

**Dr. Hans-Bernd Zöllner**  
*Manager Myanmar Literature Project*  
**Tel.: 0049-40-8317961**  
**Mail: habezett@t-online.de**

## **Reality Wrapped up in Romance**

German perceptions of Burma and Myanmar during the last two centuries<sup>1</sup>

### **Contents**

1	Introduction	p. 2
2	Prologue: The Helpers in Tenasserim: Putting Romance Before Fact	p. 7
3	Intermittent Continuity. The Natural Scientists or, Nature's Ambivalent Attractions	p. 8
4	Mr. Patzert's Untold Story, the Mantle of Silence and the End of an Era	p. 13
5	Courting a Socialist Strongman – The Two Germanys and Post-War Burma up to 1988	p. 17
	5.1 Introduction	p. 17
	5.2 Facettes of an Ambivalent Love Affair	p. 21
6	Epilogue: The Beauty and the Beast. A United Country's Tacit Division on the Subject of Burma and an Open End	p. 26

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Union of Burma in 2004. It was meant to be published in a volume commemorating the history of German-Burmese relations at which time that did not materialise.

## 1 Introduction

The year 2004 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the Union of Burma. The anniversary was celebrated at the German ambassador's residence in Yangon's Golden Valley district with a reception on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day on which an agreement to exchange diplomatic missions was signed in London. In Berlin, seat of Myanmar's embassy and only diplomatic representation in Germany, no formal commemoration took place. A German plan to publish a booklet about relations between the two countries was abandoned - relations had become so difficult following the events of 1988 that it would not have gone unnoticed in an historical appraisal. A retrospective survey was further complicated by the fact that, during the period from the end of the Second World War up to 1990, there was not one, but two Germanys trying to cooperate with Burma.

This essay looks back on more than fifty years of German-Burmese relations, beginning with the first Germans who came into contact with Burma. It examines underlying German perceptions vis-à-vis Burma, perceptions, moreover, that persist right up to the present day. This essay does not focus on formal relations between the two countries and its peoples, but rather on the myriad informal aspects of this relationship. The thoughts presented here can be regarded as corollary to an earlier published article about Germans who lived and worked in Burma from 1837 to 1945, that traced the history of German interests in Burma during the said period.<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts to take a more detailed look at events and investigates how Burma was perceived by those Germans who lived there prior to World War II as well as by those that followed during the second half of the twentieth century. Whilst these deliberations are largely based on fact, the essay also contains theoretical components.

The starting point of my investigations is an event that not only highlights Germany's highly positive estimation of Burma, but also goes some way to illustrating just how good relations between both countries once was. This event also serves as the perfect springboard for an explanation of some of this paper's basic ideas.

a) In February 1986, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker, went on an official visit to Burma. It was the first leg of a tour through three Asian countries. Weizsäcker and his wife stayed seven days in the country, visiting Rangoon, Syriam, Mandalay, Pagan, the Kinda-Dam in the Shan States and Sandoway. Besides cultural and recreational spots, they also saw several of the many German projects in the country. Weizsäcker's counterpart, San Yu, visited West-Germany just one-and-a-half years later, in early October 1987.

These two official visits represented the culmination of a long and successful period of German-Burmese cooperation after World War II. During this period, West Germany was to become Burma's second most important trade partner and provider of development aid after Japan. Moreover, a close personal relationship was to develop between General (and later U) Ne Win and some of his acolytes and a number of German businesspeople.<sup>2</sup> From 1962 to May 1988, Ne Win and his entourage visited Germany almost every year as guests

---

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Bernd Zöllner (2002) "Germans in Burma, 1837-1945", in: *The Journal of Burma Studies* 7: 29-69.

<sup>2</sup> See Hans-Bernd Zöllner (1994), "FRITZ WERNER in Burma. A Study of German-Burmese Relations after World War II." in: Uta Gärtner und Jens Lorenz (Hrsg.), *Tradition and Modernity in Myanmar. Proceedings of an International Conference held in Berlin from May 7<sup>th</sup> to May 9<sup>th</sup>*. (Berliner Asien – Afrika – Studien Band 3). Hamburg und Münster, Lit-Verlag, Band 1: 197-204; Hans-Bernd Zöllner (1993), *Unverstandene Partnerschaft in der „Einen*

of the state owned Fritz Werner Company. During these visits, representatives of German political parties, but also of various German institutions and companies met the Burmese patriarch, exchanged views and worked on business deals. Ne Win's official visit to Germany in 1968, which was the formal forerunner to von Weizaecker's journey, was followed by a substantial amount of informal and sometimes quite intimate contact between representatives from both countries.

As a result, it was certainly more than diplomatic courtesies that prompted the German President to address his hosts shortly after his arrival in Rangoon's Parliament Building thus: "From the outset, we feel that we are among friends in your country."<sup>1</sup>

The friendship that existed between the governments of both countries came to an abrupt end in September 1988 in the wake of the military takeover and the installation of the SLORC regime. Germany's policy towards Burma made a complete turn-about-face. Overnight, all development projects were terminated. Since the German government no longer felt in a position to continue its support of state-sponsored business with Burma, all business activity – including that of the company Fritz Werner and other similar ventures – came to a halt.

b) This essay intends to shed some light on a period of friendly relations between Germany and Burma that culminated in the above-mentioned state visits but was subsequently erased by the German government's complete change of direction in 1988 following the seizure of power by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

The complex nature of relations between representatives of both countries necessitates clarification of a number of parameters for terms used. The following deliberations are based on a theory of communication as set out by Paul Watzlawick and his co-authors.<sup>2</sup> The approach elaborated by Watzlawick et al is based on five axioms<sup>3</sup> which, so the authors, would appear to have intercultural validity. The second of these axioms states: "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter defines the former and is therefore a metacommunication", i.e. the relationship between two (or more) communicators determines the understanding of what is communicated in a given situation.

This two-tier structure is exemplified by von Weizaecker's aforementioned statement about feeling surrounded by friends in Burma. Different people could easily interpret this assertion in different ways - depending on the nature of the relationship between the listener and the President on the subject of German-Burmese friendship. Having a large number of Burmese friends themselves, representatives of the firm Fritz Werner in Burma would, for instance, have been inclined to agree with the President. However, a German journalist critical of Ne Win's economic mismanagement of the country would have perhaps tacitly commented that the German President was

---

*Welt* "Die deutsche Firma FRITZ WERNER in Birma, Hamburg, Evangelisches Missionswerk.

<sup>1</sup> For the speech and photos see Helmut Reuther (ed.) (1986), *Staatsbesuche. Mit dem Bundespräsidenten unterwegs*. Frankfurt a.M., Umschau-Verlag.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, Don D. Jackson (1968), *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. London, Faber & Faber.

<sup>3</sup> 1. One cannot not communicate. 2. Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter defines the former and is therefore a metacommunication. 3. The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants. 4. Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically. Digital language has a highly complex and powerful logical syntax but lacks adequate semantics in the field of relationship, while analogic language possesses the semantics but has no adequate syntax for the unambiguous definition of the nature of relationships. 5. All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference. Watzlawick 1968: 48-70.

misinformed, since this so-called “friendship” between the two countries had merely served to consolidate the sad and sorry state of Burma’s economic affairs. For his part, a diplomat from the German Democratic Republic attending the 1986 meeting might have made a mental note that the only true friend of the Socialist Union of Burma was their own Socialist German state, whilst a Buddhist Burmese listener would have pondered the impermanence of all human friendship and wondered how long the feeling mentioned by the President would last. This list of varying interpretations could be easily extended by adding a Karen Christian Bishop, a Shan member of the Hluttaw or even a German businessperson who might have envied the special status enjoyed by Fritz Werner and his associates.

Had the President been confronted with these different responses it would certainly have made him aware of the full extent of the ambiguity of his words. Being a man used to choosing his words with careful diligence, the President would no doubt have tried to explore the various ramifications of the term “friendship” when placed in the context of German-Burmese relations, so as to express himself in a more subtle way on another occasion. In order to achieve this goal he would have been obliged to communicate with members of his audience about the nature of the various relationships between himself as the representative of the Federal Republic of Germany and his listeners vis-à-vis the topic of German-Burmese friendship. In other words, it would have necessitated communicating something about the nature of his communication *per se*, thus practising metacommunication. But, as we know, such direct metacommunication is not exactly *de rigeur* in the world of international relations. Von Weizsaecker's visit and the return visit of San Yu did no more than reflect the ambiguities that already suffused relations between the two countries. Consequently, the breakdown of the official friendship between the Federal Republic of Germany and Burma in 1988 can be regarded as the result of a relationship which had in fact been defective long before it collapsed. Or, in the terms of the theory borrowed for this purpose, there was no common language, no metacommunication, with which to discuss the nature of the relationship between the two countries and the problems of communication that lay buried therein. But, prior to 1988, there had been no need to search for such a language since, ostensibly at least, this relationship appeared to be intact.

What happened to German-Burmese relations after 1988 may be compared to what many couples realise once they have broken up, namely, that what their relationship lacked was genuine and meaningful communication. The usual procedure for any ex-partner - regardless of whether we are talking about an individual who has just left a relationship or a political entity such as a nation - is to set out immediately in search of a new partner rather than spend time evaluating that which has gone before. This was certainly the case as far as Burma is concerned. The Federal Republic of Germany promptly abandoned their former ‘friends’ in the Burmese government and, without any prior consultation, decided to seek Aung San Suu Kyi's friendship. The quietly (but nevertheless persistently) troubled relationship between Germany and Burma is best examined from both sides separately. This paper seeks to address the situation from the German point-of-view; it suggests that German attitudes to Burma were pervaded by a romanticism that often defined the content of a wide range of business ventures with the Burmese. Von Weizsaecker's statement can be seen as an expression of one such romantic notion, which brought such a great influence to bear on all manner of German transactions with Burma. The term “romantic” and its derivations as used here possesses a certain duality. On the one hand it refers to a certain period of Romanticism at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when German interests in Burma received fresh impetus following the British

annexation of Tenasserim and Arakan. On the other hand, the term is also used in the broader, more commonly applied sense i.e. “not factual” and “having a strong emotional or imaginative appeal or association”.<sup>1</sup> These dual romantic notions deeply inform German perceptions of Burma and the Burmese and often colour the way in which data is communicated. Facts about Burma, it seems, have always been somehow wrapped up in a veil of romance. This obfuscation is the central thesis of this paper.

