

INTERVIEW

I fear I will never see my mother, Aung San Suu Kyi, again

In 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi became the world's most famous political prisoner. For her youngest son, Kim Aris, it was the start of a lifetime of separations. Now 46, he talks to Richard Lloyd Parry about his extraordinary mother, who is imprisoned in Myanmar



Kim Aris, aged 18, with his mother, Aung San Suu Kyi, at her home in Yangon in 1995

ROBIN MOYER

[Richard Lloyd Parry](#)

Saturday November 04 2023, 12.01am, The Times

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Half a lifetime has passed since Kim Aris's existence turned on a pivot, but at the moment it happened he had little idea of what was going on. He was ten years old at the time, a high-spirited schoolboy living with his family in a house in the city of Oxford. His father was an academic at the university, a brilliant and dreamy man who specialised in the languages and culture of the Himalayas. His mother, known to her British friends as Suu, was a housewife, who shopped, cooked and took care of her husband and her two sons. One evening in 1988, when Kim and his brother were asleep upstairs, she received a phone call from the place of her birth, the country then known as Burma.

Her elderly mother had suffered a stroke and was gravely ill in the capital, Rangoon. The following day, Suu was at the airport flying out to nurse her. "I had a premonition that our lives would change for ever," her husband, Michael Aris, said later, but her younger son had no such forebodings. "I can't remember very much about it, to be honest," says Kim. "I was just a child, and life flows over you at that age, doesn't it? I think I realised that my grandmother had taken a turn for the worse. I understood that my mother had to go back and look after her. Things progressed quite rapidly after that."

His ailing grandmother lingered on until the end of the year. By chance, her final illness came at a time of unprecedented tumult in Burma, now known as Myanmar, where student activists were demonstrating against the military junta that had oppressed the country for 26 years. In between her nursing duties, Kim's mother became involved in the movement against the dictatorship, at first cautiously and reluctantly, but then with increasing confidence and passion. In less than a year, Suu, the north Oxford housewife, had become famous across the world as Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of a peaceful movement aimed at toppling a cruel and murderous regime.

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Within 18 months she was a political prisoner; within three years she had been awarded the Nobel peace prize. In the decades since, Suu Kyi has lived through 15 years of house arrest, five years as her country's elected leader and now, following a coup in 2021, imprisonment once again.

To many Burmese, she is Mother Suu, or simply “the Lady” — a serene, almost mystical figure of inspiration and self-sacrifice. To plenty of people outside Myanmar, she is a heroine turned villain, who abandoned her moral principles to turn a blind eye to the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim Rohingya. For Kim Aris, she is “Mum”. For 30 years, his life has been lived in the shadow of the woman who left to catch a plane when he was a child, and never came home — and by the fate of the country that he is now barred from visiting. “It must have affected me in one way or another,” he says. “I probably learnt how to close off my emotions. I had to live life without my mother for many years and try not to let it get on top of me and try not to let the horror of what is going on in Burma affect me too much, while trying to get on and live a fairly normal life.”



Kim Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi at the airport in Bagan, Myanmar, 2011

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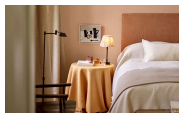
He has been an intimate witness to one of the most dramatic political stories of the age, but until now he has almost never

talked publicly about his life. I have been in intermittent touch with Kim for a few years, but he has always politely declined to be interviewed — until a few weeks ago, when he changed his mind.

In large part, it is because of grief and frustration at the continuing horrors being perpetrated in Myanmar by the country's latest military dictatorship, bumped out of public consciousness by events in Ukraine and the Middle East. Partly, it is indignation about the way that, having been raised up on a moral pedestal, his mother has been denounced by those who were once her most ardent supporters. Although he doesn't spell it out, I suspect it's also prompted by something else: the grim recognition that, close to 80, in uncertain health, and having been locked up alone for two and half years, time for his mother may be running out.

IT WAS HER OWN MOTHER'S FINAL ILLNESS that took her back to Rangoon (now called Yangon), but Suu Kyi's ascent to leadership was driven by her long-dead father, Burma's independence leader and national hero, Aung San. She was two when he was assassinated by a political rival, a tragedy that plunged the country into decades of chaos and dysfunction. As a privileged member of the ruling class, his daughter escaped the worst of it, going to a posh school in India, graduating from Oxford, and quietly settling down there as Michael Aris's wife. But she was burdened by a sense of unfulfilled duty and mission. "I only ask one thing," she wrote to Aris during their courtship, "that should my people need me, you would help me to do my duty by them... Sometimes I am beset by fears that circumstances and national considerations might tear us apart."

