

CHAPTER IV

PREPARATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE

(1943, May to July)

BURMA was to become independent. A committee was to draw up a Constitution for Independent Burma. Many Burmans and Japanese were all agog with excitement: the Burmans because they wanted to become members of the committee, and the Japanese because they wanted to use the committee to break the power of Dr. Ba Maw. Some of the nominees were as far as possible pro-Japanese. The leader of the Japanese in this matter was the famous Oseka who was the head of the Home Office during the Japanese Military Administration. His chief task was to find puppets who would do what the Japanese command wanted.

One evening a certain Professor Iwama came to my house. He was the Japanese Adviser in the Education Department. I had got to know him pretty well by going with him to Mandalay.

'I've got something important to talk about,' he said, and asked if we could be overheard. I assured him that it was quite safe, but he peered all around and asked me to come outside as he did not want to talk about it indoors. He was the kind of man who liked to be mysterious and make a great fuss about everything, however insignificant. But to please him I went along with him to Inya Lake. When we came to a lonely place he again looked carefully all round him. Then he said that Dr. Ba Maw was always grumbling about the Japanese, and in his heart was disaffected towards them. When he had been asked to

introduce Japanese as a compulsory subject in the schools he had not approved and insisted on their teaching English.

'There you are,' he went on, 'doesn't that show that he is hostile? And look here! You've been in his dining-room, haven't you? He has got a certificate from the King of England hung up on the wall.'

As a matter of fact it was not a certificate from the King of England. When Dr. Ba Maw went to England for the King's coronation he was asked to a luncheon given by the Lord Mayor of London. Dr. Ba Maw had had the invitation framed and hung up on his wall. Already one or two Japanese had drawn my attention to it, but when I told Dr. Ba Maw he said it didn't matter and left the card just as before.

'You people really are very difficult,' I replied. 'If anyone does not do exactly what you want you set him down as an enemy. And as for his objection to the teaching of Japanese, how would you like it if Burmese was made a compulsory subject in your universities?'

'Whatever you may say, my man, the whole army has set him down in the list of people disaffected towards the Japanese.'

'Well, that is just as they please.'

'Now, Thakin Nu,' he said, 'if you got the kind of chance that only comes once in a lifetime to a politician, would you take it?'

I tried to dodge the question by asking him, 'Why not?'

He clasped me by the hand and said, 'Good, then we're friends.'

'Yes, but tell me what this great chance is.' Iwama would not tell me then, but asked me to come to lunch at Oseka's house next day, and I agreed.

Iwama went off thinking that he had gained his point. Men who would greedily snap up whatever the Japanese offered were so blinded with their greed that they readily fell into all the many dangerous traps that the Japanese

set for them. The trap set by Iwama is a good illustration of the traps that the Japanese set for their tools. 'The Japanese army has entered Dr. Ba Maw in its list of enemies.' 'Will you take a chance such as comes only once in a lifetime to a politician?' Everyone knows that the three-card-trick men are swindlers. That is quite understood when they deal the cards. But men who cannot restrain their greed take fire and join the game until they are stripped even of the longyi round their waist. It was just like that with the Japanese. Everyone said they were cheats. And they did their cheating quite openly. It was just through greed that men let themselves be cheated.

On the same evening I went to see Dr. Ba Maw and told him all that had happened, and suggested that it might be as well for him to take down that invitation card and throw it away.

'That doesn't matter,' he said, 'don't worry about that.'

'No, no!' I replied. 'The men who are attacking you seize on every little thing, and when they piece all these little things together it becomes a big thing.'

(And not long afterwards I noticed that the 'certificate' had been replaced by a photograph of little fish playing in the water.)

'Anyhow,' he went on, 'tomorrow you had better try and pick up all you can get out of these men. But don't go beyond anything that I have said. You are apt to talk a little recklessly.'

So next day I went to Oseka's house where I found him surrounded with all his staff; I should think that along with him were about half a dozen Japanese officials. I expect that some of them were to watch my expression and some of them to fill in the details that Oseka wanted. They placed me on a big sofa at the end of the room and the others sat on either side and for a short time there was general conversation. Then Oseka began.