In his address, President von Weizsaecker, a rational German protestant, had unwittingly revealed just how romantic Germany’s image of Ne Win’s Burma was. It was not long before events of 1988 were to shatter this particular vision of Burma. Weizsaecker’s was by no means an isolated case. Romanticisation had occurred prior to this and, as indicated previously, was to happen again later on. Moreover, Germans were not the only Westerners that suffered from romantic delusions about Burma.

c) This essay does not aim to “prove” the aforementioned thesis. Rather, it seeks to illustrate the predominance of notions of the romantic in German perceptions of Burma by looking at the lives, deeds and writings of several Germans who lived in Burma during the last two centuries. The starting point for this essay will be the German pioneers who visited Burma during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their romantic perceptions of the country will be outlined and various conclusions will be drawn with regard to the way in which their observations were later modified and changed by successive visitors to the country up to the present day. Had they been aware of the misguided nature of these romantic perceptions, President von Weizsaecker and his speech writers may well have avoided the mistake of addressing a friendship that was not merely unstable but, as it turned out, a very poorly reflected thing indeed.

## 2 The Helpers in Tenasserim: Putting Romance Before Fact

On February 8, 1837, a German couple disembarked at Moulmein. Shortly before his arrival, thirty-year-old Dr Johann Wilhelm Helfer had been appointed Superintendent of Forests and Provincial Naturalist of Tenasserim by the East India Company in Calcutta. His wife Pauline had accompanied him on his journey from Germany to this newly acquired part of the company’s Indian possessions, travelling through Syria, Mesopotamia and India. It was the newlyweds’ honeymoon trip and thus clearly a romantic one. But it was Helfer’s motivation to undertake the journey to India in the first place that made him a prime candidate for the spirit of romanticism.

According to his wife’s memoirs, Helfer had studied medicine, although he disliked the profession of physician and was far more drawn to the study of nature. In fact, it had always been his boyhood dream to one day travel to India. Seven years prior to his arrival in Burma, he envisaged being in Calcutta, from where he hoped to travel the ‘undiscovered’ countries of Farther India. His diary entries give the impression that he clearly regarded this idea as his destiny: “What is good for me will be allotted to me; I cannot say if the man who at present is willing to give himself up to the joy of being able to travel to India as a natural scientist will not hesitate, trembling with trepidation, when the future finally reveals itself to me.” These were prophetic words. As it happened, Dr Helfer

---

<sup>1</sup> Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1994 edition: 884.

was able to savour his dream for no more than three years. In January, 1840 he was killed on a journey to the Andaman Islands by the indigenous population who did not welcome his exploratory zeal.

Helfer's attitude is characteristic of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, an impulse which can be described as: “a deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature; a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect; a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities; a preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his passions and inner struggles...”<sup>1</sup> Helfer's enthusiasm and general disposition for his tasks in Tenasserim are noteworthy for at least three reasons.

a) Helfer's job was to evaluate the natural resources of the province. Accordingly, he collected vast amounts of information which were sent back to Calcutta and published.<sup>2</sup> He summarised his findings in seven points, coming to the conclusion that: “Owing to its great stretches of unoccupied land, the various tropical products that can be grown there, the healthy climate and the long coastline as well as an abundance of navigable rivers, Tenasserim is ideally suited as an European colony.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, he asserted, “The natives would pose no hindrance to European colonists as is the case in manifold respect in Hindustan.”<sup>4</sup>

Helfer and his wife were the first to recommend Tenasserim as a site of European colonisation. The couple built a house at Mergui and furnished it with several items brought over from Calcutta, including a piano. Together they started various plantations, planting, as Helfer's wife recalled, some 9,000 palm trees (including 6,000 coconut palms and 3,000 areca palms) and 4,000 coffee bushes. This “garden” as Helfer was fond of calling it, combined both local and foreign plants; it can be seen as being very much a part of his dream of travelling to India and finding, or founding a second Garden of Eden. As far as Helfer was concerned, his goal represented the fulfilment of all that a man could want from his life.

However, it transpired that Helfer's conclusions were inaccurate – both on a personal and an official level. Whereas the indigenous population of Tenasserim were not concerned about the presence of foreigners, the indigenous population of the Andaman Islands were. After Helfer's death, Mrs Helfer and her brother (who had accompanied Dr Helfer on his last trip) tried to raise funds for the establishment of a German colony in Mergui. However, the project came to a halt in the wake of the failure of the bank that had agreed to support them. A further problem was that, contrary to expectations, economic progress was slow in Tenasserim and, initially, the province was a financial burden to the East India Company.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, in the eyes of his wife and, to a lesser extent, those German scientists that published his writings, Helfer came to be regarded as a pioneering hero, committed to the realisation of his personal dream in spite of considerable odds.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.courseworkbank.co.uk/coursework/transcendentalism\\_romanticism\\_presentation\\_2221/](http://www.courseworkbank.co.uk/coursework/transcendentalism_romanticism_presentation_2221/)

<sup>2</sup> Helfer wrote four reports for his employer. The first two (on “Amherst town” and the “Provinces of Ye, Tavoy and Mergue”) were published in by [G.H.Huttman's](#) *Bengal Military Orphan Press* in 1839, the third and fourth on Tenasserim as a whole were published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, volumes VII to IX. Translations into German together with two of Helfer's diaries were published 1859 in the *Mittheilungen der kaiserlich-königlichen geographischen Gesellschaft* of Vienna.

<sup>3</sup> Helfer 1859: 315.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John S. Furnivall (1948) *Colonial Policy and Practice. A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 47.

b) Helfer did not merely regard nature as an object of study, rather, he saw his studies as an exercise in self-fulfilment. He saw nature's abundance as serving a purpose; the indigenous population also served a purpose and he saw it as his duty to engage with them. He discovered, among other things, that the indigenous population of Tenasserim were quite different to what he had been led to believe: "Instead of wild warriors, I encountered farmers, harmless and mild by nature, but nevertheless at the mercy of a tyrannical and arbitrary monarch." Helfer's knowledge of the influence of Buddhist teachings on the Burmese and Siamese inhabitants of the province, turns his detailed assessment of the many qualities possessed by the indigenous population of Tenasserim into a kind of modified version of the "noble savage" approach to other peoples and cultures. Portraying the indigenous population in the main as "good" i.e. capable of being educated morally and practically, he essentially sees them as being part of nature. To Helfer's mind, the indigenes are "beautiful" and "good", but, rather like the palm trees on his plantation, their full potential has yet to be properly developed. And so, whilst the inhabitants possessed certain inherent qualities, they were in need of the guiding hand of a "superior". And, since the indigenous government did not provide such guidance, naturally it fell to others to take on this role of educator.

We may conclude, therefore, that Helfer's approach simply echoed the colonial belief, in the white man's general superiority over the people of the East. There is, of course, some truth in this assumption, but another element has to be taken into consideration, namely, Helfer's notion of destiny as the great force behind the lives of human beings. For Helfer, the tyranny of the Burmese rulers that had (metaphorically) trampled rough-shod over the good-natured indigenes was not an inevitable consequence of a despotic political system, but the result of a pre-ordained reign of bad rulers within a certain period of time. Further evidence of this assumption can be found in a novel published in Germany in 1832 that the Helfers could well have read before setting out for India. The novel's author, Gustav Nagel, was a writer and a soldier. He had translated John Snodgrass' history of the first Anglo-Burmese War into German and had used this war as background for a novel entitled "Tangu, the last Prince of Pegu". The protagonists in Nagel's novel are a coterie of noble characters of different ethnic origin - i.e. Burman, Mon and British - engaged in a struggle against their enemies. In doing so, these protagonists are complying with their individual destinies - be they fortunate or tragic. Tangu, the novel's eponymous hero, is destined to be the last Prince of his dynasty - a fate which he accepts with remarkable grace. This attitude pervades the book's optimistic end which envisions a harmonious community of men and women - regardless of their ethnic or cultural background.

This is not to suggest that Helfer was directly influenced by Nagel's romantic novel. However, it is fair to assume that Helfer and his wife embarked upon their journey with certain imaginative expectations about what they would encounter and that these expectations influenced and informed Helfer's perception of the data he collected. Whatever Helfer and his wife envisaged before they left Europe undoubtedly shaped their perception of what they experienced in Tenasserim. It must have been a considerable vision to motivate this husband and wife to leave their homeland as they did. In fact, Mrs Helfer was even a little reluctant to go along but, overwhelmed by her

husband's desire to go abroad and by her love for him, she complied with his wishes.<sup>1</sup> As a result, she found herself swept up by her husband's passion for the unknown regions that awaited them.

c) Her passion for what was initially her husband's great love did not cease after his death. After her unsuccessful attempt to fulfil Dr Helfer's material legacy and establish a German colony in Tenasserim, Mrs Helfer married again. She handed over his diaries to certain scientific agencies that took an interest in certain geographic novelties 'discovered' by their countrymen. She also wrote a book commemorating their trip to India, which she describes as a "memorial to a project dear to his heart". Her own feelings were encapsulated in the book as "relief at having accomplished a duty".<sup>2</sup>

This pious act of commemoration done, the memory of Dr Helfer's deeds soon faded into oblivion. His writings were buried in the archives of the British Empire as well as in different German and Austrian libraries. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Helfer was forgotten.

There is a certain logic to Helfer's fate. Helfer's project was a private one, a romantic adventure only shared by his wife. Since there was no organisation or institution behind Helfer, supporting his efforts, none of what the Helfers had attempted could form the basis for a tradition. Consequently, Germans who came to Burma after the Helfers were obliged to start from scratch and, like the Helfers, were condemned to becoming lone adventurers. And yet, such deeds did indeed inaugurate a kind of romantic tradition that somehow survived the age of Romanticism itself. This tradition involved collecting data about Burma as Dr Helfer had done, about the geography, landscape and plant life, but also about the indigenous peoples and the social structures that existed in Burma. Such data was collated by individuals and was utilised by whichever agency happened to make use of the individual researcher's abilities. None of the experiences of such lone 'heroic adventurer' types were ever put into historical context and evaluated.

