

REMEMBERING BURMESE DAYS

A FORMER SHAN PRINCESS REMEMBERS THE COUNTRY AND PEOPLE SHE LEFT BEHIND

Text Janna Graber



Image courtesy Inge Sargent

When Inge (Eberhard) Sargent decided to study in America, she never imagined how that decision would change her life. The Austrian woman had won a scholarship to a women’s college in Colorado. It was 1952, soon after WWII, and the thought of seeing a new place was thrilling.

At an international student party in Colorado, she met a handsome young man named Sao Kya Seng. She didn’t know it then, but Sao Kya Seng was a prince from the Shan State of Burma. Determined to help bring progress to his region, he had decided to study engineering in Colorado. Only the university president knew who Sao Kya Seng really was, because he wanted to live a normal student life.

The couple soon fell in love, taking romantic walks along the river near school or hiking in the foothills of Lookout Mountain. Eventually, they married, and sailed for Burma in 1954.

When the couple reached the port in Rangoon, the young bride noticed hundreds of people gathered on the dock. Others floated nearby in brightly coloured boats, holding welcome signs.

“It looks like they’re here for someone important,” she told her young husband. It was then that he told her the truth: he was the Prince of Hsipaw. All these years later, Sargent still laughs at her response. “I wish you would have told me!” she exclaimed at the time. “I would have worn a different dress!”

The bewildered bride soon grew accustomed to royal life, and came to love the region and its warm, friendly people. She acquired the title of Sao Nang Thusandi, the *mahadevi* (princess) of Hsipaw, and learned both the Shan and the Burmese languages, as well as the names of their 46 palace servants. The couple eventually had two little girls, Mayari and Kennari.

Sao Kya Seng put his engineering degree to work, establishing a salt mine and mining company. He abolished the practice of servants kneeling before him, gave his rice fields away to the farmers who worked them, and introduced new farming methods.

The beloved Shan prince and his bride were deeply devoted to their people, but in 1962, that fairytale life changed forever. Sao Kya Seng was arrested during the Ne Win coup. He was never seen again.

“We heard later that he had been killed,” says Sargent, “but there was never any confirmation”.

For two years, the princess and her daughters lived under house arrest. Finally, with the help of the Austrian ambassador, they were able to escape, carrying only three suitcases.

The princess and her children returned to Colorado, where she and her husband had been so happy. She was determined to make a good home for her girls. She became a high school German teacher, and her daughters adapted to life in America. In 1968, the former princess married Howard (Tad) Sargent.

But she never forgot the people of her adopted homeland. Years later, she shared her story in her book, *Twilight Over Burma, My Life as a Shan Princess*. The book was made into a film in 2015.

Today, more than fifty years later, the former princess still thinks of the land and people she left behind. Photos from those years still adorn her walls.

In October 2015, the Colorado School of Mines honored Sao Kya Seng when the Distinguished Achievement Medal was posthumously conferred on him for his outstanding professional achievements. The award was accepted by the former Mahadevi of Hsipaw and their two daughters. *AGP*



JANNA GRABER is a Colorado-based journalist, editor and producer. She has produced travel content for print, online, video and TV. She interviewed Inge Sargent for GoWorld Travel, where she is an editor.



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