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None of this was discernible to her sons. "I consider my upbringing to have been fairly normal," says Kim. "My mum was at home, doing the cooking, taking us to school." He was named after the hero of Rudyard Kipling's novel, *Kim*, a relic of his mother's Victorian-tinged education in post-colonial India. There were occasional visits to Burma — on one of them, the

boys spent a week and half in a Buddhist monastery where they took part in a traditional coming-of-age ceremony. The summer after her abrupt departure, they flew out to join their mother in the big old family house on University Avenue, Yangon. Inside, their grandmother lay in her final illness. Outside, young Kim played in the jungly garden. “I remember I horrified my mother by collecting cockroaches in a matchbox and dragging them around in front of her houseguests,” he says.

The visitors were the founders of the nascent National League for Democracy (NLD), who were pleading with Suu Kyi to lend her family name and authority to the anti-junta movement. The situation was becoming grimmer by the week: in August 1988, soldiers opened fire on protesters on the streets, killing thousands and arresting many more. Later that month, Suu Kyi relented to the pressure and delivered an electrifying speech at the symbolic heart of Myanmar, the Shwedagon pagoda.

“It was extremely crowded and hot,” Kim remembers. “I had to dress up for the occasion, which I resisted, as I still do. But even I was able to grasp the horror of it all. Even though I didn’t realise quite how significant my mother’s position was, I realised she was in a unique position.”



Suu Kyi with her husband, Michael Aris, on his last visit to see her, and sons Alexander (left) and Kim, 1995

ARIS FAMILY COLLECTION

The following year, he was back in Yangon staying with his mother when she was placed under house arrest in University Avenue. “I remember the soldiers moving in in big trucks and taking the student revolutionaries away,” he says. “They cut the phone lines and installed security around the house. I don’t think it bothered me too much. As a child, it’s all just an adventure in one way or another.”

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Suu Kyi went on hunger strike — it was her husband and sons who talked her out of it. But something had changed. “I think I realised it then,” says Kim. “After she was first put under house arrest, my brother and father came out to join us and we were all semi-under house arrest with her. And then we went home to England, and she didn’t come with us. So I knew then that things weren’t ever going to go back to how they were.”

In Oxford, Kim embarked on the divided existence that he has lived ever since. To all appearances it was a calm life of modest middle-class privilege — boarding school, holidays with his father and the extended Aris family. But all the time he was looking towards Yangon.

“We couldn’t write too much of significance, because we knew the letters would be pored over [by the junta’s spies],” he says. “But we could send care packages — Lindt chocolate, Toblerone, cheese, English delicacies.” Then one of the parcels was opened up and its contents — including lipstick and a Jane Fonda workout video — were photographed by the Burmese state media. The point was to discredit Suu Kyi by showing how well she lived in comparison to the poor people she claimed to

represent. After that, she refused all deliveries from outside, even letters from her sons.

- [Suu Kyi's son calls on UK to help release her from Myanmar prison](#)

For a few years, Aris and the boys had been allowed to come and go — the junta's thinking was that they would persuade Suu Kyi to return home with them. When it became clear that this wouldn't work, it refused them visas, in the hope that enforced isolation from the world would have the desired effect. This was what set her incarceration apart from other prisoners of conscious such as Andrei Sakharov or Nelson Mandela. The government wanted her out; at any moment, with a word to her guards, she could have been on her way to the airport and the comfort of exile.

In interviews, she has always briskly refused invitations to mourn the separation from her family. She could not afford to give any sign of being affected by the regime's cruelties, for fear that it would encourage them to increase their efforts. She knew that, once she had left Myanmar, she would never be allowed to return, and the young men and women who had sacrificed so much blood would be leaderless. But she was not forcibly kept from her husband and children — she volunteered for the separation.

“She talked for a while about Alexander and Kim,” a Burmese friend and colleague recorded in a diary of her time with Suu Kyi. “She had tears in her eyes, she said nothing more... I could see that she was trying not to cry. Then she said, I had better concentrate on my new sons.”