However, unbeknown to Johann Wilhelm Helfer, his life had set the pattern for German engagement with Burma and Myanmar right up to this day. Again and again, an enthusiastic start was followed by a busy period of fruitful endeavours that led, in the end, to an almost complete cessation of relations. When the German President mentioned to the friendship between Burma and Germany, he was referring to the period that commenced after World War II or, more precisely, to certain aspects of this period. The experiences of the Helfers as well as other Germans who followed this pioneering couple to Burma in the period before the Second World War were almost completely forgotten in Germany and could not possibly have been familiar to those working at the German Embassy in Rangoon during Weizaecker's visit.

### 3 Intermittent Continuity. The Natural Scientists or, Nature's Ambivalent Attractions

A great number of German individuals came to live and work in Burma after the Helfers. At the end of the second Anglo-Burmese War, new opportunities opened up for enterprising foreigners from many different walks of life. The door to Burma was closed for Germans for some time after World War I, but was thrown wide open again

---

<sup>1</sup> Nostitz, Pauline Gräfin (1873) *Johann Wilhelm Helfer's Reisen in Vorderasien und Indien*. Zwei Theile, Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1873; Part I: 8.

<sup>2</sup> Nostitz 1873 I: 18.



after the Second World War. In order to further substantiate the thesis of the exemplary nature of the Helfers' engagement in Burma, I would now like to present various examples of individuals who, in one way or another, can be described as "natural scientists". The picture would be slightly – but not altogether – different if ethnologists, merchants, missionaries and tourists were also taken into account.<sup>1</sup>

One of the central characteristics of German Romanticism is the appreciation and study of nature in relation to the self. Nature – understood here as the environment in which humankind is embedded - provided the Romantic with a means of re-discovering their true self. "[O]ne might go into nature, enter the lush forests of central Europe or the tropics of foreign lands, and there in the wild tangled growth of primitive nature discover the self."<sup>2</sup> This love of nature was a very active one; it included practical research guided by the desire to find out the truth about life and death. Helfer's fate is a perfect illustration of the risky nature of this endeavour. Nature encompasses life and death; consequently, the shadow of death accompanied the lives of many of the Germans who, after Helfer, were attracted by the fascination of India and Farther India. And if some of these explorers met their death in the process, their fate was seen as a Romantic transformation of their mortal lives into immortal spirit, in which case, as the idealistic philosopher Hegel proclaimed: "Nature has completed itself in the living and has made its peace, by inverting itself to something more elevated. Thus spirit has gone forth out of nature."<sup>3</sup> This spiritual transformation may be taken as one theme in Helfer's life; it was a theme later modified by four other Germans whose interest in nature also brought them to Burma.

a) Possibly the best-known German figure to have worked in Burma was Dietrich Brandis (1824-1907). Brandis was appointed Superintendent of Forests of the Province of Pegu in 1855 and lived in Burma between 1856 and 1862. His diligence won him a promotion to the post of General Inspector of Indian Forests. Unlike Helfer, he enjoyed a long and successful career (he was knighted in 1887), but, like Helfer, his Burmese achievements were not much appreciated outside Burma, although his efforts did earn him the epithet "Father of Indian forestry".

Although Brandis is not exactly a household name in Burma, nevertheless, his achievements in terms of Burmese forestry are still recalled and appreciated in today's Myanmar. Brandis is chiefly remembered as having laid the foundations of a forest conservation system based on the local knowledge of Burmese lumbermen that was recently heralded as "one of the earliest in the world".<sup>4</sup> In Brandis we have an example of how much perspectives on memories of 'German influence' on Burma can differ between Burma and Germany. In Burma, there exists a recollection that does not require retrieval from archives, because the man and his deeds were never quite forgotten. This key difference in perspectives on a shared past is an integral part of the asymmetric nature of the relationship between the two countries.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of the Germans who lived and worked in Burma up to 1945 see Zöllner 2002. - For the period after 1945 see Hans-Bernd Zöllner (1994) „FRITZ WERNER in Burma. A Study on German-Burmese Relations after World War II.“ in: Uta Gärtner und Jens Lorenz (Hrsg.), *Tradition and Modernity in Myanmar. Proceedings of an International Conference held in Berlin from May 7<sup>th</sup> to May 9<sup>th</sup>*. (Berliner Asien – Afrika – Studien Band 3). Hamburg und Münster, Lit-Verlag, Band 1: 197-204.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Richards (2002), *The Romantic Conception of Life. Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press: 134.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from David Farrell Krell (1998), *Contagion, Sexuality, Disease and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press: 162.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Sein Tun, "A tree-hugging scientist before his time", *The Myanmar Times* No. 150, January 2003.

Putting Brandis' professional achievements as a biologist and practitioner of a sustainable logging aside for a moment, a letter written by Brandis shortly after his arrival in Burma conveys his general assessment of his first destination in the Far East. In this letter, Brandis, like Helfer before him, praises the astonishing examples of tropical vegetation he encounters and immediately sets about collecting samples. He too praises British rule over the peoples of India, albeit from a Christian perspective. In Germany, Brandis was a follower of a conservative Christian social reformer named Johann Hinrich Wichern, who promoted education for the lower classes and visible deeds of charity for the needy in order to counter the influence of Socialism and Marxism. Brandis saw education as a means of elevating the 'natives' of India to a higher level of humanity, describing missionaries as the 'cream' of British inhabitants in British India. He also proposed Thayetmo as a suitable capital of Burma or, at least, a place where a Christian mission could be established, citing the town's comparatively low rainfall as one reason for this proposal. However, in Brandis' eyes, even Rangoon's climate was as temperate as that of England.<sup>1</sup>

However, Brandis' endeavours were stalled by physical constraints. In mid 1859, after a long and strenuous journey through the eastern parts of British Burma, he suffered a serious bout of malaria from which it took him three months to recover sufficiently<sup>2</sup> to be able to return to his busy working schedule. Looking back on this episode during his retirement, he summarises: "This exhausting work only served to steel my resolve about the task that lay ahead."<sup>3</sup> The mere fact that he had taken the trouble of successfully traversing Burma's inhospitable forests and jungles was seen by Brandis as a positive sign, confirming that he was on the right track in his attempt to rationalise Burmese forestry.

b) A year after Brandis left Burma for India, another German stepped out onto Burmese soil. Although Ferdinand Marfels (1827-1876) had not intended to work in Burma's forests, he did indeed become Brandis' counterpart in Upper Burma, which, at the time was still ruled by the Burmese monarch. In sharp contrast to his famous compatriot, almost all memory of Ferdinand Marfels has been lost. Curiously, he is even less known in Germany than he is in Burma, where specialists on Mindon's reign ascribe to Marfels the role of minister and advisor to the king. His task, so Burmese scholars, was to help reform and equip the monarchy to face the onslaught of a modern world that threatened the very existence of an independent Burma.

Until such time as all extant Burmese sources have been examined for additional information about Marfels, scattered fragments are all that exist of this man's remarkable life. Leopold Ferdinand Marfels was born not far from Cologne in the town of Coblenz on the eastern bank of the river Rhine on December 8, 1827. After finishing his schooling, he took up studies in philosophy in Munich in 1848 - the year of the German (and indeed pan-European) - revolution. In 1851, Marfels moved to the charmingly romantic city of Heidelberg, taking up studies in medicine at one of Germany's oldest universities. He completed his medical studies in 1857, graduating with a doctorate<sup>4</sup> and moved back to his home town for a short while.

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Petermann (1857) *Mitteilungen aus Justus Perthes' geographischer Anstalt über wichtige neue Erforschungen auf dem gesamten Gebiete der Geographie*. Gotha, Justus Perthes: pp. 49; 479-484.

<sup>2</sup> After moving to India, he suffered a second serious illness in 1871 that forced him to return to Europe for three years. His wife often mentions her husband's illnesses in her correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Hesmer (1975), *Leben und Werk von Dietrich Brandis, 1824-1907. Begründer der tropischen Forstwirtschaft, Förderer der forstlichen Entwicklung in den USA, Botaniker und Ökologe*. Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag: 54.

<sup>4</sup> The title of his thesis was "The pathological anatomy of cretinism".

He left Germany that same year and travelled east. He arrived in Burma in 1858 or 1859 – the exact date is not known – where he settled down in Rangoon and began working as a physician. In 1863, he left the city heading for Mandalay. His plan was to cross the Shan hills and travel as far as the Mekong river. Unfortunately, he was ambushed by dacoits and had to return to Mandalay<sup>1</sup> where he found employment as King Mindon's personal physician, but also as Minister of Forests and go-between during official visits from foreign merchants and dignitaries paying a visit at Mindon's court. According to Burmese sources, Marfels also founded a home for the aged and was interested in traditional Burmese medicine.<sup>2</sup>

When officiating on state occasions, Marfels was said to have worn Burmese court dress. Some sources even report his conversion to Buddhism – much to the dismay of some Western visitors, who regarded this move as a degrading “Burmanisation”.<sup>3</sup> British missionary and educationalist Dr Marks describes Marfel's behaviour as non-cooperative, complaining that the King's German minister had deliberately delayed the supply of timber for the construction of a school.<sup>4</sup>

There are no records of Marfels' communication with his own country, although such communication must have existed. In February 1877, Marfel's family published an obituary in a German newspaper which states that Marfels died in Mandalay on December 30, 1876. Notification of his death was also published in Rangoon newspapers in January 1877.<sup>5</sup>

In the absence of details of any sort pertaining to Marfels' death, it can only be concluded that it terminated a life that, like Helfers', was inspired by the dream to transgress boundaries and find his real self by undertaking a journey into the unknown. Unlike Helfer, however, Marfels was denied the status of a romantic hero by his fellow Europeans. His physical demise was preceded by his social ‘death’, since, at least in the eyes of his fellow-Europeans, his behaviour had betrayed and negated the ideals of a European hero. Whether he had felt himself obliged to do so or had acted of his own volition, he had changed sides and, in doing so, had forfeited his European identity forever. And herein lies the real risk for the romantic adventurer: not physical danger or death even, but loss of the spirit that was perceived by the Romantics both as a driving force and a reconciling power that transcended the ambiguities of life and death.

