

# ADDRESSES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*A Print Point of View*  
*The Rise of Asian Advertising*

# ADDRESSES

Siamese Memoirs in wartime England  
and post-war Europe and Siam

Teddy Spha Palasthira

With maps, graphics and sketches by the author



The Post Publishing Public Company Limited  
BANGKOK

First published in Thailand in 2010 by Post Books

Copyright © 2010 Teddy Spha Palasthira

‘We’ll Meet Again’ Words & Music by Ross Parker & Hugh Charles

© Copyright 1939 Dash Music Company Limited.

All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.

Reprinted by Permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

**National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data**

Teddy Spha Palasthira.

ADDRESSES—Bangkok: Postbooks, 2010. 272 p.

1. Spha Palasthira. 2. Free Thai movement during the Second World War. I. Title.

920.71

ISBN 978-616-7061-84-9

Post Books

The Post Publishing Public Company Limited

136 Na Ranong Rd., Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110, Thailand

Tel: 66 2 240 3700

Fax: 66 2 671 3167

[www.postbooksonline.com](http://www.postbooksonline.com)

Printed in Thailand by Commercial Printing

The Post Publishing Public Company Limited

*To Malina*

*& John*

*Hoping they will never know what war is like*

## CONTENTS

	Foreword	ix
	Acknowledgements	xi
	Introduction	xiii
ONE:	23 Ashburn Place, London SW7	1
TWO:	1 Auriol Road, London W14	13
THREE:	Sheen Court, London SW14	29
FOUR:	Mon Rêve, Runnymede, Surrey	41
FIVE:	Eccleston Hotel, London SW1	55
SIX:	Barons Court Station, London W14	73
SEVEN:	Misbourne, Virginia Water	85
EIGHT:	Melville Court, London W12	107
	Barons Keep, London W14	
NINE:	8 Rue Greuze, Paris 16 <sup>e</sup>	119
TEN:	On board the Willem Ruys	147
ELEVEN:	Soi Sethabutr, Bangkok	165
TWELVE:	Villa Thai, Roma	189
	Envoi	212
APPENDICES:	Nostalgic Moments	213

## FOREWORD

The number of Thais living in Britain in 1942 was not more than 65 people. This is the story of one Thai family who lived in England throughout the Second World War, their experiences as Free Thais, their remarkable survival from the bombs during the Blitz, and the deprivations of wartime England and post-war France, Italy and Siam. All this is seen through the eyes of a Siamese boy who was born and raised in England.

The war was a formative experience for most of our generation, whether for myself living in Siam at the time or for Teddy in England.

As events unfold, we follow Teddy's childhood through a series of addresses, some where he had lived, others where his father, a Siamese diplomat, had worked.

It is the story of a young boy's relationship with the people he met, both Thai and European, and the effect they had on him. Teddy has drawn both figuratively and literally from his experiences, vividly describing the different places where he lived, from the dilapidated houses which became his home to his schools and teachers, and encompassing the social and political changes of the time.

It is a personal story of war and peace, simply told through the reminiscences of a Thai boy caught up by events that shook the world in the last century.

Anand Panyarachun  
Former Prime Minister of Thailand

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These memoirs would not have been possible without the courage and love of my parents who brought me up through the difficult war and post-war years.

This book would not have been published without the confidence and trust that Supakorn Vejjajiva, President of the Post Publishing Company, had in my manuscript. Thanks also to his book publishing team for their help, in particular M.L. Dhanavisuth Visuthi, Suporn Pornrerkgam, Panee Loiket and Khamhom Srinawk.

My gratitude goes to Anand Panyarachun for contributing the forward. I am indebted to Jane Vejjajiva who very kindly undertook to translate these memoirs into Thai.

My appreciative thanks to Axel Aylwen for being my tireless editor and to Julian Atkinson for typing the manuscript from my difficult handwriting. The layout is the excellent work of Teerapong Hoonnirun, the talented graphic designer.

Many historic photographs were reproduced with kind permission from the archives of the descendants of HSH Prince Subha Svasti, from Bilaibhan Sampatsiri's collection belonging to Nai Lert, her grandfather, from the Pibulsonggram's family albums, and from the archives of the Bangkok Post, who also sought permission to reproduce photographs from other sources. Thanks also to River Books, Editions Didier Millet and Patrick Gauvain for allowing me to reproduce a number of postcards, posters and historic pictures. The rest of the photographs are either from our family albums or taken by me.

I am grateful to Voraphot Snidvong for the assistance he gave me on Villa Thai's history and for the photographs of our Rome Embassy. Thanks also to Fabio Chinda for additional information on Villa Thai. Appreciation goes to Charles Henn who advised me on points of legal diplomacy, and to David Lyman and Dominic Faulder for their advice on the thorny issue of copyright law.

During the course of writing this book, I was encouraged by my friends, both in England and Thailand, too many to mention here. To each one of them, my heartfelt thanks.

Last but not least, thank you, my wife Manuela, for your support and love. I am blessed.

In a personal book such as this, there are many opinions and even more mistakes. They are all mine.

## INTRODUCTION

Dear Malina,

So much has happened in the world since I was born seventy-two years ago. Growing up as a Siamese in wartime Britain and post-war France and Italy, there is a story to be told, a personal record during those eventful years.

Before my memory starts playing tricks, I'm putting down on paper some impressionable events of my past, both momentous and mundane. It is also a record of a way of life that is long gone.

To put this into a timeline perspective, when I was born, the American Civil War ( '*Gone With the Wind*' to you) had been over for just 73 years. By the time you read this, the Second World War will have been over for 65 years.

This is not intended to be a historic document (so much has been written of people's harrowing experiences in wartime Europe), nor a biography. Rather, it attempts to narrate the events and experiences of the only Thai boy who survived (thanks to your grandparents) the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, and who lived through the post-war deprivations of France, Italy and Siam in the forties and fifties, becoming a product of the boom years of the sixties.

According to my British birth certificate, I was born a Siamese. I didn't become Thai until after the war in France, when I met young Thai people of my age for the first time. (I had spent the first eight years of my life thinking I was an English boy.)

Today we live in what the *International Herald Tribune* calls the ‘Global Village.’ In the forties it was simply called ‘the world’ and by 1945, we lived through the ‘Second World War.’ Today, we live under a ‘Global Nuclear Threat.’ E-mail and Internet access (yes, I’ve learned how to work it, thanks to you), actual events on Cable TV as they happen in ‘real time,’ cellular telephonic conversations across continents via satellite, and the real possibility of space travel, are a far cry from the slow and cumbersome communication and transportation systems of the thirties and forties. One of your grandfather’s jobs as a functionary in the Siamese Legation in London was to write telegrams in code to Siam every night (I still remember the heavy code book father brought home and put away under lock and key), reporting to the Foreign Ministry on the latest developments from Downing Street and the war front. Today, BBC and CNN are there as events unfold.

The world, or ‘the globe,’ is now a different place. More informed, wealthier, comfortable, convenient and fast. But better? I leave that for you to judge when you reach my age.

