

# Zeya's School

Scholarly sources:

Aung-Thwin, Michael & Aung-Thwin, Maitrii (2012). *A history of Myanmar since ancient times*. London, UK: Reaktion Books, Ltd.

Coats, Austin (1997). The proud Mon. In Gerry Abbott (ed) *Inroads into Burma*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Pp 231-244.

# Meet Zeya

Zeya was a twelve-year-old boy living in Burma in 1948. Burma had been a war-torn country for hundreds of years, but in 1948 things looked like they were finally going to improve.

Much of this had to do with a school two sisters built in Zeya's village. But we'll get to that in a moment. First, let's learn a little bit about Zeya's world.



# Zeya's world

Zeya was a member of the proud Mon ethnic group in Burma. The largest ethnic group in the country was the Burman (also known as the Bamar) who often dominated the other groups. They were practically everywhere in the center of Burma, as they made up 68 percent of the country's population.

At the time of this story, Zeya's Mon people were located in lower Burma. See if you can find them.



Zeya lived with his parents. He had two older sisters (right) but they were married and living with their husbands.

The year 1948 was a very important one for the Burmese people, as it was the year that they were granted independence from the British, who had ruled Burma since 1885.





Because the British were leaving Burma, Zeya's parents had decided to make a long trip by foot and boat to Thailand to visit Zeya's uncle. The uncle, U Wumma, had once been involved in an uprising against the British and had fled Burma and ended up in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Today he lived alone in a Thai village. But Zeya's family felt now was a good time to bring him home.





When they arrived in Thailand, U Wumma was very excited to see them and right away sat them down for tea. He'd read all about the British leaving Burma.

Immediately, Zeya's parents began to plead with U Wumma to return home to his birth village.

When U Wumma hesitated, the impatient Zeya couldn't resist speaking out of turn. "You must see our new school," he pleaded. "We are really bringing back Mon culture."





U Wumma smiled. "I often had this dream of walking home to the village of our birth and seeing everything Mon again," he began. "But then I realize that even if the British are gone, the Burmans would still oppress us. I mean, I think back to the history of our people and how so much has been taken from us."



U Wumma continued. "For the sake of the boy, let me talk about a little of our history. So much of what is today Burma came from the Mon."

He turned to Zeya. "Just for starters, little man. Our main religion—that of Theravada Buddhism with the original teachings of the Buddha—was spread across Burma by our own Mon people."

Zeya actually knew this because he was now being educated in a Mon school, but he was too polite to tell his uncle.

