



NA AW HSAW HA
EH EH'S STORY

Na Aw Hsaw Ha Eh Eh's Story

Eh Eh Tin with Keiron Galloway

Keiron gratefully acknowledges the support of 26TEN and TCAL



First published: Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy 2015

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Authors: Eh Eh Tin with Keiron Galloway

Illustrator: Keiron Galloway

Photography: Eh Eh Tin and Scott Pennicott

Map design: Keiron Galloway and Steve Cooke

Title: Na Aw Hsaw Ha – Eh Eh’s Story

ISBN: 978-0-9924881-4-7

Kindle eBook ISBN: 978-0-9924881-2-3

ePub ISBN: 978-0-9924881-3-0

Publication date: November 2015

Subjects: Adult Learning, Adult Literacy, Refugee Stories, Biography

Cover image and graphics: Keiron Galloway

Cover design: Isabel Galloway and Matthew Dunn

Book design: Keiron Galloway, Isabel Galloway and Matthew Dunn

Printing by NewPrint, Kingston

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors and creators and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy nor of any of the institutions and agencies cited in this publication.

Na Aw Hsaw Ha Eh Eh's Story

We carry nothing with us
But the golden memories
Of a love that had once
Bound us together as a people...

Patrick Purnell SJ – *"Refugees"*

Dear Eh Eh,
May you and your family be united, safe and happy.
May Australia provide you with the means
to make your dreams a reality.



Eh Eh's Story

Eh Eh Tin was 15 years old when he was forced to flee his village in Burma to escape the marauding military that were burning villages and kidnapping and hurting villagers. Eh Eh escaped with his father and it was a year before he was reunited with the rest of his family in a Thai refugee camp.

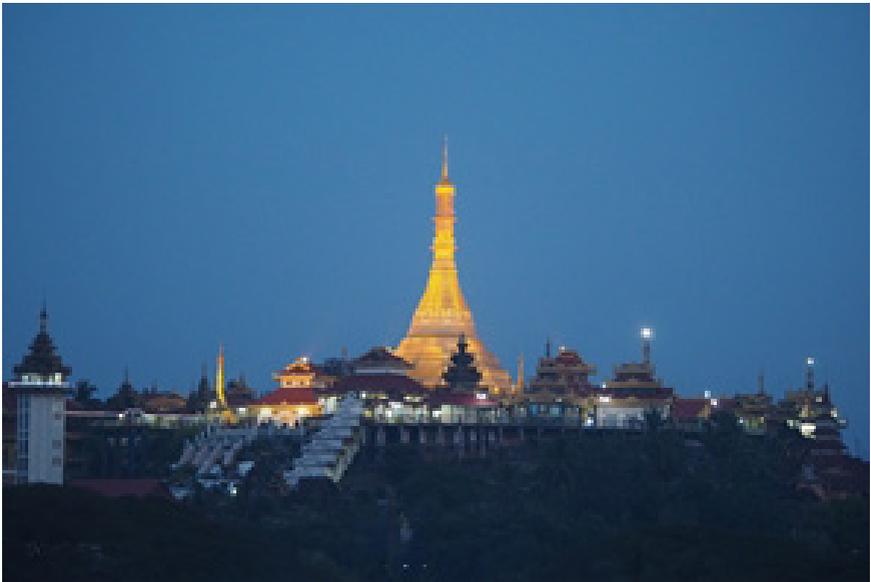
Life in the camp was difficult, however Eh Eh was determined to care for his family and other camp residents while continuing to learn. Despite the danger of moving between camps without papers, Eh Eh completed his education to a level that later allowed him to complete a bachelor's degree at the University of Tasmania. Eh Eh is a leader of the Hobart Karen community and continues to support his remaining family members in the Thai refugee camp.

Eh Eh was born in Kawh Pawn, a Karen village located in the south-east of Burma (officially known as Myanmar). There are about 7 million Karen people living in Burma and about 140,000 Karen refugees living in camps in Thailand. Most Karen are subsistence farmers living in small mountain villages growing rice, vegetables, and raising animals. Eh Eh attended school and also tended the family's cow and goats.