A few words on the title. Anyone who has attended as many schools (nine by the time I was 18) and has had so many addresses (15 homes in 10 years) has got to have problems. The problems multiply when one locates these addresses in countries that had gone through the most horrifying war of the millennium.

The droning of planes. The piercing sirens. Death and destruction everywhere. Survival in London during the nightly bombing raids from 1940 onwards was entirely a matter of luck: being at the right address at the right time. Often after a night of heavy bombardment, emerging safely from one’s shelter, entire streets had disappeared, reduced to rubble. Some of our addresses included suburban villas, country houses, single rooms, city flats, and Siamese legations. For almost two years one of many nightly

addresses was the nearby Underground railway station – the London ‘tube.’ Earls Court and Hammersmith were favourites.

‘Addresses’ it is then. Not a very imaginative title, but the first fifteen years of my life was defined by where I lived.

Also a word about style. Not being a professional writer, and having problems putting pen to paper (yes, the original manuscript is hand-written), it was suggested by Lady Olga Maitland, a British journalist, that I write the book as if I were talking to you in the form of a letter – or a series of letters. I am indebted to Olga. The words seem to flow much easier.

I have also taken the liberty of adding a few vignettes, maps, photographs and lists of my favorite things of the past. So please forgive me, my dear daughter, when I lapse (as I often will) into bouts of nostalgia.

Teddy Spha Palasthira  
Hua Hin,  
2010





23 Ashburn Place  
LONDON SW 7





*Students arriving at the legation at 23 Ashburn Place for a Siamese reunion. The legation was a refuge for us all in times of war and peace.*



*A reunion in the legation's garden in 1938. Grandfather is third from right, with grandmother seated in front of him.*

1

## 23 Ashburn Place London SW7

Frobisher 2983. FRO 2983, the telephone number of 23 Ashburn Place, address of the Siamese Legation that every Siamese expatriate studying or working in Great Britain committed to memory. It was the number to be used should any emergency (other than financial) arose. Even at the age of 91, your grandmother who had forgotten everything else that happened in Britain during the war, still remembered this number.

You can get to Ashburn Place by tube. Get off at Gloucester Road Station, and if you don't get lost in the squares of Courtfield Road and Harrington Gardens, it will take 5 minutes. Better still, take a cab, get off on the corner of Ashburn Place (23 alas has been torn down and is now a hotel) and the relatively (for London) narrow pavement constricts one's movement, forcing you to look upwards to a rather non-descript Victorian building. A neo-classical pillared entrance – the kind favoured by Thai architects of the Rangsang school – leads up the narrow staircase to an undistinguished thick wooden door, attached with your standard English brass knocker and single doorbell. A faded card with the typed word 'Chancery' invites you to ring the bell.

## NOSTALGIC MOMENTS

## Telephone Numbers

## – LONDON –

My first telephone number in London was FRO 2983 or FRObisher 2983. My last number before I left London in 1969 was PRImrose 0034. In those days you answered the phone with your number, 'Knightsbridge 1234,' never 'hello' or with your name. The seven digits (three letters and four numbers) were easy to remember and told people where you lived. Here are some area codes I remember:

ALBany	HOLborn	QUEensbury
BAYswater	ISLington	REGents Park
BELgravia	KENSington	SLOane Square
CHAring Cross	KNightsbridge	SWIss Cottage
COVent Garden	MARylebone	TEMple
FLEet Street	NOTting Hill	VICToria
FULham	PADddington	WARwick Ave.
GROsvenor	PICadilly	WESTminster
HAMstead	PORTobello	WHIttehall

My T-Mobile number in London today is 07957330975!

## – PARIS –

In Paris, our legation number was TROcadero 4879. Other area codes I remember:

BAS tille	KLEber	OPERA	VENDome
ÉTOile	LONGchamp	PASSy	
HAUSSman	MARais	RIVoli	

## – NEW YORK –

I never lived in New York during the days of area codes. I know a few, probably from American films and books: LEXington, MURray Hill, PARK Avenue, MADison Avenue, GREENwich, SUTTON, GRAMercy, BEEKman, RHINelander. Here, you dialed the first two letters followed by five numbers.

Even more undistinguished is the interior of number 23. Not the gleaming diplomatic mansion of today's new republics, but dingy, dark and dusty, reminiscent of a Ruritanian consulate. H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse, who spent many years living there, had this to say: 'The house had many floors and numerous bedrooms, but there was no lift, and each bedroom had painted on the door a letter of the English alphabet and one only had to cross the main entrance hall with its stained glass to feel thoroughly depressed.'<sup>1</sup>

Decidedly more distinguished is the Thai Garuda<sup>2</sup> shield above the entrance. 'The Royal Siamese Legation' in Thai and English is printed on the top and bottom edges of the oval emblem. This, the Garuda, is a source of great veneration, commanding respect for Thais everywhere. Even today, whenever I pass any Thai Embassy and look up to the Garuda, a frisson of pride overcomes me. Above the Garuda, an empty flagpole. In those days, the Siamese flag would only be hoisted during special occasions, a royal visit, for example, or a national event. Today, in Kensington and Belgravia, there are flags from a hundred nations above their embassies, each boasting their national identity. In the thirties, we Siamese were proud of our heritage. It was not necessary to raise the flag everyday to proclaim our credentials. After all, the only other two Asian legations in London at that time – China and Japan – didn't raise their flags either.

23 Ashburn Place in the thirties was Siam's most important legation in the world. It had to be. England had become the final home of King Rama VII, King Prajadhipok, since 1934, when he came to Britain for an operation on his eyes. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1935, he abdicated and decided to remain in England in voluntary exile. His Majesty was no stranger to England. He was the second Siamese

<sup>1</sup> H.R.H. Prince Chula Chakrabongse: *The Twain Have Met*, London 1956, page 118.

<sup>2</sup> Mythical half-bird, half-human Hindu deity, the Garuda is the national symbol of the Royal Thai Government.





*King Rama VI, a graduate of Sandhurst Military College and Christ Church, Oxford, in full uniform of his regiment, the Royal Durham Light Infantry.*

king to be educated there. King Rama VI, his elder brother and predecessor, graduated from Sandhurst Military College and went on to Christ Church, Oxford. He himself went to Eton and then on to the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, where he attained the rank of sergeant. During the outbreak of the First World War, in 1914, King Prajadhipok volunteered to serve with his British regiment, but was turned down because Siam, at the time, was neutral, and neither was His Majesty a British subject.

Today, overlooking the playing fields of Eton, where, as legend has it, great battles in English history have been

won, stands a bust of Rama VII, the King of Siam. It is placed in front of the housemaster's residence and is called the 'Prajadhipok Garden,' a name that must be both perplexing and unpronounceable to Etonians. On a fine summer's day in 1969, your mother and I had the singular pleasure of being invited to tea here, by Martin Dyson, the housemaster.

