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## Foreword

By U Thaw Kaung

Khin Let Ya brought me the manuscript of her book *Paintings of Bo Let Ya*; apart from the text there were also colour prints of the paintings. At first I was reluctant to write the "Foreword" as I did not know much about painting and art. I felt that I could not really write much about the work of one of the best amateur painters of post-Independent Myanmar, who also happened to be one of the founders of the Burma Army and ultimately of the Union of Burma.

We have all read about the Thirty Comrades who went clandestinely to Japan just before the beginning of the Second World War in the East, how they were led by General Aung San who had a dedicated, intelligent, deputy Thakin Hla Pe, who later became Bo Let Ya when the Burma Independence Army was formed in December 1941.

My father, U Kaung, who became the Director

## PAINTINGS OF BO LET YA

of Education in Post – Independent Myanmar was a friend of Bo Let Ya, joining the group of amateur artists that gathered around this famous politician, military commander and later a successful businessman.

Our family owe a debt of gratitude to Bo Let Ya for finding for us a plot of land just one house away from his, off Inya Road. My father built a house around 1952 as he wanted to live there when he would retire at age (55) a few years later. Then he would be able to paint with Bo Let Ya as his neighbour, but unforeseen fate cut short his life in a car accident when he was only 52. So although my father never lived at 18B Inya Rd, my mother and myself and my two sisters all had a house to live in due to Bo Let Ya's help. So we had all been neighbours of Khin Let Ya and her sister Yu Let Ya. We also went to the same school.

My reluctance to write the "Foreword" disappeared once I started reading Khin Let Ya's text, explaining what each painting meant to her, her sister and family. I came to realise that these paintings were not just mere depictions of Myanmar scenery, they were special, they all conveyed a message to the artist's family. At first glance they may look like just any other painting of the Myanmar countryside, the seacoast, the riverside, and so on. The paintings were special because they had all been painted by Bo Let Ya from memory and imagination while he was being incarcerated in the infamous Insein jail—while he was all alone by himself, missing his family and his home.

We should all be thankful to Khin Let Ya for

her insightful, well-written commentary for each painting for only after reading her text, the true meaning that the artist wanted to convey becomes alive.

Like Pandit Nehru writing letters to his daughter, who later become Mrs. Indra Gandhi, Bo Let Ya was sending the paintings to his daughters to express his moods and feelings, his loneliness, his longing to be back home with his loved ones.

The physical body can be kept behind bars, but the mind and spirit of love and longing for separated loved ones cannot be shackled. It is the sentiment that Richard Lovelace (1618-1658) expressed so exquisitely in the following verses;

*Stone walls do not a prison make  
Nor iron bars a cage  
Minds innocent and quiet take  
that for a hermitage.  
If I have freedom in my love  
and in my soul am free  
Angels alone that soar above,  
Enjoy such liberty.*

These paintings by Bo Let Ya were a manifestation of a father's love for his daughters, painted over a period of five years when he had been unjustly detained and forced to live by himself far from his home and family. Now Khin Let Ya is letting us see the other side of Bo Let Ya, the gentler, artistic side, the visionary, the dreamer.

I hope that this little book, with its lovely pictures, will form a companion volume to the biography

of Bo Let Ya which his diligent, thoughtful daughter, an artist of her own with words, both in English and Burmese, has now completed. It is my wish that others will enjoy reading this book, and appreciating the paintings, as much as I have done.

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Thaw Kaung