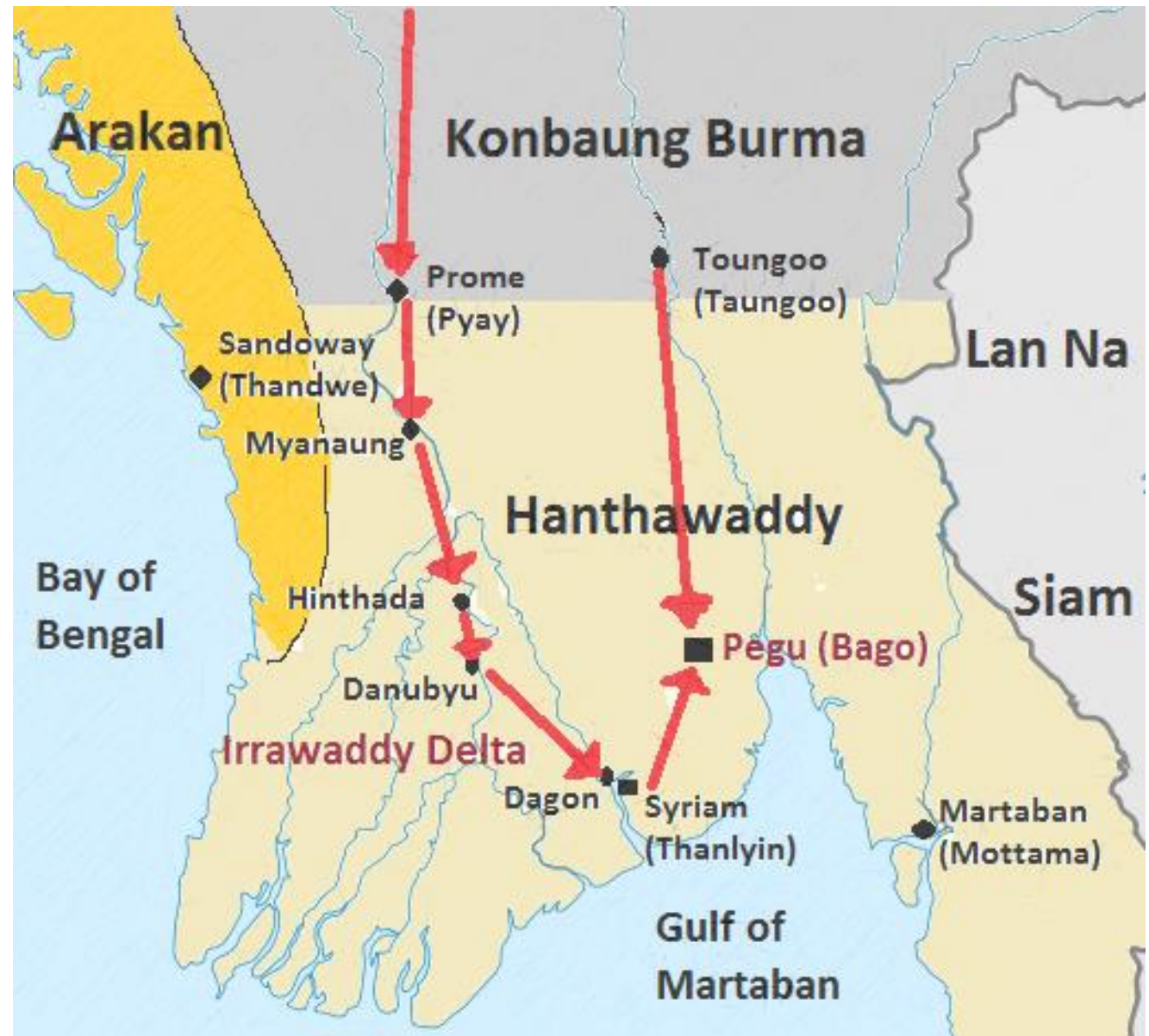




"And while we were so often ruled by the Burmans in our country, we still had our moments of glory." U Wumma pulled out an old map from his drawer and spread it across the table.

"Ah yes," sighed Zeya's mother, "The Hanthawaddy Kingdom."

"Yes," said U Wumma, turning again to Zeya. "Hanthawaddy was a Mon kingdom that ruled for nearly 300 years back in the Middle Ages. Mon culture was everything then."

