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SUBHEADLINE: Her life experience spans widely contrasting social classes, cultures and countries and this nonagenarian, who recently returned to the Kingdom, still has a few surprises up her sleeve

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

BYLINE: Picture by SOMKID CHAIJITVANIT

Strength, durability and flexibility are essential properties for building materials. All the more vital when they are used in bridge construction to link components of varying natures and consistencies from different sources. Princess Rudivoravan, whose life has spanned three continents and almost an entire century, is made of similarly resilient stuff.

The weather was beautiful that morning in April, 1911, when she was born at Praeng Nara Palace in Bangkok. Her mother, Soon Penkul, was the youngest wife of Prince Narathip Prabhanbongse, a son of King Rama IV. He already had no less than 22 children but Rudivoravan was to become the apple of his eye.

Her life was to give the lie to that dreary aphorism which was often quoted to her during her childhood: ``East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet''.

Indeed, some 90 years later, the error of Rudyard Kipling's bombastic statement is very evident; East and West have inarguably fused, and there's no better illustration of this than MC Rudivoravan aka Rudi Voravan.

In addition to paving the way for a marriage between opposite points of the compass, divergent cultures and civilisations, her fascinating life also linked the flamboyance of palace life during the last years of Siam's absolute monarchy with the rough-and-tumble existence of a working mother in America, the pressing obligations of a mom chao with the anonymity of a commoner struggling to make ends meet.

The alloy of which Rudi is made has stood the test of time and is still capable of springing a few more surprises on us.

``I've had a wonderful and very fruitful life. I believe I am amongst the very few _ if not the only _ members of the royal family to have led an existence from top to bottom, to have had a very wide range of experiences,' comments this amiable woman who turned 90 in April.

In the charming setting of her daughter's small apartment on Rajdamri Road, majestic in red blouse and matching skirt, Rudi's erect posture gives no hint of her age. ``I have gone through very rough times but I always hung on and never gave up, knowing that the sun would eventually shine at the end of the tunnel.''

Six months ago she quit her adopted country (Chicago was her last place of residence) to come back and live in Thailand. She continues, in the mixed English and American accent she developed during the 50-odd years she's spent abroad: ``I have no regrets whatsoever. I feel very rich and fortunate _ I feel like a millionaire because I have health and love. What else would I need?''

Rudi's wealth adds up to quite a lot in the end. And we're referring not to the number of digits in her bank balance but to the unrivalled collection of memories and experiences she has accumulated. Part of this priceless collection she shared with Ruth Adams Knight for a book published in New York in 1957 as *The Treasured One, The Story of Rudivoravan, Princess of Siam*. The biography was recently translated into Thai and serialised in *Krungthep Turakij* newspaper. Rudi is now planning to reprint the original English version and is also thinking of writing a second volume of memoirs.

Practically unheard of here, *The Treasured One* teems with juicy details and captivating experiences. It brings back to life historic buildings now either demolished or hidden behind high walls, off-limits to the general public: the City of the Forbidden Women (nang haam), the women-only section of the Grand Palace where she was sent at the age of five, to live with her aunt, Princess Chudharat; Chakri Palace; and Dusit Palace _ where she lived with her elder sister, Queen Lakshamilavan, wife of Rama VI, after returning from school in England.

Written with the wisdom of hindsight, the memoir takes a critical and bemused look at the behaviour of a pampered but endearing little princess.

``As to why everybody made such fuss over me I am not clear, for later my sisters told me that I had so little hair [that] they called it cigarette tobacco, because it resembled the straggling ends of our loosely packed Siamese cigarettes, and that I always looked cross about something. My family seem to have loved me greatly in spite of it. Why I appeared angry I do not know ... Perhaps I was play-acting, trying to make myself important,' the princess explains in the book.