'Not long ago I was looking at some reports from the districts up-country. Well, now, on reading them I found they said that all over the country Thakin Nu was much more highly respected than Dr. Ba Maw. One thing particularly struck me. They said that even in the neighbourhood of Mandalay, where Dr. Ba Maw is supposed to be so strong, the supporters of Thakin Nu were more numerous. Now why . . . ?'

To look at Oseka one might think that he had only just risen from a sick-bed. His eyes were half closed and he spoke rather slowly in a low tone of voice. But don't be taken in by that. 'Now why . . . ?' was not just a stock phrase, like the questions in the correspondence columns of the *Deedok Journal*. And I thought to myself, 'Now you are trying to diddle me'. The day before, his man Iwama had told me about Dr. Ba Maw being in the black books of the army and had asked if I would dare to take advantage of a good opportunity. To talk in the language of draughts he had given away two pieces, and now Oseka was offering me a third. When I have watched men playing draughts, I have sometimes seen a player sacrifice as many as three pieces one after another, and have wondered why he allowed so many to be taken. As a result, however, he gets his three men back and crowns a king. That was the kind of trap that Oseka was laying for me.

'Now why is that?' asked Oseka, and I replied that in my opinion the reports were quite untrue. And glancing at his face I noticed that he seemed very disappointed. I noted also that, although he was a graduate of an American university, he did not speak English but used an interpreter, and it occurred to me that he wanted time while the interpreter was talking to make up his mind what line to take.

'The fact is,' I said, 'the men who make the enquiries don't consult everyone. The people who could give sound information as to the state of affairs keep out of the way of

your military police as they do not want to meet them. So the people that your military police come across talk just at random according to their likes and dislikes.'

'There may be something in that,' he replied, 'but the reports include a lot of enquiries from trustworthy people.'

'Well, I don't know how far your trustworthy people can be trusted. But I can tell you this. I refuse to believe that people in Mandalay and the neighbourhood think more highly of me than of Dr. Ba Maw. Don't talk about the Mandalay people having a good opinion of me. Why, they have hardly heard my name!'

'I don't know how that may be,' said Oseka, 'I am merely going by the reports that I get from the districts.'

Oseka seemed to have placed great confidence in his trap. And he might well do so. For so many people had fallen into traps of this kind that he reckoned quite confidently on succeeding as easily with me. When I did not tumble into it, he did not quite know what to do, and became rather silent. Then a Japanese officer whose name I do not know asked whether our thakins were on good terms with the men who had joined Dr. Ba Maw's Party.

'Of course they are,' I answered.

'They really are on good terms?'

'Really and truly.'

'If you are all on such good terms, can you show anything to prove it?'

'Certainly,' I replied. 'Look at our joint Do Bama-Sinyetha Association. Isn't that good enough proof that the thakins and damas are on good terms.'

The officer spoke a few words to Oseka with a supercilious expression and Oseka replied to him briefly with a smile. The officer, turning to me, again asked if this joint association was not merely a signboard while the thakins and damas were each gathering their own separate forces. I admitted that might be true to some extent of the underlings but the leaders were all on quite good terms.

'It is all very well for you to say that the leaders are on good terms,' he answered with a sneer, 'but do you yourself approve of everything that Dr. Ba Maw does?'

By this time I was getting fed up with his sneering countenance and said, 'You've got no right to ask that kind of thing. Dr. Ba Maw is our Ahnashin, and Ahnashin means our Leader. What would you say if I asked whether you approve everything done by your Commander-in-Chief, Kawabi?' Here Oseka broke in with a few words to the officer that I could not follow, and when the officer spoke again he had dropped the sneering look.

'Dr. Ba Maw gives all the appointments to his own men. Don't you know that all the younger thakins are grumbling because they don't get any of the jobs?'

I told him that this was no business of his, and about a quarter of an hour later I got up and left. In the evening I discussed the whole conversation with Dr. Ba Maw.