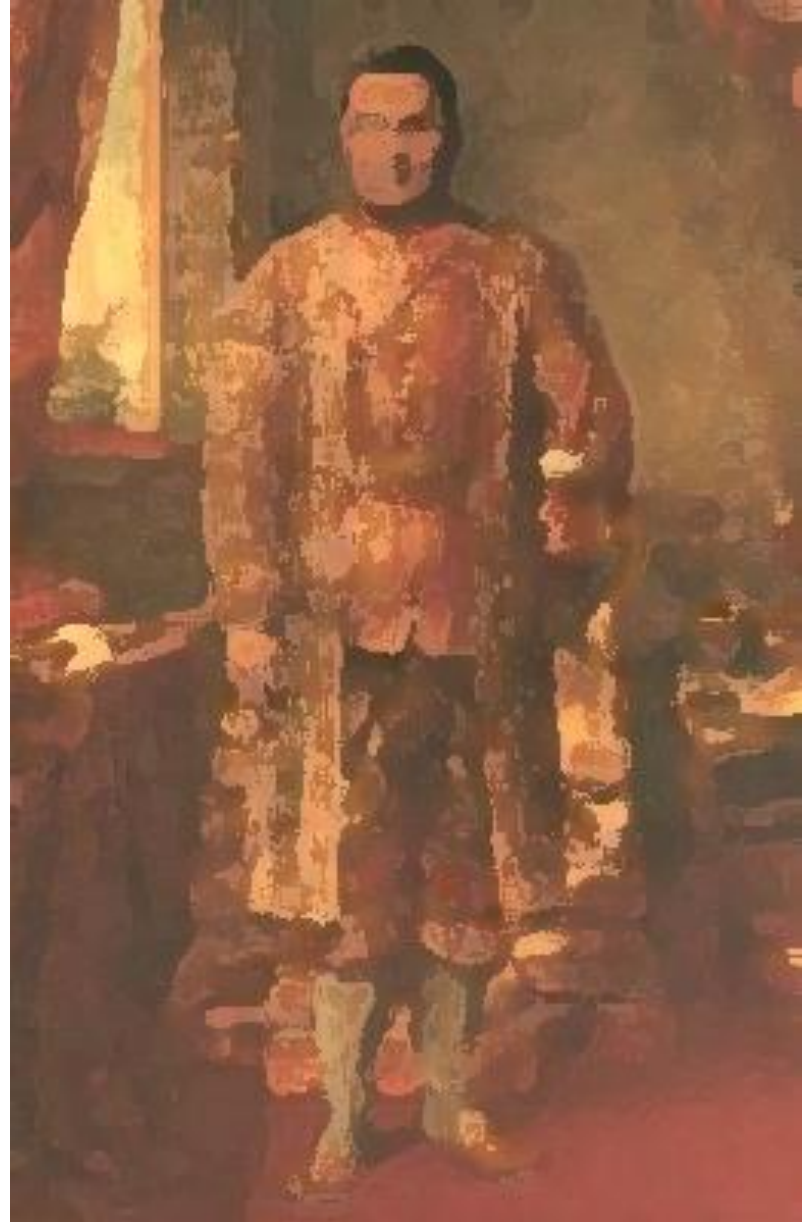


"But alas," moaned U Wumma, "when that fell, it was 200 years of Burman rule again. The Mon were treated cruelly."





"So many were forced into Thailand, just to survive." U Wumma said. He tapped Zeya's shoulder. "At least the Thai king let us in."



"And then the French helped us," interjected Zeya's father.

"Yes," responded U Wumma, looking at Zeya, "but that was in their self-interest. But they helped us and we were able to stay independent for seventeen very short years in the 1700s."

Zeya spoke up. "But my teacher says that if we didn't have those seventeen years, we'd have lost all of our Mon culture."

U Wumma thought for a moment. "Ah, she might be right. Now let me continue."





"But when the Burman ruler U Aungzeya came in, it was all over for the Mon. He killed tens of thousands of our people, including important Mon priests, pregnant women, and children."

U Wumma's voice got louder. "Over 3,000 priests were massacred by the Burmans in the capital city alone! Thousands more priests were killed in the countryside! Now I'll bet your teacher never told you that!"

Zeya wanted to tell his uncle that he knew every bit of this history from his school, but he remained silent.

"And again and again and again they did this!" U Wumma cried. "More and more Mon were forced into Thailand!"



