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A man for all seasons

Sharifah Al-Attas

THE son of independent Malaya's first Yang di-Pertuan Agong has been a stellar statesman and sportsman. Captain of his school's football, cricket and hockey teams, and badminton blue at Oxford, Tuanku Ja'afar ibni almarhum Tuanku Abdul Rahman has also been the country's High Commissioner to Nigeria and Ghana - and Malaysia's 10th Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

"I WAS born in 1922, at the British Sanatorium in Klang. As a boy, I'd ponteng classes at the Malay School in Seri Menanti. My older brother Tunku Munawir was ringleader!

The new palace at Seri Menanti was then being built. Halfway to school, we'd stop at the guardhouse there and play truant. We'd stay until school was long over, then go home.

The guards happily played host. We'd listen to the Indians working on the road: digging, shovelling, laying tar. They were singing, and I liked their songs ... they'd be singing in unison.

As a teenager, I was enrolled at the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar. Our religious teacher at MCKK was determined to teach ... and we were determined not to learn. Our greatest, most bitter sporting rival was our neighbour, Clifford School.

Teachers were mainly British, as was the headmaster, Bazell. An extremely strict man, he gave me six of the best on several occasions. Once, the crime was carelessness at Maths. This was reported to him by the Maths mistress, Mrs Purdom. Another time, it was for playing pranks.

He'd use a cane, and you could see the welts on your buttocks! The red marks had been made even through the sarong.

On still another occasion, I was caned for coming second in exams. First was Tun Abdul Razak. He was studious; I was sportif.

Sport was compulsory whether you liked it or not. So everyone played football, cricket, hockey. There was a season for each, so we were always playing something. Leisure meant squash, badminton, tennis. I became captain of the football, cricket and hockey teams.

I became head boy after Razak. In 1938, I beat him at squash and tennis, just before he left - poor fellow! But then, he spent his time studying; I spent mine on the playing fields!

My turn came to leave, and I began at Singapore's Raffles College. After six months, the Japanese bombed Singapore, and we were told to go home. I stopped briefly in Johor, then returned to Seri Menanti. I was 18.

Many things happened during the Occupation. People on foot or on a bicycle had to stop and bow to Japanese guards. Otherwise, you'd get a tight slap for disrespecting a Japanese officer!

Each morning, we had to do Radio Tae So - exercises to the radio - in front of an officer. Everyone was expected to be on-the-dot punctual.

The Kempeitai - the military police - were everywhere. They rounded up Chinese, and Malays who collaborated with the British, to be executed in public for treason.

From every town and village they'd be lined up. The Japanese didn't want to waste bullets, so they decapitated their victims, whose heads'd drop straight off their shoulders into the holes their erstwhile owners had dug!

It wasn't too terrifying for me, though. I spoke a little Japanese. It was compulsory - but I didn't study properly, so while others became very proficient, I muddled through with a bit!

We'd listen to keroncong during the war - Jakarta's S. Abdullah. Joget, too, was a perennial favourite. We weren't supposed to listen to the radio, but we secretly did. We listened to Radio Bandung, and everybody heard Japanese propaganda; that they were winning everywhere - though they weren't, and we knew they weren't. I mean, it was wartime, and they held an island - then moved; they must've lost it!

After the war, after Raffles College - I didn't pass, by the way - I attended Nottingham University, and read Law for three years. The campus was beautiful, and the city boasted a ratio of 10 girls to one man! So I didn't so much choose Law; I chose the ratio!

Later, on holidays from Oxford, I'd descend on Tun Razak - I'd just turn up without telling him. Today's Sultan of Perak did the same, so did the Sultan of Pahang - about 10 of us. He'd barricade himself in his room to study, and we had to fend for ourselves!

That became Kampung Melayu. He studied even during the hols - and took just two years to get his law degree.

I began my career in the foreign service in Washington D.C., opening our office there. I was charge d'affaires until the arrival of Tun Dr Ismail, who was then Deputy Prime Minister. He'd fallen out with the PM, and was despatched to D.C. as ambassador; eventually, I was posted to Egypt.

In Cairo, people were very poor. There were many beggars - pity them! I met students who're now our qadis - Datuk Fadzil Noor was an Al-Azhar student then; so was today's mufti of Negri Sembilan.

