



## MIGRANTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT MEDIA AWARD FIRST PLACE WINNER

**Good, good, good!**

by *Magdalena Vaculciakova*

*“Burma, No! No!” Mister Khupsawn was repeating when I asked him about Burma. Eventually, it came out, there is no Burma anymore. It is the Union of Myanmar since 1989. It is difficult to get some information about the country. “There are very few sources available.” says Ludmila Sovova, the social assistant of the Burmese family that lives in Vsetin. She is accompanying me to Khupsawn’s place and I am eager to find out how their life is after two years of living in the Czech Republic.*

### **Two different worlds**

Burma is the country under the rule of military junta since 1962, however there were various attempts to change the regime. The opposition leader and Nobel Prize winner in 1991 Aung San Suu Kyi is a well-known person all around the world. Except for this information, there is little information you can get about Burma in Europe. Different reports of NGOs and international organizations say that there is no freedom, only poverty and famine, in Burma. And there are only two seasons a year – the rainy one and the dry one.

The Czech Republic is an EU member state currently ruled by a right wing government. It declares freedom of the press and it guarantees all human rights to its population. Life in central Europe definitely sounds better than in Southeast Asia, in spite of the fact that there are four seasons – one of them is snowy and freezing.

It must be a significant change when a person comes from the middle of a green jungle where everybody grows his own food to survive to a concrete jungle where everybody has to earn money to survive. How is it to be cold during the winter when for the first 30 years of your life you knew only sun and rain? Or from the other point of view – how is it to leave the place of fear and come to the one where freedom is essential?

### **Burmese wide smile**

Ludmila Sovova tells me that the Khupsawn family smiles all the time, but, to be honest, I cannot imagine it as I know nobody like that here in Europe. The door is locked, so we are waiting for Siang to open it for us. He really comes with a wide smile on his face holding his son’s hand. He meets neighbours with their dog in the hall and makes his son smile when playing with the pet. Gideon is two and half years old, he was born in Malaysia, in a refugee camp. The couple invites us to their flat with two rooms and a dominant LCD television in the centre of the living room. “We have just bought it,” Siang says. “Finally, I got a job last year in July, so everything is good now,” he explains. Later on, he repeats the importance of having a job many times. And it is not only because of his poor knowledge



and very simple vocabulary that he can use in the Czech language. He works in a local factory, day or night shifts. The factory is just next to the block of flats which they live in.

### **Life in fear**

Siang Peng Lian Khupsawn, the father of the family, comes from a small town in Chin state. "There is a very bad government in Burma," he says. "I was forced to enter the military service although I did not want to. I hold on one month. All soldiers were drinking alcohol all the time. I had to run away. Consequently, I could not stay in Burma anymore, because they would arrest me," Siang says about the reason why he had to leave his home country.

Siang went to Malaysia where thousands of Burmese refugees are living at the moment. "In Malaysia, you can work, however, it is illegal. And when there is no work, you just pay and they find you some," Siang says. He worked as an electrician. The problem was he could not claim asylum in Malaysia, because if he had told them he was a Burmese refugee, they would surely have sent him back to Burma. "I was always afraid of being sent back to Burma if they would have found out that I had no asylum," Siang admits. Then a possibility to go the West appeared. Siang made a registration at UNHCR office and he hoped to go to Canada or Norway as he did not speak Czech. "Anyway, the best would have been moving to USA. My brother lives there and you do not need a certificate of apprenticeship to find a good job," he explains and again adds: "But now we also have a job here in the Czech Republic, so it is okay."

### **Czech-Burmese cooperation**

At that time, Siang had been alone in Malaysia, his girlfriend Tawk Men Tiol had been in Burma. After the interview with the UNHCR officer, she had to come to the refugee camp where they had a wedding in order to get an opportunity to leave Asia together. While waiting for plane tickets and all the administration to be done, Gideon was born. So, there were already three of them when they came into the Czech Republic in February 2009. After a couple of months in the asylum centre, Vsetin town offered them a flat. That was the moment when Ludmila Sovova started to help them with the troubles they had to solve.

"Mister Khupsawn, I will come on Friday and we will fill in the form together," Ludmila says. Siang checks his working hours in March and agrees on the appointment. "When we came here, we could not understand Czech so it was very difficult to manage communication with offices and filling in the papers alone," he says: "Ludmila helped us a lot., and she also did shopping with us and showed us the town. She accompanied us to the hospital, too." At the beginning, the Khupsawn family spent every day with their social assistant. However it is not necessary anymore, although she still helps them regularly.

