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Saleha - another trailblazer of the Ali family soldiers on

Joceline Tan

THE storm that swept in about 5.50pm had the effect of a switch, plunging what had been a bright, balmy day into a premature dusk slashed by lightning and booming with thunder.

Datuk Paduka Saleha Mohd Ali has a dread for lightning but the presence of company seemed to have abated the fear and she talked animatedly - through the storm and well after it had subsided into a deliciously cool evening.

By then, the interview had stretched into a total of some six hours.

Somewhere along the fourth or fifth hour, a telephone conversation with Saleha's secretary, Cindy, came to my mind - the latter had asked how much time I would need. About an hour and a half would be sufficient, I had told her, since most people get tired after an hour of talking.

Cindy had said, crisp as keropok: "You don't know Datuk at all; I'll give you half a day!"

Thus, we began at 10am, breaking off at 12.15pm because she had a lunch appointment with her elder brother Tun Ismail (former Permodalan Nasional Bhd chairman and Bank Negara Governor) and the younger Tan Sri Hashim (she calls him "the General") at the former's home.

When I returned at 3pm, she emerged from her room, her gait languid and her coiffure somewhat disarranged.

She had, she says slowly, been late for lunch, but Ismail was, miraculously, not crossed with her in spite of his legendary penchant for punctuality.

Her lethargy does not last.

Minutes later, she is her perky self, peals of laughter interspersing accounts of episodes in her life and told in a way that is so uniquely her.

Her stories are quite absorbing, not only because they are fleshed with detail and laced with wit, but because Saleha is not exactly an ordinary woman.

She was born on Jan 29, 1923, and grew up at a time when women were still largely seen but not heard, yet went on to do things that may seem ordinary now but which were milestones for Malay women of the time.

In many ways too, the story of Saleha is the story of the famous "Ali family", of a foresighted Malay couple who raised each and every single one of their 10 children - seven boys and three girls - with quite unparalleled devotion and purpose.

Saleha is the third-born of the late Mohd Ali Taib - often described by his children as a disciplinarian - and Khadijah Ahmad, whom photographs depict as a fair-skinned woman with a kind smile and the sort of high forehead considered a mark of beauty among Chinese women.

Mohd Ali, to whom Ismail bears a striking likeness, started off as a clerk; he studied law and eventually became official assignee in the Estate Duty Office (thus, his friends called him Pak Ali Bankrup) before ending his career as legal adviser to the Terengganu Government.

Their children were the sort most parents dream of.

They turned out well; in fact, better than well. Many of the boys, and especially the girls, managed to break barriers in their careers.

Saleha rattles off the credentials of her siblings with undisguised pleasure:

* The eldest, the late Mohd Noor, officer with the National Registration

Department. ("The one who signed our ICs then.");

* Tun Ismail, distinguished himself as the first Malaysian Governor of Bank Negara ("I quake whenever I have to see him.");

* The late Abdul Aziz, who came after Saleha, was secretary-general of the Works Ministry ("He was very close to Tun Razak.");

* Siti Jameah, first woman information officer. ("The beauty of the family.");

* The Prime Minister's wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, among the earliest Malay women doctors;

* Datuk Ahmad Razali, a teacher who went on to become Menteri Besar of Selangor;

* Datuk Jaafar, a household name in the advertising industry;

* Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Hashim, former Chief of Armed Forces ("... lovable chap, we are very close"); and,

* Datuk Zainal Abidin, an architect and active in Malaysian tennis. ("He takes the handicapped tennis players abroad for tournaments and they come back with golds... the others, they get bronzes").

They are a good-looking family, with good bone structure.

Those born after Saleha, especially, are tall and well proportioned, an indication, probably, of the growing prosperity of the Ali family as well as an improved diet.

The Ali siblings went to school seven days a week. They attended English school in the morning and religious classes in the afternoon, five days a week.

On weekends, they attended Malay school.

Asked how she had coped with the back-to-back routine, Saleha slaps her forehead with a ringed hand and says: "Oh my God! School!"

Only Ahmad Razali was spared the seven-day school week because their grandmother had insisted he attend the village religious school.

Says Saleha: "He didn't go to university and look where he ended up... MB of Selangor!"

Saleha, herself, is highly qualified.

She graduated from the London School of Economics in 1949; then at age 50, enrolled for law at Universiti Malaya (but her studies were terminated by the illness of her husband); and a few years later, followed her youngest son to London where she acquired a Diploma in Building and Construction.