Our legation in London was also our largest. Our diplomatic and commercial relations with Australia, Canada, South Africa, India, Ceylon, Burma, Malaya and other countries in the British Empire, as well as with Britain itself, were conducted and channelled through 23 Ashburn Place. Clearly, during the first four decades of the last century, relations between Siam and Britain

were excellent. Many members of the Siamese royal family and the elite were educated in Britain. Two prime ministers graduated from Oxford and another from Cambridge. In 1936, there were seventy-six Siamese students. Many British nationals were living and working in Siam, and many government advisers were British. The British and Siamese royal families were close friends.

But had relations between the country of my birth and the country of my parents always been good?

In July, 1687, the Siamese authorities allowed the massacre of some sixty English freebooters and adventurers in Mergui, a port on the Bay of Bengal, then part of Siam, now in Burma. The next month the Siamese king declared war on the English East India Company. Not a good start. Relations slowly improved in the nineteenth century when diplomatic relations were restored, starting with the Bowring Treaty of 1855, an 'unequal' treaty whereby Siam was forced to grant trading and territorial concessions to the British, culminating in the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1909, when Britain gave up the system of extra-territoriality, whereby Britons in Siam were not subject to the law of the Kingdom. The years between 1855 and 1909 were a critical period in Thai history, when two astute Thai kings – Ramas IV and V – were able to play off one imperial power against another. The choice facing our country was 'to swim up river and make friends with the crocodile (the French) or to swim out to sea and hang on to the whale (the British).' The whale, as it turned out, became one of our best friends, that is, until 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1942. On that date, Siam declared war on the English. Again.

For a Siamese foreign service official, it was both an honour and a privilege to serve at the London legation. It was also a lot of hard work. In the years leading up to the Second World War, your grandfather had one of the most challenging jobs in the Thai foreign office.

23 Ashburn Place was not only your grandfather's place of work, but a refuge for all of us in times of peace.

I was not a ‘wartime baby,’ as children born during the war were called. It was not until September 1939 – a full 16 months after I was born – that Britain declared war on Germany. Quoting William Woodruff, the historian: ‘The second great war of the twentieth century – the greatest single slaughter in history – had begun.’

For those of us who lived in Britain between 1939 and 1941, it felt like there were three successive ‘wars.’ The first was what we called the ‘Phoney War.’ When the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain informed the nation on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939, that Britain was at war with Germany, nothing much happened on the home front. The pretext for war was Hitler’s invasion of Poland, the incorporation of Austria into the ‘Greater Germany’ and the annexation of western Czechoslovakia. In Britain 250,000 men over the age of twenty had been conscripted, and we were on war alert. Eerie sirens pierced the night, we were issued with and taught how to use uncomfortable gas masks, government buildings were fortified with sandbags and air-raid shelters were supplied to houses that demanded them. But still nothing happened. The expected German invasion never came.

The ‘second war,’ what became the Battle of Britain, started the following year, in April, 1940, when Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway. I was just two years old at the time. On 10<sup>th</sup> May,



*Preparing for the Evening Court of King George VI at Buckingham Palace in 1937. Grandfather is standing left.*

Germany invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. A British Expeditionary Force of four divisions was sent to Belgium the previous year to halt the German advance into France. But Hitler’s famous Panzer tank division unexpectedly blasted through the much vaunted and impenetrable Maginot Line in eastern France with lightening speed, and by 20<sup>th</sup> May the Germans had reached the French coast on the Channel. British troops of the Expeditionary Force and 100,000 of their French allies were now pinned down on a narrow stretch of coastline at Dunkirk.

The famous evacuation of Dunkirk is the stuff of heroism on an epic scale. Every conceivable vessel, from small dinghies to fishing boats, from private yachts to Royal Navy ships, crossed the channel from ports and harbours in southern England and rescued 338,226 Allied troops.

Although the Dunkirk evacuation was hailed as a psychological ‘victory’ and did much to uplift the spirits of the British people, Churchill, who had now replaced Chamberlain as prime minister, was more realistic. ‘Wars are not won by evacuations,’ he said in Parliament. Realizing that the country was now threatened with real invasion, he delivered his famous speech of defiance:

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight in the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the hills, we will never surrender.

Hitler was now undisputed master of the European continent. Operation Sealion, the invasion of Britain, was his next card for final control of Western Europe. To ensure the success of Operation Sealion, the German airforce – the Luftwaffe – needed to knock out the Royal Air Force, and thereby gain superiority of the air over southern England.

On 8<sup>th</sup> August 1940, ‘The Attack of the Eagles,’<sup>3</sup> Hitler’s operation to destroy British air strength, had begun. The targets for the German bombers were army bases, airfields, vital industries and strategic ports. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, one thousand German planes ranged as far north as Scotland. Croydon airfield was destroyed. The RAF retaliated with heavy raids on Berlin, Düsseldorf, Essen, and other German cities. The Battle of Britain had begun.

This is not the book to describe the heroic deeds of the RAF pilots, some as young as eighteen. Suffice it to say that within one month, the RAF had turned the tide. Improved defense measures also inflicted heavy losses on the German air raiders, with 185 invading bombers crashing in one single day.

The RAF’s southern headquarters in Uxbridge, 10 miles west of London, was a key German target. The squadron based there was Britain’s first line of defense and when Churchill paid a visit here he was famously moved to say: ‘Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few.’ These iconic words, which he first uttered in Uxbridge and four days later in Parliament, were a rallying cry for not just the RAF, but for all of us in Britain at the time.

Having failed to win the Battle of Britain, Operation Sealion was aborted. Hitler still wanted to bring Britain to its knees, and the ‘third war,’ the Blitzkrieg, was just beginning. And our family’s destiny was about to change forever.



*Your grandmother wore elegant hats long before they became fashionable in Siam.*



*In 1942, hats became all the rage in Siam, but these smiling models didn’t look very comfortable in them.*

