the State Peace and Development Council in 1997—forcibly puts them down.

The U.S. Department of State wrote on their Web site last year, "The situation in Burma remains bleak. Violence against ethnic minorities continues, more than a million Burmese have been displaced internally or to neighboring countries, complaints of forced labor continue to emerge, narcotics continue to flow across borders, and the regime holds over 1,100 political prisoners in its custody, including Aung San Suu Kyi and other key civil society leaders."

The state department counts one million refugees; advocacy groups say there are three million. Whichever number is correct, it makes for a lot of humanity fleeing to neighboring regions like Thailand, where resources are already stretched.

Inge, wanting to bring attention to the nation's tragic decline, wrote "Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess." It was published in 1994, suddenly making the Boulder schoolteacher a well-known spokesperson for Burma.

Inge says she has no more books left in her, but she's happy that "Twilight" continues to sell and was recently published in German. The penalty for possessing the book in Burma is 17 years in prison, but everyone there seems to have read it, she says.

One of the striking features about the book is that Inge wrote in the third person from Sao's point of view during his days of captivity. She took that artistic license, she says, because she knew him so well she was certain she could accurately tell what he'd have thought. How much he'd missed his family. How he'd regretted not paying attention to signs that the military was abusing its growing power. Other detainees provided her with descriptions of the military jails, including the one where Sao had been incarcerated.

Among "Twilight's" readers is filmmaker François Girard, director of "The Red Violin." Girard is producing a film based on the book, but



NOVEL IDEAS > INGE SARGENT



Inge retains creative control and is able to make changes to the script. "It will be a credit to my first husband. He was a real hero. His life and his sacrifice should not be forgotten," she says.

Hollywood has shown interest in their love story, but Inge wanted to ensure Sao's work and progressive initiatives were portrayed, too. She hopes the film will raise awareness of what's happening in Burma now.

Inge has a lot of sad stories from Burma. One is about a boy, 5 or 6, whose father was murdered. En route to Thailand with his mother and his dog, he saw his mother blown up by a mine. All he had left was the dog. He continued traveling until he came upon Burmese soldiers making a fire. Hidden behind a tree in the dense jungle, the boy couldn't prevent his dog from approaching the soldiers.

"They caught the dog, killed the dog, cooked the dog and ate the dog. The little boy was watching and he thought he was next. We have hundreds of orphans like that. The military is very brutal. And nobody is doing anything about it because Burma has no oil," Inge says.

### Trying to Help

Inge may no longer care for her royal title, but she's never stopped doing what she can for Burmese refugees. She and Tad founded Burma Lifeline in 1999, a nonprofit that raises about \$50,000 a year. The money provides the stuff of survival—rice, oil, salt, soybeans, powdered milk and meal. Just \$20 supports a family of five for a month, Inge says. It also helps support border clinics that provide health care and gives out thatch for constructing houses.

"I beg and plead. I go to book groups, for instance, but only if I get some money for the refugees," she says.

Although she'd like to see the Burmese military lose power, the organization is nonpolitical, focused on helping refugees. In 2005,

hoping to do more, they opened an office and hired a part-time staffer. But as more money went into administration, Inge realized it wasn't in the best interest of the refugees. Now, she and Tad run Burma Lifeline together from their apartment home in a Boulder retirement community.

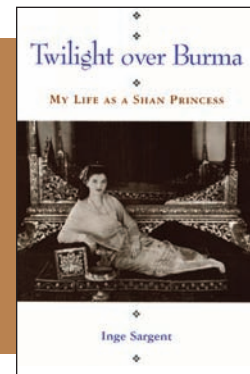
Inge says she's certain she'd be killed if she went to Burma today. As for other Americans, while they can travel to Burma, movements within the country are strictly monitored. Burma won't extradite foreigners arrested there and even embassy personnel may be prevented from traveling to their aid. While Inge urges visitors to go and ask tough questions, travel to Burma remains an extremely risky proposition for anyone.

Inge never got official word about her first husband's fate, but shortly before she fled Burma, a politician with high-ranking connections told her that Sao had been executed soon after his arrest. Her daughters write to the Burmese government every March on the anniversary of their father's disappearance. They know, of course, that the news won't be good, but they'd still like an official explanation. There has never been a response.

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## info

Tax-deductible contributions may be sent to:  
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Photos courtesy of Inge Sargent

