

Remembering Srilaksana Suntarahut On the 50th Anniversary of Her Baptism

Sister Srilaksana Suntarahut was born on July 4th, 1924, in Bangkok Thailand. She was the third child in a family of eleven children. Her father was a physician and had the distinction of being the physician to the king of Thailand HM King Vajiravudh (Rama VI).

*King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) (1910-1925) was a son of King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V). He was educated at Oxford and was deeply interested in literature (English and Thai). In 1917 he named the first university in Thailand after his father "Chulalongkorn University." His queen was **HM Queen Indrasakdi Sachi**¹ (1902-1975). The two did not have any children.*

After the King (Rama VI) passed away, Srilaksana's father returned to the private practice of medicine.



HM King Vajiravudh
(Rama VI) with HM
Queen Indrasakdi

Srilaksana and Queen Indrasakdi Sachi



Srilaksana's
Mother (rear)
with the future
Queen.

Srilaksana's mother was a friend of Queen Indrasakdi Sachi. Having been widowed without children, the Queen asked Srilaksana's parents if they would allow her to raise three of their daughters in the palace. So, it was that at age five or six (1929 or 1930) Srilaksana along with an older and younger sister moved into Suan Hong (Swan Garden Residence) one of several residences in Dusit Palace in Bangkok. Indrasakdi Sachi and Srilaksana grew to love each other. Srilaksana said, "It was the happiest time living with the queen in the palace." Living with the widowed Queen allowed Srilaksana many wonderful opportunities. Among these was access to the best education, her own maid, as well as life in a real palace with the Queen. Srilaksana was allowed to return home to be with her parents whenever she felt a little homesick. Her parents could also come and visit her at the palace. Srilaksana and her sisters were educated at a Catholic school (Santa Cruz) until she completed the 12th grade. It was among the finest schools in the country at that time.

The nuns who taught at the school were mostly from Europe (Britain, France, and Germany). They taught school in English and generally prohibited the students from speaking Thai. Here she received the best education and became versed in Christianity as practiced by the Catholic Church in Thailand.

A favorite activity of the queen was to have Srilaksana read to her each night at bedtime. She would read Thai literature as well as current events from the newspaper. When she read the newspaper Srilaksana would often sit on the floor and set the paper in front of her. Doing this was a favorite time of day for each of them.



Swan Garden Residence at Dusit
Palace Bangkok

After the democracy revolution of 1932, the Queen along with Srilaksana and her two sisters had to move out of the palace. The queen's father provided them a new home. The home was smaller than Suan Hong, yet it was a wonderful place to live. The house was located on a large tract of land that included a small lake, with tennis and badminton courts. Srilaksana would often play badminton with the queen. This new home was three floors in height and included a tower on top of that. Srilaksana added, *"When I was tired of reading to the queen I'd go to the tower where I could be alone for a while and enjoy the view of the surrounding area."*

World War II Interrupts an Education



Srilaksana
when a
college
student.

When Srilaksana completed the 12th-grade, she left the queen's home and enrolled in Chulalongkorn University. There she studied science for about two years. When World War II broke out, Thailand was invaded by Japan. Srilaksana's parents were concerned what evil things the members of the Japanese army might do to them and their children so they took flight northward on the great Chao Phraya River to the city of Pitsanuloke. During the night they would live on a houseboat on the river, and during the day they would move to a nearby home. Late one night a member of the Japanese military knocked on the door. Srilaksana's father answered it. Srilaksana said, *"He was so scared he was white."* Fortunately, they just wanted him to take care of a sick officer. After helping the officer recover the family was well treated by the Japanese army. They would bring Srilaksana's family supplies that otherwise were hard to find.

Marriage and Family

Upon their return to Bangkok Srilaksana became a civil servant working for the Thai government. It was here she met William Gottsche. He was from Denmark. His parents were in Thailand while his father helped design the railroad from Samut Prakan (on the Gulf of Thailand) to Hua Lumpong (the main train station) in Bangkok. They were married in a Catholic ceremony in Bangkok in 1951. Srilaksana remarked, *"It seems I was always around the Catholic Church, but I was never a member of that faith."*

In 1953 a daughter was born to William and Srilaksana. The girl was named Korani.

Later Srilaksana continued her education at Thammasat University where she studied business and accounting. She became a teacher of science and mathematics for 12th-grade students at two different schools run by the Catholic Church in Thailand.

Several years later Srilaksana adopted two young girls who were dropped off at her home (at different times). The first was named Khomkham and the second Thonggon, nicknamed Banana.