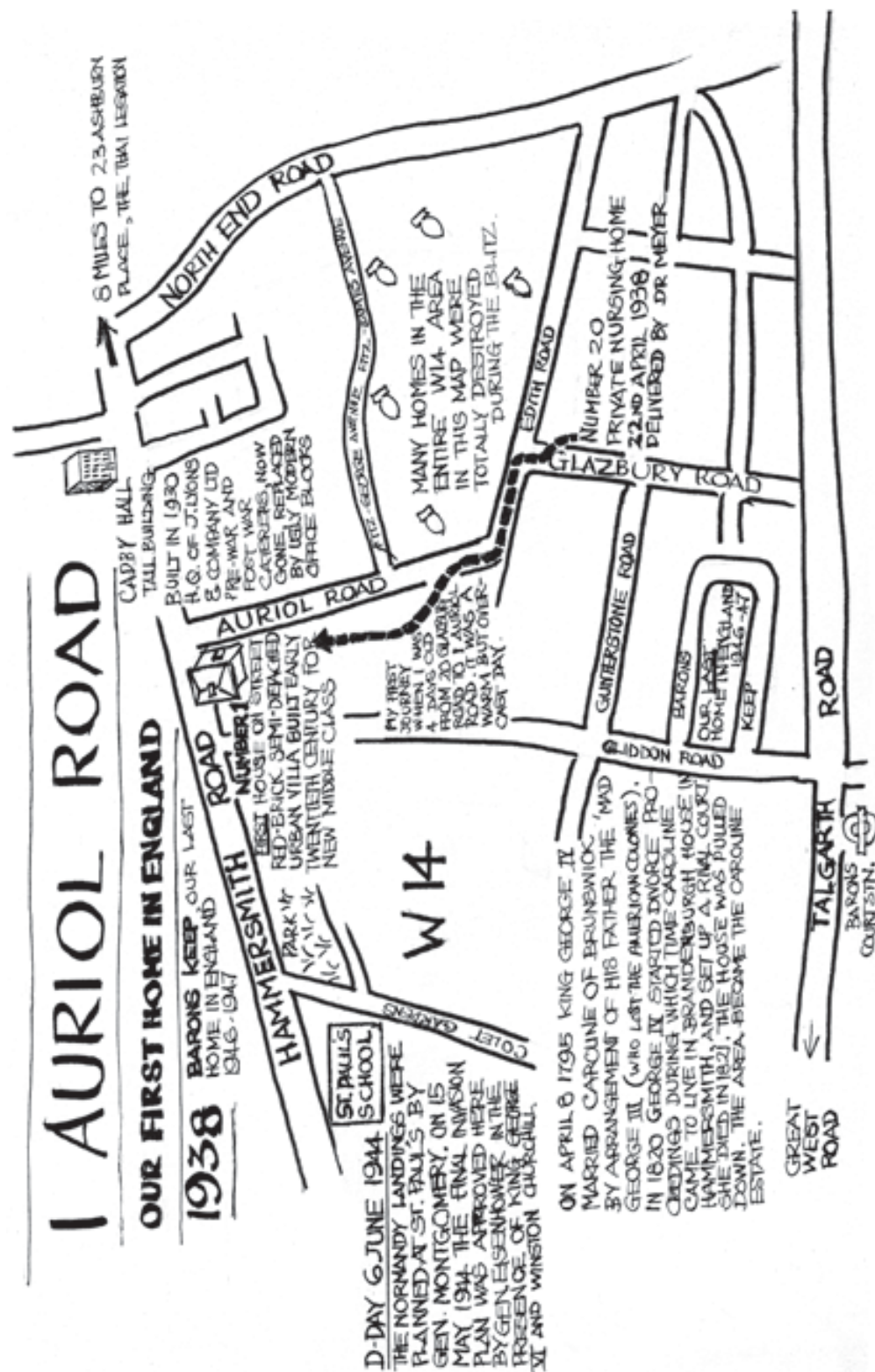
<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the Eagle Squadron, American RAF volunteers.





1 Auriol Road  
LONDON W14





2

## 1 Auriol Road London W14 1937 – 1938

Your grandparents' first home in England, like many houses in Fulham, was a small flat in an unprepossessing red-brick semi-detached urban villa, the kind that was built in Edwardian times to cater for the upwardly mobile middle class of the time.

Although I was born a few hundred yards away in a nursing home (delivered by our kindly family doctor Meyer) on 20 Glazbury Road, Auriol Road was my first address. Your grandmother brought me home on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April, 1938, four days after my birthday.



*The nursing home where I was born was on 20 Glazbury Road.*



Appropriately, and curiously, our first home was also the first house on the street, number one Auriol Road.

In 1972, for 40 pence, the General Registry Office in Somerset House (now the Courtauld Institute of Fine Art) issued a certified copy of my birth certificate. The Registration District was the Metropolitan Borough of Fulham and the certificate was divided into ten columns:

Column 1 *'When and where born'*

Twenty-second April 1938,  
20 Glazbury Road

Column 2 *'Name, if any'*

Here, a blank, because your grandparents hadn't named me yet, not knowing whether I would be a boy or a girl. As it turned out, my grandparents in Siam were predictably pleased when they learned the news. In those days, boys were chauvinistically preferred.

Column 3 *'Sex'* Boy

Column 4 *'Name and surname of father'*

Somboon PALASTHIRA

Column 5 *'Name, surname and maiden name of mother'*

Prapha PALASTHIRA, formerly UDHINDHU

Column 6 *'Occupation of father'*

Secretary, Siamese Legation

Column 7 *'Signature, description and residence of informant'*

Somboon Palasthira, Father, 1 Auriol Road, W.14

Column 8 *'When registered'*

First July, 1938

*According to my birth certificate, I was born a Siamese citizen.*

Column 9 *'Signature of registrar'*

H. Jeeves, Registrar

Column 10 *'Name entered after registration<sup>1</sup>'*

Again, blank. Not having been baptised, my Thai name, Spha, was never registered.

Auriol Road, Hammersmith, was at the poor end of Fulham, in those days predominantly Irish, where rents were well below Kensington, and thus affordable for a lowly paid Siamese government officer. Barons Court, our nearest Tube station, was only two stops away from the legation at Gloucester Road. The commute on the Piccadilly Line, partly overground, was a pleasant

<sup>1</sup> A name given to a child (whether in baptism or otherwise) before the expiration of twelve months – may be inserted provided a certificate of baptism is presented.

one for your grandfather. He could not have known then that within four years, the family would be spending many nights in the tube stations on the Picadilly and District lines.

For a newly arrived Siamese Legation secretary and his bride coming to London in those days from the tropics, the journey was



*London 1937, your grandparents, a young hopeful couple on the rooftop of the Siamese legation, looking forward to the future.*

an adventure of a lifetime. The British Airways flight today from Bangkok to London is around 12 hours. In 1936, when they left Siam, it took them more than four weeks. From Bangkok, the Butterworth Express was a five day train journey to Singapore, via Penang. A Danish ship from Singapore took them almost three weeks to get to Genoa, where they disembarked. Staying their first night in Europe in Italy, little did they foresee that sixteen years later, your grandfather would be

posted to that country, in 1951, as first secretary, and in 1964, as ambassador. Even more remote was the idea that their future

daughter-in-law would be Italian. From Genoa, it was another train journey via Paris, to Victoria Station in London.

I am looking at some old sepia photographs that your grandfather, a self professed 'shutterbug' (old slang for amateur photographer), took or had someone take on the sea voyage: when photographed together he, young at twenty-six, and she, just nineteen, look in love and happy. The threat of world war that would change their lives forever was far from their minds. They were eagerly looking forward to their new posting in England, and grandfather

was particularly proud of having been selected to serve at Siam's largest and most important legation. With his white flannel trousers and her pretty thirties-style cotton frock, they must have presented a handsome couple. Certainly, as the only Orientals on board, they were a most unusual couple, especially on a liner (nowadays called 'cruise ship') that transported European tea planters, teak wallahs, proselytizing missionaries and civil servants to and from their colonial posts. 'We are Siamese!' I can almost hear them protesting, informing fellow passengers that they were not Chinese (high cheekbones, slit eyes) or Malay (your grandmother's darker colouring). 'We are Siamese' was a retort to persist for at least another twenty years. In France it became 'We are Thai!' when, as often happened, we were mistaken for 'Indochinois' or 'Vietnamien,' and in England when we were invariably identified with the many

Asian nationalities in the British Empire. Much later, in America, being Thai sometimes meant we came from Taiwan. For an Asian country that has never been colonised, being Thai or Siamese often generated unique moments of confusion and amusement.

