

About This Book

This book chronicles many historically important events that took place at the Rangoon Public General Hospital and beyond during the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) as witnessed by Dr. Myint Swe, a staff physician. It includes firsthand accounts involving many bold face names of history such as Gen. Aung San, Daw Khin Kyi, U Nu, Bo Ne Win, Bo Letya, Bo Setkya, Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Mya, Deedok U Ba Cho, Lanmadaw Po Tote, Gen. SC Bose, Lt. Col. JR Bhonsle, and many more.

It is also a story of how a small group of determined people against all odds not only made the wartime hospital function but also restarted the country's medical system.

The first edition of the book won the 1967 Sarpay Beikman Manuscript Award.

About The Author



Wunna Kyaw-Htin Dr. Myint Swe (1912–1978) started out his medical career at the BIA Hospital (Rangoon Public General Hospital) in 1942. He was one of the exceedingly few physicians who stayed behind to serve the country during World War II.

After independence, he led a successful practice in Yangon. He treated poor patients throughout his career, and volunteered at the Kaba Aye Sangha Hospital and the Sasana Yeiktha from 1956 to 1976. He published four books. For his service to the country, he was awarded the titles of Wunna Kyaw-Htin and Mawgun Win (3rd Order) by the government.

Foreword by Author (First Edition)

This book is a memoir of my experiences as a staff physician at the main hospital in Rangoon [Yangon] during the Japanese occupation of Burma [Myanmar] (1942–1945).

I'd first like to give the readers some background. Western-style healthcare in colonial Burma was available only in a few major cities. The number of physicians was miniscule, and that of specialists smaller still. Specialists could really be found only at the Rangoon General Hospital (RGH). Everyone in the country had to come to the RGH to see a specialist. There was a good chance that they would be met by foreign-born physicians since about half the physicians and most of specialists were foreigners.

You may ask why. In my opinion, healthcare for the masses was never a priority of the British imperialist government. The record speaks for itself. University education was strictly a province of the elite. Only the very few could afford to go to university. The country's only medical school at Rangoon University had a few seats. Even that medical school, which offered an MBBS degree program, was opened only in 1923. The highest medical education available before 1923 was a three-and-a-half year LMP (Licensed Medical Practitioner) program launched in 1905. Prior to 1905, the best you

could do in the country was a two-year Hospital Assistant program. If you wanted to receive further education, you had to travel abroad. For example, my father had to study in Madras [Chennai] for his LMP degree.

The point is only a select few in the country could even dream of becoming a physician. The small medical system was run mainly by foreigners and the tiny elite for foreigners and the tiny elite.

All this came home to roost when World War II reached ashore in 1942. The imperialists evacuated the country so abruptly that all kinds of chaos ensued. I was a final year medical student studying in Rangoon then, and witnessed how many people, especially foreigners and the elite, scrambled to leave town with the retreating British forces. In a rush to get out, many simply left their properties unattended. Several buildings in downtown were abandoned.

One immediate effect of the exodus was that whatever semblance of a medical system the country had also promptly collapsed. Hospitals stopped operating. The medical school was closed down. Students were stranded. Some like me were really close to graduating. The war had come just before we were about to take our final-year exams.

The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and their ally Burma Independence Army (BIA) entered the city on 7 March 1942. The IJA took over the RGH, and reserved the hospital solely for the Japanese, staffing mainly with Japanese personnel. The rest of the city, including the BIA, needed a hospital, and of course, physicians to staff it.

Fortunately for us Burmese, one brilliant physician had not fled. He was one U Ba Than. I consider Dr. Ba Than truly special—one in a million. He was one of the exceedingly few Burmese who had obtained an advanced medical degree. Not only had he received an FRCS (Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons) degree from the UK but he had also practiced at the RGH and taught at the medical school. When almost everyone else in the elite circles fled, he stayed behind.

When Dr. T. Suzuki of the incoming Japanese administration contacted him to re-open a hospital for the BIA, Dr. Ba Than readily agreed. Now came the hard part. There was nothing left. No infrastructure. No hospital. No staff. Nothing. Everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch. It was how the story of the Japanese-era hospital began.

First, he needed a large enough building to house his new "BIA Hospital". He asked one of his former students Ko Kyawt Maung to find a suitable place. Mr. Kyawt Maung selected the building of Anglican Diocesan School of Rangoon. The girls' school for the daughters of Rangoon's elite had been used by the British army as a makeshift hospital right before they left.

Next, the "hospital" needed staff. At the outset, in early April 1942, it had just two physicians. The Outpatient Department was staffed by Dr. Ko Ko Gyi, who sat both morning and evening shifts. Inpatient cases were handled by Dr. Ba Than and his assistant Ko Kyawt Maung. They desperately needed help. But all they could recruit were final year students like me. In late April, four stranded final year students—Ko Hla Han (Hla Thamein), Ko Kyaw Khin, Ko San Myint and myself—were hired as Resident Medical Officers (RMOs). With our arrival, Ko Kyawt Maung focused on hiring and managing the auxiliary staff—orderlies, janitors, cooks, etc.

