

WE were a very normal family," says Marina, 46, of their growing up years. "We lived in Alor Star in typical middle class."

This was in the 1960s and when Dr Mahathir was sacked from Umno in 1969, he was able to spend more time with his family.

"That (his sacking) was a bit strange though. I was too young to understand – why people didn't like him and I thought he was going to jail."

According to second daughter Melinda, 43, the family moved to their new house in Titi Gajah in 1969.

"I remember there were lots of people coming to see him to say how sorry they were and show him their support. But they also came to see the house which was the biggest in Alor Star at that time," she says with a laugh.

The house was designed by Dr Mahathir and holds many happy memories for the family. This was where they lived before his return to Umno and the

Living as Mahathirs

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NO ONE is more affected by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's retirement than his family. For 30 years, from the time he became a Minister, they have had to live in the glare of the public eye almost as much as him. But apart from Marina – who occasionally offered tantalising personal glimpses of her parents in her column in *The Star* – the Mahathir offspring have fiercely protected their privacy. For the first time, they speak on a wide range of issues and share delightful, surprising insights into the Mahathir family life. By JUNE H.L. WONG

Family 'secrets'

He was born on July 10, not Dec 20. His father was a headmaster and because children start school January, he knew that a child born in July or the first half of the year would lose out by 6 months. At that time, there were no birth certificates so everybody would do it... Dec 20 is his 'official' birthday, I suppose." – *wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah*

We call him Tok Det and her Tok or Tok Asmah if other aunts are around. – *granddaughter Anisha 15*

He says you (should) always eat half of what you want to eat. That's another of his health secrets (apart from 10-minute catnaps and eating nuts). – *son Mazhar, 19*

Never share anything with him because he'll take three-quarters of it, especially if it's chocolate. He'll say 'Nak sikit saja' but his sikit is a lot! He likes chocolate ice cream too. – *Anisha*

"Once on holiday in London, I was sitting with Daddy while his doctor Dr Zainal was at another table. He whispered to me, 'Mai, order chocolate ice cream for me and put it in front of you.' Whenever Dr Zainal wasn't looking, he would put a spoonful in his mouth." – *daughter Maizura, 19*

going for a drive, ya? and I mean my type of driving – slow. He's a good driver but I'm a jittery kind of person, a backseat driver. – *Dr Siti Hasmah*

I was recently with him in a car and he was doing 200kph! He was looking in the rear view mirror to see where his security guys were; he thought it was funny. – *son Mokhzani*

At the age of 60, he took up two new hobbies – horse riding and flying. – *Dr Siti Hasmah*

When I decided on law, Mummy actually said, 'Oh, no one wants to be a doctor. At least we have one lawyer in the house, but who's going to do medicine?'. – *Maizura, law undergraduate at UiTM*

Recently he was walking with Mummy and friends in Hyde Park, London, and they stopped at the Speaker's Corner to listen to an Afghan. This guy said all Muslim leaders were useless. Then he said there was only one leader who could save the Muslim world and that was Dr Mahathir. He didn't know Daddy was right there in the middle of the crowd. After hearing that, Daddy and the rest quietly walked away because security was worried. Daddy was laughing when he told us about it over dinner. I think he was very amused by it. – *Maizura*

start of his public life.

"It was fun. The house was on an acre of land and we had an orchard near the river. We used to go by boat to visit the orchard which had all sorts of fruit trees, including *petai*. That's how the boats came about," reminisces Melinda.

Dr Mahathir who was good with his hands, loved building boats. Melinda and her brothers – Datuk Mokhzani, 42, and Datuk Mukhriz, 39 – remember him building a boat for every child.

"The biggest was a 23-foot motorboat made of fibreglass. It might well have been the first fibreglass boat made in Malaysia," says Mukhriz.

Dr Mahathir's boat-building hobby was helped greatly by their neighbour, Pak Arshad, who was a carpenter – and blue-prints from *Popular Mechanics*.

The magazine was a source of inspiration for Dr Mahathir to try his hand at all sorts of wood and metal works.

Mukhriz also has fond memories of his father sailing up the Kedah River out to the Kuala Kedah and onwards to Langkawi.

"He's always loved sailing with the wind in his face. That's where I got my love for the sea," says Mukhriz, whose boat-decorated office bears testimony to that passion.

Boats were not the only things Dr Mahathir made. Mokhzani remembers his



The house that Mahathir built in Titi Gajah, Kedah.

dad crafting a steel chandelier painted black which "worked fine but didn't look all that great."

The youngest Mahathir children, Mazhar and Maizura, both 19, also remember Dr Mahathir tooling around in the

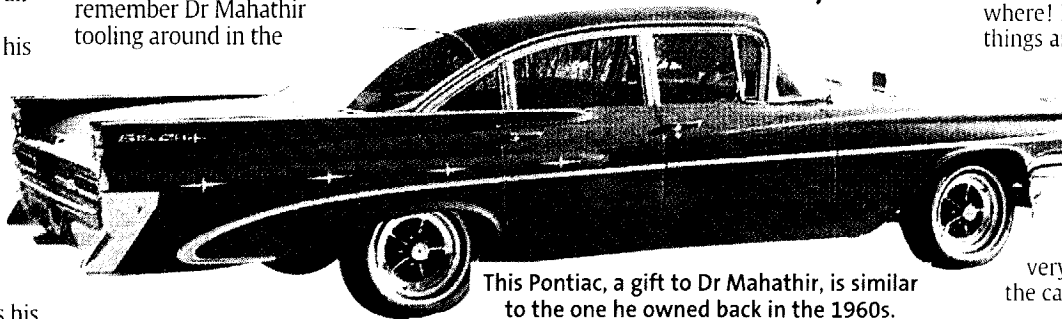
basement workshop in the old Seri Perdana in Federal Hill, Kuala Lumpur, where he carved spoons, horses and table legs. The residence in Putrajaya, however, does not have such a facility.

