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The last of the `Gurkhas'

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TAKE A WALK past Datuk Mazlan Nordin's glass cubicle on Wednesdays and chances are you'll see a man in a hurry.

Hunched in front of his well-oiled Olivetti typewriter, his thick bifocals would slowly make their way down the bridge of his nose as he pounds away furiously on the well-worn keys. Occasionally, he would glance at the clock ticking on the wall; but other than that, he would be completely oblivious to everything else save for the solitary sheet of paper in front of him.

That piece of paper would eventually be transformed into journey back through time or a frank, thought-provoking commentary on the state of the nation under the banner `Personally Speaking' on Fridays in the New Straits Times.

It seems absurd, almost comical, to see a journalist of his stature and experience rushing feverishly to meet the deadline. After all, he has been in the business for the last 47 years.

While rookie reporters facing the same predicament would be sweating bullets, Mazlan, 72, rarely gets rattled and is not quick to hit the panic button. `It's normal ...,' he says.

At the same time, he insists that he is not a procrastinator. `Somehow, I always work better under pressure,' he says. To those outside the press fraternity, Mazlan's name may not invoke the same response as Tan Sri A Samad Ismail, Tan Sri Lee Siew Yee, Usman Awang or Keris Emas. But within the Brotherhood, his sagacity, determination and a sense of purpose is the stuff of legends.

`He's the last of a rare breed,' says veteran journalist Samad, who reserves the term `Gurkha' to describe Mazlan. `He's a foot soldier. Even as a news editor, he would go down with his troops to get a story. Give him something and he'll get the job done; and he'll do it well. Job titles don't mean all that much to him. You don't find a lot of those anymore,' says Samad, 73.

Born on Oct 14, 1925, Mazlan grew up in the backwoods of Tanjong Malim. The desire to know more was the one trait he developed early on. Back in those days, life in the `pau capital of the world' was painfully simple but Mazlan always managed to find something that piqued his curiosity and challenged his mind.

By all accounts, he was sharp; mature beyond his years and could hold his own against older adversaries. Mazlan characteristically downplays this. It came as no surprise when, in 1939, he enrolled in one of the most prestigious schools in the country - the Malay College Kuala Kangsar. But the ever-modest Mazlan says brains had little to do with it. `I think I got in because my uncle was a health inspector in Kuala Kangsar,' he laughs.

There, he immersed himself in academia and constantly craved for more. The onset of World War Two put an end to his pursuits. The moment the Imperial Japanese Army hit the beaches of Kota Baru, Mazlan's world centred around Japan. He did not have a choice.

After the war, Mazlan decided not to continue his education and instead began looking for a job. `There was this little bookshop called Yahaya Arif & Sons in Kuala Kangsar and I managed to get a job there as an assistant.' Little did he know that he was about to take his first step into journalism and a career that would span almost half a century.

`It wasn't a conscious decision, actually. I remember seeing people waiting in line early in the morning for the shop to open its doors, so they could pick up the newspaper. And I remember thinking, what is it about newspapers that makes people go through all that?'

The need to know was so great that Mazlan, with no idea of what he was getting himself into, applied for a job as an English translator with Utusan Melayu in Singapore.

He realised that it was a long shot. He sent in his application but soon forgot about it. A couple of days later, a telegram, signed by Utusan Melayu editor A Samad Ismail, was waiting for him at home. The message was brief and straight to the point. He was told to report for duty as a cub reporter. His starting salary was \$72 a month.

An elated Mazlan, not wanting to waste time, immediately packed his things and headed south. It was December 1950.

He was totally unprepared for what happened next. Far from handling the new reporter with kid gloves, Samad instead threw the hapless Mazlan right into the thick of things. It was either sink or swim. `He was so shy and quiet then, it was unbelievable,' remembers Samad. `I wanted to expose him to as much as possible as quickly as possible.'