The Conversion of Sister Srilaksana

One day in 1968 while driving home Srilaksana Suntarahut noticed a group of young American men moving into a home in Bangkok not far from her own home. She turned to her sister who was riding in the car and asked, *"I wonder what those young men in white shirts are doing here in Thailand? Why have they come to live in Bangkok?"*

Learning Thai was a slow process for the first missionaries who arrived in Bangkok on February 2, 1968. While learning the language, they continued to look for those interested in the gospel hoping to find a few people with whom they could communicate and practice their Thai language skills. They were

hopeful they could find some who could become future leaders for the Church. With limited language abilities, they went out teaching introductions in Thai to those who would allow them into their homes. They had no literature in the Thai language and spoke only the most rudimentary Thai but felt that by practicing the language among the people, they would learn the language more quickly.

On April 20, 1968, Elder Larry White and Elder Carl Hanson were tracting in a neighborhood close to their home. Elder White recalls the events as follows:

We approached yet another impressive home with a large wall around it and rang the bell at the gate. We could not see through the gate, but a servant soon appeared and acted as if she was expecting us. She vigorously invited us to come in". [Srilaksana explained that the maid had been out in the yard playing with the children when the missionaries arrived at the gate]. "We explained in our best Thai who we were (thinking she might change her mind), but she insisted all the more that we come in and then ran up the driveway to the back of the house (where the servants enter) to let us in the front door. We were happy to get inside out of the blazing hot sun. We walked up the rather long path to the front door. The servant soon let us in and motioned us to sit although no one else was present in the room into which we were invited.

After a short wait, a woman came down from upstairs appearing as if she were ill or as if she had been asleep. [Srilaksana explained that she had been out playing cards and took a nap when she came home]. When the owner approached, we first spoke to her in Thai. She then responded in English and introduced herself as Srilaksana. From that point on we conversed with each other in English. We introduced ourselves as missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and explained that we had a special message. She agreed to allow us to proceed and since it was my turn to give an introduction to the Church, I commenced to explain about the Church using the book 'Meet the Mormons' which had lovely illustrations to aid the explanation. I had not proceeded very far when the Spirit literally fell upon me as it never had before and as it never did after that; telling me with great force that this lady would join the Church. I was so overcome with emotion I was unable to continue speaking and passed the book to Elder Hanson asking him to complete the introduction. He finished ably, and we asked for a return appointment. Srilaksana said that we could come back any time but refused to make a firm appointment".

Pondering the Message

After the missionaries left Srilaksana was not sure what they were talking about, but she did recognize that it was different from what she had learned at the Catholic school when she was growing up.

She later described her religious upbringing: *"I was brought up in the environment of the Buddhist religion. I was taught to do good and to learn to give without thinking of any compensation, to treat my elders with respect, to treat the poor with kindness. I learned to feed the beggar, to clothe the needy and to give alms to the priests [monks]. This way of life was taught to me and in our household so that we could enjoy a happier life when reincarnated in the next generation. Buddhism, as it is practiced here, does not accept the theory of a Supreme Being or God, I never thought of it nor had I any belief in His Son, Jesus Christ and His prophets² [even though I had been educated in Catholic schools]."*

She did not understand all that they told her. She thought they had just come to give the usual message like other Christian missionaries. She remembered having strange feelings and asked herself, *“What can these young men do to teach the Thai people about God?”* As they left, she realized that she could not remember the name of the church that they represented.

Subsequent Visits by the Missionaries

Elder White recounts the second meeting with Sister Srilaksana as follows:

We returned several days later and showed her a Church filmstrip. She watched it with what appeared to be great indifference smoking throughout the presentation. However, she again allowed us to return. If I had not had a profound spiritual experience on the first visit, it is unlikely that we would have ever returned.

On a subsequent visit, they told her about a book of scripture known as the Book of Mormon and how the book came through the prophet Joseph Smith. She had never heard of this book before, so when they offered to sell her a copy of the book in English, she agreed to purchase it for ten Baht (about fifty cents). She took the book with a blue cover and a golden angel, thumbed through it for a couple of minutes and then put it on her bookshelf. She asked herself *“What is the use of listening to these young American men? How can they, being so young and without much understanding of the Thai people, be of any help to me?”*

She had trouble understanding what they meant by “the restored gospel.” *“How could this gospel help me? Why should I continue to invite them back?”*

The Impact of the Book of Mormon

Sister Srilaksana enjoyed going out in the evening and playing cards with her friends. One evening she found she had a few minutes to wait before it was time to leave. She noticed the Book of Mormon on the shelf and decided to see what it was all about. She took the book off the shelf and opened it to page 287 (Alma 37) and began to read. Almost immediately she felt the power of the book. Physically she was completely overcome, tears filled her eyes. She called her friends and told them she would not be coming to play cards. She held the book tightly as she went upstairs to her room where she knelt in prayer for the first time in her life. She addressed God as “My Father” and realized that God knew her and loved her. She cried for 20 minutes before she gained control of her “tears of joy.” She then went and washed her face and returned to her room where she began to read the Book of Mormon from the beginning. She soon realized she was learning more about Jesus Christ than the nuns at the Catholic school had taught her in all the years she had studied with them.