A day or two later Professor Iwama called on me and I could see from his face that he was rather angry about something. He said that they were all very disappointed with me the other day.

'And I was very disappointed with your lot,' I replied. 'What about that Japanese officer sneering and jeering and behaving so rudely?'

'Thakin Nu,' he said, 'you have missed a great chance. If it had been me I would have thrown over Dr. Ba Maw and stepped up into his place.'

'Professor Iwama, please listen to me. In the first place I have pledged my loyalty. In the second I don't want Dr. Ba Maw's kind of job. He has openly told me that he wants to resign. Moreover, he has given me free leave to tell that to any responsible officer of the Japanese army. And I have, in fact, mentioned it to Colonel Hiraoka. I told him because I thought he would pass it on to the army. And Dr. Ba Maw himself has said just the same

thing to Isamura,¹ as you will find out if you ask him. There! Have you got all that quite clearly? Have you still got any doubt about my wishes? For I certainly can't make them any clearer.'

Not long after this conversation with Professor Iwama we started to make preparations for the Independence Committee and I was dragged into it willy-nilly. I was very reluctant because framing rules and so on makes my head ache; it does not interest me and I don't understand it. About two days before the list was to be published Dr. Ba Maw showed it to me. When I saw that my name was included I asked him to let me off as it was the kind of thing that I did not understand. But he pointed out its importance and pressed me to join, and finally I agreed. In this committee there were some men who favoured an hereditary monarchy. Others held that the country would be ruined if it were governed by one man or one group. There were some men who would give the Japanese anything they wanted, and there were some men who would always take the Burman side in any dispute with the Japanese. Some were so muddled that, as the saying goes, they would not know whether they were going north or south, and would comply with any suggestion from Dr. Ba Maw without any thought about the direction in which he was taking them. And some were afraid that if they did not support Dr. Ba Maw he would become merely a puppet in the hands of the Japanese. So, with men who would object to everything and others who would agree to anything, the committee included men of all kinds. But four of us, Kodaw Hmaing, Thakin Mya, Thakin Than Tun and I, held the scales, and the side to which we four

¹ One day not long after Dr. Ba Maw's return from his first visit to Japan he and Thakin Mya met Major-General Isamura who was then third in command on the Japanese staff and in charge of Burma-Japanese relations. When Dr. Ba Maw had told him that he wished to resign, Isamura thumped on the table and stormed at him and threatened him. All this was known to Thakin Mya, and Dr. Ba Maw had pressed him not to let anyone know that he had been scolded like that.

gave our votes could win. Then why not use our strong position to smash Dr. Ba Maw who had been giving all the jobs to his own men and not to the thakins? That would have been a bad mistake, for then we would all have fallen into the Japanese trap. Let me try to make that rather clearer.

The Japanese wanted Dr. Ba Maw as their puppet. But as Ahnashin of the whole Party he held the strings in his own hands and would not allow the Japanese to pull them; he was firmly intent on holding the centre of the stage. So he was at odds with the Japanese army that wanted to pull the strings. Ordinarily the Japanese army could have got rid of him by a single blow. But from Dr. Ba Maw's first arrival in Japan he made a lot of friends, and the army could not get rid of him as easily as they had got rid of unsatisfactory leaders in China and Manchuria and elsewhere. So that in Burma the Japanese army could do no more than clip his wings by undermining him while strengthening his opponents. In this way they reckoned that either he would have to lean on them or, if he continued obstinate, would be powerless to do anything. So if we allowed ourselves to be annoyed by trifles, we should gain nothing by working against Dr. Ba Maw. As he had said to us in the first meeting of the committee, 'Chip off eight annas from the rupee, and it is not you who will get the eight annas that is left; it will go to the Japanese.' If we men who held the scales should attack him because of private grudges, we would gain nothing by it; all the profit would go to our good friends the Japanese. Thakin Mya, Thakin Than Tun and I were well aware of this.