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KIM ARIS DOES NOT WEEP WHEN HE TALKS OF HIS

MOTHER, but there is little doubt about the effect on his life of the choice that she made. In the past few weeks, I have spent six hours talking to him, twice on Zoom and once over the course of an evening at his local pub in west London. From his reluctance to speak to a journalist, I had expected someone more obviously troubled and withdrawn. But in person he is a dry, droll and good-humoured man of 46, who puffs at roll-ups and laughs with a smoker's wheeze. When asked about the dissolution of his family, he gives the same reply that his mother has done in interviews of her own — that the sufferings of his own family are trivial compared with those of others. But he seems to acknowledge the repression that has been necessary, for him as well as her, to cleave to this idea.

“Compared with what the people of Burma have had to go through I'm lucky,” he says. “Part of the shutting down of emotions is that other people have been through so much more — why should I get upset about my lot? Maybe it's affected me in ways I can't appreciate — being exposed to everything that's been happening in Burma, cutting myself off emotionally.”

He has never undergone therapy or counselling, and wonders if he should. “I'm sure I'm totally screwed up,” he says, with that laugh. “But no — if I wasn't affected by things, then I'd be screwed up.”

Even people with stable families struggle with life and it is impossible to measure how much he was hurt by having a mother who was locked up by brutal generals. But Kim's youth was far from smooth. He dropped out of his posh private school, and walked away from a place at Durham University after a week. He settled back in Oxford, trained as a carpenter, and lived for seven years with his girlfriend, Rachel Jefferies, before they separated.

He is reticent about the details; at one point, he tells me that some of his memories have been lost in a haze of drinking and drugs. “There was uncommon stress on our relationship,” he says. “The fact that my background is quite unique — it can put a strain on things. There are pressures other people don't necessarily have to deal with.” The couple had two children — Jamie, now 24, and Jasmine, 21. Neither was planned, but both were a delight to their father, and saved him from his family's greatest crisis.

In January 1999, after months of backache, Michael Aris was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer. He immediately applied to the Burmese embassy for a visa to visit his wife. It was refused. Friends and supporters, including the Prince of Wales, pleaded on his behalf, but in vain. In a nauseating display of hypocrisy, the junta expressed sympathy — but in such a case, it explained, it was the duty of the wife to go to her sick husband, not the other way round. “The military didn’t have a heart,” says Kim. “They wanted to use him against her. They wanted to get her out of the country so she wouldn’t be so much of a fly in their ointment.”

Kim was with his dying father during his last days. “It was one of the hardest points in my life,” he says. “They wouldn’t allow me to visit [Burma] either — I’m not even sure that we were allowed to write. I remember having a phone call with my mother. She was desperately sad that she couldn’t be there. I was desperately sad too, and so was my father. He wanted to go to her, but he didn’t want her to come back. He realised she was needed there and she had already sacrificed so much. That’s the only time I asked her to come back. I feel terrible for having done so. It’s not as though she didn’t have enough on her plate as it was.”

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Michael Aris died in March 1999, on his 53rd birthday. “It was a month or so before my son was born,” says Kim. “It wasn’t an easy phase in my life, but my son brought a lot of joy and I think without him I would probably have fallen to pieces.”

AFTER HER ARREST IN 1989, AUNG SAN SUU KYI spent 15 of the next 21 years under house arrest. The harshness of her treatment ebbed and flowed; in the better periods, Kim was able to stay with her. Obvious spies trailed him wherever he went but he was at least able to leave the house — to shop for

souvenirs or swim in the British ambassador's pool. The friendly soldiers who guarded his mother taught him Burmese kick-boxing. A tattoo artist came to the house and engraved his arms with beautiful designs of the Burmese *naga* or serpent. Sometimes contact with his mother was broken off by the junta for years at a time, but the moments they did spend together were precious. "When I was with her under house arrest, strange as it may seem, it was actually quite a nice period for me," he says. "Because I had her all to myself."



