

## **A Family during the Second World War: A Trip to Uragasmanhandiya**

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I begin this narrative by giving some background as to how we ended up in Uragasmanhandiya some seventy years ago, describe aspects of our life there and give a brief account of the place. I follow this with an account of my recent trip to explore our past at that place.

### *My Parents move to Uragasmanhandiya*

I had always wanted to visit Uragasmanhandiya since my twin sister Lucky and our younger brother Nath spent our early childhoods there, from 1942 to 1946. My parents had moved there because of the fear of a Japanese invasion. A Japanese aircraft carrier with some 125 zero fighters had bombed parts of Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1942<sup>1</sup>. After that attack many families living in Colombo and its suburbs, moved to the provinces. My parents were a part of that fear-motivated evacuation.

I have been puzzled as to why my parents chose Uragasmanhandiya over other places to be away from Colombo. From a distant time and place, it was not an ideal place. It had the highest concentration of IRCs (or Island Reconvicted Convicts some 165 persons in 1942), it had a leper colony and it was not known for being a place with a salubrious climate. Schooling, medical facilities and other essential services were not good, as I note from this seventy year perspective. There was a tragic and very sad consequence to being in such a remote place. We lost a sister who was born there around 1944 and passed away around 18 months of age with diphtheria. It was an impossible disease to cure, with no penicillin available in Sri Lanka at that time. So, why did my parents go there? I am almost certain that it was due to the following reasons: land there was cheap and available under a ninety-nine year lease from the Government. I believe we had about 10 to 15 acres probably leased for about Rupees 500 an acre ( in today's prices, about Rs: 250,000 per acre) ; they were in a hurry to get out of Colombo following the air raid, they also had some money to pay for it since the main family home owned by my grandfather in Ratmalana was sold in a panic sale for Rs 11,000 (with nearly about two acres and the price today would be around Rs: 44,000,000 an acre at Rs 275,000 a perch. )<sup>2</sup> And the proceeds shared among three of the siblings who had no houses of their own. My parents were young- both were 35 years of age and they may have looked upon the move there as an adventure.

### *Life in Uragasmanhandiya*

Life in Uragasmanhandiya for us, the children was okay. We did not know any better then. Our house which was meant to have been a temporary one turned out to be the one we lived for the four years, we were there. The walls were made out of clay and the roof was made out of *cadjan* or dry

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<sup>1</sup> One zero fighter crashed or mistakenly landed in the Talangama Tank after taking anti-aircraft fire . The tank was covered with salvinia (a water plant that covers water surfaces which makes a body of water look like a plain field). The plane was discovered few years before we moved to our house in November 2006 which is by the side of the tank.

<sup>2</sup> At today's prices.

coconut leaves. It was basically a thatched house and the floor was mud, sometimes topped with cow dung as it was the practice then. It had two bed rooms, an office room and another room in front that served as a store room. I remember that the store room was at times used to store plumbago (the mineral that functions as lead in pencils) that was mined in our leased land. The house was situated behind a hill some distance away from the road. Behind the house was a slope that was bordered by a stream and next to the stream was a well that provided water to the large vegetables garden that we grew.

There were no work opportunities for my father nor was he searching for them there. He and my mother were taking a break from work. My father and mother had started a small English and Business skills teaching "tutory" or a small school at Bandaragama (few miles inland from Pandura). That must have been before my father was recruited as a tea control inspector and they had moved to Kadugannawa (about ten miles south of Kandy on the main Colombo-Kandy Road). With the coming of the Second World War, Sri Lanka's exports were completely state-controlled. After all, it was a British colony so they had the say about economic policy, especially during the time of war. Both tea and rubber supplies were controlled. The tea control inspectors saw to it that the plantations produced increased tea and rubber volumes, mostly by greater intensity of cultivation, by pruning tea plants intensively and tapping rubber trees deeper<sup>3</sup>. The area of cultivation was not extended.