Although the negative aspects associated with Marfels' “Burmanisation” provide some explanation as to why his considerable efforts (preserving Burma's natural resources and helping the Burmese achieve their full potential) were not honoured in his homeland, his status in Burma, where, conversely, his role is respected to a considerable degree, is not so easy for a foreign observer to comprehend. An investigation into notions of the “romantic” with regard to the lives and achievements of foreigners who chose to dedicate their careers – and in some cases their lives – to working in Burma would make a fascinating subject.

c) Like Marfels, it was Robert Brunhuber's (1878-1909) intention to use Burma as a starting-point for a more extensive journey. Brunhuber was an amateur naturalist. His dream (shared with many others before and after

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Petermann (1864) *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes' Geographischer Anstalt und wichtige neue Erforschungen auf dem Gesamtgebiete der Geographie*. Gotha, Justus Perthes: 72; 308.

<sup>2</sup> From the author's own communication with Dr Toe Hla.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Joest (1882), *Ein Besuch beim Könige von Birma*. Köln, DuMont-Schauberg: 18.

<sup>4</sup> John Ebenezer Marks (1917), *Forty Years in Burma*. London, Hutchinson & Co.: 259.

<sup>5</sup> Internet source [http://www.mandalaycity.net/mandalay/chronology\\_mandalay2.htm](http://www.mandalaycity.net/mandalay/chronology_mandalay2.htm): Mandalay chronicle: “20 January 1877: Death notice of a German medical man in the service of the Burmese king, Dr Marfels (Minkyawtheikdhibhithekkapyinya) appeared in the Rangoon dailies.”

him) was to find the sources of the “great rivers of Farther India” - the Mekong, Salween, and Irrawaddy. Before setting out on this journey, he had written on politics and lectured on journalism in Cologne. He travelled to Bhamo in late 1908 together with another German, Karl Schmitz, where they hired men, ponies and mules for their expedition eastwards. Brunhuber and his entourage left Bhamo on 12 November, after which date he soon began to encounter tracks “that deteriorated rapidly but became increasingly romantic as we progressed”.<sup>1</sup> Crossing the Sino-Burmese border four days later, they reached the Salween on the 5 December. After proceeding upstream for 12 days, Brunhuber’s crew revolted. Undeterred, Brunhuber and Schmitz decided to continue their journey upstream on foot. The two Germans were back on British-Burmese territory again when, on 5 January, they were both killed by members of the local population.

Prior to his death, Brunhuber had written the foreword to a book he had intended to publish following his trip. In it, he invites the reader to accompany him on his journey “through areas as mighty and as strange as they are unexplored; to meet unknown tribes and learn of their friendship or enmity towards peaceful conquest of their native mountain home.” The author promises to share with the reader “all the hopes and disappointments of a human being who is willing to sacrifice the best of his ability in order to add a tiny pebble to the mighty construct that is human knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

This foreword, along with several letters and parts of Brunhuber's diary, were all that survived. They were published in a book, three years later. Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer of Tibet, wrote a sympathetic foreword to this posthumous publication, in which he describes Brunhuber as a “martyr to science”.<sup>3</sup>

#### Preliminary Conclusions

Brunhuber's case is noteworthy for at least three reasons, all of which could easily be applied not only to the above-mentioned group of professional and semi-professional naturalists, but also to other groups of Germans such as merchants, missionaries, cultural theorists, German Buddhists and finally, the tourists who began visiting Burma in this period of time

Firstly, Brunhuber's example demonstrates a tendency among German pioneers to be drawn not so much to Burma the country (“Burma” as a modern nation was not yet born. Nor was Germany for that matter, until 1871) as to the prospect of Burma as a means of fulfilling a personal goal. Brunhuber's real destination was Tibet, that geographer's Shangri-La and source of Asia’s mightiest rivers. Helfer’s initial plan was to explore India’s geography, plant life and natural resources; when he decided to settle down in Tenasserim, he did it with the intention of establishing a hybrid colony, dominated by Westerners. Brandis' goal was to find a suitable task in which to channel his considerable botanical skills and decided that nothing short of the forests of the entire globe would satisfy his ambition and his energy. Marfels’ really wanted to get to China but found himself stranded in Mandalay. All of these men wanted to go “beyond Burma” – both physically and, more importantly, mentally. The lives and deeds of these men were very much self-centred and yet, despite their personal impact on Burma's affairs and the knowledge they garnered about the country, they left it as it was. This is one reason why the Germans were - and still are - particularly well remembered in Burma.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brunhuber (1912), *An Hinterindiens Riesenströmen*. Berlin, Franz Ledermann: 27.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*: 20.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*: 7.

Brunhuber's explanation of his intentions also demonstrates that the romantic impetus to transgress one's limits and discover one's true destiny in the exploration of an exotic and dangerous environment had not lost any of its appeal - in spite of the end of the era of Romanticism in Germany around 1835. However, romanticism as embodied in the personal histories of these pioneers was not regarded by them so much an all encompassing disposition towards life (*Lebensgefühl*), rather, it was seen as simply one of life's attributes. Romantic feelings could be evoked in other people, in other ways. Besides Brunhuber's "romantic" forests, there were sunsets at Pagan, the wonders of Shwe-Dagon, the friendly smiling people and a myriad other opportunities for romantic readings of the country. Moreover, the journey to Burma itself could be also be interpreted as a genuine adventure that elevated the self.

German Romanticism was thus imported to Burma in order to serve specific German, euro-centric needs. Had he been able to look forward to our age, Brunhuber might well have thought that he had, by accident, propagated a special kind of individual eco-tourism, a journeying to a somehow intact, unspoilt, charming country. However, the forerunners of the backpacker had in fact already detected Burma decades before Brunhuber set out on his ill-fated journey. By making use of the bungalows the British government had built, these proto-backpackers could afford to travel comfortably - even on a modest budget - and still felt gratifyingly superior to the English and American tourists who had booked their tour with Cook's agency.

Finally, the case of Brunhuber also highlights the importance of the mass media in spreading news about "exotic" foreign destinations. In 1908, the year Brunhuber left Germany, he published a book on German print media. It was his third book on the subject. His planned book about his journey to Burma was a way of putting his theories about mass communication into practice. In this sense, he may perhaps have been less of a "martyr to science" than he was a martyr to adventurous journalism.

Brunhuber was not the first German travel writer who had attempted to describe parts of Burma. But he is exceptional in his interest in burgeoning theories of mass communication. When he - and other travel writers of the time - invited their imagined readers to accompany them on their journeys and share their feelings, they were proffering a view of Burmese reality with both their own eyes as the author and the eyes of their readers. In other words, their perspective exposed their readers to virtual realities. These writings have had a considerable effect on both public as well as official opinion, because at the time and, in some cases even up to the present day, relatively few people have ever been able to refute or verify, either by their own knowledge or as a result of scientific investigation, anything presented to them about Burma in books. Thus, a peculiarly Germanised picture of Burma emerged, based for the most part on a mass of largely unverified data.

#### 4 Mr. Patzert's Untold Story, the Mantle of Silence and the End of an Era

a) The experiences of two German prisoners of war who escaped from an Indian camp towards the end of World War II serve to illustrate just how wide the gulf can be between reality and imagined reality. Rolf Magener and Heinz von Have escaped from Dehra Dun in May 1944, at the time of the decisive battle at Imphal in Eastern India. It took them 34 days to reach Burmese territory, which, at the time, was occupied by Germany's ally, Japan. The Burmese government under Dr Ba Maw declared war on the allies on August 1, 1943. Burma was

subsequently recognised by Germany four days later. The two German POWs were not well-received by the Japanese, who suspected them of being British spies.<sup>1</sup> The men were escorted to Rangoon where they had hoped to meet a German consul who would be able to certify their German identity. In the absence of any such figure of authority, the two were imprisoned for a while by the Kempetai in Rangoon before finally being released. The lack of an official German presence in the country persisted even on their release, and so the men found themselves dining instead with Subhas Chandra Bose, who, after having travelled from Germany to Asia in two submarines, had moved the headquarters of both his Indian National Army and his provisional Government of Free India to Rangoon.

Unbeknown to either of these German POWs, there was at least one person of German descent living in Rangoon at the time they reached Burma's capital: his name was Max Patzert. Although he had been living in Burma for over thirty-five years, Patzert had decided to keep a low profile once war broke out. Although he was not remembered in Germany or in Burma after the war, parts of his life story can be reconstructed with the help of certain articles in Burmese newspapers.

b) Patzert, born 1879 in Berlin, came to Rangoon in 1907 as an agent for Carl Hagenbeck's Zoo in Hamburg. His job was to purchase animals in Burma and ship them back to Germany. From a report published in 1932, we learn that he first lived in Insein, subsequently moving to Fytche Street and, in 1920, to Short Street. His compound must have resembled something of a private zoo, since this is where he housed animals after their capture and prior to their transportation abroad. Patzert was familiar with a great many people working in Burma's forests, which certainly facilitated his own task. However, his private zoo in Rangoon also appears to have contained several animals brought over from Germany. By 1932, Patzert had sold about 40 elephants, as well as some tigers and other animals. The Rangoon Gazette in 1932 published pictures of some deer Patzert had imported from Germany; Patzert's fair-haired daughter also appears in one of the photographs, pictured with a baby elephant. Like others, Patzert had abandoned his German citizenship prior to World War I, a move which prevented him from being interned. After the outbreak of the World War II, Patzert remained in the country and was even employed by the Burmese authorities during the war.<sup>2</sup> After the British left Rangoon, Patzert's zoo had to be evacuated. Some 23 animals were taken into custody by a Burmese animal lover, U Ba Thein, who also maintained a private zoo. However, it seems that U Ba Thein was unable to provide the animals with proper care and some died. U Ba Thein contacted Patzert, who had moved back to Insein. Mr Patzert contacted Dr Ba Maw, and, in September 1942, Patzert was appointed Superintendent of Rangoon Zoo by Thakin Tun Ok, Minister of Forests in Dr Ba Maw's New Era Burma Government of August 1942. Patzert was allotted a salary of 250 rupees a month; U Ba Thein was appointed his deputy, with a monthly salary of 150 rupees. The surviving animals were brought back, and the zoo later reopened.<sup>3</sup> Mr Patzert it was said, could be observed, striding around the place in breeches and a khaki uniform which sported an armband on which a Nazi swastika and the black, white and red

<sup>1</sup> The story of their escape is told in Rolf Magener's book, *Prisoner's Bluff*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954 as a translation from the German book which came out in the same year entitled "Die Chance war Null" (Zero Chance)..