This is a good place to answer the often asked question: 'Why did your country change its name from Siam to Thailand?' The short answer is that we never changed our name. In Thai we have always referred to our country as '*Muang Thai*,' or the 'Land of the Thai,' just as much as England is the 'Land of the Angles.' As a child I learned that I was born and lived in England. Then I discovered



*In 1937, your grandparents' sea voyage from Siam to England took over one month.*

that England is a part of Great Britain, and its inhabitants were not English, but British. Sometime during the end of the last century, Britain lost her Great and became the United Kingdom. Young Brits nowadays say that they are from ‘the UK’ which of course includes Northern Ireland, as well as Scotland and Wales. Confused? More geographical confusion: Persia and Iran; Holland, the Dutch and the Netherlands; Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States; Magyar and Hungary; Hellas and Greece; Ceylon and Sri Lanka; Cambodia and Kampuchea; Zaire and Congo, and more recently, Burma and Myanmar. Is it historic nostalgia, regime change, new-found nationalism, tribal origins, or simply geography, that causes governments to switch and change their country’s name?

‘Siamese’ sounds quaint. We are known for a certain breed of blue eyed cat, and for the famous twin brothers joined together at birth (Chang and Eng) in Siam who emigrated to America and sadly became a circus act. The 1946 film *Anna and the King of Siam* was hopelessly miscast with Rex Harrison, that quintessential British gentleman, playing the King. Two dreadful Hollywood tunes, *We are Siamese, if you please* and *The March of the Siamese Children*, further romanticizes our country. Even Cole Porter got into the act, with these inane lyrics: ‘...take a plane, fly to Siam, in Bangkok, they all like to rock....’

The T’ais are originally an ancient Mongol tribe from the Altai mountains in China. Over the past 4,000 years, they gradually migrated southwards, looking for greener pastures. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, this peace loving tribe of wetland farmers reached Southeast Asia, partly to escape the clutches of Genghis Khan, but mostly to do what they did best, planting and harvesting rice. From that time, there were three Thai southward migration movements: the first branch were the T’ai Yai or Shan of Burma (some historians theorize that Shan and Siam are one and the same because in Chinese Shan means mountain). The second branch, the Menam T’ais migrated to present day Thailand, and the third, the Lao, migrated along

the Mekhong River to present day Laos and Isaan, northeastern Thailand. There are today a few pockets of T’ai tribes in the southern hills of Yunnan in China, the northwestern valleys of Vietnam, and the hills of northeastern Burma.

The name Siam came into use from the first Europeans who came to trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, probably the Portuguese, to describe the geographic area of present day central Thailand. The population was ‘Siamese,’ at that time a very mixed race of people, including Khmers, Mons, Burmans, Malays, Laotians, Vietnamese, Chinese, and of course, ethnic T’ais.

For Thai people, at the turn of the last century, Siam and Thailand have been used interchangeably in our language to describe our country until 1949, after we became a charter member of the United Nations, when the name Thailand was officially adopted. Siam, incidentally, was an original member of the League of Nations founded on 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1920.

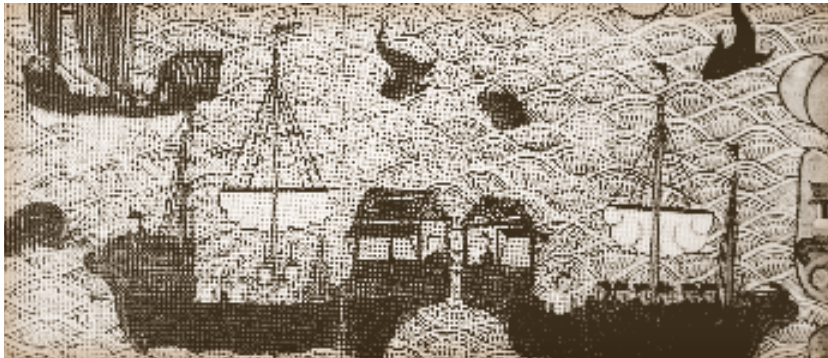
There are arguably more pure *ethnic* T’ais living outside Thailand, just as there are probably more Anglo-Saxons living outside England.

Having explained where the Thais came from, let me now tell you where the paternal side of your family came from.

Your ancestors from Khun Pu’s (grandfather’s) side, as sketchy family records tell us, came from a Chinese trading family in the old capital of Ayudhya. Uncorroborated memory tells us that Khun Ya’s (grandmother’s) grandfather was a Siamese landowner. In Siam, there were no written records, no family annals, and no ancestral trees to fall back on. Records of births, marriages and deaths only started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then only for urban literates. Before then, only royalty and a few prominent families who served the King were able to trace their forbears back two or three centuries. The rest of us descended either from small Siamese landowning farmers or hardworking Chinese of the diaspora.



From our *Chinese* side, my great-grandfather was a typical product of the merchant class in Ayudhya, Siam's old capital since 1351, before the founding of Bangkok in 1782. When Ayudhya closed its doors to the West in 1685, due to excessive European political and religious (Catholic) interference in the Kingdom's internal affairs (as indeed did Japan at about the same time and for the same reasons), trade shifted from Europe to China, and Siam became China's principal rice supplier.



*The profitable rice trade carried on junks lured many Chinese traders to Siam in the eighteenth century.*

Chinese traders, attracted by the fortunes that could be made, and to escape famine and earthquakes as well as political and social upheavals at home, gladly emigrated to Siam. One of them was great-great-great grandfather, who settled in Siam to join a community of 20,000 Chinese in 1780. This is the time when Chinese men started to integrate into Siamese society, for they arrived here as unmarried fortune seekers. Chinese women did not really come here until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after 1948, when the Communists took over. By the late 1780s, there emerged a new 'aristocracy of great households led by traders, adventurers, old nobles and charismatic monks.'<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*, p.29.

development of this new class is not unlike the origins of the noble families in Renaissance Italy (the Estes, the Sforzas and the Borgias) and the robber-baron families of America (the Carnegies, the Fricks and the Rockefellers). These Chinese traders adapted to the system of political patronage, often marrying into royalty. At least two Chinese traders were given ministerial appointments (*phra klang*) in eighteenth century Ayudhya.

In addition to rice exports, there was a booming trade in manufactured noodles, pig breeding and distilled liquor, as well as the importation of textiles, chinaware, and iron products.

It was the practical, materialistic Chinese who fueled the economy, as they still do today. With their own trading settlements, they were a major contributor to the royal family's coffers. Until Rama II, Thai kings had very little interest in China or understanding of commerce. It was Rama III who, in the 1830s, realized their financial strength and decided to empower them, rather than alienate them, risking what could have been a rich and powerful, but marginalized minority. Rama III was an admirer of Chinese culture and, aware of their wealth, encouraged them to use it to build new temples, often in the Chinese style. The king therefore elevated wealthy Chinese traders to the ruling class. Your great-great grandfather was one of them.

