my children to Japanese school; I just wanted them to live a normal life.

Masao is currently one of the volunteer curators at the Japanese National Museum in Little Tokyo, downtown Los Angeles. He retired three years ago from his job with the Los Angeles County printing press and spends about five hours a day at the museum giving tours and sharing his personal experiences. When I asked Masao how he feels about his experiences and how they contribute to his definition of being an Asian-American he simply replied, "I am an American. I love America. There is no other place that I would rather be."

KYAW LIN TUN'S MOTHER

Kyaw Lin Tun

My mother grew up in Mandalay, a large city in Myanmar. Her living conditions back in Mandalay weren't bad because her father was wealthy. They had a massive two-story house and all the neighbors that walked by admired it. Her father was well known throughout the community, and their home was known as Mr Leather's house (U Maung Ko's house.) "He was a very hard working man," she told me. Her father owned a leather factory that manufactured high quality leather that was exported to India, Germany, China and Malaysia. At one point, her father had over three hundred men working for him.

In Mandalay, the street where she lived was lined with small stores that sold mostly Burmese snacks such as preserved fruits, in a special sauce, soda and seeds. The small pharmacy would sell herbs and medicine and sometimes tried to imitate Western names. Meat stores were buzzing with people and flies. An occasional carriage pulled by horses would pass by the house, where on many nights the whole family sat outside, in a group, and because the humidity and heat were unbearable inside. Mandalay lies almost directly on the equator. During the summer, temperatures often exceed 100 degrees on a cool day and many deaths occur because of heat waves. My mom said as a little girl, her older brother took them all over town due to their wealth. She said they owned three different cars, a Mercedes, a truck, and the Jeep that they used to travel with.

However, my mom's nice life came to an end as the country fell into chaos after the 1962 military coup led by General U Ne Win who began to rule the country with an iron fist. His method of socialism meant that all property belonged to the government and all wealth was claimed and redistributed among the citizens. My mom was a teenager at the time but she remembers clearly the day he took power. People protested in the streets. The protesters were shot with rubber bullets and targeted with high-powered water hoses that pushed people back. Her brothers drove their expensive foreign cars away from the property when the military came to occupy the factory and claim it for the government. They came with machine guns strapped and took my grandfather away for questioning. Since my grandfather was a wealthy man, he was perceived as a risk due to his resources. My mother was left behind weeping and screaming for her father. Her father didn't cry, he was such a strong man, and told her calmly, "I will be back." Indeed, they released him a few days later. He was among the innocent in a crowed cell. They interrogated him and ask him questions about possessions such as jewelry and precious material.

A few days later, the army came by the house and took everything that was valuable. The family was left with a few diamonds that he had intended to give his wife and daughters. Luckily, he had hidden the diamonds in the basement. My mother recalled that, "the soldiers ripped through the house throwing our things around, breaking our furniture." My mom was trying to stop them and telling them to be gentle with the things but she was shoved aside. After that incident, her father fell into depression and turned to drugs to suppress his anger, frustration and helplessness. He became addicted to drugs and about two years after the takeover, he passed away. My mom, as the youngest of her siblings, was greatly saddened by her father's death. She couldn't stop thinking about all the important life events her father would miss, such as her wedding day.

My mom and dad did not met until about one week before their wedding. It was an arranged marriage, which was very common in those days. Her aunt served as the matchmaker and arranged the terms with my dad's side. My mom said she was very unhappy about the arrangement. She felt like she was being forced to marry someone that she had never met and didn't know if she was going to love. My mother was in love with another man who eventually became a doctor. Her family disapproved of him because he was of a different religion. Since she did not want to bring any shame to her family, she broke off the relationship.

She said the first time she met my dad, she didn't like him, although he was nice to her.

My dad also came from a wealthy family that used to work for the government before the Socialists took over. She said, "They were like the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) here, not very nice people but wealthy and respected, just like us. His father was the chief of that office, but he lost his position." They got married and a year later after I was born, they decided to move to Singapore. Her father in-law had started a company there and business seemed to be improving. He needed his son's help and wanted my mom to do the cooking and cleaning around the office. We lived in the attic throughout my childhood. By this time, Myanmar was still in chaos, people were protesting on the streets everyday, getting arrested and treated with brutality for opposing the government. Everything was peaceful in Singapore, and my mom said with a sigh, "I didn't have to worry about your safety or worry about your father getting arrested for protesting." Ten years went by, during which she toiled away in the kitchen, serving her husband, her father-in-law, the clients that came to the office and at the same time making sure that I was fed and went to school. Things finally changed for her as the business went bankrupt, and the bank repossessed the office that they had paid half a million dollars for.