After Egypt, to Nigeria. Population 60 million, consisting of three main tribes: the Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo. The last were diligent; the Yoruba less so, but very stylish - like Malays! The Muslim Hausa were religious, and the three were incessantly quarrelling.

While we were there, Nigeria's Prime Minister was killed, and the military reigned supreme. The present President, Olesegun Obasanjo, was an officer then.

When my brother died in 1967, I was in London on leave. I was hurriedly summoned home, and chosen the Yang di-Pertuan Besar. I hadn't expected this turn of events. But, as Ruler of Negri Sembilan, I waited my turn to be the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

The Yang di-Pertuan Agong has much more to do than the Yang di-Pertuan Besar. Entertaining foreign dignitaries, for example. Less so today, though. Then, the PM was constantly touring, promoting Malaysia. So guests'd visit. We'd play host to presidents at night, Prime Ministers for coffee.

Now, they're afraid of travelling! Besides, most have been here.

I never expected to be 80, actually. We Malays never anticipate old age - and 80 is quite an age to be! In addition, I'm large, and the overweight aren't expected to last. After two angioplasties, I cut down on food - but my weight doesn't go down! I have a weakness for ice-cream. And cake. And chocolate.

I still visit rural areas. And the people come - for sedekah, or for help with their son's education. In 1996, we established the Tuanku Ja'afar Educational Trust, in response to requests for aid. It's lamentable - so many are earning just RM100 a month! I exhibited my paintings, and we raised over RM1 million. I had a German art teacher. I'm colour blind, so he guided me.

I married in 1943, during the Occupation. We were worried she'd be snatched by marauding Japanese! They roamed the villages, keeping their eyes peeled for young girls. I was told that they pounced on Rembau girls in padi fields.

We complement each other. We're both outgoing, but I'm diplomatic. I give way. Otherwise, we'd be at loggerheads!

My father was strict, my headmaster stricter. And I'm strict about detail and punctuality. I do things by the book; after reading Law, I am convinced of the paramount importance of justice.

Do you go to the kampung? You must see those poor people sometimes, see if politicians work! Are there pockets of poverty? A lack of social services? Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has tried to convey the message that you must meet constituents regularly. I've always been available for advice. But people don't always approach.

I rise early - subuh, sometimes. I watch CNN for the latest, or Al-Jazeera; I see what Selamat Pagi Malaysia's about, and if it's rubbish, I switch channels! I retire late; Mondays to Fridays I watch Idaman at 11.30 on Channel Four. I missed the last episode, so I must catch the next. Deanna Yusof - I knew her father, a Rembau man.

I watched all matches of the World Cup, and favoured Brazil and Korea. Let the East win ... show the West!

I'm president of the Malay Cricket Association, which is doing extremely well; under-12, under-13 is being played at rural schools, and Gemencih are national champions. We sent our under-13s to Australia; in 11 matches at Australian schools, they won six!

A decade ago, hardly any Malay would play cricket. They felt it was too hot! Whereas in the `40s and `50s, they all played. Schools must start cricket again - it should be compulsory.

With golf, too, I've "adopted" caddies who show promise: Shaaban, Khairil Ridwan, Ratib. Don't hit with all clubs, I tell them. Play with just one. So you're perfect; putting, chipping - every morning you must practise.

Negri Sembilan has developed rapidly - but haphazardly. Hotels monopolise the beaches. When I was young, there were crocodile nets at Port Dickson; the reptiles'd swim downriver to the sea.

In Florida, I saw eight crocodiles on a golf course, and no one was worried. Here, you seen one in a pond, and everyone wants it dead!

Negri Sembilan is lagging behind other States, partly because of the mountains which divide it; the coastal area develops, but the other side doesn't. It is opening up, but it could be better. Why channel funds to Malacca, for example, when our capital is closer to the KLIA?

Penang, for example, hires consultants for tourism. We think we have resources within, and don't need outside assistance. We need a master plan; and that needs a consultant.

Now, you also need English. Otherwise, university graduates are unemployed, and unemployable. There's so much waste; they graduate in their thousands each year, and there's nowhere for them to go. And there're still objections to English!

Speaking of objections, though ... I've always been happy; `Smile, and be of good cheer', I say. It's a good motto to live by."

* Pictures by HAMSIAH ABU BAKAR, and courtesy of Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

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