<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian Monthly Magazine*, Februar 1962: 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> The Intelligence Bureau of the Burmese exile government in Simla reported that there was much radio talk in Rangoon about the reconstruction of the zoo in 1943 (Government of Burma, Intelligence Bureau (1943) *Burma under Japanese Occupation*, Vol. I, Simla: 64) and that the zoo reopened in January 1944 (Government of Burma (1944) *Burma during the Japanese Occupation*, Simla, Vol. II, Simla 1944: 153).

German flag of the time were emblazoned.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part, the animals at the zoo appear to have survived the episode – which is more than can be said for the unfortunate Patzert. In December, 1944, the Japanese authorities asked him to move out of his Insein home. Apparently fearing arrest, Patzert took a gun one night and shot his three daughters and himself. The bodies were discovered by Patzert's deputy, U Ba Thein, who had rushed to Insein after Patzert had not appeared at his office at the usual time.<sup>2</sup>

c) The many missing parts of Patzert's life (one wonders, for example, what happened to his wife) are open to speculation and could easily provide material for a marvellous tale of adventure, set in Burma. One can just imagine the novel's trajectory: perhaps entitled *An Elephant Whisperer's Nightmare*, it might open with the characterisation of a young German animal lover, longing for an opportunity to prove his talent for working with wild beasts in far away places, who also displayed an exceptional talent to mobilise the passion that others shared with him for nature and, in so doing, help bridge the gap between Europe and Asia. Such a novel might employ the figure of Dr Helfer as a kind of *leitmotiv* overshadowing events with a sense of dark foreboding, as Patzert gradually begins to realise how his dream is turning into a nightmare. If well written, such a novel would, I am sure, demonstrate admirably that Burma remains the perfect site for romantic fiction posing as botanical, geographical and historical data. Romance is, after all, an effective selling point. Moreover, this yet-to-be-created work would be a case of German perspectives on Burma meeting a global trend that has long since exceeded the quaint invitation extended by Brunhuber to his readers to somehow imagine themselves as participant observers. However, in the period following Brunhuber's exploits and prior to Patzert's death, travelogues and novels were already busy dissociating adventure from the persona of a real adventurer. Using a romantic approach is one way of distancing oneself from reality. Throwing the mantle of silence and forgetting over a life that, as in Patzert's case, ended in an impasse is another way of leaving the real behind.

d) Patzert's fate provides a symbolic end to the period of German-Burmese relations up to 1945. Up to this point, German-Burmese relations had been largely characterised by individuals who were acting independently – regardless of whether they were employed by a British agency, a Burmese king or a German company. With few exceptions (Brandis being the most prominent), the memory of the achievements of each and every entrepreneur faded in Germany along with their physical demise. The tragic death of Max Patzert represents the final act in a drama that had commenced with the outbreak of World War I. In 1914, all 133 Germans registered in Burma at the time – 111 men and 22 women – were asked to leave the country. Most of these Germans were involved in trade of some description. After they left, their companies were taken over by their British competitors. Few German merchants returned to Burma after the war; those that did, like Patzert, had already given up their German citizenship. Nevertheless, trade continued, with the aid of middlemen, and so enterprises shifted from being propelled by veritable personalities who had acquired a good deal of hand-on knowledge about rice-growing and such like in Burma, becoming instead businesses conducted by proxy, and on paper. Trade thus became dissociated from the traders themselves, and, not unlike the way that stories about Burma have a habit of growing

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's communication with retired ambassador Maung Maung Gyi.

<sup>2</sup> *The Working People's Daily*, February 1, 1970, Supplement.

and distending, trade relations too were embellished and became dislocated from the people that had first-hand knowledge of the country themselves. Thus, the age of virtual realities, in which the “real” began to be displaced by a romanticised notion of the real, had commenced.

None of the many writers on Burma after Brunhuber's death were well acquainted with Burmese life or had lived for any amount of time in the country. In 1930, German writer Hans Leip published a novel recounting the story of a shipwreck off the coast of Arakan. Leip based his novel on the memoirs of an English sailor who had survived a real wreck in 1795 and published his experiences two years later. For his work, the German author decided to invent a number of scenes set in Hamburg; he also created a female German passenger who had lived in Rangoon for some time – this being a substitute for the character of the Burmese maid to the captain's wife in the original tale. Leip's novel was in fact a looser reworking of another writer, Gustav Nagel's adaptation of Snodgrass' war tale. Written a century before, Nagel's novel did not contain any German characters; the only reference to Germany is a fragment from an iron brooch made in Germany. After Leip, no mention was made in any romantic or adventurous novel set in Burma of any German who actually lived and worked in the country. Most of the novels published at this time are pure fantasy; some, however, are loosely based on contemporary events.

Yet another case of amnesia vis-à-vis Germans in Burma occurred in the commercial sector. Up to 1914, German traders had provided their British counterparts with stiff competition. A symbol of this German efficiency was the German Club, which opened its doors in 1867 in Commissioner Street (now Bogyoke Aung San Street) opposite Rangoon General Hospital. In 1890, a new and impressive building was erected in a half-Burmese, half-German style that made the structure reminiscent of a castle on the banks of the river Rhine, as one writer has commented.<sup>1</sup> Our Mr Patzert may have visited the Club in his early Rangoon years. After the outbreak of the First World War, the building was declared enemy property. In June 1917, the convent of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd acquired the adjacent compound measuring some 2,891 acres. The basic structure of the building still stands today and it is currently being used by the nuns as their sleeping quarters. (German Embassy staff were quite unaware of this fact until it was mentioned to them by the author).

e) To some extent it is possible to draw a line in the history of Burmese-German relations – in particular Germany's perception of those relations - at the end of the Second World War. This sense of an era having come to a close has much to do with the fact that Germany had started both wars. Patzert's fate as an individual and particularly his death reflects, in microcosm, the finality of this particular chapter in German-Burmese relations. Naturally, there was a deep-seated need for renewal which, for Germans, included the need to confront their dark recent history – no matter how painful this process might be. This task was addressed piecemeal (for it was certainly not something that could be undertaken in one fell swoop) and is still being addressed today. German-Burmese relations are but one example of the many relationships that have still not been fully repaired. The remainder of this essay deals with how this factor has influenced German perceptions of Burma and post-war attitudes towards Burma. Although those who began to re-establish relations after the war may have suspected

<sup>1</sup> “The German Club was a wooden building, remarkable like a medieval castle with a great central octagonal tower, and looked as if it had been transported from somewhere in the Rhine valley. It was one of the most striking structures in the city, and stood within spacious well-kept grounds.” (Noel F. Singer (1995) *Old Rangoon. City of Shwedagon*. Gartmore: Kiscadale: 153).



that they were entering a new chapter, they could not have known what kind of legacy they had inherited, or indeed that this legacy should first perhaps be evaluated before proceeding. The Burmese approach, was, however, quite different. As far as the Burmese were concerned, the relationship between the two countries and their peoples had remained unbroken.

The premise that informs the following comments on German post-war perceptions of Burma is this: the void perceived by Germans regarding their history in Burma may have helped to pave the way for a re-emergence of the same flawed romantic notions vis-à-vis Burma once postulated by long-forgotten predecessors.

## 5 Courting a Socialist Strongman – The Two Germanys and Post-War Burma up to 1988

### 5.1 Introduction

a) After World War II, Germany and Burma had some obvious traits in common. Both countries had suffered heavily as a result of the war and both were in urgent need of economic recovery. In addition to this, both countries faced the challenge to establish a new national identity and a new political system whilst trying to carve out a suitable role in the world at large. Moreover, both countries were occupied by foreign powers. Less obviously, both countries were experiencing severe difficulties in establishing national unity. Finally, both countries had been virtual allies since August 1, 1943 when Burma, which had formally declared itself an independent country, declared war on the allies and U Nu (?), then foreign minister in Ba Maw's cabinet after the declaration of independence, received recognition of Burma's new status from the country's new German ally (although this recognition was practically meaningless - as the two German POWs later discovered). All of the above, as well as the many differences between the two countries, are concomitant to geopolitical developments that are open to a number of readings. The same can be said, however, of the historical period under consideration in this section. 1988 was not only the year which saw the downfall of Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism", it also marked the beginnings of the peaceful revolution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that was to lead to re-unification. Both events were connected to Michael Gorbachov's reforms in the Soviet Union and the end of the various Communist systems in Eastern Europe.

From the outset of this post-war period, relations between Germany and Burma were influenced by two factors. On the one hand, there were economic interests, but, on the other, two German states had emerged, each firmly embedded in one of the two competing blocs of the Cold War era. Urged by West Germans hoping to do business in Burma, but also prompted by a GDR trade mission to Burma in 1954, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) decided to set up diplomatic relations with Burma. Not wanting to compromise its neutrality by getting involved in the conflict between the two German states and their allies, the Burmese government were reluctant to respond to these proposals at first. Finally, however, Burma decided to establish relations with both states - on different levels. Burma exchanged legations with West Germany that were later upgraded to embassies in 1961. Likewise, the East German trade mission was transformed into a Consulate General in 1960. In 1973, when the FRG decided to abandon its claim to being the sole representative of German interests (a policy known as the Hallstein doctrine), the GDR also opened an embassy in Burma. Diplomatic representation of the two Germanys in Burma

mirrors the Burmese government's pragmatic attitude towards the two German nations. Burma was quick to tap into the financial resources and know-how of both Germanys. Indeed, West Germany's economic strength and willingness to provide development aid soon made it Burma's strongest partner after Japan. Burma's cooperation with the GDR concentrated largely on such areas as education, medicine, culture and sports.

The relationship between Burma and its two German partners was also pervaded by a climate of competition and courtship. Competition in the sense that the FRG and the GDR saw their relationship towards each other as contenders, and courtship in so far as the two states vied with each other in order to win over Burma.