Tien, as he was known, was born in 1826, on the banks of the Klong Suan Plu Canal district of Ayudhya, off the Chao Phraya River, where many Chinese settled in the eighteenth century. Typically, his formative years, like many Chinese traders, were on the river, the very hub of Siamese commerce. Here he learned firsthand about the profitable rice trade, and how junks from China made annual voyages from 'Nanyang', the South Seas, to the ports on the east coast of China. But the Ayudhya trade was on the decline, and Tien, aged 30, saw an opportunity to grow his business in Bangkok. Here he prospered, and set up his company on both sides of Klong Padung Krungkasem Canal, where he built his godowns and factories, and

operated his own junk fleet. Following a series of astute business decisions, combined with royal patronage, he became known as *Jao Sua* or merchant lord (the equivalent of *Tai Pan* in Hong Kong). For his contribution to the royal coffers, he was appointed *Phraya Choduek Rajasethi*. 'Choduek' was the traditional title for the head



*Klong Padung Krungkasem Canal where Tien set up business in the 1850s, after he moved to Bangkok from Ayudhya.*

of the Chinese community in the 1850s. *Phraya* means lord, *Rajasethi* roughly translates as 'prosperous rajah.' Tien was an expert in finance and Rama IV made him Chief Tax Collector of the Left Bank<sup>3</sup>; in 1873 he was promoted to Lord Chief Tax Treasurer (*Luang Phasipiset*) and helped establish Siam's first Royal Treasury. In 1893, he was

bestowed the title of His Majesty's Privy Councillor, before he died, aged 69, in 1894.

Tien, who founded the Jotikasthira clan, was a man of many talents and interests. Other royal duties included establishing a museum at Sanam Luang (precursor of the National Museum) and helping to build one of Bangkok's first hospitals. He was also responsible for the capital's first public water supply system for Sampeng, in downtown Bangkok.

He was granted a four acre plot of land on the banks of the Chao Phraya River. Here he built a huge teak mansion (now long gone) with a dual staircase entrance fashioned after Fontainebleau, and with fifty bedrooms, no doubt to cater for his large ménage.

<sup>3</sup> Tax collected in the Left Bank was from the Far Eastern trade, mainly China and Japan, and in the Right Bank from the West, initially the Persian trade, and in the 19th century, European.

This, as was the political exigency of the time, consisted of a major wife and several minor ones, sufficient to ensure enough sons to carry on the fortunes of the dynasty, and enough daughters to forge alliances with other prominent families. Khun Pu, your grandfather, is the descendent of Tien with one of his minor wives and their daughter Ob. Khun Pu was born in this palatial mansion in 1910.

My grandfather, Khun Pu's father, came from Swatow, bringing with him all his goods and chattels, including the

furniture. Life under the Manchus at the end of the last century was intolerable. The Manchus conquered China in 1664, and to let the Chinese know they were in charge, they had imposed the partly shaven head and queue on every Chinese man, and required all Chinese women to bind their feet. These northern Manchurians allowed the British, French, Germans and Americans to set up foreign settlements in the wealthy east coast ports, including Swatow in 1869. The country was in decay. Anarchy was rife, the Manchus were digging in and isolating themselves in the Forbidden City in Peking, unaware of what was really happening in the rest of the country. The Western colonial powers were milking the treaty ports for all they were worth. For poor farmers and dispossessed peasants, the lucky ones were in servitude to the local warlord, otherwise they died of starvation. For honest, hardworking traders with financial standing, they dreamt of getting out. Many Teo Chiew from Swatow had



*Your great-great grandfather Tien, knighted by the King to Phraya Choduek Rajasethi, founder of the Jotikasthira clan, in 1890.*

emigrated to Siam. Your great-grandfather decided around 1890 that it was time to leave.

With the Teo Chiew network in Bangkok, he was able to establish himself, and his prospects were sufficiently good for him to marry Ob, Tien's youngest daughter. It was certainly an arranged one. He took on the new family name of Palasthira (pronounced Palasatien). A man of moral principles and integrity, he abandoned a profitable partnership with another prominent Chinese trader, when the latter embarked upon the opium and gambling trades. Your great-grandfather did not make it to *Jao Sua*.

On our *Siamese* side, your great-great grandfather was a landowner in Thonburi, west of the river. Khun Ya's grandfather owed part of his fortune as a usurer to dispossessed or indebted land-owning farmers, and I have been told that so great was the extent of his plantations that it took him all day to inspect his estates on horseback. On one of his inspection tours he contracted cholera and died. Khun Ya's father was a well-read person and started life as a schoolteacher. He was converted to Christianity by American Protestant missionaries, and for that, he was disowned by his father. He entered into the civil service and served Siam's early post office, and was awarded the title of *Khun Phra Paisan Praisanee Rak*, or 'Sir Post Office.' He was an avid stamp collector, and part of his collection will be passed on to you. He also loved working on his land. The story goes that, up to his neck in mud, instructing and joining his labourers in digging a water catchment, he was approached by a young official demanding to see 'his excellency.' Your great-grandfather stepped out of the muddy trench, saluted respectfully and said 'Yessir, I will inform his excellency immediately.' He rushed back to the house, bathed and donned his official white uniform, and reappeared to receive the emissary, who was none the wiser.

Was Khun Pu's and Khun Ya's marriage arranged? In those days all marriages, even upcountry ones, were arranged. Security



*Your grandparents' wedding picture on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1936.*



*The first winter in Auriol Road in 1937 was a bitter one.*

and breeding first; love, if at all, came later. Your grandparents were a devoted couple, their marriage lasting 64 years, until Khun Pu's death. Considering the facility with which modern Thai couples marry and divorce today, there is a lot to be said about arranged marriages.

When Khun Pu joined the Foreign Ministry in 1935 after graduating in law from Thammasat University, Siam was in the process of negotiating a series of revised treaties with the West, in order for the country to attain full freedom and equality in her relations with foreign powers. Your grandfather clearly had his work cut out for him. But those early days in Auriol Road were happy ones, and from contemporary home movies (Khun Pu was also a keen amateur 8mm cameraman) you could not but notice their excitement and delight with

England, and their hope for a promising future. They were in awe of their first snowfall in London. This was the winter of 1937.