Around the same time we joined, a group of young nurses who would become the core of the nursing staff came on board. The first two to arrive were Daw Khin Gyi (later, wife of Thakin Than Tun) and her younger sister Daw Khin Kyi (later, wife of Gen. Aung San). They were charged with recruiting nurses, as well as setting up an on-campus dormitory for nurses. There weren't enough certified nurses left either. Besides the two sisters, only one other nurse, Daw Kelly Khin Shwe, formerly of Ellen Mitchell Hospital of Moulmein, was certified. So, they had to recruit nursing students, many of whom hadn't finished school because of the war.

All the nurses stayed on campus. Daw Khin Gyi was the chief of the nurses' dorm. Under her watch were: (1) Ma Tin Htwe, (2) Ma Yin Nu (later, Capt. Yin Nu), (3) Ma Khin Si (later, Maj. Khin Si), (4) Ma Chit Si (later, head of the Nursing School), (5) Ma Mya (later, Capt. Mya of the Mingaladon Military Hospital), and (6) Ma Khin Nyunt. Ma Tin Htwe, who would later become my wife, roomed with Daw Khin Gyi and Daw Khin Kyi.

Against all odds, the hospital slowly came into its own. Its name was changed to the Burma Defence Army (BDA) Hospital in August 1942. U Shwe, the former treasurer at RGH, was hired as the treasurer. His son Ko Tun Sein joined Ko Kyawt Maung in the operations department. A second-year med school student, Nyunt Thwin (later Dr. Nyunt Thwin) became an assistant to Dr. Ba Than and myself. Ko Tin Ngwe and Ko Thein Nyunt joined as hospital pharmacists. I must also mention several others—orderlies, cooks, janitors, etc.—who did the essential tasks to keep the hospital running.

A photograph of the medical staff (doctors and nurses) was taken in c. mid-1942. The photo, preserved for posterity, is included in the book here. (The picture counts 22 members not including three who were away.) Many of my colleagues too have kept the photo with much nostalgia.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Dr. SS Sen, who joined the staff shortly after the photo was taken. The Indian-born Dr. Sen was an internal medicine specialist. He was working at the Mogok prison in Upper Burma at the start of the war, and helped Dr. Ba Maw [later, Premier of the Japanese installed Burmese government] escape from prison. Dr. Sen could easily have left the country, but stayed behind because he dearly loved the country. His arrival greatly helped reduce Dr. Ba Than's workload.

In November 1942, the hospital officially became a public hospital, and came under the purview of the Ministry of Health. The hospital became a magnet for the few remain-

ing physicians. The physicians were: (1) Dr. Ba Than, (2) Dr. Sen, (3) Dr. Myint Swe, (4) Dr. San Myint, (5) Dr. Than Aung, (6) Dr. Yan Shin, (7) Dr. Yin May, (8) Dr. Kyi Paw (later, surgeon), (9) Dr. Maung Maung Than, (10) Dr. C. Torrens, (11) Dr. Naw Saw Khin, (12) Dr. Daw Khin Kyi, (13) Dr. Daw Pu, (14) Dr. Chan Tate, (15) Dr. Seit Shein, (16) Dr. E., (17) Dr. Hla Shwe. There were also Japanese specialists such as Dr. Asahi, Dr. Suji, Dr. Horibe, and Dr. Shikuma.

In November 1942, Daw Ama of Dufferin Hospital, joined as head of nursing. A few changes followed. Daw Khin Gyi left her role as the head of the nursing dormitory. After a couple of interim replacements, Ma Kelly took over the role until the war's end. By late 1943, the hospital was established enough that affiliate hospitals were established. Dr. Yin May led a group of physicians to start a maternity hospital at another building downtown. Dr. Kyi Paw, Dr. Naw Saw Khin, Dr. Pu and Dr. Khin Kyi went there. My med school classmates Ko Hla Han and Ko Kyaw Khin had joined the army, and left for the newly opened military hospital.

A number of the physicians at the hospital were novices like me who didn't get to take their final year exams. By working at the hospital day and night, we got plenty of hands-on experiences. But we still didn't have any certification. The senior physicians at the hospital recognized the real need to restart the medical school to get the next generation of medical practitioners. Dr. Ba Than, Dr. Sen, Dr. Yin May and Dr. Chan Tate led the creation of the LSMP (Licensed Surgery and Medical Practitioner) course. Because of their tireless efforts, the new school was able to produce much needed physicians for the country, many of whom went on to become specialists in their respective fields.

Because of the selfless efforts of many people, the general hospital at Gora Hill served the people for three years (1942–1945), and the alumni of the hospital continued to serve the country in the following years. May I note that today, there are many young Burmese physicians, many of

whom have gone on to receive advanced degrees undreamed of by those in the colonial era. They should remember the pioneers who made all this possible.

I dedicate this book to Sayagyi U Ba Than and other pioneers of the medical profession, to whom I owe deepest gratitude.

Myint Swe
December 1966