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Showing patriotic support for the railway

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THERE was queue at the railway station in Keppel Road, Singapore. People were milling around and protesting aloud that the S\$16 imposed by KTM on meals was unjustified. "Aiyah, so expensive. Why must we eat their food?"

When it was my turn to purchase my ticket to Ipoh, the counter clerk, somewhat unfazed by the scenario outside his window, asked calmly:

"Auntie, S\$16 lebih (extra), okay?"

"Apa boleh buat; saya mesti ikut undang-undang (What to do, I must follow the rules)," I replied.

He laughed, issued me my aisle seat ticket and wished me Selamat Jalan.

For me, travelling by train is convenient; my track record with KTM goes back to pre-war days. My sisters and I commuted by train from Seremban (boarding school) to Malacca (home) and back during the school vacation. We loved the rides even if soot got into our eyes and on our clothes from the charcoal-burning engine.

In the Sixties when my husband and I moved to Singapore, we left our children in my mother's care in Seremban. Our favourite haunts were the railway stations.

I practically grew up with KTM. There were the train delays, jostling crowds and dirty toilets, but KTM made travel accessible to rich and poor alike, long before flying became fashionable. Now, the trains try to run on schedule and, of course, the toilets are much cleaner.

During my last train ride, I was prepared to savour the first of my S\$16 KTM meals. The hostesses looked smart in their turquoise uniforms. As one approached me, I asked if I could snap her picture.

"Boleh, auntie, apa fasil mau gambar saya? (Sure, why do you want my picture?)"

"Uniform awak elok (Your uniform looks smart)," I replied.

"Terima kasih! (Thank you)" She smiled and posed as my camera clicked. Her attitude was refreshing.

I must admit that the two package meals, with tea or coffee thrown in, were nothing to rave about. I only hope the food will improve in time.

I read the views aired in the papers about KTM's lousy service and meals. My simple deduction is that KTM would not have imposed this ruling if its buffet coach was well patronised.

More often than not, commuters bring their own food and drinks. Some even sleep throughout the journey and wake up only when the train reaches their destination.

Malaysia is entering the Information Technology age. If KTM were to run more smoothly and rapidly towards the 21st century, it should be given a break. If Malaysians do not care, who would?

An article, "What I Think Of S'pore" by Marina Mahathir, appeared in the Straits Times of Singapore on Oct 30. In it, she says: "I think you guys could do more to understand what Malaysia is all about.

"I have lots of friends in Singapore whom I admire for their creativity and industriousness."

But I was touched to note her comments on her fellow Malaysians.

"What I like about Malaysians is their salt-of-the-earth quality, no matter how well-off they are. People are true to themselves and can't hide their roots, and it's nice. We remain very human because of it."

Talking about roots, mine may have germinated in China but deep in my heart, my real roots were planted in a small kampung in Klebang Kechil,

Malacca.

There, as a baby, I was fostered to a gentle Malay woman, Mak Esah, until I was five. She taught me the rudiments of not always taking but giving.

This is why I am true to a Malaysian cause, even though I am now a Singaporean.

I will continue to commute by train, eat whatever meals they offer, the KTM way.

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