Suu Kyi in 2011 with her dog, Tai Chi Toe, who was a gift from Kim

ALAMY

In 2010, Suu Kyi was released from house arrest by the latest junta leader, a reformist who promised a return to civilian government. Two years later, she was able to make a short visit to Britain. She saw Kim and her grandchildren, and finally revisited Oxford, and addressed a joint sitting of both houses of parliament. This was the peak of her prestige and authority, and leaders and celebrities from all over the world — from Barack Obama to Bono — hastened to be photographed alongside the liberated heroine. In 2016, after an overwhelming NLD election victory, she became national leader. Her ascension felt like the vindication of precious hopes and principles. But within two years, her reputation was irreparably soiled.

In August 2017, the Myanmar security forces responded to small-scale attacks by militants to launch a murderous campaign against villages in western Rakhine State. They were populated by an ethnic group known as the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim people who had long faced discrimination and oppression by the Buddhist majority. A UN report would later describe the bestial violence used against the defenceless villagers: women and girls as young as 13 raped, some of them

with sticks and knives. Survivors recounted how Burmese soldiers shot, stabbed and burnt men, women and children, and buried them in mass graves. A UN team concluded that an estimate of 10,000 dead was “conservative”. More than 700,000 people were driven over the border into Bangladesh where they live even now in conditions of dire poverty and overcrowding in the world’s largest refugee camp.

Almost as shocking as the violence, for many people outside Burma, was the attitude of Aung San Suu Kyi. Her failure to denounce the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya aroused the horror of those around the world who had cheered her the most. “You no longer represent a symbol of hope, courage and the undying defence of human rights,” Amnesty International said, in stripping her of its Ambassador of Conscience award. To Kim in Britain, it was unexpected, confusing and deeply painful but, as he talks about it today, he is fiercely, even bitterly, defensive of the decisions made by his mother.

“What was said and done [by her] at the time was completely misrepresented,” he says. “She was taking every action possible to rectify the situation without more bloodshed. She was condemning what the military were doing. It’s just that people weren’t interested in the way she was saying it. She wanted rule of law. People are bored by things like that. She wants justice to be done in an orderly manner.”

He blames the media for his mother’s loss of reputation. “They’ll build idols up and then tear them down even quicker,” he says. “It wasn’t at all proportionate.” The pop stars, actors and politicians who had competed for Suu Kyi selfies suddenly shunned her; the honorary degrees were abruptly withdrawn. “It upset me,” says Kim. “After all she’d given over the years, to see her treated like that was saddening to say the least.”



Kim Aris in London: "It upset me, after all she'd given, to see how she was treated"

GRAEME ROBERTSON/ GUARDIAN / EYEVINE

The strongest argument in favour of Suu Kyi's approach was one of political necessity. Under the new "reformist" constitution, her civilian government had no authority over the armed forces, which remained under the independent control of the commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. To have spoken out on behalf of the Rohingya, it was said, would have provoked the army into deposing her. But in the end, Suu Kyi threw away her moral credibility — and there was a coup anyway.

At dawn on February 1, 2021, soldiers seized her from her home in the new capital, Naypyidaw and took control of the government. Weeks of peaceful protest were met with deadly violence, and by the end of the year, the country was in a state of civil war between the armed forces and a loose network of poorly armed insurgents.

At a stroke, Myanmar's politics had rewound more than a decade. The situation of the country is worse than ever. People are dying every day; every few weeks comes news of a new atrocity against civilians — a village strafed, a refugee camp bombed — although they make little impression on a western world preoccupied by the Middle East and Ukraine. The war looks unwinnable by either side, and the non-violence insisted on by Suu Kyi is a quaint relic of the past.

"The bloodshed going on now is atrocious," says Kim. "There are so many armed groups and some of them are almost as bad as the military. Children are growing up thinking guns are toys

and killing is acceptable, which is something my mother was trying to avoid for the best part of her life.”

Suu Kyi is 78 and is serving a 27-year sentence for invented crimes (originally 33 years, the sentence was reduced earlier this year). Kim gets a certain amount of information from the brave Burmese lawyers representing her, but this places them at risk of arrest and imprisonment. “I don’t know where she’s being held, but I know the conditions won’t be very good,” he says. “From what I know she’s being held in barracks within the [Naypyidaw] prison compound. She’s not even allowed to mingle with the other prisoners. As far as I’m aware, she’s allowed no visitors at all.”

Reports over the summer, impossible to confirm independently, said that she was suffering from painful gum disease, which was being inadequately treated. “I’m very worried,” says Kim. “If you can’t eat, then you won’t live much longer, will you? That’s almost the hardest thing — just not knowing what’s happening.”