Mohd Ali was a progressive middle-class Malay who saw education as the key to a better world for his children and who believed in educating his daughters during an era when girls were raised to be married off as soon as possible.

Thus, Mohd Ali's elder brother was stunned when he decided to send Saleha, his eldest girl, for further studies in England.

"My father always spoke in English. He told my uncle: `When you educate a boy, you educate an individual; when you educate a girl, you educate a nation.'"

But it was not all work and no play. Once a year, the family vacationed in Port Dickson. The three girls, their grandmother, parents and two cats left in the family car, whereas the boys took the train to Seremban, from where they continued their journey on bicycle.

Saleha completed her secondary school at 17, but the Government only sent students abroad at age 18, so she sat out a year during which she got involved in social organisations.

Jobs for women were almost non-existent and social work was about the most acceptable way for upper-class women to keep themselves occupied outside the home. Besides, Saleha was not your demure girl-next-door. She was always up and about, or as she puts it "a bit of a tomboy".

But more frustrating delays lay ahead, namely the Japanese invasion of Malaya.

"How I hated the Japanese then. Day and night, I prayed for them to go!" she recalls.

She did not mop around doing nothing; for much of the war years, she worked first as secretary to her father, then to a Japanese judge (a Cambridge graduate who went on to become Attorney-General and whom she met up with in Tokyo more than a year ago).

When the war clouds cleared, the first Malay girl to study abroad on a government scholarship left for England to study at the London School of Economics.

Saleha returned to join the Government as an officer in the Welfare Department.

A black-and-white photograph taken of her then shows a petite and pretty girl in a lightly patterned baju kebaya, an embroidered shawl around her shoulders and clutching a fashionable handbag.

But what stands out is her trade mark - the dazzling smile, an asset which has retained its voltage through the years.

It was around then that she met her husband-to-be, Mohd Zain Ahmad, then private secretary to the Raja of Perlis and Perlis Commissioner of Scouts.

After two encounters, he wrote her a one-lined letter which, however, managed to say everything: "It seems so paradoxical, but I have fallen in love with you", and signed it simply as "Zain".

Saleha's reply was more ambivalent, if not rather cheeky: "It is good to love, but better to be loved," and signed it "Sheikh's Arrow", a borrowed reference from Shakespeare.

Zain was a divorcee, serious and level-headed while Saleha was chirpy and impetuous. He was also rather good-looking in a subdued sort of way.

First, he approached Mohd Ali directly, which of course was not the done thing. Then he sent a delegation headed by his dotting mother.

"I fell in love with him only after I married him," she says candidly.

Her parents' marriage, she says, had not been a love-match but had ripened into a loving and devoted partnership.

"Besides, I found him quite different. He didn't smoke or drink... he reminded me of my father."

Their marriage bore three sons - Zahedi, 42, Zabidi, 41, and Zahari, 39, all married, with children of their own.

Saleha is 74 this year, but remains amazingly on-the-go, in spite of a benign tumour of the brain in 1992 and, two years later, breast cancer.

"I asked them to take out the whole breast. They offered to replace it but I said, nonsense, I don't need it," she says.

Hint that the Petaling Jaya home where she lives is not an ordinary home lies in the photographs and mementos from her energetic social and corporate life.

For instance, a framed photograph of (South African President) Nelson Mandela is signed: "To kakak, best wishes, Mandela."

She is kakak to most people, including her famous brother-in-law whose picture - a birthday gift from him - hangs in a gilded frame above a well-used piano.

"He's more of a brother than brother-in-law," she says of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The house has long been an empty nest although she is hardly the homing pigeon. Rarely a day passes without one or more appointments beckoning her out of the house.

And the telephone rings relentlessly. "Since 7am," she says the day I was there.

She is involved in more than 20 charities - she is chairman of the

Selangor School for the Deaf as well as the Handicapped and Spastic Children's Association - besides being executive chairman of Help Institute, chairman of the Genting View Resort Group and adviser to Asli.

The previous Sunday, she thought she would sleep in for a change. But, at 5am, the phone trilled; by 7am, she was at Help Institute, flagging off a treasure hunt.

"I can never sit still. I've always been like this," she says, flashing a smile almost as dazzling as that of the young girl newly-returned from England all those years ago.

* SALEHA ON DR MAHATHIR: P12

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