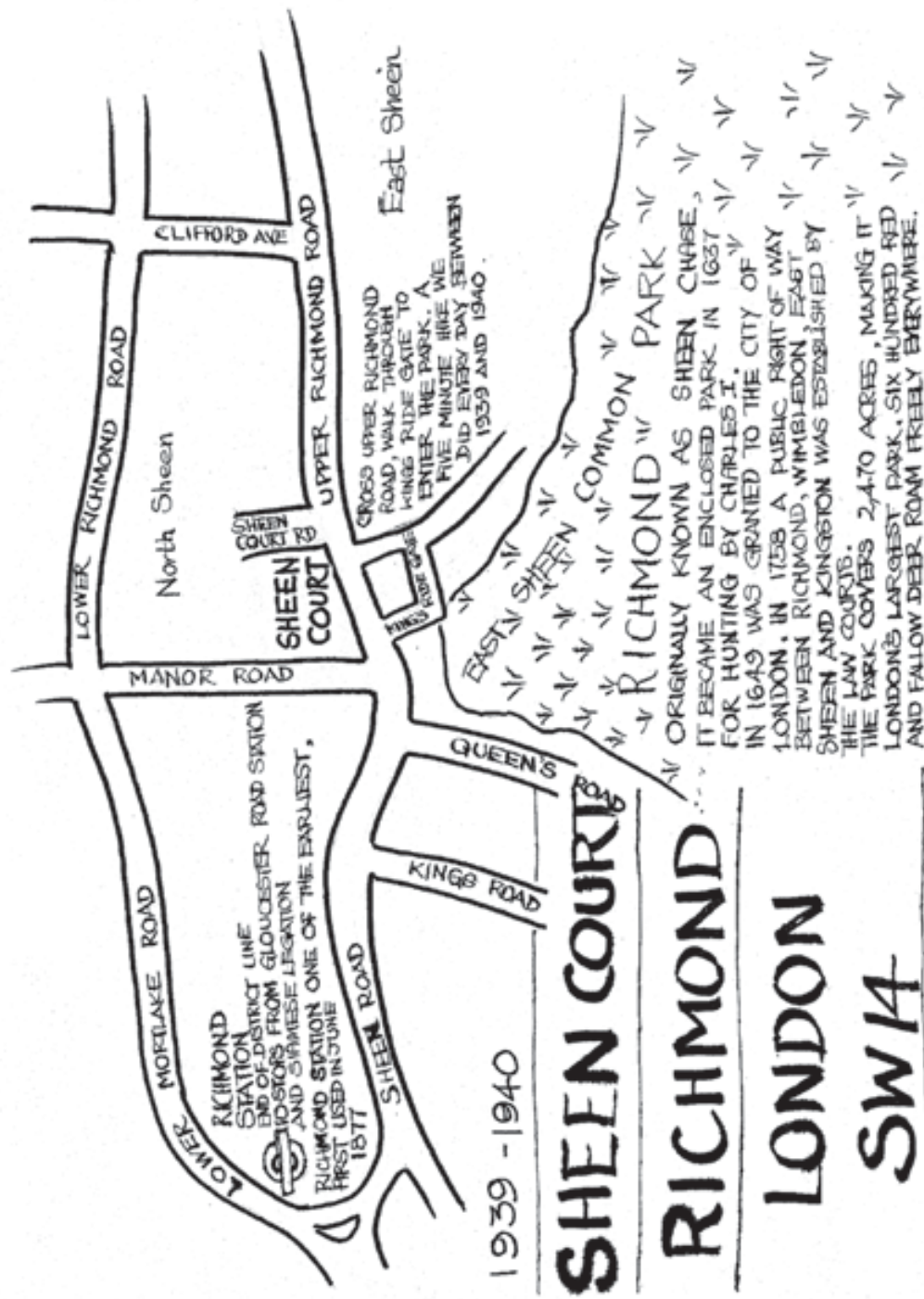
Events in Europe were less promising. While your grandparents were interviewing Doris Bennett for the position of (my) nanny, Nazi Germany was on the march.





Sheen Court  
LONDON SW14





3

Sheen Court  
Richmond  
London SW14  
1939 – 1940



*Your grandparents were enchanted by the English countryside.*

There is nothing quite so lyrical as the English countryside. One of your grandparents' greatest pleasures was exploring and discovering the parks and gardens of England. So orderly, so well groomed and so utterly pretty. England, they were told, was one big pastoral paradise. After the wild vegetation of Siam's tropical orchards, where dense coconut palms and bamboo trees fringed every thoroughfare and canal, England's countryside was picture perfect. The fields and meadows, the hedgerows and public paths, the dappled country lanes, the oaks, the willows, the blossoms of



spring and the summer splash of rhododendrons were an experience they would never forget. In the thirties, the English countryside was totally quiet, empty and unspoilt. Even today, much of rural England is still the idyllic playground of our childhoods.

All this was made possible after grandfather bought his first car in England, a Wolseley Four. With this black, sturdy and cheap car, they would go onto the Great West Road, the A4, and explore rural England. It was less than half an hour to Windsor and the Thames Valley. Nearer home they discovered Richmond Park, a short drive south across the river.



*Your grandmother and the Wolseley Four at Richmond Park in 1938.*



*With grandfather's cousin, Luang Suranarong, later to become H.M. the King's aide-de-camp.*

It was hard for them not to fall in love with Richmond Park. Once a royal hunting ground created by King Charles I, at 2470 acres, it was the largest park in greater London, yet 15 minutes away from Kensington on the District Line. Adorned with several lakes, five hundred year old oak trees and populated by red and fallow



*Six hundred red and fallow deer roam freely in Richmond Park.*

deer, Richmond became their getaway from the drabness of Auriol Road. On Richmond Hill, they could see as far as Windsor Castle and St. Paul's Cathedral. Turner, Constable and Joshua Reynolds were regular visitors to this spot, and here they painted many of their landscape masterpieces. Beautifully set in this majestic park is the Palladian style hunting lodge – the White Lodge – where in 1894, King Edward VIII was born, and who abdicated in 1936, a few months before your grandparents arrived in England.

As soon as the Auriol Road lease was up, we moved to Sheen Court, a thirties style development on the edge of Richmond Park for people who worked in London but wanted to live in the 'countryside.' Sheen Court is the original commuter-land, a group of five-storey blocks of flats, built around a large communal garden. On a recent visit (2008), I discovered it had become a 'gated community,' but in the thirties it was an experiment in suburban living.

Alas, when Doris Bennett, my nanny, was informed that we were moving to Sheen Court, she reluctantly had to leave us. Richmond was a long journey from Fulham for her to make every day. We were saddened; Mother had become very attached to her, and it must have been especially poignant for me at the time (although I only realised it much later) because every time she called me 'Teddy' I would apparently look up to her with glee and recognition.



*Nanny Doris Bennett named me Teddy after her fiancée, a London policeman.*

I was nicknamed ‘Teddy’ before my parents came up with my Thai name, Spha. Doris had named me after Edward, her ‘sweetheart,’ a policeman. Teddy, of course, is a shortened form of Edward in England. I must be the only Thai in the world who is named after an English copper.

1938, the year I was born, is one of the saddest in European history. In March, Hitler, then 49 years old, annexed Austria and the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia. The British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, tried to appeal to Hitler and had several meetings with him to broker a peace. Assured by Hitler that German aims in Europe were nationalistic rather than hegemonic, Chamberlain reached an agreement with Hitler at Munich and returned to London declaring ‘peace in our time.’ It was, of course, an appeasement. Chamberlain has been vilified in history for allowing Germany to become the strongest power in Europe.