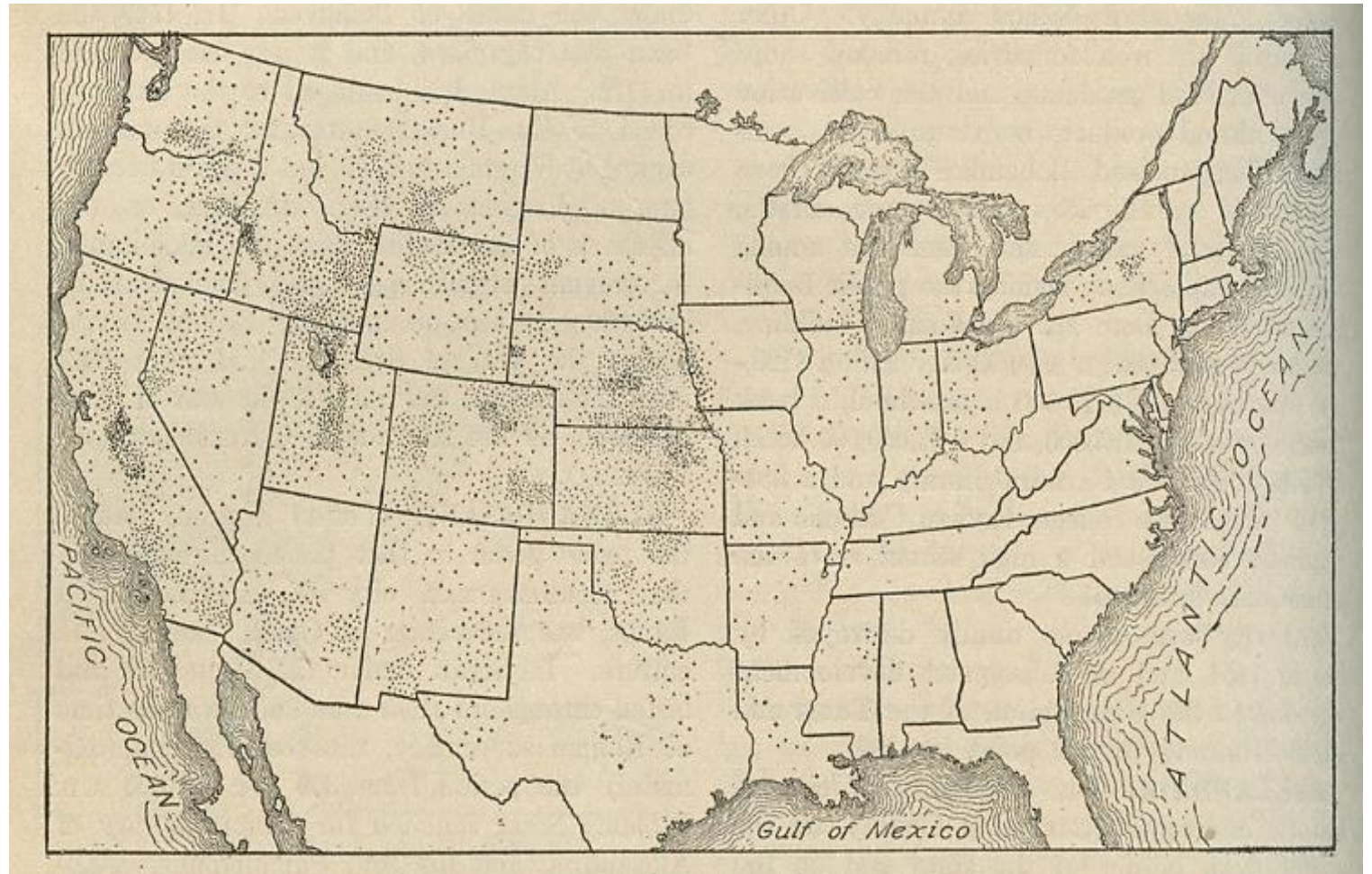
"And then came the British!" exclaimed U Wumma. "And they too did everything they could to squash the Mon spirit, the Mon language, the Mon culture. More heartbreak, More losses. More refugees."





"But my brother," pleaded Zeya's father, "the British are gone now. The talk is that we will now have a federation. Like the one they have in America where there is a central government but also states that have their own rights. The talk is that the ethnic groups in Burma will have these rights like the states have in America."

U Wumma laughed loudly. "This will NEVER happen! The Burmans will seize power again and it will be life as usual."



Zeya and his parents dropped their heads in disappointment. His father spoke up. "Do I take it in all of this, my brother, that you are telling us you will not return to Burma?"

"I will not," snapped U Wumma. "The Mon culture is dead in Burma."

Zeya's father looked at his son. "Perhaps you want to at least tell your uncle about our school now, if my brother will listen."

U Wumma agreed to listen respectfully.





## Zeya's school

Zeya was very nervous to have such an audience with his respected uncle. He began slowly.

"Sir, it all began just before the War—World War Two."

U Wumma nodded.

"We used to have to go to school at the monastery,"  
Zeya continued.



Zeya's mother interrupted. "See, the government schools would not teach in the Mon language. Only Burmese and English. So the monastery would take a few children, but only a few."

"Let the boy tell the story," ordered U Wumma.