“At this time I feel I need to risk poking my head above the parapet,” Kim wrote to me in June, when we were negotiating our interview. He has given up his carpentry to become a full-time campaigner; he will soon launch a drive to raise funds for humanitarian relief for Burmese refugees. Kim will be tattooed with another *naga*; people will sponsor him. He says that he has hope for Myanmar, that the junta cannot last and he believes that he will see his mother in two years — “but I have no idea.

“I do sometimes wish she would be a little less steadfast, less willing to sacrifice so much,” he says. “Because she’s getting old now and she’s not the spring chicken she once was. She could retire!” He gives his wheezy laugh, for this is an unlikely notion, as he knows. “I don’t know if she would ever leave Burma and when she’s there, she’ll always have work to do.

“I’ve never really felt like she left me,” he says. “I was with her when she was first arrested, and things unfolded in a way that almost seemed... not normal, just a natural progression. She’s still alive. We still have a relationship at the end of the day. Like I said, I always thought myself lucky. I feel privileged to have had the upbringing I did — and happy I had the time with my mother that I did have. We had a wonderful time together as a family.”

To contribute to Kim Aris’s charitable appeal, go to

gofundme.com, and follow his Instagram page [@kimaris_hteinlin](https://www.instagram.com/kimaris_hteinlin)

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Aung San Suu Kyi

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P Douglas

2 DAYS AGO

It is terribly sad to see children separated from their mother for so long. Kim and his brother have endured such tragedy. I do hope

the love of their children can keep them and they will get to see their Mum again.

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R

Richard Tuber

1 DAY AGO

How many Rohingya will never see their mums again?

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DAVID JONES

1 DAY AGO

He's 46 years old!

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A

A kanwal

1 DAY AGO

She supported the attacks and defended the junta in its genocide of Muslim citizens, including at international forums. Not sure how the media misrepresented her actions. You only have to listen to the words she used.

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R

Richard Tuber

1 DAY AGO

She is an apologist for genocide. Full stop.

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D

Derek Tonkin

1 DAY AGO

See my article at www.networkmyanmar.org. I give chapter and verse for what she actually said and what she actually did over the Rohingya. Indeed, listen to her repeated expressions of sympathy for the Rohingya. You only have to listen to the words she used.

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D

D Franklin

1 DAY AGO

She made her choices. Clearly motherhood was not a priority for her.

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M

M Wavell

1 DAY AGO

Some very hurtful and ignorant comments here from people who I suspect have never been to Myanmar and have no grasp of the

delicate position of the NLD before the present crackdown. Suu Kyi knew well that the military were not to be crossed if even a semblance of democracy were to be allowed. Even ...

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Richard Tuber

1 DAY AGO

She collaborated with genocidists because it was worth it? Is that your stance?

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Mrs Pam Burn

1 DAY AGO

Sadly, for all her earlier sacrifices, which were many, history will not deal kindly with her.

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DAVID JONES

1 DAY AGO

Nor should it

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Richard Tuber

1 DAY AGO

Nor have the authorities.

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Michael Bradley

2 DAYS AGO

Yes its to easy to forget how some people sacrifice much time, effort and freedom to take positions of political and national leadership.

We need to be more grateful and less critical if the majority of decent politicians of all Parties in the UK.

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Richard Tuber

1 DAY AGO

Decent politicians, eh?

When she ascended to the office of state counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi drew criticism from several countries, organisations and figures over Myanmar's inaction in response to the genocide of the Rohingya people in Rakhine State and refusal to acknowledge that Myanmar's militar...

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T Jawed

1 DAY AGO



I cannot recall a person who was so revered and admired in the West, falling so far so quickly.

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Angelo Zavattieri Neto

1 DAY AGO



Lots of Rohingyas will not see either

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Derek Tonkin

1 DAY AGO



Recently I analysed in detail what Suu Kyi actually said and did about the Rohingya. The results may be read at www.networkmyanmar.org . My conclusions are precisely the same as those of Kim Aris. Suu Kyi has been grossly misrepresented by human rights groups and the media. She didn't "throw away h...

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Dominica Jewell

1 DAY AGO



She chose separation from your father and her family.

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