Kadugannawa was important for our life in Uragasmanhandiya because it is where my parents took in a cook to help them- Isabelahamy who was to become a close member of our family, and we called her *aachi* (grandmother in Sinhala). She was with us in Ratmalana where we were born and at Uragasmanhandiya and practically brought up my sister and me. And she lived with us until 1963 when she passed away. My sister and I were in the university at Peradeniya at that time and came for the funeral. She had also looked after my sister Nandani and brother Thilak, our younger siblings, after she had looked after the three of us and our sister Amitha. She had joined our household the day after my parents returned from their honeymoon. So she was very involved in our family, cooking, keeping house and looking after us. She was more like a house-keeper and had an assistant to help her at various times. She was to stay back in Uragasmanhandiya in our house, after we left, but she did not, as her romantic connection with a local man had not worked out.

My father and mother were both unemployed in a formal sense after they moved to Uragasmanhandiya. My father had left his job before the war ended. My mother, who was teaching at *Waisaka Vidyalyaya* in Wellawatte, gave up her job when they moved to Kadugannawa. And, from there, they were back to Ratmalana and then moved to Uragasmanhandiya. The land that they had leased in Uragasmanhandiya was used to grow cinnamon and vegetables. A couple of laborers were engaged to help with the vegetable growing<sup>4</sup>. The leader of this small labor gang was known as a *kankanema*. We had many areas in the land blocked up to grow a wide variety of vegetables, from brinjals (eggplant), to chilies (peppers), cucumbers and a variety of melons. I am not sure we made an adequate income despite the rise in agricultural prices during the war, but my parents had some money left from the sale

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<sup>3</sup> This was called "slaughter tapping".

<sup>4</sup> Cinnamon did not need daily attention but some drainage and fertilization every three month or so.

of the main house that my grandfather had owned. It seemed to me that they had a holiday from the hustle and bustle of the city and safe from Japanese attacks, if there was going to be an invasion<sup>5</sup>.

My mother had a person who was very close to her about 8 miles from where we lived, past Elpitiya known as Kurundugahahattama. That person was Mrs. Pichanhamy, who was brought up by my grandmother and basically looked after my mother and her younger sister Lily. Mrs. Pichanhamy married a butler and had four children, Henry, Margaret, Charlotte and Albert (known by his pet name- *baby-mahthaya* who is now eighty years old!). When we lost our sister, Mrs. Pichanhamy was a huge help to my mother to deal with the death of her child. I cannot believe how devastating it would have been for her to lose a baby girl who was growing up so well. Later, Charlotte *akka* lived with us when she started teaching in Colombo. And, my brother Nath and I sometime spent our holidays there. Because, that family was very close to us in the past, I wanted to combine my trip to Urugasmanhandiya with a visit to the house of Mrs. Pichanhamy.

My sister, brother and I were preschoolers. We watched military vehicles pass by from the hillock that bordered our land and the main road. There was an army camp in the area with both British and Indian soldiers. We used to shout to them "hello, Johnny, one cigarette". We had learned it from the older village children who came to play with us. Sometimes the British soldiers obliged and threw their "k-ration" tins from the trucks they travelled in. On some occasions we would see small planes flying above the hill in front of our house. Wartime was not a trying time for us. We lived in a peaceful place, playing with children from the village and the children of some of our parent's friends, like the rest housekeeper's children. We played a version of "*hora police*" or cops and robbers. Our family easily integrated with the village folk. My father came to be known as "*Kannadi mahathaya*" (the gentleman in glasses). My mother was known as the "*iskole nona*", or the "teacher lady".

From what I can gather, my parents got on well with the village folks. My mother may have helped the villagers with advice on the education of their children, while my father may have helped the villagers with their interaction with the local administration, led by British nationals and Sri Lankan administrative officers. Sometimes, my father invited officers from the Army camp close by to come for dinner. I was fascinated, seeing huge Sikh officers who were at the camp. They brought *chapattis* with them and ate rice and curry at our place, so well prepared by *aachi*.