The unfortunate Chamberlain, ill with cancer, sincere and genuinely desirous for peace at all costs, was no match for the bullying, militaristic and lying dictator. ‘Appeasement’ became an ugly word, a symbol of weakness. This century’s hawkish governments of Britain and America cite Chamberlain as an example of appeasement, justifying George W. Bush and Tony Blair in their decision to eliminate Saddam Hussein. Evil and cruel, it was easy to equate Saddam and his Ba’ath party with Hitler and the Nazis. For America, the war in Europe lasted four years. At the time of writing, the war in Iraq is into its seventh year. After the destruction of Saddam’s Sunni regime, the mullahs were free to move into Iraq to propagate their subversive Islamic revolutionary doctrines. Thanks to Bush and Blair, Al Qaeda has become active in Iraq and the world is now a much less safe place.

In defence of Chamberlain, it was the experience of the Great War (the First World War, 1914–1918), with all its horrors, the useless sacrifice of lives, the pointless slaughter of twenty million men and the wounding of a further twenty million, that persuaded

the democracies of Europe to prefer appeasement to war. The masses, particularly the working classes of Britain and France, were fed up with conflict, knowing full well that it would be their lives that would be sacrificed on the front lines. Although Chamberlain may not have known it at the time, appeasement bought Britain valuable time to rearm and rebuild her armed forces.

Much has been written and reported in the annals of history on Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement and his desire for peace. While the British were understandably concerned with the *Anschluss* (the union) of Austria and Germany and the future of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the events of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> November in Germany should have been of equal, if not greater, concern. In retaliation to the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris by a Polish Jew, the Nazi party authorised street gangs to rampage through the streets of German cities, beating up and murdering Jews, destroying Jewish shops and synagogues. Twenty-five thousand Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. It was called *Kristallnacht* or Crystal Night, because it happened at night and a lot of plate glass was broken. It was the first pogrom against Jews in Germany.

Western democratically elected presidents and prime ministers have not changed very much in their world view of crimes against humanity. Both Bush and Blair were more concerned with weapons of mass destruction (which didn’t exist) than Saddam’s pogrom against the Kurds (which did). Far greater atrocities have been, and sadly are still being committed, in Burma. The military regime has been conducting a brutal and continuous armed campaign for more than thirty years against the ethnic minorities of the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan groups in eastern Burma, the Chin and Kachin peoples in the north and west, and the Muslim Rohingyas on the southwest coast. Since 1996 more than 3000 villages have been destroyed and more than a million people internally displaced. Some of the terror tactics of the Burmese army include the widespread and systematic policy of gang rape, forced labour, the use of human

minesweepers and the conscription of child soldiers. The Shan are slowly being exterminated and by the end of this century will no longer exist as a T'ai ethnic group. Ethnic cleansing in Burma has never been on either Bush or Blair's political agenda. If this is not a policy of appeasement, then I would like to know what is.

By March 1939, Hitler reneged on the Munich agreement by invading the non-German speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, and on 1<sup>st</sup> September, Poland was attacked. At 11 a.m. on Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939, Neville Chamberlain declared war against Germany on the BBC. Within minutes, air-raid sirens went off in London, but it turned out to be a false alarm triggered by a friendly plane carrying two French officers across the Channel. Several sirens were to be heard over the next few days, but the much expected invasion never came. Over the next seven months, as Europe was gearing up for an all-out war, it became a war of nerves, called the Bore War or Phoney War in Britain, and the Funny War (*drôle de guerre*) in France.

This period of inactivity seemed to give false hopes to British people who had been preparing for war since 1938. Government plans to evacuate millions from London began to seem unnecessary, and many evacuees, particularly children, were glad to return to their urban homes. Londoners, getting used to the black-outs, carrying torches at night, dimming their car lights and taping their windows, were losing their patience, particularly with the Ministry of Information's directives on Air-Raid Precautions. The much despised gas mask – 38 million had been issued in 1938 – no longer seemed necessary, and people who were instructed to carry a gas mask with them at all times no longer did so. And no wonder, it was the single most uncomfortable experience I can remember. It smelled of rancid rubber, it was suffocating, the breathing holes made a scary snorting sound, and it was difficult for a child to put on, even with help from adults. We were frequently encouraged to practice wearing one and to spit on the glass goggles to de-mist

them. Paradoxically, the Ministry of Information also instructed citizens not to spit and were to report anyone seen spitting.

Other curious directives from the Ministry of Information through nationwide leaflets during the interim Phoney War period included such gems as:

- If you have a garden you can dig a trench, but not too deep unless you know how to make one properly, as you might fall in.
- Lighting a cigarette in the black-out is subject to a fine.
- Do not give any German anything. Do not tell him anything. Hide your food, your bicycles and maps.
- If you hear German broadcasts on the radio, switch it off.
- If your blinds do not fit closely, paint the edges of the windowpanes with dark paint.
- Always carry your Identity Card.
- Bedding should be aired daily if you use it in a shelter.
- Pay no attention to rumours.

A Canadian diplomat in London, Charles Ritchie, made this comment: 'Living in London is like being an inmate of a reformatory school. Everywhere you turn, you run into some regulation designed for your protection. The government is like the School Matron.' Thus was born the Nanny State.

It was while living at Sheen Court that grandfather and the Siamese Legation were instructed to declare our neutrality and inform the British government of Siam's position. Apart from Japan and China (who were already at war with each other), Siam at the time was the only independent country in Asia. Japan, for many Siamese, was a role model for progress and modernity. For others, there was a certain amount of anxiety in the country, as it was widely believed that sooner or later Japan would join forces with Germany, thus forcing Siam to make a choice, should the conflict escalate in Southeast Asia.



In fact the Second World War had already begun in the Far East. When the Japanese attacked Manchuria in 1933, Siam did not side with the majority in the League of Nations to condemn Japanese aggression, thinking of that country as a bulwark against the ever-feared China. A minor skirmish at the Marco Polo Bridge near Peking on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1937 – the China Incident – launched the Sino-Japanese War.



*Siam before and after France annexed nearly half a million square kilometers and Britain four southern states of Thai territory.*

Siam was in a dilemma. Never having been colonised and not having a traditional enemy (apart from France who had sent three warships to attack Siam in 1893 and in the years ahead forced us to cede one third of our territory<sup>1</sup>) it was difficult to

<sup>1</sup> 481,600 sq. km.

practice neutrality; we declared war against Germany in July 1917, aligning Siam with the allies in the First World War. The elite in the thirties were anti-French, the army tended to be pro-German, foreign affairs were influenced by American advisers and the royal family were pro-British. The Chinese were not to be trusted and the Japanese feared. Sir Josiah Crosby, British minister to the Court of Siam, described our nation's precarious position in a book appropriately titled '*Siam: The Crossroads*'.



*The second English winter for your grandparents in 1938. The Wolseley is in the background.*



Mon Rêve  
Runnymede  
SURREY

