

## Great Lives from History: The 20th Century

# Aung San Suu Kyi

Burmese political activist

*Suu Kyi, through nonviolent activism and peaceful resistance, advocated on behalf of the Burmese people against military rule in Burma (now Myanmar). She endured house arrest--a form of imprisonment--and separation from her family. She earned the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, one of many awards for her convictions.*

**Born:** June 19, 1945; Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar)

**Areas of Achievement:** Government and politics, social reform, civil rights, peace advocacy

### Early Life

Aung San Suu Kyi (awng sahn soo chee) was two years old when her father, General Aung San, died at the hands of assassins with rifles. He had led the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, supported democracy, and helped Burma (now Myanmar) struggle against those illegally in power. Suu Kyi's mother, Khin Kyi, arranged monthly memorial services to keep Aung San's memory alive. Khin served Burma by assuming her late husband's seat in parliament, pursuing nursing, and opening her home to nursing students of all nationalities. When Suu Kyi's nine-year-old brother Aung San Lin drowned in a local pond in 1953, Suu Kyi's grief-stricken mother finished her workday before returning home to join family and to view his dead body. Suu Kyi learned that duty and others come first.

Suu Kyi accompanied her mother to New Delhi, where she served as ambassador to India (1960). After attending high school at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Suu Kyi entered Delhi University. She studied the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, a martyr who often used voluntary starvation--a peaceful practice that affected only him directly--to show determination and conviction.

While attending St. Hugh's College in Oxford (1964-1967), Suu Kyi met British student Michael Aris, a Tibetan studies major. Suu Kyi traveled in the summers to Africa, Spain, and Algiers, where she helped build homes for widows of Algerian soldiers. After graduation, she worked as assistant secretariat to the Advisory Committee on Administration and Budgetary Questions at the United Nations (1969-1971) and volunteered at Bellevue Hospital.

Suu Kyi corresponded with Aris in Bhutan, explained her obligations to the Burmese people, and asked that he help her fulfill these obligations, if necessary. They married in London on January 1, 1972, and traveled to Japan and India. While Aris tutored the royal family in Bhutan and headed the government's translation department, Suu Kyi was the research officer on United Nations Affairs for the Bhutan foreign ministry.

Suu Kyi and Aris had two children, Alexander, born in 1973, and Kim, born in 1977, both in England, where Michael was working on Tibetan and Himalayan studies at

Oxford University. Suu Kyi cataloged Burmese books in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and she cared for the family.

### **Life's Work**

By 1985, Suu Kyi was a researcher in Japan, bringing her son Kim with her. Her husband and her son Alexander went to the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Simla for Michael's fellowship. The four reunited after Suu Kyi completed her research, which was published as *Aung San* (1984), *Let's Visit Burma* (1985), *Let's Visit Nepal* (1985), and *Let's Visit Bhutan* (1985). Michael, still an Oxford scholar, wrote on the Himalayas and Tibet.

A graduate student at London University's School of Oriental and Asian Studies, Suu Kyi returned to Burma when her mother suffered a stroke (March 31, 1988). In Burma she found violence and death and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in power. Suu Kyi wrote to the BSPP and urged peace, delivering her first political speech on August 26, with her sons and husband in attendance. Later that year, Suu Kyi became secretary of the newly formed National League for Democracy (NLD). She counseled, advised, urged nonviolence, and publicized Burma's concerns.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), now called the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, soon assumed power, opposing the NLD and changing Burma's official name to Myanmar. The Burmese people were powerless, even when the SLORC agreed to a 1989 election. Suu Kyi organized her opposition to the SLORC with secret videotapes and short-wave broadcasts. She wore a jacket-and-hat combination that was to become a fashion statement--and a symbol for the NLD. On April 5, 1989, Suu Kyi led a group of NLD members on a march down a city street; six soldiers kneeled and aimed rifles at her, yet she continued to walk calmly. It did not take long for her legend to spread.

Results of the May, 1989, election showed that the NLD had won most of the open government seats, but the SLORC ignored the returns. They made all newspapers illegal--except one--permitted the detention of those persons considered criminals up to three years without trial or charges, and, on July 20, placed Suu Kyi under house arrest. Suu Kyi's sons were with her. Her calmness and imprisonment became world news. Her husband, in Scotland for his father's funeral, found her in the third day of her hunger strike to demand humane treatment for NLD members.