Over the next few weeks, she continued reading the Book of Mormon whenever she had free time. At mealtime, she would eat with one hand and hold the Book of Mormon with her other hand. Never before had any book seemed so meaningful. She had begun her thirst for knowledge of the gospel, which thirst was never quenched.

During this period, while she was reading the Book of Mormon, Elders White and Hanson visited her a couple of times to continue their presentation of the gospel message. On one visit

Elder White noticed she was holding her copy of the Book of Mormon tightly. He asked, *“Have you read from the Book of Mormon?”* Sister Srilaksana replied, *“Yes I have been reading that book.”* Elder White was pleasantly surprised by her answer. To see if her response was true, Elder White asked some questions about the early chapters of the book. Sister Srilaksana gave the correct responses.

She proceeded to read 6-8 pages per day and finished the book in about six weeks. At that point, she told the missionaries, *“I must be baptized.”* The Elders then completed teaching the discussions with her and her daughters and worked through the process of breaking her smoking habit. They explained the gospel principals of the word of wisdom, tithing, and church service. Sister Srilaksana had many questions, but she knew the Book of Mormon was true and that Christ’s gospel would bless her life.

Receiving Baptism

On her 44th birthday, July 4, 1968, she and her daughters Korani and Khomkham were baptized. A third daughter Thonggon had not yet reached the age of eight. They were baptized in a swimming pool at the condominium complex where the Farmer family lived. The Farmers were members of the church from the United States who were living in Bangkok.

It had taken just ten weeks from when the missionaries first met Sister Srilaksana until her baptism. The missionaries had only been in Thailand for five months at that time.

Sister Sri’s parents and siblings abandoned her after she was baptized, however, many years later they again accepted her and made sure she was part of family events. They decided that such events would not be held on Sunday so that she could join with them. This was one of the Lord’s tender mercies extended to her late in her life.



Sister Srilaksana and her three daughters. Left to Right Thonggon, Srilaksana, Korani (standing) and Khomkham.

Sister Sri and the Thai Book of Mormon

The church first tried the services of a professional translator, but it was determined that without an understanding of Christian concepts and the doctrines revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, such translations would not be adequate. Starting in 1970, Sister Srilaksana began to translate the Book of Mormon into the Thai language. She worked with several of the missionaries over the next six years as the translation of the first edition of the Book of Mormon moved forward. The process was difficult and challenging. Things began to progress when it was decided to make a dictionary of gospel terms that had been translated so that the same translation could be used at the next occurrence of those terms.



Sister Sri just after the Thai Book of Mormon was printed in 1976.

The translation department in Salt Lake City favored a word for word translation process. It was decided that the guidance of the Thai Bible would be used when appropriate, but that it could not be relied upon for all decisions. In the early days, there were several missionaries who would meet with Sister Srilaksana periodically to review her translation. The missionaries were responsible for ensuring that the doctrine was expressed correctly. Latter just one or two missionaries would work with her MOneday through Friday during the day as part of the mission office staff. In the evenings these missionaries would proselyte.

Sister Srilaksana suffered from back pain most of her life. At times it was so bad that she could not translate. Whenever the translation process was difficult Sister Srilaksana would ponder, fast, and pray to know how to proceed. She had several remarkable experiences as she translated “priesthood,” paradise, and “the brother of Jared.” Three thousand copies of the Book of Mormon were printed in Thailand and delivered to the Church in October 1976. This sacred volume of scripture was then available in the Thai language for the first time. It was the twenty-fourth language into which the book was translated.

Sister Srilaksana was always happy to share her testimony of the Book of Mormon with others. She would always look for new members and seek the opportunity to share her testimony with them. In the early days of the Church in Thailand, she was the oldest member. After church at the Asoke branch, many of the younger members would gather at her home to enjoy food, friendship, and the support and wisdom that Sister Srilaksana provided. In this role, she was the mother of the LDS Church in Thailand.

The translation of the Doctrine and Covenants began before the Book of Mormon was completed. It was published in 1979 along with the Pearl of Great Price.

Sister Srilaksana passed away on November 7, 2013, in Bangkok, Thailand. A memorial service for Srilaksana Suntarahut was held at the Asoke Ward meetinghouse in Bangkok on November 9, 2013. Larry White provided a taped message for the service.

Sister Srilaksana had a profound and powerful impact on the church in Thailand in its early days. She had a strong testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, and her influence persists to the present day. Like Amulek and many others, she sacrificed family and social position to assist in establishing church.



Sister Sri's portrait at the memorial service.