A few chapters and many years later, she recalls the period following her mother's death when she spent most of her time with Queen Lakshamilavan:

``Another colourful pastime was to be rowed past the floating markets. There, wares were picturesquely displayed in boats along the shores and Bangkok did its daily buying. But I was chaperoned on those occasions, too, and at the pools where I swam, and even while I plucked water lilies, or played with a fawn-colored gibbon chained in the garden. The gibbon was a beautiful creature. It had everything it could wish for, except freedom

``We had much in common, I thought; for often I felt I was only a chained and pampered pet myself.''

A few pages later, Rudi carries on in introspective mode: ``I felt no fear of him [my father] at all. Perhaps that was my tragedy ... What I unknowingly craved, I think, was to be under authority I respected and to have responsibilities of my own. My life was too easy and too empty for all the devotion lavished on me.''

Early on in the biography she talks of the special position she held in her father's heart: ``My father combined Rudi [meaning `one who brings joy, who is greatly beloved'] with his own name to show his affection and his hopes for me ... he wished me to have great happiness in my own life and advantages beyond those usual for women of my country ... While he used his power over me arbitrarily during my childhood, later he allowed me to make many of my own decisions, with only a warning to me that my youthful values

might prove to be false, that true happiness must come from within and great courage and effort often were required to achieve it.'

But of all the little favours and preferential treatment he showered on her, the following piece of advice, couched in metaphorical terms, was to prove most valuable:

``There is an admonition of my father that I carry in my heart: Never be as a stone, my daughter! Be as a ball. A stone thrown into the water sinks to the bottom and remains there. A ball filled with air, no matter how far down it is flung, comes bounding to the surface. So the human spirit, when it is cast into the depths, must force its way upward again to light and life.''

Indeed, it would seem that Rudi's entire life was lived in total compliance with this counsel. The buoyant spirit she inherited from her father would always help her hold her head up high.

Grasp this ability to bounce back and Rudi's irrepressible attraction for the West and you have the two keys to understanding the character of a colourful personage whose behaviour was often to set tongues wagging back then: Refusing a senior prince's invitation to dance during the Doll Fair at the Phya Thai Hotel; turning down the same man a few weeks later after a picnic when he suggested walking her home along the beach; her decision, some years later, to divorce her first husband, Prince Jitjanok.

As Rudi puts it in her book: ``The entire pattern of my life has been one of sharp contrast. As a child, my home was the City of Forbidden Women ... in Bangkok. I went to school in rural England [at the age of 10]. Back in Siam, I attended my sister Queen Lakshami and lived with her in the villa of Dusit Palace. I married a prince, and later scandalised my royal family by getting a divorce. For love, I became the wife of a commoner. I am the mother of three children. A princess of Siam, I have also been a designer, a restaurant keeper, an actress, a dancer, a reporter, an area air-controller and the wife of a diplomatic attache. In these widely differing positions I have lived in both East and West and have learned, in the intimate way of a woman, to know the heart of each.''

She continues, a few paragraphs later: ``In me, a child of the East grown into a woman of the West, they [both poles] have met and fused ... Yet much that is Western in my nature is not acquired. It was mine from the beginning. I believe my father knew that.''

With the passing of time, Rudi looks back at the appeal the West held for her with a fresh eye and a hint of nostalgia: ``Perhaps the family I lived with in England [between the ages of 10 and 15 at the home of the Rev Ambrose Sturges-Jones, in Garbaldisham, Norfolk] was the only real family I knew _ I always wanted to go back to this true family life, it was my dearest dream and a true source of happiness. Coming back to Siam after these years in rural England I didn't stay with my mother either.''

Whatever the reason, Rudi was ultimately to return to the object of the love she had had a taste of during her teenage years _ the West.

After getting a divorce from Prince Jitjanok (to whom she had borne a son), she taught drama at the Fine Arts School in Bangkok, was shaken by the end of the absolute monarchy and saw Ananda Mahidol crowned King Rama VIII in 1935 and Siam, now renamed Thailand, moving toward democracy.

During World War Two she gave birth to her second child with her new husband _ Pooh Prabhailakshana, then secretary to a foreign adviser to the Ministry of Finance _ in the middle of an Allied air raid on the capital. She made the trip to Siriraj Hospital in a trishaw, in the complete obscurity of the black-out.