But some people suspected that we supported Ba Maw because we were keen on holding office. Not to mention others, our chief counsellor, Kodaw Hmaing himself, made the same mistake. 'You won't starve if you don't get office,' he said. He reproached Thakin Mya so keenly as to move him to tears. But it was only because our critics

did not appreciate the facts of the situation that they were apprehensive. In view of the backing behind Thakin Mya and Thakin Than Tun there was no need for us to woo Dr. Ba Maw in order to get office; it was Dr. Ba Maw who had to woo us. He even had to conciliate men with much less backing. Indeed it would have been very difficult for Dr. Ba Maw to form a government without the support of Thakin Mya and Thakin Than Tun. Thakin Mya chiefly wanted to lead a quiet life and had not the slightest wish to take part in such a tangled drama. And Thakin Than Tun only accepted office because he thought that this would be the best cover for him to play his part in the resistance movement. So there was not the least truth in the charge that we supported Dr. Ba Maw because we wanted to hold office.

A little while before the Independence Committee was to meet, Dr. Ba Maw told me to get up as soon as the meeting began and say that I wanted to know from the Japanese army whether there was to be freedom of speech in the Assembly and whether members would get into trouble afterwards for anything that they might say. He would take up the question and obtain assurances from the Japanese. There would be many things said in the Assembly that the Japanese would not like so it would be better for them to know about it. U Thein Maung, M.A., had already been pressing me to put some questions of this kind. So when I rose to put the questions, Dr. Ba Maw, as arranged, produced the permit from the Japanese.

The way that U Thein Maung behaved in our discussions was very encouraging; he was so bold in protesting vigorously against the Japanese attempts to encroach on the internal affairs of a so-called independent country that people who heard him were quite startled. As I have already mentioned some people firmly believed that it would be a terrible blunder to entrust all the affairs of country to one man or one party, and among these was

U Thein Maung. When motions were proposed by Dr. Ba Maw and our group he argued with all his force, and said all there was to say, though he knew very well that against all the combined forces the opposition vote could not prevail. But he stuck to his point whatever the result might be, and in some matters we gave way on account of his perseverance. He often said that he was like a man rescuing his goods from a sinking ship; if he could save only a single pillow he was one pillow to the good and did not lose everything.

One day, less than a week after the committee had been sitting, the Commander-in-Chief, General Kawabi, sent a message for all the members to attend in his house. After we had all gathered in the reception hall a Japanese official entered to say that General Kawabi was just coming, and we all stood up. General Kawabi walked in with a haughty demeanour and a face adorned by a stiffly waxed moustache rather like a rat's tail. He remained standing by the seat of honour while a Japanese officer led us up in turn to shake hands with him. As soon as we sat down again he rated us for about half an hour like a schoolmaster rebuking his pupils. The substance of what he said was, 'You people talk a lot of nonsense. We soldiers don't like too many words. In future I want more work and less talk. Now you can go.' We were all left staring with great round eyes like an owl in the twilight, and, when he told us to go, we went off without having had a chance to say anything.

It was Major-General Isamura who arranged for us to be summoned like this and rebuked and dismissed. This Isamura was a man with a very good opinion of himself and a very poor opinion of Burmans; he seemed to think we were no better than Coringhi coolies. Day in, day out, his chief object was to humiliate Dr. Ba Maw and Dr. Ba Maw's Government. In this connection I must give another instance of his rude behaviour. While we were

holding our meeting of the committee to prepare for independence the Japanese Premier Tojo invited Dr. Ba Maw to meet him in Singapore to discuss the transfer of two Shan States to Siam. So we had to adjourn our meeting and arrange to go to Singapore. In fact, he really did not want to consult Dr. Ba Maw but merely to give him instructions. Dr. Ba Maw asked me to accompany him. In the evening before we were to leave, Isamura telephoned to Dr. Ba Maw that we were to wait outside the gate punctually at six o'clock next morning to go with him and report to the Commander-in-Chief. Dr. Ba Maw and I arrived punctually at six o'clock. Six-fifteen, no sign of Isamura's car. Six-thirty, no car. Then at six-forty-five Isamura arrived and drove straight on without stopping, merely calling out 'Sorry' from his car. He thought it quite unnecessary to apologize for keeping the Prime Minister, Dr. Ba Maw, waiting in the road for three-quarters of an hour.