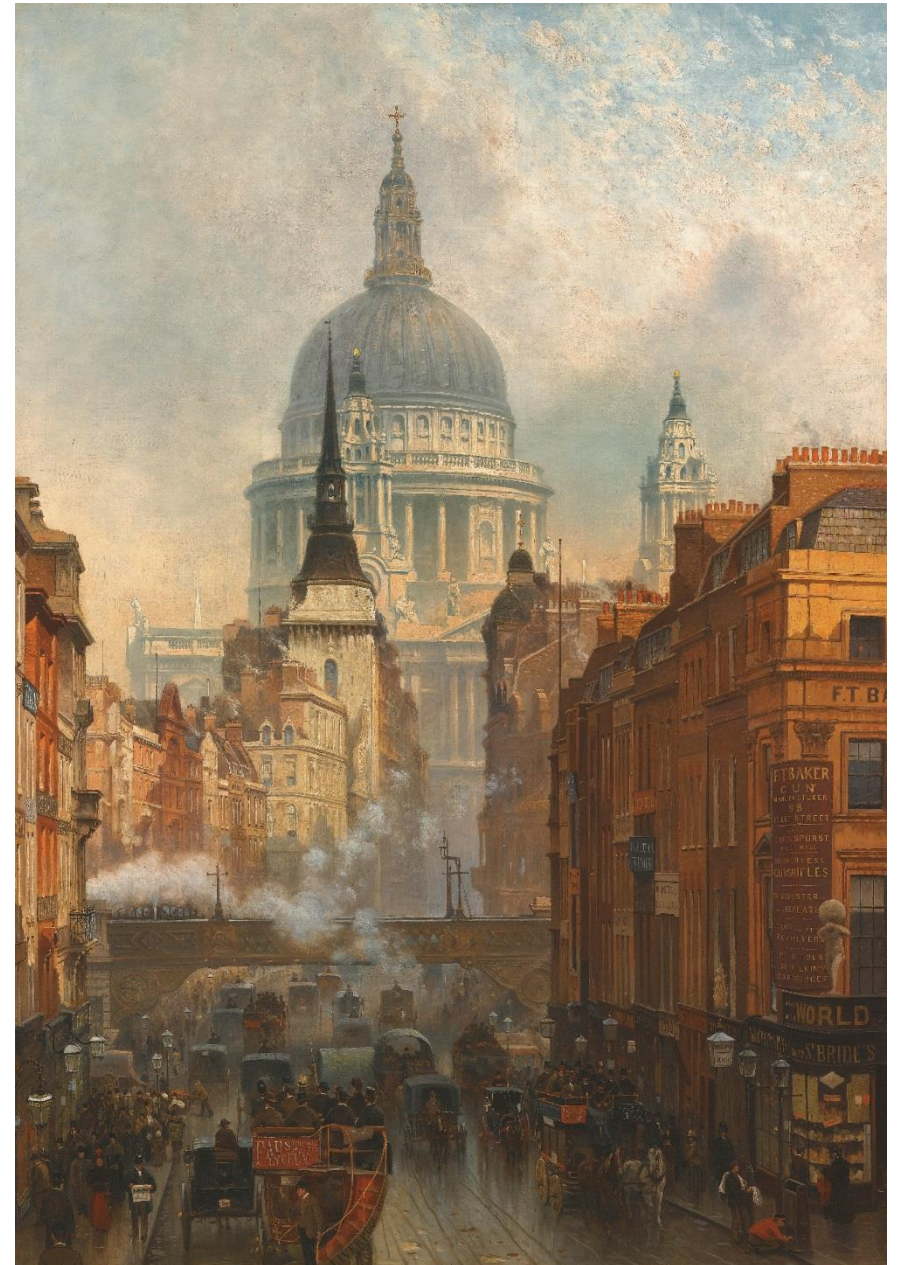
Zeya took a deep breath. "There were two sisters in the village who are greatly respected. They are named Mi thiri and Mi nyein. Even the British respected them."

U Wumma began to let out a snide sigh, but stopped himself.



Zeya continued. "They were educated in Burma and then their father sent them to London, England (right) before the War to go to college. They became learned in many subjects."