### **Farmers not only in Burma**

Recently, Ludmila Sovova has arranged a garden where the Burmese can grow their own vegetables and fruits. As they say, the town they come from is very small. There is only a post office, a police station, one school and a hospital. Very few people can work within those services and the rest are farmers. There are big shops and offices only in Rangoon, which is the biggest city that used to be the capital until 2005. At that year, the government made Neipyijto the capital of Burma.

"The friend of mine has a garden, so he will tell what to grow. But we would like to have tomatoes, celery, carrots," Tawk says. "They even grow their celery and carrot in the plant pot on the window," Ludmila smiles. "It is better to have your own vegetables. You do not have to spend money on it then," logically explains Siang. His wife can cook 4 Czech meals she learnt from the Czech language teacher that became her friend, too. But mostly they eat rice with vegetables like they used

to eat in Southeast Asia. "And we also eat bread. Now I have bread for breakfast and snack when I am at work. But it has taken us some time until we got used to it," Siang says.

### **New lifestyle**

The social assistant says the Khupsawn family has integrated into the Czech society quite well. Last year, the Burma centre in Prague conducted a research on how the Czech population perceives Burmese families in towns and villages where they live. According to the results of the survey, Czechs expect immigrants to have working qualifications necessary in the country and to adapt to the Czech lifestyle. Practically, for the immigrants there is no other way. They have to change their eating habits, family traditions and even their religion.

The Khupsawns plan to have three children, because it is very expensive to have more in Europe. "However, in Burma, I know a couple that has 12 children. Usually, it is about 6 to 8 kids. But we cannot afford them out of our country," Siang says. They also had to adjust their religious beliefs as their church does not exist in the Czech Republic. "So, we joined Baptist church in Vsetin," Khupsawn explains: "Every Sunday we go to the mass. But it is still different from Burma. There you meet the whole group of families and you go to church together. Maybe the reason is that I don't speak Czech well enough to have more friends here."

### **The importance of family life**

The language barrier seems to be the biggest problem within the integration process. Tawk speaks very little during my visit. She wants to speak perfectly so if she is not sure about the grammar, she prefers to be quiet. She brings bananas on the table and pours sparkling water into my glass every time when it is empty. At some moments she understands better my Czech than her husband. "When I am at their place, talking to mister Khupsawn and he does not understand but she does, she always translates to him," Ludmila Sovova says: "However, I would say she is a bit inferior. I remember when we went to see a doctor she was walking about three meters behind us. Well, she is inferior, but only at public places, not at home," Ludmila smiles. The Khupsawns do everything together. They walk in a park or the long way to supermarket. Tawk only goes to the maternal centre with Gideon regularly while Siang is working. Family means everything to them. "We call to Burma very often through Skype. My father is already 70 years old, but he is healthy. The only pity is that my brothers and sisters live in Denmark, USA and Malaysia. We are not together," Siang says.

### **Snow is no problem**

They cannot speak proper Czech but after two years in the country, Khupsawn finally got a job and found more friends. They show me around the small but very cosy flat. They even open the fridge for me. They are still smiling. When I ask about how they perceive Czechs, they compare them to Burmese: "It is the same here and in Burma. When I greet anyone on the street, there are people who reply and some that do not do so," Siang says. "I just cannot talk to the people here more, because I do not understand," the Burmese expresses his disappointment about the difficulty of the new language. "Dobre dobre, dobre," Czech meaning "good" resonates in the small living room at the beginning of every answer to my questions. They seem to be really satisfied with life in Europe. "Yes, you have snow here, but 35 degrees in Burma is too much," both spouses laugh. "We have everything we need for life in Vsetin. The policy in the Czech Republic is good. The insurance is very good. Comparing it to Burma, there is no insurance and neither can you draw benefits. Comparing it to the dream USA, you do not have to pay huge money in hospitals. The policy is important," Siang explains. Now I understand that when someone lives in fear with no freedom nor the status of even an asylum holder he just tries to adapt to the new environment and is happy about every little thing that is obvious for those living in a state for all their lives.

"I cannot say whether the situation in Burma will change. If so, I would like to go there again. But I cannot go there now, they would arrest me," Siang says: "But now, it is important that our Gideon goes to school and that I have job. It is the most important thing and another very important thing for us is to learn Czech," he smiles. He offers me a banana, or it's better to say he does not want to let me leave without taking one. All of them stand at the door and wave. I get infected by their smile. Firstly, I am disappointed realising that there is not a journalistic topic in the story, it is too positive with optimistic characters. After a while of thinking I change my mind and I decide to change the journalistic routine. Not only negative stories are necessary to publish.