Mazlan's baptism of fire occurred when he was assigned to cover the Nadra riots. He handled that assignment with grit and determination, refusing to take no for an answer, chasing stories with the ferocity of a pit bull terrier. Even for a relative greenhorn, Mazlan showed a remarkable ability to deliver.

Over the years, his relationship with Samad was cemented further and Mazlan readily admits that Samad was the single most important influence in his life.

`He was my mentor,' says Mazlan.

His stint with Utusan Melayu did not last that long. In April 1951, Mazlan left for New York as a broadcast journalist with the Voice of America. This time the carrot dangled in front of him was far more tempting - the chance of seeing America. Oh, and they also threw in \$1,000 a month for good measure.

On the three-day flight from Kuala Lumpur to Cairo to London and finally on to New York aboard a state-of-the-art (by 1950s standards, at least) Lockheed Constellation, Mazlan marvelled at how fortunate he was. Even as he gazed at the magnificent pyramids in Egypt with the sun beating mercilessly down on him during the brief stopover in Cairo, Mazlan could still hardly believe that a kid from the boondocks of Tanjung Malim was embarking on his greatest adventure after less than a year in the business. `It was like a dream,' he says.

New York was characteristically dank and morose. It took Mazlan quite a while to get used to the place. Worried that he might end up being gloomy and brooding at the Big Apple, Mazlan decided to throw himself in his work. The Korean War, then in its first year, fortunately, kept him busy. In 1953, as the war in Korea wound down to a close, Mazlan returned to Utusan Malaysia where he put his experiences to good use. He worked well on his own and was equally at home in English and Bahasa Melayu. His star began shining; people began to take notice. `He was one of the few bilingual reporters then, and that was what made him stand out from among the crowd,' says Samad, who left Utusan Melayu for Berita Harian in 1958. There was another reason why those around him saw an inner glow in Mazlan. In 1954, he married Rogayah Simoen and over the years, the two were blessed with five children - Roselin, Kamarulzaman, Edlin, Yuri Azhar and Faizal.

Meanwhile, Samad was responsible for turning the paper around and one of the first things he did was to give the newly-established Berita Harian

its own identity. He hand-picked Mazlan to head the paper's Jalan Pudu office.

'Back then, Berita Harian was a carbon copy of the Straits Times. Even the editorial was translated to Bahasa,' says Samad.

'I wanted to change that; I wanted to give the paper its own identity and I needed someone I could trust to run the desk, to shape and mold the reporters. I just knew Mazlan could do it. He was my right-hand man.' Being a newly-wed and being handed the responsibility of helping to transform the embryonic Bahasa daily into a major player may have been too much of a juggling act for a lesser mortal. But Mazlan took both 'assignments' with zeal. He gave both 100 per cent.

'I used to spend hours in the office. Sometimes, when we're chasing an important story, the guys would lay out old newspapers on the tables and catch some sleep; we'd literally live in the office,' says Mazlan. But when he got home, Mazlan gave all he had to his wife and children. Once the Jalan Pudu office was up and running, Mazlan devoted more time to other things; like thinking of the bigger picture. But he never lost touch with his subordinates.

He stayed on as news editor of Berita Harian until 1970 when he was signed on as Bernama's first editor and was instrumental in the setting up of the agency's economic desk.

He left Bernama in 1973. Since then, he has held a variety of posts, including editor-in-chief of Utusan Melayu from 1973-83 and managing director of Utusan from 1983 until he retired in 1987.

But Mazlan's finest achievement was yet to come. Just when he thought he could wind down, take things easy and enjoy retirement, he was appointed chairman of Bernama by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1987. He relinquished his post only in 1996.

Unfortunately, Mazlan suffered a great loss in the same year when his wife, Datin Rogaiyah, passed away in March. She was 62. Four months later, he suffered another blow when his mother, Rojiah Rawi, died at the age of 91.

In the wake of the two tragedies, Mazlan struggled to carry on, to care for his children.

To Mazlan, his job keeps him busy. But apart from that, he admits to an agenda of his own, 'I plan to write till the year 2000, completing 50 years of service.'

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