Between 1962 and 2011 Burma was ruled by a military dictatorship. This period was marked by ethnic strife and long-standing civil war. During these years many Karen fled their country to escape torture, rape, landmines, and forced labour by the military regime. About 50,000 Karen refugees have been resettled in America, Canada, Australia and some European countries.



Eh Eh, his wife, and first-born son on graduation day, December 2013



There are Buddhist monasteries in most Karen villages. About 15% of Karen people are Christians (image: Scott Pennicott)

Burma And Civil War

"My middle childhood was not really pleasant because I had to leave my village a few weeks after the '8888' student uprising..."

– Eh Eh Tin

When Eh Eh was seven years old, he moved from Kawh Pawn to Anzin to be further away from military action. He lived there with his family for eight years. His family consisted of his parents, two sisters, one brother and extended family. Sadly, one of his sisters passed away when she was 13 years old. Than Than, Eh Eh's surviving sister, moved away from the village to study. She came back to the village several times a year to visit her family.

When Eh Eh was very young, the Burmese military would come to the villages of the Karen people once a year and arrest the young and fit people. They would force them to work as porters without payment. The Burmese military arrested Eh Eh's parents several times and the head of the village had to bargain with them and offer a lot of money to set them free. His parents had to repay the money.

Through the next few years, the war escalated. The Burmese military came to Eh Eh's village more frequently, where they would shoot any villagers they encountered and burn their houses. The villagers had radios that could transmit for a short distance. When the military were about five hours away, they would receive a message from a nearby village to leave their homes and hide in the jungle.

In 1997, when Eh Eh was 15, the Burmese military came to the village and stayed. Eh Eh, his father, and two neighbours were afraid for their lives and fled, taking their cow and goat. Everyone was in a panic and the family was separated.

On the day that Eh Eh, his father and neighbours fled, they walked all day without food. When it was late and the sun went down, they prepared their dinner and a place to sleep. Eh Eh could only eat a



Eh Eh's grandmother at Nu Po refugee camp

little, as he was too tired, and went to sleep. His father woke him up at midnight because the Burmese military were very near. He had woken with a stomach pain, and after about 15 minutes of walking in the dark his stomach became increasingly painful and he fainted and collapsed. His father carried him on his back through the night to the Thai border.

The group arrived at the border, with a lot of other refugees, in December 1997. It was summer and the water in the river was only about ankle deep. Thai soldiers were guarding the border but they showed compassion and didn't shoot the many people trying to reach safety. The group were able to cross the border safely and formed a settlement in Thailand.

For the first few months, the refugees lived roughly, without shelter, supplied food or outside support. Eh Eh hunted to feed himself, his father, and the people around him. He caught rats and birds to survive. He also gathered edible fruit, seeds and vegetation. He once lived for a month on the vegetation from a banana sapling he found in the jungle. He had to sell the cow and goat and the money allowed him and his family to survive in the camp for a short time.

During those first months in the camp there was no news from outside. Eh Eh and his father worried because they did not know whether his mother, sister and other relatives were safe. They later discovered that his mother and others had fled Burma and were in another refugee camp in Thailand. Five months after their arrival at the camp, Eh Eh's mother joined them. They still didn't know whether Eh Eh's brother and sister were safe. The siblings and extended family were reunited after one year.

After three or four months, the camp began to receive support from the UNHCR and life became a little easier. Everyone received small amounts of basic food. They were given small quantities of rice, fishpaste, beans, and other cooking ingredients such as oil, salt and chilli. They were also given tarpaulins and string to make basic shelters for themselves. They had to collect bamboo and leaves from the jungle around them to complete the shelters. There were thousands of people in the camp and many became sick and died because of the conditions and insufficient medical care.

After the first year in the camp, the refugees began to build more permanent houses from the bamboo and leaves they found in the surrounding jungle. The bamboo ran out after two years, as houses made from bamboo and leaves need to be repaired every year, and there were many people in the camp. The refugees did everything for themselves.

Day to day life in the refugee camp was very challenging. The camp was guarded by Thai soldiers. The first three to four years living in the camp were scary for Eh Eh and the other refugees. They were afraid of the Burmese military who were just across the border. They could also hear the Thai guards practise shooting every night. Eh Eh did not sleep well and always felt stressed. He still often feels stressed but for different reasons!