I remember a friend of my parents (Mr. Mahatun) who managed a rubber estate close to the Miriswatte School (where we started school and my mother taught). We used to visit him sometimes for dinner and my parents and he sang and played a harmonium and a violin. Later we met him on a trip we made to the South in the late 1950s. He was occupying our house. Probably it was given to him by my parents as they had no interest in that place any more. It had bitter memories for them because of the loss of Amitha. When we saw Mr. Mahatun he was distraught and looked to be in very poor economic circumstances and he was going through a mental depression. He started crying when he saw us and

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<sup>5</sup> Churchill was very worried about the Japanese conquering Sri Lanka. That would have been a huge disaster for British naval power since the Japanese conquered Singapore on February 15, 1942 without much effort. See Robert Andrews "Leaders and Commanders" Harper Perennial, New York, 2010.

tried to explain to us the poor circumstances that he was in. There was little we could do to help him. My mother tried to give him some money she had with her on the trip, but he refused to take it.

With the above recounting I have unburdened myself of the responsibility as the only one left to tell our family's story, how things were in those years. I bear witness to that time and place. I do this for our children and for my siblings who had no part of the life there and to our grandchildren. All in all, it was not a bad place to be, as children. Our one tragedy there would have happened even if we had lived in Colombo.

#### *My visit to Uragasmanhandiya on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012*

After some inquiries from persons who knew the area, I planned on a visit to Uragasmanhandiya. An official of The Finance Company, Manjula put me in touch with a local businessman whom the villagers called the "Forty Loan Mudalali", Mr. Piyaratne Wickremasinghe. He promised to devote a full day to help me find the place we lived and the persons who may have known my parents.

I looked up Google maps and GPS images in preparation for the trip. They were only a little help since the place had changed much over a span of some seventy years. I jogged my memory and wrote down few notes, hoping that would help me to get a fix on the place. I also questioned a person who had lived there recently. To get a fix on the house we lived in. I worked out that our *aachi* could walk to the main Uragasmanhandiya junction to buy provisions. From the maps and information from Mr. Wickremasinghe, I found that there were two roads that I had to distinguish. I had two points on the relevant road that went past our house. One point was the Uragasmanhandiya junction and the other was the Miriswatte School that my sister and I attended after our mother began to teach there. The relevant road was the Elpitiya- Ambalangoda Road. Across from our land and the road there was a paddy field. I remember people harvesting paddy from it. My parents may have leased that paddy field for our consumption, since rice was scarce during the war years.

I went to Uragasmanhandiya with my friend and class mate, Dharmisiri Wickramaratne, the well-known playwright and film director. He wanted to provide me company for the trip and also get a chance to see the South since he had not been there in a long while. His family was from a nearby town called Kosgoda. Our enthusiastic driver, Jayatilleke was excited at the prospect of driving down the new Southern Highway. He drove above the speed limit of 100 Kph and we got to Galle in about fifty minutes and had to backtrack since we missed the *Kurundugahatamma* (literally means the mile post by the cinnamon tree) exit.

Our first challenge was to find Mrs. Pichanhami's house where we had spent our vacations in the mid-1950s. I remember it as being close to the 9<sup>th</sup> mile post on the way to Elpitiya from Ambalangoda and close to a bridge. My memory was being tested. The place had changed totally in sixty years and the road was no longer marked in terms of mile posts but in kilometer posts. I was very excited at the prospect of seeing the family who was very nice to us, so many years ago. I was not sure of their surname, so I had to walk along the road in that vicinity that I thought where the house was located, looking for old folks in the neighborhood who could help me to find a family that I could only

describe. The father was a butler to a British rubber planter, Mr. Gruin, the two girls in the family were trained teachers and the eldest son was Henry while the younger was Albert. One lady in that vicinity knew the family and directed me to the house. I saw an old gentleman working in the garden and I approached him and introduced myself. He could not recognize me, since we had not met in some sixty years. But slowly it dawned on him who I was. He mentioned to me that he knew that one member of our family was working in a bank in the United States. I told him that I was that person. Then a strange thing happened. He said that about three months before he had thought about our family and had wandered where we were. It was the same time that I had made plans to visit them.

I got to meet his wife, a gracious lady who reminded me of Mr. Albert Silva's mother and two daughters. They had four daughters, Nadie a pharmacist, Nilanka a music teacher (*visharadha* or master), Nimali a civil engineer and Thasithala who ran a retail business with her husband. All well accomplished persons. The other siblings of Albert Silva were dead. I was particularly moved to hear that Charlotte *akka* (sister in Sinhala), who never married, had died. She stayed with us when she was teaching in Colombo. She was a very nice person. I saw some pictures of her. Similarly, Margaret *akka* was also dead and the same was the case with Henry. But their families were doing well.

