

CHAPTER 2

THE CONVERSION OF SRILAKSANA SUNTARAHUT

(ศรีลักษณ์ สุนทรหุต)

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 new missionaries. 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 wanted to find some who could become future leaders in 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 they felt that by practicing the language among the people they would learn it more quickly.

In late March 1968, Elders Larry R. White and L. Carl Hanson were tracting¹ in a neighborhood close to their home. Elder White recalls the events as follows:

“We approached yet another imposing 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 she ran up the driveway to the back of the house (where the servants enter) to let us in the front door. Elder Hanson was somewhat reluctant to proceed, but I felt that any chance to get into a home (and get inside out of the blazing hot sun) should not be missed, even though it seemed as if the servant perhaps had mistaken us for someone whom the owner was expecting. We walked up the rather long path and waited at the front door, which was open with only a screen door sheltering a living room. 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 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 from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and explained that we had a special message. She allowed us to proceed and since it was my turn to give an introduction, I commenced to explain about the Church using

1 Tracting is the process of going from door to door, knocking at each in a search for those who might be interested in the missionaries' message. Today Thai law prohibits missionaries from knocking on doors, although they are still able to talk with people who are outside.

the book *Meet the Mormons*. I had not proceeded very far when the Spirit literally fell upon me as it never had before and as it never did thereafter, 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 had been 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 did not understand all that they told her. She thought they had just come to give the usual message like other Christian missionaries. She remembers 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 even remember the name of the Church that they represented.

She later described her religious upbringing: “Brought up as I was 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, 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, or His prophets [even though I had been educated in Catholic schools].”²

² *Echo Asia*, October 1970, p. 5.

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. Elder Hanson did not share my conviction about her future as a member of the Church and I had not shared my spiritual experience of that first visit with him, though in retrospect I should have.”

On a subsequent visit they told her about a book of scripture known as the Book of Mormon and how the book had come 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 its blue cover and 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 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. She was completely overcome physically as 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 twenty minutes before gaining 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 to read the Book of Mormon whenever she had free time. At mealtime she would eat with one hand and hold the Book of Mormon with the other. Never before had any book seemed so meaningful. She had begun her thirst for knowledge of the gospel, and that thirst has never been quenched. During this period of time 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?” “Yes,” Sister Srilaksana replied, “I have been reading that book.” Elder White was pleasantly surprised by her answer. To see if her response was true, he asked some questions about the early chapters of the book. Sister Srilaksana gave the correct responses. Elder White turned to Elder Hanson and said, “She really has been reading it.”

She proceeded to read six to eight 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 to her and her daughters and worked through the process of breaking her smoking habit. They explained the gospel principles 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.

BAPTISM

On her 44th birthday, July 4, 1968, she and her daughters Korani (อรณี) and Khomkhum (คมขำ) were baptized. A third daughter, Thonggon (ทองกร, nicknamed “Banana”), had not yet turned eight years old. 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.



Sister Srilaksana and her three daughters. **From left:** Thonggon, Srilaksana, Korani (standing) and Khomkhum. (1969)