Burmese countryside (image: Scott Pennicott)

Education is the Key to a Better Life

"Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom."

– George Washington Carver

Although life was difficult it took on a sense of normality and the camp inhabitants still enjoyed their lives. Eh Eh went to school, had hobbies, played sport, played guitar and even had a girlfriend. Life goes on.

Eh Eh had always enjoyed school and excelled at his studies. He was determined to continue his education to provide opportunities for himself and his family. With support from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), the teachers amongst the refugees were able to establish a school in the camp. This suited Eh Eh's needs for a time.

Three years after escaping from Burma, Eh Eh decided he needed to move to a different camp to attend a school with a better standard of English language education. He knew that learning English was the

key to his future. As he was a refugee with no official identification papers, it was illegal for him to travel outside the camp. He travelled secretly through many Thai checkpoints to reach the new school.

Eh Eh completed his studies at that school and was keen to continue extending his education so that he could attend university one day. He then sat an entrance exam to attend a one year English language course. Again, this was away from the camp where his family were living. He had married his sweetheart, who lived in the camp with his family. He missed his family and especially his wife whilst he lived away.

Eh Eh would return to the camp whenever he could to spend time with his family. In 2003, Eh Eh and his wife became pregnant with their first child. He had successfully completed the English course and was on his way back to the camp to be with his wife when he was arrested. He spent one night in a Thai jail and one day in a detention centre. The next day he was sent back to the border.

At the border he was arrested by Burmese soldiers who interrogated him and other refugees. In the detention centre he had asked the other prisoners what to do if he was arrested by the Burmese military. They advised him to lie and say he was living as a migrant in Thailand. He said he was a migrant and paid the soldiers to release him. He walked to Myawaddy, a city inside the Burmese border.

Eh Eh sought accommodation but there was none available. He was turned away wherever he went. He went to a Buddhist monastery but the monks were afraid to provide sanctuary. He was also afraid. It was dark and late and he had nowhere to sleep. Eh Eh approached the head of the village and paid him to provide him and several other refugees with official papers. They returned to the border and approached the crossing office. They had papers to enter Thailand for one day. They were allowed to cross into Thailand and Eh Eh contacted a friend. His friend helped Eh Eh and six of his fellow travellers arrange transport back to the refugee camp. He was safe again.

Pursuing his goal to attend university, Eh Eh successfully sat an entrance exam for a university preparatory program. An NGO paid the cost of the course, transport and living expenses. The course was conducted in Chiang Mai where he lived for one and a half years. He completed the program, which provided an international qualification called the GED, which is equivalent to year 12 in Australia.



Map of Burma

Asylum In Australia

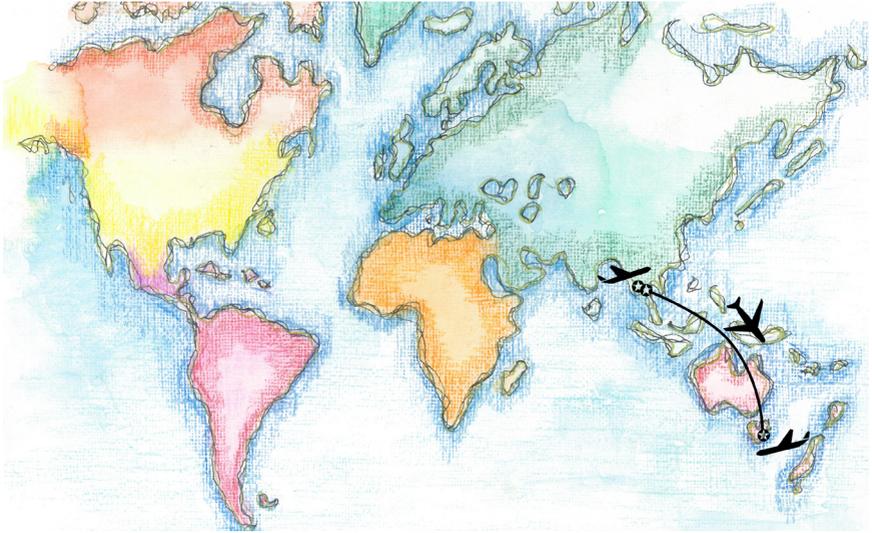
"In my life I have never had peaceful sleeping – until the day I arrived in Tasmania."