``It was black as the inside of a dragon, but every once in a while the moon would drift out from behind the deep clouds for a moment ... There, with warning sirens screaming, and the roar of enemy planes overhead, I proceeded to have my second daughter. She arrived before the doctor did. The nurse said I was the worst patient they had ever had. I screamed all the time ...''

A few years later, in 1947, Rudi's husband was posted as a financial attache to the Thai embassy in Washington where her second eldest brother, Prince Wan Waithayakorn, was the ambassador. Their stay in the US capital was to be

abruptly cut short. ``We had a good life [there] for ourselves and our daughters and we were able to do more for Pooh's mother and children [back] in Bangkok than if we had remained in Siam. I was confident that our troubles were over ... It was like an earthquake when word came to us suddenly, soon after, that the position my husband held was to be abolished and that we must return to Thailand at once.''

It didn't take long for Rudi to get over the disappointment. After a short detour with the air traffic control authorities in Bangkok (she was one of the first bilingual Thai women to work with the Americans informing pilots about weather conditions and guiding them in to land), she secured a job in the Government Publicity Department, presenting a radio programme which broadcast overseas news and Thai music.

``My voice was a part of the Voice of Thailand and the work brought me in close contact with the United States Information Service. I acted as a liaison officer in the Foreign Division. There I worked with journalists, reported interviews and often acted as interpreter in meetings with the prime minister.''

These contacts later helped her get a job in New York as a broadcaster with the Voice of America. Although this meant a separation from her husband, the couple concluded that the United States, as ``an operating democracy'', was the proper place to educate their two daughters.

So off Rudi went, with her two girls and ``only a quarter and two pennies left in my pocketbook,''' she recalls.

``There was no turning back now. Through the long night I thought longingly of my husband and his love and protection. But in the morning when we landed, I was in America, with a wonderful feeling that I had come home.''

And home the US would be, on and off, for the next four decades: She lived in New York for three years, Alabama for 11, Washington for seven, and Chicago for six, and later nine years. This period brought Princess Rudivoravan, now plain Mrs Rudi, great rewards as well as ``rude shocks''.

``I was made unpleasantly aware at times of being both foreign and dark-skinned.''

Despite lingering insecurities about the fact that she'd never obtained a degree, she felt great satisfaction at having been decorated for her work with the Voice of America and being made honorary president of several American universities.

During the 15 years she spent in the US, she gave countless lectures on Thailand and on the topic, ``East and West can meet''. She also presented a half-hour weekly TV show and still keeps a pile of video tapes of this in her daughter's Rajdamri apartment.

``I am proud that America accepted the little ability I had,'' she says, going on to concede that she could have done even better _ become a creative writer, for example _ if she'd had a college education.

Yet, above all, Rudi is most proud of having loyally served the land of her birth.

``I always tried to work for the benefit of my country and I am very proud to be Thai. Through my lectures, I am confident I have given Americans a proper understanding of Thai culture and tradition. People have been able to feel the greatness of our country. Hopefully I have contributed in my own way to the aura of our country.''

At the age of 63, Rudi married for the third time. Her husband, a brilliant American architect, died 14 years ago. It was only recently, however, that she decided to spend her remaining years in Thailand. ``I somehow started to get tired of doing everything by myself and as one of the eldest of the family, I felt it was my duty to come back and live in Thailand.''

Since her return Rudi has begun to take a keen interest in computer games and the Internet. Anyone who knows her true nature will feel confident in her ability to re-adjust to living here. She says she's having problems getting used to the climate _ the humidity, in particular, torments her _ and all the changes in place names (although she says these give rise to lots of surprises and interesting arguments with taxi drivers). Nor are local TV soap operas at all to her taste.

Still, it is the nature of a ball to bounce back _ regardless of the size of the obstacle in its path. And this indomitable lady is not about to be sunk by an impertinent cabbie or an asinine TV programme.