Just as in a sporting event where competitors are compared in terms of speed and distance, so too were the economic and political dealings of both Germanys with Burma measured in terms of import-export statistics and the number of delegations exchanged. Hefty official files and documents pertaining to the efforts of both the FRG and the GDR in Burma fairly bristle with such data and demonstrate the institutionalised aspect of this competition. It is not so easy to evaluate the courtship element, since it is an altogether vaguer and more ambiguous undertaking. West German President Richard Weizaecker's assertion of friendship during his state visit to Burma (during which he is said to have given an impromptu speech that deeply moved his Burmese audience) may serve as one example of this element of courtship. The ability to court others has a great deal to do with the personalities of the individuals who represent their country or its agencies. Courtship is, if you will, the personal side of competition; it represents the ability to convince a partner of the sincerity of a proposal of friendship.

In the paragraphs that follow, I would like to explore post-war German attitudes to Burma in the context of this idea of courtship, since it contains an element of the romantic which permits a comparison to German naturalists' attitudes towards Burma. Before doing so, however, I would like to make a few comments on the changed context that had helped to shape German post-war perceptions of Burma and how this context differed from the situation after the first Anglo-Burmese War.

b) After the Second World War, Burma's landscape and lush vegetation did not exert the same fascination for Germans it had done before and was certainly no longer the main reason they chose to venture to Burma. The primary source of interest had now shifted towards technology and a skilful manipulation of natural resources that had long outgrown the pioneer's search for the self. However, technology could also be seen as a way of ameliorating people's lives and this aspect gave those who came to Burma a fresh *raison d'être*. This new humanitarian content meant that the focus of German attention towards Burma had to undergo a shift. All at once, it became important to develop a relationship with the Burmese people. Back in the days of colonial as well as royal rule, the relationship of the German expert to his employers was predetermined by the extant hierarchies in Mandalay and Rangoon. No courtship was necessary in order to establish a working relationship at the court of Mandalay or at the offices of the British colonial government in Rangoon. (It was different for the French, because they had a general and not just a personal interest in Burmese affairs.) However, for Germans in post-war Burma, it was now necessary to form a partnership with the new masters of the country.

Although the new generation of Germans setting foot on Burmese soil were not in a position to assess their predecessors' readings of the peoples of Burma, I believe it is nevertheless useful to take another look at the attitudes of these early pioneers vis-à-vis the indigenous population. In Helfer's view, the 'natives' posed no

serious obstacle to the development of the country and were even susceptible to European concepts of education. We do not know anything about Marfels' and Patzert's view of the peoples of Burma; Brunhuber's death was partly due to his gross misunderstanding of the indigenes, however, the assessment of the natives given by Brandis - the man who 'survived' the Burmese forests - is interesting. On his return to Germany, Brandis held a large number of lectures on the subject of the forests of India. Regardless of the ostensible topic of his talks on Burma - be it teak, bamboo or slash-and-burn cultivation - he never missed an opportunity to mention the Karen who inhabited the Burmese forests. Brandis' descriptions of the Karen, their traditions and their attitudes to their environment were sympathetically portrayed and he was impressed by how well they seemed able to adapt to the new forestry techniques introduced by the British through Brandis and his men. It did not escape Brandis' notice that some Karens were Christians, and he alleged that others 'could easily become members of a church'.<sup>1</sup> Those Germans who listened to his recollections and read his articles, may well have nodded in assent. Given this background, it comes as no surprise that education was at the core of the involvement of the two Germanys after formal relations had been re-established in 1954. Before I go into detail about German perceptions of the Burmese, I would like to provide a brief summary of the technical aspect of German-Burmese relations.<sup>2</sup>

c) As mentioned previously, 1954 marked the beginning of a very strong West German 'Burma connection' indeed. The history of the activities of the company Fritz Werner in Burma began in 1955 with a request on the part of the Burmese to assist the country in obtaining adequate military equipment to fight insurgents, which, at the time, were largely Kuomintang intruders. On one of his "shopping-trips" for the Burmese military<sup>3</sup> in Europe in 1955, Colonel (later Brigadier) Maung Maung was advised to contact this German company, since it was reputed to be a manufacturer of quality guns and ammunition. After the ratification of the Paris Pacts in April that same year, the FRG had gained full sovereignty - including the right to establish an army and produce arms. According to Maung Maung,<sup>4</sup> he also proposed sending Burmese soldiers to Germany, in order to learn how to establish an armaments industry in Burma and related matters. Since Maung Maung's proposal was in line with the country's policy of self-sufficiency and independence, an agreement was duly signed and, from the end of the 1950s, young Burmese, mostly soldiers, were sent to Germany to attend training courses lasting between six months and two years. An East German observer whose job it was to monitor the bulletins of the West German embassy counted a total of 250 trainees that were sent to Germany between the years 1956 and 1967. This number increased to between 30-50 trainees per year after 1967 and reached a peak in 1970/71 with no less than 130 "experts" being sent out to receive training (???). Judging by these statistics, the FRG's position with regard to providing aid and assistance to Burma was surpassed only by Japan.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these training schemes, employees of Fritz Werner helped to purchase arms manufactured in

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Brandis (1884) "Über Brandrodung in den Bergen Ostindiens [On slash-and-burn cultivation in the hills of East India]," in: *Allgemeine Forst- und Jagdzeitung* November 1884: 377-386.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on relations between the FRG and Burma see Zöllner 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See Mary P. Callahan (1996) *The Origins of Military Rule in Burma*. A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University: 447-449

<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Maung Maung.

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Thomas (1972), *Die Außenpolitik der Union von Burma in der Periode von 1962 bis 1970 – Grundlagen, Konzeption und Praxis*. Dissertation Berlin: 254-255.

Germany; the company also sent its own experts to Burma to build factories for the production of armaments, first in Rangoon and later near Pyay (Prome). From the outset, cooperation between the Burmese government and Fritz Werner also included non-military trade, which was handled at the time by the Burmese Development Corporation (or BDC, renamed BEEC after the coup in 1962).

To crown it all, the German company's top executive developed a good personal relationship to General Ne Win, who visited Germany every year from 1962 to 1988 on his annual European trips. After 1962, Fritz Werner also acted as 'European agent' for Ne Win's Burma, thus contributing to the growth of economic cooperation between both countries.

Just how significant this cooperation had become is underlined by the fact, that in 1966 Fritz Werner was made a Burmese state enterprise. German government officials as well as politicians and businessmen used Ne Win's visits to discuss a variety of issues with the Burmese premier. German business in Burma was encouraged by the Burmese and practically supported by the German state which provided loans and insurance for the various economic projects.

German-Burmese relations entered a new phase when some of the Burmese who had travelled to Germany as trainees attained influential posts in the post-1962 Burmese government. The most prominent of these was Maung Cho, who was Minister for Industries II from 1974 to 1988. Maung Cho masterminded a joint venture, established in 1984, entitled "Myanmar Fritz Werner". The company was created to produce industrial goods "made in Burma" intended for export. This ambitious project, the first and only one of its kind with a Western partner during this period, never took off as intended, but it still exists.<sup>1</sup>

Another related field of cooperation during the post-war period was German development aid in the form of experts sent by the *Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit* (Association for Technical Cooperation or GTZ). Founded as a private company in 1975, this organisation's major client is the FRG's *Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung* (Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development or BMZ). This organisation worked in Burma from 1962 to 1995<sup>2</sup> during which time its focus was the training of Burmese citizens in a variety of skills.

d) As the establishment of the East German trade mission in 1954 shows, the GDR chose to commence cooperation with Burma at the same time as its Western contender. From the outset of its trade relations with Burma, the GDR pursued a policy of purchasing rice from Burma on a barter basis – an approach that mirrored that of other Eastern Bloc countries. Before long, a race began with West Germany to provide Burma with entire factories. However, the GDR's lack of economic clout saw a widening of the gap between the two Germanys in respect of their economic ties with Burma over the years in the favour of the FRG.

As far as scientific and cultural cooperation with Burma was concerned, the GDR placed an emphasis on educational programmes. In June 1959, Burma accepted the GDR's offer to train Burmese students on East German turf. As a result, by 1970, 75 Burmese students had attended university courses in the GDR lasting six

---

<sup>1</sup> Today, the office of the Joint Ventures hosts MAMI (Myanmar Agriculture Machineries Industries), This organisation under the supervision of the Ministry for Industry (2) maintains a training school in Sinde that was founded with the assistance of the FRG.

<sup>2</sup> According to the records of the GTZ, 62 projects were undertaken in various parts of the country. From 1988 to 1995 three of them were continued.

years,<sup>3</sup> whereas other Burmese students received medical training or acquired expertise in mining, printing, collectivisation and sporting activities. These courses in the GDR lasted between three months to three years. Besides these activities on the part of the GDR, the FRG also offered German language courses in association with West Germany's Goethe Institute. Unfortunately, the Goethe Institute was obliged to close down operations in Rangoon – along with other foreign cultural institutes - in 1965 in line with Ne Win's policy of expelling foreign staff from the country.<sup>2</sup> The GDR later sent a group of teachers to assist staff at Rangoon University's foreign language department. It was during this time that some of these German teachers studied Burmese and later contributed to the emergence of the academic study of Burmese language and literature in Germany.

## 5.2 Facettes of an Ambivalent Love Affair

a) The above survey demonstrates a wide range of contact between Burmese and Germans of both political persuasions during the period in question. It is possible to categorise these relationships as follows:

- German language teachers. The relationship between German educator and Burmese student was characterised by a formal hierarchy based on the traditional relationship between Burmese teachers and students. This hierarchical student-teacher relationship was also fuelled by the European notion that the Burmese needed to be educated. However, the hierarchical nature of their relationship was somewhat modified by the fact that instruction took place in Germany rather than in Burma. Burmese students coming to Germany needed special assistance and support in order to cope with an European culture with which they were completely unfamiliar, making possible more informal contact between teachers and students. Although German teachers were doubtless equally in need of assistance when in Burma, to admit such a need would have undermined their position of authority as a teacher.
- Burmese working under German supervision, as was the case on many construction sites as well as in households where Burmese personnel were employed. There would have been plenty of opportunity for a fairly close relationship to develop in such situations – particularly in household settings.
- Germans and Burmese working together in a formal partnership, as occurred whenever German experts worked in Burma within a Burmese institutional framework.
- Civil servants or holders of public office representing either their country or one of their country's institutions. Such persons were called upon to represent the entire scope of what their country stood for with regard to the partner country.