– Eh Eh Tin

In 2007, Eh Eh applied for third country resettlement under the UNHCR Humanitarian Resettlement Program. Eh Eh, his wife and son were accepted by Australia and they travelled to Tasmania in March 2008.

A lot of people in the camp applied to resettle. The other members of Eh Eh's family were afraid to leave. They did not speak English and were overwhelmed by the thought of moving to another country. Eh Eh told his parents that he would go first and see what it was like. He would then make arrangements for them to join him.

Eh Eh's father did not make it to Australia. He died from throat cancer in 2009. Eh Eh's mother, sister, and his sister's husband and two daughters have now joined him in Hobart. His sister Than Than now has an Australian baby. His grandmother, aunty and brother remain in the refugee camp in Thailand. Eh Eh hopes that at some stage in the future they can also resettle in Australia. In the meantime, he regularly sends them money.



Eh Eh's journey to Australia



*Motorcycles are a popular mode of transport in Burma
(image: Scott Pennicott)*

The Future

"One day I asked my wife a question, 'would you agree if I disconnect all the telephone lines so people from the refugee camp could no longer ask for money from us?' And then she said, 'when we live we serve. When I die, I can't take that money with me.'

I am very happy to see Australian people who serve as they live."

– Eh Eh Tin

When Eh Eh first arrived in Tasmania he studied English at TasTAFE for one year. He then applied to enrol at the University of Tasmania. He went to the student advisor and said that he wanted to do a degree that would guarantee he would gain well-paid employment. He was most interested in medical science and law, but those courses are very competitive and take longer to complete. The advisor told Eh Eh that there were jobs available in Information Technology (IT) and he enrolled in that course.

In the beginning, Eh Eh found his studies difficult. He struggled a lot. It was more than his studies that occupied him. Eh Eh's wife did not speak English well and he was responsible for many of the household tasks.

He was also a leader of the Karen community in Hobart. There are about 25 Karen households in Hobart who rely on Eh Eh, not only to communicate, but also to assist them with technology and other things they need help with. He was the only English speaker in the community for the first two years after his arrival. Eh Eh says that he is strong and capable and has the capacity to help his community.

While Eh Eh was studying he was also doing paid work as an interpreter. He was, and still is, very busy. He did three units each semester and completed his degree in four years. He graduated with a Bachelor Degree in Information Systems (Hons), specialising in systems and business analysis. Despite his academic achievement, Eh Eh has found it difficult to enter the IT field in Tasmania.

Eh Eh has found the job market in Hobart very competitive. He has attended a number of interviews but is told he lacks experience. He does not have access to the networks that are so vital in a small community like Hobart. He currently works for the Hobart City Council in a non-IT role.

Eh Eh now has two sons and a daughter who are 12, six and three years old. His hopes for the future include being able to support his family and educate his children. He wants his children to go to university and be successful in their lives.

Eh Eh will leave Tasmania soon to take up a graduate position in the Department of Employment in Canberra. He will move first to establish a home for his family, who will follow later. He is excited to be beginning his professional career in Australia. It is sad to be leaving his extended family again but he must to achieve his goals.



*Canberra, with the old and new Parliament House in the centre
(image: creative commons from Wikipedia)*

Resource List

International Organization for Migration (IOM)
www.iom.int

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
www.unhcr.org

Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL)
www.tcal.org.au

The Department of Education Tasmania
www.education.tas.gov.au

TasTAFE
www.tastafe.tas.edu.au

26TEN
www.26ten.tas.gov.au

Migrant Resource Centre
www.mrchobart.org.au

Refugee Council of Australia
www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Keiron Galloway and the Namste Book Series
www.keirongalloway.com.au

Eh Eh's Story is the fourth book
in the Namaste Book Series.

This book tells Eh Eh's story
of his journey from Burma to Australia.