The next and the main purpose of the trip was to find the place where we lived in Uragasmanhandiya, meet any persons who could have known my parents, visit the school my sister and I attended and my mother taught and then also go to the hospital where our younger sister had died some 68 years ago. It was not too difficult to find the place that we lived when we passed the area, as I had remembered that it was a hill on the right hand side of the road on the way to Ambalangoda. The road to our house which was uphill was easily seen particularly when one looked through a camera lens. The road was all full of wild vegetation. The house we lived could not be seen. It is unlikely that such a structure would have lasted over seventy years. We saw that the hill that once we had to go by to our house. Its side had been cut to build some new houses. We could not go up to the property because it had ferns and trees covering a way to the top. Nevertheless, it was very good to have gone as close as we did to that place. I recognized the road by the side of the hill and the magnificent ferns that grew on the side of the road, even then.

My new friends from Uragasmanhandiya, Piyaratne Wickremasinghe *mudali* and Sergeant Wimalaratne took us to meet their grand aunt who was 97 years old. After getting her to remember events of the 1942-1946 period, I asked her this question: do you remember a gentleman named "*Kannadi mahataya*"?<sup>6</sup> She remembered the name. And, she told me that he was a fine gentleman, very helpful to the villagers but she said that the family suddenly moved out of the area leaving their house and property as well as everything in the house behind. This was correct. But she did not know other details of the family. I was lucky to meet her. It was clear that she did not remember any details after that. So we thanked her and left their house. My friends gave me a couple of new names with whom we

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<sup>6</sup> It was Dharmasiri Wickramaratne who gave me the tip to speak to the lady about any event of that time so that she could get to that time in her mind. It was like getting her to go to that file in her mind so that after getting to it she could recall the items in it.

could meet with, on another occasion. These were Buramphy *mudalali* and Reverend Deepankara. I will keep these clues in mind for our next visit.

Next we visited our old school, *Mirisawatte Laduru Pasala* (Miriswatte School for Infants). It has now become a central school with students going up to the university level. The one building school now had many buildings and seemed to be well kept, something noteworthy, because Government schools are generally not well maintained. I met the principal and told him that my sister and I started our schooling there and that my mother taught at the school. Four of the five students who took the university entrance examination had passed this year. One reason for it, which the principal did not say, was due to parents paying private tutors outside schooling hours. The sharp rise in cinnamon prices had given more cash to farmers in the area and they could pay for the children's tuition classes. The principal had done a good job with the school. He was seeking funds to improve the school further.

Our final place to visit was the Elpitiya Government hospital where our sister Amitha was taken when she had diphtheria. I remember two police constables coming to our house, the dead of night and speaking to our *aachi*. She broke down, crying hard. Our place was remote and only policemen traveling together in bicycles could come there at that hour. There being no street lights or any lights for that matter. My parents knew the Inspector of police Mr. Chandrasena and he must have sent the policemen to inform us of the loss of our sister. My parents had spent few days at the hospital hoping for a recovery that never came. I took a couple of pictures of the hospital. The security guard on duty wanted to know whether I was a newspaper reporter.

My final thoughts on the visit are the following. It was very important for me to have been on that journey to reconnect with my past and with the members of my family that I have lost. It brings closure to the death of Amitha since we were then too young to realize what had happened. Even though there was no trace of the house that we lived in, I was able to see the access to the land and see the path we treaded on, some sixty odd years ago. It was also very nice to see Albert Silva, the youngest child of Mrs Pichanhamy and meet his family. I will keep in touch with them. Finally the two persons from Uragasmanhandiya , Piyaratne Wickremasinghe (Forty loan *mudalali*) and Sergeant K.D Wimalaratne were most helpful to me. Sergeant Wimalaratne could hardly walk having got a stroke after he retired from the army few years ago. They helped me, a total stranger expecting no reward at all. And, they invited me to their homes and asked me to come back and that they will find out more about our stay in that village. I will certainly see them again. I am in their debt.

Sarath Rajapatirana

Battaramulla, 16th April 2012