Given the wide spectrum of contacts between Burmese and German nationals and the convoluted nature of intercultural communication, one might well expect highly diversified reports of meetings between Germans and Burmese. However, this is not the case. The handful of published recollections of Germans who had anything to do with the Burmese for a substantial period of time paint a surprisingly homogenous picture of these relations. When Weizaecker pronounced his belief in 1986 that he was encountering friends in Burma, he was not only speaking on behalf of all West Germans involved with the country, but on behalf of East Germans in Burma, too.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas 1972, annotations: 65.

<sup>2</sup> The USA, Great Britain and France maintained their cultural institutes because they were located on the respective embassy's compound.

Naturally, West and East Germany both had very different reasons for assuming that the Burmese were their 'friends'.

Before listing some of the obvious (and less obvious) reasons for this 'dissonant concordance', I would like to describe two examples of post-war German perceptions of Burma. These readings are based on the publications of two men, both of whom served for several years as members of their respective diplomatic representations in Rangoon in the sixties. Dr Otto Esche lived in Burma between the years 1959 and 1969 as deputy head of the Consulate General of the GDR. Dr Esche's wife, Annemarie, is Germany's leading expert on Burmese language and literature. The couple has maintained a close relationship to Burma, as a result of regular lengthy sojourns in the country. In 1963, Dr Esche published a short study of Burma<sup>1</sup> and in 1979 a book of his recollections entitled "Burmese Impressions" was published.<sup>2</sup> Tonny Rosiny worked at the West German embassy between ?? and ??. In 1970, he contributed to a travel guide on Cambodia, Burma and Laos,<sup>3</sup> and in 1979 he published a small book devoted to Burma entitled "Burma. The Joys of a Simple Life".<sup>4</sup> The following survey is largely based on each author's second work, both of which were published seven years prior to the West German President's trip to Burma.

b) Esche's book demonstrates the author's intimate knowledge and appreciation of many aspects of Burmese life, gained from his copious personal contacts with a whole range of people from different parts of the country. The reader accompanies the Esches as they go about various activities, such as finding a house in Rangoon, visiting a market, attending a wedding, musing about a white elephant in Rangoon's zoo or travelling to the Shan and Chin states. It is obvious from the way the journal is written that the Esches liked their Burmese hosts very much; the tone of the writing also makes it abundantly clear that, as far as the Esches are concerned, there is an ideological background for this empathy. Highly sympathetic to Burmese anti-colonial attitudes, Esche identifies with the Burmese desire to create an independent, progressive Socialist society. Esche's recollections of encounters with the Burmese therefore combines information about Burmese traditions and culture with the vision of a 'new Burma', liberated from the shackles of colonial exploitation. Esche's vision typifies the rationale behind "the bond of fellowship and friendly relations between the German Democratic Republic and the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma", symbolised by the establishment of an East German embassy in 1973. According to Esche, Burma's bid to establish good relations with other countries contains a natural bent towards "progressive countries, in the interests of contributing to the preservation of peace throughout the world."<sup>5</sup> These final comments from Esche underline that for him, this was no mere rhetoric but a personal conviction, which he firmly believed was shared by the Burmese people under Ne Win's leadership.

As far as West German diplomat Tonny Rosiny is concerned, the "Burmese Way to Socialism" holds no such

---

<sup>1</sup> Otto Esche (1963), *Burma. Land und Leute*. Leipzig, VEB F. A. Brockhaus Verlag, 60pp.

<sup>2</sup> Esche (1979), *Im Land der weißen Elefanten. Burmesische Impressionen*. Berlin, Verlag Neues Leben. 125pp.

<sup>3</sup> Tonny Rosiny (1970), "Birma. Mit Stadtführer Rangun und Reiserouten ins Land", in: *Kambodscha mit Angkor Wat, Birma, Laos*. Bearbeitet von Erhard Rathenberg, Tonny Rosiny, Christian Velder. Mai's Auslandstaschenbuch Nr. 30. Buchenhain, Verlag Volk und Heimat: 67-107.

<sup>4</sup> Tonny Rosiny (1979), *Birma. Das Glück des einfachen Lebens. Eine Länderkunde*. Tübingen und Basel, Horst Erdmann Verlag. 280 pp.

<sup>5</sup> Esche 1979: 124.

fascination. Where Esche uses the word “Socialism”, Rosiny opts for the term “Burmese”.<sup>6</sup> As his book’s title reveals, Rosiny is, like Fielding Hall, clearly attracted to the “Soul of a People” and the pleasures of the “simple life”. According to Rosiny, the key to such happiness is a non-Western approach to life, based on the Buddhist faith. Thanks to the precepts of Buddhism, he writes, the Burmese are mercifully untainted by the temptations of “too much” that dog our own society – as in too much material gain, too much pleasure or too much success. However, Rosiny adds a caveat to his praise by wondering how long it will be possible for the Burmese to maintain this Buddhist middle path. Rosiny sees Burma’s relations with West Germany as the perfect reflection of this middle path, being as he says, “well-tempered, neither particularly warm, nor particularly cool”.<sup>2</sup> Rosiny also felt that relations between Burma and West Germany were encapsulated by Chancellor Kiesinger’s trip to Burma in 1967, during which the German premier expressed Germany’s respect for Burma’s ‘positive neutrality’. At the time, relations between the two countries concentrated on economic cooperation; close cultural ties were yet to be established.

The varying approaches of these two authors to Burma are once more in evidence when it comes to describing Burma’s problems. Whilst neither author attempts to hide the existence of Burma’s considerable difficulties – which they both see chiefly as being economic deficiency and insurgency - their assessment of such problems are quite different. Whereas Rosiny regards these problems as the price Burma is obliged to pay for its neutrality, Esche is more inclined to see such difficulties as part of the legacy of Burma’s colonial past. Both books provide a surprisingly toned down version of Ne Win’s coup, which reflects the attitude of both German governments at the time. So Rosiny: “The coup was executed humanely and with style.”<sup>3</sup> In Esche’s version: “The people on Rangoon’s streets realised immediately that the coup had been carried out not against the people, but *for* the people.”<sup>4</sup> However, both authors are consistently reticent on one subject, namely, the activities of the other German state in Burma.<sup>5</sup> No mention was made, for instance, of West German support of the Burmese armament industry.

This deliberate silence would seem to indicate that each side had good reasons for playing close to the chest and I would like to elaborate this point for a moment. Whilst the two authors were still diplomats, part of their brief would certainly have been to observe the activities of the “other Germany”. In this context, one might well wonder why the GDR did not openly inform the public about this particular aspect of West German engagement in Burma.<sup>6</sup> However, the reason for Esche’s silence on this is quite simple: such information would have been damaging to Burma’s official take on “good relations with all countries”. Accepting assistance from the capitalist class enemy with a view to building up an armaments industry would have tarnished Burma’s peace-loving image as a genuinely Socialist partner. If the truth be known, the GDR never once doubted Burma’s right to defend her sovereignty by means of a strong military in the service of the Burmese people. Indeed, the GDR even offered

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosiny 1979: 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 238.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 64.

<sup>4</sup> Esche 1979: 30.

<sup>5</sup> Rosiny does make some concessions: in his bibliography he lists a translation of Burmese fairy tales by Annemarie Esche; he also mentions Otto Esche’s book, published in 1963 (the author’s name is given as “Esche, Otto von” underlining the author’s aristocratic ancestry).

<sup>6</sup> A dissertation dealing with Burma’s relations to each of the two Germanys written by a GDR ex-diplomat, makes it clear that Fritz Werner’s activities were well known to the staff of the GDR representation in Rangoon.

Burma military training. The motives behind West German author Rosiny's reticence on the subject were not dissimilar although they would have been based on a different stance. His argument would have been that Burma's flirtation with East Germany would shed a bad light on the sincerity of the country's "positive neutrality". Typical for one engaged in wooing the object of their desire, both authors display a tendency to see Burma in an idealised way, as being a land somehow without blemish. Each writer's conspicuous silence on the subject of Burma's faults reveals a crucial if hidden ambivalence in the attitude of both Germanys towards Burma.

c) Esche's and Rosiny's contributions were not the only German works to be published on the subject of Burma and German-Burmese relations prior to 1988. Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" was often criticised in the East as well as the West, although there was, of course, a greater diversity of opinions in the Federal Republic, where criticism focused on the Burmese government's poor economic performance as well as the civil war that continued to rage throughout the country. Academic studies written in the GDR during the same period displayed concern for and disappointment in Burma's acceptance of West German aid, although it modified Burma's behaviour by portraying it as a natural response to pressure exercised by Western "imperialists and neo-colonialists". In essays such as these, Burma was stylised as a country at the mercy of the deceptive tactics of West German diplomats and businessmen who were deliberately trying to mislead the Burmese public about their "true intentions".<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Esche's and Rosiny's assessments of Burma are highly representative of the two Germanys' attitudes towards Burma up to the beginning of the 1980s. A booklet published in the 1970s by Fritz Werner providing the company's German employees with basic information about Burma contains the statement: "The Burmese population is religious (85% Buddhist) and reserved." This pronouncement is essentially a curter, more matter-of-fact version of Rosiny's elaborate appraisal of the Burmese people who he deems as being basically 'good', but very different, and who, he advises, should be treated with "friendliness and patience".

To summarise the above: German post-war perceptions of the people of Burma were shaped by two distinct manifestations of a late flowering of romanticism that can be characterised as "socialist" and "humanistic" respectively. These perceptions earn the epithet "romantic" on account of their idealistic nature. One prerequisite for this type of romantic reading of the Burmese is the assumption that all humankind possesses an "essential nature" (including a series of specific and sometimes oblique variants of universal values) that had so far seemed to have eluded the Western partners. This romantic impulse soon proved highly useful when it came to arranging all kinds of data and impressions. Before long, it began to take on an integral role, informing all manner of communication with the Burmese.