When the SLORC promised fair treatment for the NLD, Suu Kyi stopped fasting. She had lost twelve pounds in twelve days and had to receive nourishment intravenously. She remained a political prisoner, but the SLORC allowed her to correspond with her family, which at this time was in England. The SLORC finally allowed her husband--but not her boys--to visit; his luggage was full of food for Suu Kyi. Malnourished, Suu Kyi had thin hair, poor vision, spinal degeneration, a weight sometimes below 100 pounds, and heart and breathing problems. When he left, Michael took with him Suu Kyi's writings, composed during her captivity.

### **Significance**

Suu Kyi's imprisonment began in 1989. Although she was offered her freedom if she left Myanmar, she chose to remain in her country and endured--with dignity--house arrest as a symbol of peace and determination to her people. The world recognized

her sacrifices for peace, awarding her more than twenty-five peace and humanitarian prizes, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. The Nobel committee acknowledged Suu Kyi as a model of human determination and bravery.

Among Suu Kyi's awards are the Rafto Prize (for her work promoting human rights), the European parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and seventeen other humanitarian awards. Her family would continue to accept her awards, fearing that if she left the country she would be denied reentry by the SLORC. All prize money was donated to the people of Myanmar, and Suu Kyi's only income was the money she had in a bank account from publishing *Freedom from Fear*.

The SLORC denied Suu Kyi most visitors. It refused visits between Suu Kyi and her husband, even after he had developed prostate cancer. (Michael died on March 27, 1999, having last seen Suu Kyi in 1995.) After her husband's death, Suu Kyi continued with her movement for peace in Myanmar, urging the world community to help her people, who continued to suffer under the SLORC. Global attention to Suu Kyi's cause included that of musicians such as Eric Clapton, Paul McCartney, and the Indigo Girls, and of the bands U2, R. E. M., and Pearl Jam, who launched the album *For the Lady* on October 26, 2004. Profits from the sale of the album benefited the United States Campaign for Burma (USCB). Predictably, Myanmar banned the album and even established a law against singing "freedom songs." Those found in violation of this law received a seven-year prison term.

*Anita Price Davis*

### **Further Reading**

Abrams, Irwin. *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1991-1995*. Singapore: World Scientific, 1999. This volume contains Alexander Aris's acceptance speech on behalf of his mother, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. He spoke of his mother's dedication, sacrifice, and plight, and reminded the audience that his mother's quest is spiritual.

Aung San Suu Kyi. *Freedom from Fear, and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 1995. In 1995 the Myanmar government allowed Suu Kyi to leave her home temporarily. Includes a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Davis, Anita Price, and Marla Selvidge. *Women Nobel Peace Prize Winners*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006. Main features of the essay on Suu Kyi include her portrait, quotations from Michael Aris, an overview of politics in Myanmar, and a complete biography of Suu Kyi. This volume also features a biography of every female Nobel Peace Prize recipient, through 2005.

Ling, Bettina. *Aung San Suu Kyi: Standing for Democracy in Burma*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1999. A biography of Suu Kyi that traces her political activism in the face of adversity and antidemocracy in Myanmar/Burma. Written especially for younger readers.

Wintle, Justin. *The Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*. London: Hutchinson, 2007. An academic biography of Suu Kyi, for advanced readers. Recommended for its overall accuracy but, as one reviewer noted, short on accurate details.

### **See Also**

Jean-Bertrand Aristide; Benazir Bhutto; Indira Gandhi; Mahatma Gandhi; Le Ly Hayslip; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Albert Lutuli; Nelson Mandela; Andrei Sakharov; Mother Teresa; U Thant.

**Related articles in *Great Events from History: The Twentieth Century*:**

**1971-2000:** Aug. 8, 1988: Auspicious Day of 8/8/88 Turns Deadly in Rangoon;  
1991-1992: Muslim Refugees Flee Persecution in Myanmar; Jan.-Mar., 1997: Karen Refugee Crisis.