

08/08/2001

An emotional moment

Ruslina Yusoff

MOST of us know about Aug 31, 1957 from history textbooks. But what was it like during the days preceding it?

Azizah Ahmad, 82, remembers those days clearly.

An active Umno member then, she recalls: "There was a sense of relief. Finally we were going to be masters of our own destiny. There was excitement in the air. Earlier on, Umno had held a meeting at Istana Hinggap in Seremban to discuss the agenda for the auspicious day."

For Azizah, who now spends most of her time in Kuala Lumpur with her children and moves around in a wheelchair, her memory of the auspicious day remains vivid.

Although Umno members then were not highly educated, she is proud that they were united.

"We wanted the Malays to work hard," she says. She was initially reluctant to attend the declaration of independence because she was in her third trimester of pregnancy with her fourth child. However, her father insisted that she attend, saying: "Independence is only once. So don't lose this opportunity."

With such encouragement, she changed her mind and left Pontian to spend the night with Ibu Zain (Zainon Sulaiman, head of Kaum Ibu) in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur.

As if to usher in a new era, she recalled that it had been raining heavily since dawn. Undaunted they (together with three others) made their way to Selangor Club. As independence was to be declared at 9am, they left the house at 5am.

Traffic was heavy but luck was on their side and they were allowed to use the VIP road. Only those with special passes were allowed entry. In fact she still has her pass (which is still in good condition) which she would proudly show to her children and grandchildren.

The Queen of England's representative was also there.

"It was an occasion I did not want to miss despite having a full bladder," recalls Azizah with an infectious laugh. When it was finally over, they were among the first to leave the padang.

"Can you imagine, we were just ordinary people yet we were accorded VIP treatment," she says. She remembers going to Umno house to celebrate their "victory".

Forty-two days after the declaration, she delivered her fourth child. She made history when she and her sister were given the task of sewing the Umno flag. It took them two months to complete.

"I went to Singapore with Datuk Onn to purchase the material for the flag," she recalls with a smile.

Her heart missed a beat when the Umno flag was finally raised at Padang Mahkamah Besar in Johor Baru.

"Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes," says Azizah, who was also a keen writer having contributed to Mastika, a monthly Malay magazine.

While others recoil at the mention of Japanese rule, she had a different experience. She and her sisters were never slapped nor yelled at by the Japanese. She learnt and taught the Japanese language.

On one occasion, a Japanese soldier who came to their house was delighted to find someone to talk to in his mother tongue. Soon, he became their personal tutor. Azizah and her family also made friends with a Japanese by the name of Emori, who ran a farm supplying vegetables to the

Japanese soldiers. When the Japanese were about to surrender, Emori, she says, shed tears.

She adds that one of her sisters cheekily joked: "Not about to perform hara-kiri, are you?", to which their father gave a cold stare. They gave Emori a pen and a ring as mementos and corresponded with him when he returned to Japan.

Now, years after their sacrifices, Azizah is impressed with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's efforts to preserve unity among the Malays.

"Whatever sacrifices we made for the party were out of genuine love, not for monetary or material rewards," says Azizah, who was awarded the PPN in 1965.

She is concerned with the lifestyle of youth today. "It is really sad when our youth resort to drugs and succumb to negative influences." While she lauds the Government's efforts to help the young, she believes that religious values could help them face today's challenges.

Then again, she says, today's youth like to take the easy way out when confronted with difficulties. "It does not matter if they have to do menial jobs for a living. There is no excuse to resort to killing others or robbing."