Zeya took another deep breath. "But more than anything they loved their Mon culture and wanted to come home and teach it."





"The sisters told all of us in the village about what they wanted to do and we were so happy. Hardly anyone in the village still spoke Mon and they would bring it back. They would teach us about our culture and our history. They knew so much of it from their elders—even the music and the dances."

"But tell U Wumma about the problems," interjected Zeya's father.

"No, he's doing fine," declared U Wumma. "Continue, nephew."



"Uh, well, they could teach in the monasteries but there they could only teach a few. And people couldn't afford to pay for the school privately, so they needed the British government to help them with money. Because they had been educated in England, the government agreed to help.

"But there were more problems. See, uncle, there were no books written in Mon. All the country's books were in Burmese or English. This meant that the sisters had to translate every single word of every single school book and get them printed."

"It took years," added Zeya's mother.





"They let them use an administrative building in the village for the school. And the government helped so that the kids would not have to pay."

U Wumma sat with his arms folded.



Zeya continued. "The sisters first opened the school right after the War. People really wanted this school. Students came by boat-- some from 30 miles away."

"And did the teachers keep their promises to teach Mon culture?" asked U Wumma.





"Oh yes!" exclaimed Zeya. "They taught Mon language and history. They taught Mon dress and music and art and dance. They taught the other school stuff too—reading, writing, math, and English."

"The school has now doubled the number of people who speak Mon in the village," Zeya's mother stated proudly.

"See, my brother, the Mon culture is coming back in Burma. I wish you would reconsider returning home with us."



"I appreciate what you and your articulate boy have said, but I won't change my mind. I am fifteen years older than you and have been through too much frustration trying to keep my culture in Burma.

"You and your family are welcome to stay with me as long as you wish, but I cannot return to Burma with you. The Thais are not fond of us Mon, but we are tolerated here. If ever you need to leave Burma, you are welcome to live with me."





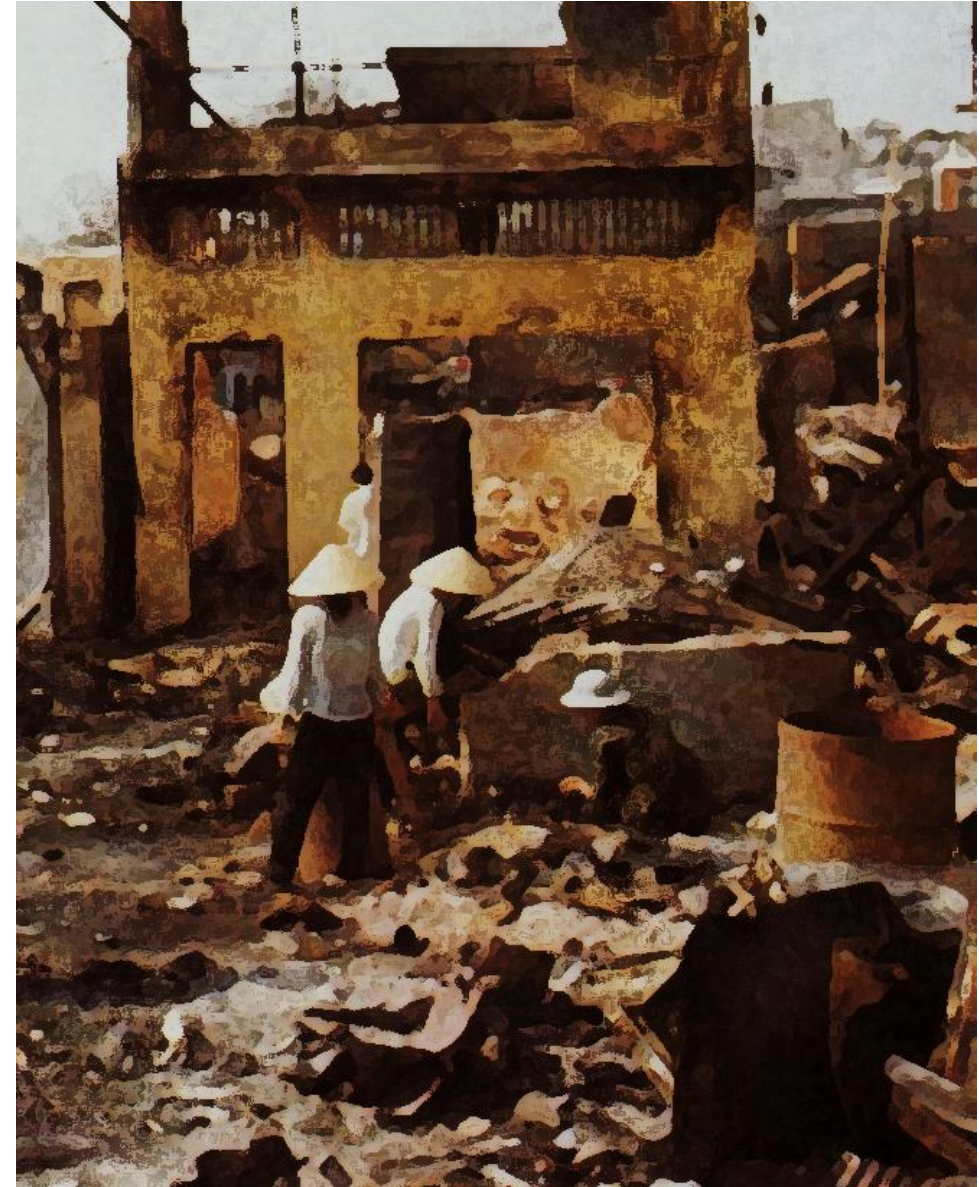
Zeya's family stayed with U Wumma for a month and were unable to convince him to come back to Burma. They traveled home, mostly by boat.