At that time we were still under the Military Administration. Dr. Ba Maw was subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief, and had to report to him all his goings and comings whenever he left or returned to Rangoon. But we might just as well have waited inside the house. Or if Isamura had been decently polite he could have met us in Dr. Ba Maw's house, which was only some three minutes' drive to that of the Commander-in-Chief and we could all have gone together. It was just because he wanted to humiliate Dr. Ba Maw as much as possible that he made him wait in the road for three-quarters of an hour.

When we got to Singapore an officer came to the airport to greet us and take Dr. Ba Maw by car to the house where he was to put up. The pilot car was in front; next came Dr. Ba Maw. I was in the next car and Isamura in the last. When he saw this arrangement he looked very disgusted. After about five miles Isamura pressed on ahead and told Dr. Ba Maw's car to stop as there was

something of his in it that he wanted. After hunting around for about five minutes he gave up looking for what had never been there and, without saying anything, set off again with his car at the head of the procession. So when we finally arrived Isamura was in the first car, Dr. Ba Maw in the second and I was in the third.

Similarly, when General Tojo came to Singapore, Mr. Bose and Dr. Ba Maw went to welcome him at the airport. After General Tojo had left we all got into our cars to follow him. Dr. Ba Maw was kept waiting in his car for about five minutes because Isamura, who was to go in the car ahead of him, just stood idly beside his car smoking one cigarette after another. And as the car in front did not start, Dr. Ba Maw's car could not start. Bose was standing close by waiting for his own car, and it looked as if Isamura was just showing off for his benefit, as much as to say, 'See what a great man I am; this fellow Dr. Ba Maw cannot get away until I leave.' Dr. Ba Maw used to try to hit back at him, but as he was just like water in Isamura's hand he could not hit back very hard. For example, while they were staying in Singapore Isamura sent a military policeman to call Dr. Ba Maw to breakfast, and Dr. Ba Maw shouted at the man that he would not come to breakfast and his food was to be brought up to his room. If he could not get out of it and had to take lunch or dinner with Isamura, Dr. Ba Maw would gobble up his food without speaking a word and go off as soon as he had finished.

So it was in order to humiliate the members of the committee that Isamura had arranged this meeting with the Commander-in-Chief. Their feelings were badly hurt and when the committee met next day there was much grumbling. 'We are not little children,' they said, 'and object very strongly to the manner in which this Commander-in-Chief fellow addressed us yesterday.' U Thein Maung tabled a remonstrance expressing the displeasure

of the members. The Burman stenographers used to take down all that was said and it was translated into English and sent to the army, so it is quite certain that the Commander-in-Chief must have seen U Thein Maung's remonstrance.

Every day in the discussions among the members there were references to our distrust of the Japanese. One day in a communication from the army there was a passage exhorting us to trust the Japanese. So in our reply we included a paragraph to say that we were quite willing to trust the Japanese, but wanted the Japanese to trust Burmans. Isamura was cunning enough to get this passage omitted from the report. But Dr. Ba Maw was not the kind of man to give in easily, and when he had to speak at a dinner given to the members of the Assembly by the Commander-in-Chief he included this passage in his speech.

While Dr. Ba Maw was pressing forward against the Japanese on the main front, he also had to settle accounts with us in the rear. Shortly before he was due for election as Adipati the three of us, Thakin Mya, Thakin Than Tun and I, went to see him in his office.

'Now, Ahnashin,' we said, 'we have fulfilled our pledge to support you to the best of our ability, how about the other matter that we mentioned?'

'What is that?' he asked.

'Group dictatorship,¹ of course.'

'Well, what about it?'

'We want to be certain of our position while there is still time. If you don't agree we shall be unable to support you in the election for Adipati.'²

¹ Group dictatorship means that supreme power is not vested in one man but in a group. For example, in any matter of importance it is not for the one man but the group to decide.