Looking back to the beginnings of German-Burmese relations, it is possible to observe a certain continuity, albeit modified by changing historical circumstances. Over the years, Germans have tended to regard the Burmese as being essentially "good" and therefore deserving of assistance and training. Germans have, on various occasions also seen the Burmese as partners and even friends. The romantically inclined Germans who first came to Burma were so completely absorbed by their own encounter with nature that an assessment of the Burmese character was only of secondary importance to them. However, after independence, the Burmese themselves were to become the

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas 1972: 241-260.



focus of German interest in the country. This new target of German interest posed at least one challenge, in that the relationship between the Burmese people and the government of Burma had yet to be defined. Given the impersonal nature of any government *per se*, but also on account of the comparatively weak post-war Burmese governments, it was inevitable that governments on both sides of the Berlin Wall should have developed such an ambivalent attitude towards post-colonial Burma. The overriding desire to woo Burma made it difficult for either country to express reservations about the other's policies. Another stumbling block was the good working relationship that existed between representatives of both German governments and their opposite numbers in Ne Win's system. Representatives of the FRG were well-connected to the likes of Ne Win and Maung Cho (who was even married to a German for a while) and other members of the military government. GDR delegates in Burma concentrated their efforts on other leading members of Burmese society, such as Thakin Kodaw Hmine (1876 - 1964). Thakin Hmine was Burma's most famous literary figure. An advocate of Burmese socialism, he underwent eye surgery in East Berlin in 1960. During his stay in the GDR he was decorated by the East German government.

d) There were, however, other factors that influenced relations between the two Germanys and Burma during this period. Geopolitical developments and the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and its European allies were just two of these factors. The diametrically opposed ideologies that divided the two Germanys served to intensify the FRG's and the GDR's focus on those aspects that favoured the continuation of good relations. A further factor was the lack of public awareness or even general interest (in either East or West Germany) when it came to the subject of Burma. Prior to 1988, not one NGO was in a position to follow events in Burma with a critical eye. This was a period when West German politics were dominated by a major coalition between the CDU and SPD. The Social Democrats (SPD) had made a point of developing strong ties with Burmese Socialists after independence. This friendly attitude remained intact – even after Ne Win had taken hold of the reins and many of the SPD's socialist cohorts in Burma were incarcerated for substantial periods. The conservative Christian Democrats or CDU (known in Bavaria as the Christian Social Union) supported the efforts of German firms in Burma as well as various aid programmes. Even those on the extreme Left in Germany (including founding members of the Green Party) did not oppose Burma's official policy, because, initially at least, the "Burmese Way to Socialism" appeared to many to be an Asian version of a "third path" that, not unlike the system in Nyerere's Tanzania, had the potential to transcend both capitalism and Communism..

Two reasons for the absence both of NGOs operating in the country and any public debate about West Germany's policy vis-à-vis Burma during the pre-1988 era are certainly to be found in Burma's lack of economic clout and relative insignificance on a global political scale. Another is the brief on the part of the government under Ne Win not to put its good relations with Germany on display. One result of the Federal Republic of Germany's tactful compliance on this score was that Ne Win's annual trips with his entourage to the 'romantic' Rheingau region were never covered in national German print media.

It was this combination of *Realpolitik*, amicable personal contacts and post-romantic perceptions of Burma that suppressed the ambivalent nature of the love affair each Germany had with Burma. These were also the factors that made both Germanys so very unprepared for the events of 1988. Just a short time after the reign of socialism in Burma was declared defunct by the military junta in 1988, the German Socialist state crumbled in the face of a

peaceful people's revolution. Once again, one chapter of German-Burmese relations closed and another one opened – in more ways than one.

## 6 Epilogue: The Beauty and the Beast. A United Country's Tacit Division on the Subject of Burma and an Open End

a) Following the events of 1988, official West German policy underwent a complete change of direction. All at once, all development aid to Burma came to a halt (although time was allowed for ongoing projects to be wound up). From this point onwards, all state support for German businesses in Burma was stopped. The GDR's Rangoon embassy was closed in 1990 in the wake of German reunification and, although the FRG's embassy remained open, there was little to be done except observe events and report back to Germany.

The German firm Fritz Werner was transformed into a private company in 1990. In the *Bundestag*, questions began to be raised about the company's involvement in the crushing of the popular uprising of 1988. The impulse to pose such questions came about partly as a result of lobbying on the part of various Burma support groups that had begun to emerge in the western parts of a now reunited Germany.<sup>1</sup> Many of these groups were founded by Germans together with Burmese who had come to Germany during Ne Win's regime. Their aim was to speak out against human rights violations in Burma and help establish a democratic government. This first wave of Burmese émigrés were later joined by a younger generation of Burmese refugees who had sought refuge in Germany following the unsuccessful uprising of 1988. Most of the German members of these groups had never taken any particular interest in Burmese affairs before this point. Neither, for that matter, had the German media or the German public at large.

These were the circumstances that helped to form a dichotomous picture of post-1988 Burma. On one side was a beastly military regime with absolutely no respect for human dignity, represented by General Khin Nyunt who was military intelligence chief and the alleged brain behind the junta. On the other side of the fence, a beautiful and courageous champion of democracy and human rights had risen to prominence. She was the daughter of Burma's national hero, Aung San, and her name was Aung San Suu Kyi. Remarkably, this black-and-white-picture has endured, in spite of the fact that Suu Kyi's struggle against an iron-fisted junta has received less media attention over the years, and many solidarity groups have run out of steam in the face of dwindling support on the part of German volunteers and internal disagreements.

Yet another rift appeared in German attitudes towards Burma at the beginning of the post-socialist, post-Ne Win era. Aung San Suu Kyi and her party were not universally held in high esteem in Germany. Consequently, the corresponding blanket condemnation of the ruling military and support for the United States' and the European Union's boycott of Burma did not always meet with approval. Particularly those Germans who had spent a considerable amount of time working in Burma prior to the events of 1988 took umbrage at official German policy on two counts: firstly, aid workers and UN officials working in Burma argued that boycotting the country only served to ignore the needs of the people of Burma and prolong their suffering. Secondly, many business representatives questioned the ability of Suu Kyi and her NLD to govern the country. One outspoken critic of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the most moderate of these solidarity groups was established in Berlin. It was supported by Burmese who had lived in both East and West Germany.

NLD's political competence was Günter Siemers, who, up until 1993, had provided many an illuminating report on Burma for Germany's state-sponsored *Institut für Asienkunde* (Institute for Asian Affairs) – an institution renowned for its well-founded, practical insights into current developments in Asia.<sup>1</sup> Other – albeit less vocal – advocates of the ruling power in Burma and therefore the continuing legitimacy of the military government came from the ranks of those who had once had close links to the now defunct GDR.

Even today, there is still a conspicuous absence of direct and open communication between representatives of these two stances on post-1988 Myanmar. Both groups have a tendency to behave as if they belonged to diametrically opposed ideological camps in a throwback to the hostile delineations of the Cold War era. The two opposing groups' usage of the name of the country is symptomatic of this deep rift. Whereas one camp continues to use "Burma" (although in Germany the country had in fact always been known as "Birma"), the other camp prefers to refer to the country by its new name, Myanmar, following the junta's 1989 decision. This critical division mirrors the situation in Myanmar itself, where the government and its opponents have consistently failed to get down to any form of meaningful dialogue.

b) To a certain extent, German attitudes towards Burma after 1988 resemble the situation after the Second World War. After 1988, Burma found itself 'rediscovered' by Germany. For most contemporary Germans, an awareness of Burmese history commences in the year 1988 or, rather, 1962, since in this reading, military rule tends to be extended backwards - regardless of Germany's tacit approval at the time of Burmese politics under Ne Win. With the exception of those who played an active role in events in Burma or had made a point of acquiring knowledge about the prehistory of the current situation, today's Germans do not know any more about Burma's history and German-Burmese relations than Germans did in the early 1950s. The above-mentioned rift in attitudes to Burma's post-1988 situation is intricately bound up with the existence of these two groups. They could be described as "old Burma hands" (small group) and "fresh converts" (larger group), respectively. Naturally, there are individuals in both groups who maintain an ambivalent attitude and try not to take sides, preferring instead to analyse the complex situation as a whole. However, in general, seen from this perspective, the hidden ambivalences of the pre-1988 era could be said to have evolved into a major schism, that, sadly, is not subject to any form of open and rational discussion.

One particular stumbling block that seems to hinder any rational discussion of German policy towards "Myanmar/Burma" is the romantically motivated esteem for Aung San Suu Kyi on the part of many a fresh convert to Burma. For these Burma-lovers, Aung San Suu Kyi is the perfect embodiment of a peculiarly German fantasy, namely, the fusion of Burmese-Buddhist charm and Western education. Any admission on the part of some of her fans that their support of her struggle is founded on wishful thinking rather than on sound political considerations would be like sending an arrow straight through the heart of this fantasy. On the other hand, even members of the smaller group, wary as they are of such hero-worship and preferring to bring their own political judgement to bear, would have to admit that their earlier reading of Burma's development was (at least partly) based on illusion, as the course of events leading to the events of 1988 has shown. The emotionally charged

---

<sup>1</sup> See Siemers' articles in the institute's quarterly *Südostasien* from 1988 onwards.

nature of attitudes towards Burma are bound to make any form of metacommunication à la Watzlawick an extremely painful process. It is far easier to simply avoid it.

c) What can we expect of future German-Burmese relations? Myanmar will certainly continue to illicit strong feelings on the part of tourists, businesspeople and humanitarians. After all, it is an attractive country, inhabited by charming people who happen to be in great need. In time, the divisions that separate the two camps of pro- and anti-Suu Kyi activists may well lose their definition, giving way perhaps to a growing number of individuals who decide to make use of the country's many attractions as a means of fulfilling their personal post-romantic adventure. Naturally, this would give rise to a great variety of uncoordinated perceptions of the country that would simply fade away, just as they have done in the past, without being evaluated.

If it were to be attempted, such an evaluation would certainly require putting one's own experiences and perceptions into an historical perspective. In any case, it looks as though the romantic element in German-Burmese relations shows no sign of dying out. It may, however, change its form. In this scenario, the situation could become inverted and, instead of unconsciously embellishing data about the country, the romantic impulse itself might be wrapped up in data-based historical reflection. This essay is an attempt to commence with such reflection.