It was around this time that she persuaded my dad to find a new place to go to because she did not want to return to Myanmar. Even though her family was there, she did not want to go back due to the violence there. My father wrote a letter to a childhood friend who had settled in America and was doing well as an engineer. His friend would turn out to be our savior. He talked my parents into leaving for the U.S. and promise that he would take care of everything. My mom was willing to take the risk of going to a strange far away land that she knew nothing about and we boarded a plane to Los Angeles, California. My mom said, "[j]ust a couple of months after we landed here, the September 11 attacks occurred and that really scared me. I thought to myself, we escaped all the violence in Myanmar and I didn't want to see any more people getting killed." The economy declined as a result of the terrorist attacks. My mom and dad couldn't get jobs, and they were using the money they had brought to pay for rent and food and my schooling, but the money was disappearing fast. Finding a job wasn't as easy as they had thought. Degrees from Burmese universities, were not recognized here unless my parents went back to college and got an American degree. They were in their late forties and even though they could speak English, they were not

fluent. It was difficult for them to go back to a university here since they lacked funds to pay for tuition and our living expenses. Luckily, my mom, who is a very social person, made a lot of friends very quickly among the Burmese community here and that led to work opportunities. My parents both went to work at the same place, in a lab where they processed medication. They served as assistants to their Burmese friend even though they had college degrees. The friend that helped them to get these jobs had earned an American college degree.

My mom kept applying to different places and she finally landed a job at 3M Unitek, a major company that produces medical supplies. She started as a temporary worker and since it was a factory, the work was hard. “You had to be fast, there was a certain number of items you had to finish checking or the boss got very mad at you and started yelling. And since I didn’t speak English very well, I didn’t know how to talk back. I just nodded my head and said yes boss.”

All of this was a real transformation for my mom. As the daughter of a wealthy factory owner, who lived in luxury when she was younger and, now in her late forties, she had to work in a factory making barely a little more than minimum wage. “The supervisors know that Asians work hard and they won’t complain no matter how much work they get, so they make them work even harder.” She says that Asians have to work harder than most other races, in 3M Unitek, mainly because of their docile personalities and not being able to speak fluent English to communicate with their supervisors.

> America has its good and bad just like any other country. If you work hard here, more than likely you will become successful; it is fair in that sense. I don’t hate this country because we come from a different part of the world and different cultures, so the way things work here is not the same as back home. Back in Myanmar, we lived like royalty, nobody looked down on us or discriminated against us, we were respected people especially because my father was a successful businessman. But what can we do? Things happen that are beyond our control. If I didn’t have any children I would go back to Burma, just to be with my family. But if I go back to Burma and take you with me, your future would be ruined because there is no future there but drugs. So we started here from scratch and struggle and put up with the people here. But not everyone is bad; I have met a lot of nice people who have helped me a lot at work. We are old and it is too late for us to take advantage of the

> opportunities this country has to offer. But you are a young man, and if you work hard you will be successful and it will make our sacrifice and hard work worth it, even if you get married and forgot about us, I will be happy for you.

My mom tries hard to preserve Burmese culture. She cooks all the traditional foods on the Burmese holidays and as Americanized as I am, I wouldn't trade what she cooks for any American food. We still speak to each other in Burmese and watch Burmese shows and movies that we order from Burma. We attend Burmese festivals and social gatherings every year to keep that Burmese culture. She identifies herself as a Burmese immigrant. She feels she is just here for my sake and not to be an American citizen. But she does blend in the American culture especially recently. She buys a Christmas tree because she likes the smell of it and likes to decorate it and she wakes up early on Black Friday morning to go stand in line for the shopping madness. She loves to shop and her taste in clothes has definitely shifted to the western fashion. She frequents Macy's and Nordstrom, her two favorite stores. She tries to improve her English by watching shows on TV even though she doesn't really like American shows. She talks to me in Burmese most of the time because she has a hard time understanding the English spoken by younger people. She lives with my dad in Temple City, California.

THOMAS TRAN

Ha Van

Thomas Tran is Chinese-Vietnamese and he has lived in the U.S. for nearly thirty years. He is 45 years old and lives in Alhambra, California with his wife and two daughters. Tran was born in 1964 in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam. He is the fifth child in a family of nine siblings, four brothers and five sisters. He works as an accountant for Union Bank.

My uncle Thomas was a Vietnamese refugee who was forced to flee his homeland. His family did not have enough food to eat and his father's government job salary was not enough to provide for the family. In 1978, he left Vietnam when he was only fifteen years old. He was the