² When Burma was declared independent the Japanese did not want Dr. Ba Maw to be styled President, and he was therefore given the title of *Adipati*, a Pali word meaning Chief. It is the style adopted for the Chancellor of the University.

When Dr. Ba Maw heard this he took up the watch that was lying on the table and was so shocked that he stared straight ahead for a couple of minutes without saying a word. Then he went on, 'But isn't that just what I've been saying. For ages I've been urging the appointment of an Inner Circle. Wasn't it I who first had the idea? Very well, then, form your Inner Circle. It ought to have been formed long ago.'

What he really wanted was to purge our discontent with honeyed words. We knew that this was his object, and, as we quite understood this, you may well ask why we just returned home and accepted what he said. The fact is that we never intended to press Dr. Ba Maw about his promise. We knew that whatever he might promise it was impossible to bind him. He would say just what he liked and do just what he liked. We knew that as well as we knew that two and two make four. Our only object was to let Dr. Ba Maw understand how far we would go in supporting him.

As a matter of fact, even if Dr. Ba Maw had refused us point-blank, we would not have dared to oppose him in the election. For we had trustworthy information that Oseka had instigated some members to vote against him, and that Isamura had threatened them and warned them not to do so. We did not want the Japanese to go stirring up strife between Burmans and then restoring peace by threats. That was their regular trick. They would encourage a man to do something rash. Thinking he was safe enough, he would do it just to please them. Then some other Japanese would lay hold on him. It was all fixed up between them. This trickery made it impossible to be loyal to the Japanese. Moreover, we were well aware that we had no one among us to match Dr. Ba Maw in resisting Japanese pretensions. When Dr. Ba Maw wanted to do anything he paid little heed to danger but had the grit and courage to take strong measures in order to gain

his end one way or another. Although the Japanese tried so often to humiliate him he was never depressed for very long, and if any Japanese trespassed on his preserves, he would try to get his own back without considering anyone's feelings.

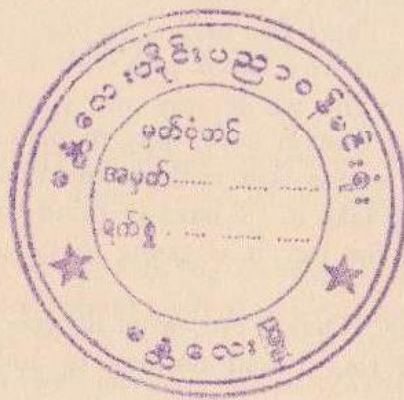
At last the day for the election of the Adipati arrived. Isamura as usual was in the Visitors' Gallery. He always used to take note of the speeches and the speakers and made his interpreter pay special attention to vehement speeches as if taking it for granted that they must be directed against the Japanese. But on the day for electing the Adipati he did not come to take note of the speeches but to see that any who seemed recalcitrant should vote in accordance with his instructions. It was certainly not because he was such a great friend of Dr. Ba Maw and was anxious to see him elected. But Premier Tojo himself had said that Dr. Ba Maw was to be elected, and it was in accordance with orders from above that he came to watch over our proceedings. If the choice had rested with him personally, Dr. Ba Maw would have been put away long ago.

When the time came for the voting Kodaw Hmaing nominated Dr. Ba Maw. The effect on the members was as if a million-horse-power engine working continually day and night with its roar and clatter had suddenly stopped at midnight when all was quiet with not even a footstep to be heard. Or it was like being suddenly transported from a place humming with the noise of men and dogs and birds into a tunnel three miles long. Or as if a captain with a troop of soldiers bearing instruments of torture appeared suddenly on the platform in a noisy assembly crying out 'Silence! I've got these things ready for the first who speaks,' and the commotion dies down like fire quenched by water.

The whole hall was stilled. It seemed that in the surrounding precincts even the dogs stopped howling and

yelping, and the starlings who usually filled the trees with their quarrels and chatter in competition with the members in the Chamber were suddenly quieted as if in wonder at the uncanny silence in the hall.

Isamura had got his way and went off with a smile of mockery rather than of satisfaction. But what he really thought is a secret between him and his guardian angel.



G