The family had been away from their home for a long time. They were very excited as they neared the shore where their village was located. It was nearly sunset. They stood up and looked for familiar signs.



But what they saw shocked them to the depths of their souls. Their village was in shambles. It had been burned to the ground.

The family tried to call out to the few people they could see in the distance. Finally they caught the attention of an elderly village man, carting a wagon full of charred belongings. They demanded to know what had happened.





"It is the worst possible thing," the man answered. "The Burman Prime Minister, U Nu, told the people that he would refuse any kind of self-rule by the country's other ethnic groups. He said we must all unite under the Burmans."

Zeya's parents were horrified. "So why did they burn down our villages?"

"It was the Karen over there," he said, pointing east toward the region that the ethnic Karens occupied. "They began to make a lot of noise about not having self rule. They took up arms. The sisters Mi thiri and Mi nyein told everyone we should back the Karens."

"So the Burmans burned our villages?"





"Yes, and the school. Now we all need to move on.  
You too."

As the sun set, the old man pointed to a family in  
the distance that was fleeing a nearby village.  
"You need to hurry. The soldiers will come and  
force you to the Thai border if they know you've  
returned. You could be killed."





Zeya's father quickly ran to the site of the family's house, to see if anything survived the fire. He found nothing. And it was now nearly dark.

In the distance Zeya could see Burman soldiers. "Hurry, Father," Zeya cried.

Within minutes the soldiers closed in on the family and ordered them at gunpoint to move on. The already exhausted family had to walk east, through Karen territory, and to the Thai border.



Once they crossed the Thai border, the soldiers retreated.

"What will happen to us?" asked Zeya.

"We'll have to register with the refugee camp," his father replied, "but I am sure they will let us go to U Wumma after that."





Zeya's mother patted his head. "Perhaps in time we will be able to go somewhere where we will have rights—where we can practice our culture freely again."

"Like America?" Zeya asked.

"We can only hope," his mother replied.

But Zeya's parents died in Thailand. They just felt grateful that they didn't spend their last years in a refugee camp.

Eventually Zeya married and had children. He too died in Thailand.



Zeya's grandchildren ended up returning to Burma, but lost their homes when Cyclone Nargis hit the area in 2008. The ethnic tensions were still present. They ended up getting refugee status and were able to immigrate to America.

Today they live in a very nice American city. Look at the picture. Do you know what city this is?





The End  
Let's Talk!!!!