The Titi Gajah house was also full of music because Dr Siti Hasmah played the piano by ear while Marina and Mirzan took lessons.

"But Mukhriz is the gifted one. He played the piano, organ and drums. All of us taught ourselves to play the organ which was the in-thing in early 1970s," says Melinda.

By 1972, the family's Alor Star halcyon days were coming to an end. Dr Mahathir had been reinstated into Umno and Kuala Lumpur beckoned.

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This Pontiac, a gift to Dr Mahathir, is similar to the one he owned back in the 1960s.

He's always liked cars. His first car was a Pontiac which really *minum minyak*. The last Western-made car was a Ford. After that, it was Japanese cars. He liked Toyotas but we also had a Mitsubishi Gallant and a stationwagon. – daughter Melinda

We were on holiday in Europe where people like to sit outside cafés and he asked why Malaysians didn't do that. We said it was too hot and he replied that we should invent some sort of cooling system, like a mist, so that people can sit outside and feel cool. We were like, 'Yeah right.' Now years later, those mist fans are everywhere! He likes to invent things and that's how he'll think of such things.

– daughter Marina

On the weekend when he takes the car around, he drives very fast but if I am in the car, I'll tell him, I'm

Mummy is the one who's really into gadgets not Daddy. She's into PDAs, SMS-ing and she wants a laptop now! It's not that he's intimidated by the stuff, he just has no time to learn. Of course he knows how to use a computer and can surf the Net but he doesn't e-mail. He learned how to print the other day and he was so happy. "I printed out something!" he said.

But we keep trying to teach him! Just this semester, he asked me "Mai, when are you coming back? I need you to teach me the computer." That day, I helped him to surf the Net and he asked me to type in "Bush" (as in President George W. Bush) and what popped up were pictures of a chimpanzee and Bush side by side looking alike. We were both burst out laughing. – Mazhar and Maizura

I asked him, 'What are your words of wisdom for people in the year 3000 and he said 'Good luck'. – Maizura

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Coming to Kuala Lumpur

IN 1974, after winning the Kubang Pasu parliamentary seat uncontested, Dr Mahathir was appointed Education Minister.

Marina found out in a letter her mother gave her as she was leaving for boarding school in England.

"Both Mirzan and I got the letter and Mum told us not to open it till three days later on a certain date. That was how we learnt of his appointment," she recalls.

Their first home in Kuala Lumpur was a rented bungalow in Section 16, Petaling Jaya. When Dr Mahathir became Deputy Prime Minister, they moved to another house in Bukit Tunku. Each time it was Dr Mahathir who supervised the renovations.

"He likes houses and every house we stayed in, he would do it up, especially the bedrooms. He even chose the curtains," says Melinda.

When he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 1976, Marina remembers her reaction – dismay.

"I didn't like the idea of sharing him with everyone else because even then, I knew that you 'lose' your parent straightaway (when he is in such a high position). I knew that our lives were going to change."

Father knows best

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Then when he became Prime Minister in 1981, Mukhriz's reaction was one filled with anxiety.

"I remember that I had the impression that whoever became PM, their health would be gone after a few years; that was how it seemed with Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn. So I thought it would take a toll on him too and he wouldn't last long. None of us would have guessed then that he would go on for 20 years."

Fortunately for the children, just as their parents became increasingly busy, they were fast developing into independent young people.

"By the mid-70s it so happened that almost all of us were in boarding schools and coming home only during holidays. When his role in government became more prominent and time-consuming, we children were more or less already standing on our own two feet," says Mokhzani.

Getting educated

UNKNOWN to the public is how Dr

Mahathir used his own son and future son-in-law as guinea pigs by sending them to work and study in Japan to see how they would fare.

"I was offered a Mara scholarship to study in England but my dad said no. That was in 1982 and he had already launched his Look East policy and he wanted to make a point by sending me to Japan. I wasn't very happy about it. There was the problem of the food, culture, and language and in the beginning it was tough," says Mukhriz.

He spent one-and-a-half years learning the language before enrolling in Sophia University in Tokyo. He was sponsored by the Bank of Tokyo to study business administration. He was all of 17 and would spend five years in Japan.

Fortunately for Mukhriz, he had a familiar face in Melinda who was already in Japan with her husband, Che Wan Mohd Adlil, 43. The latter had been sent earlier to Japan by Dr Mahathir.

Che Wan, a businessman who married Melinda in 1982, had been

dating her since they were teenagers. His late father was a close friend of Dr Mahathir's.

Che Wan was waiting to start his university course in the US when Dr Mahathir took him out to dinner and presented him with an opportunity.

"He asked me what I was going to study and I said business. Then he asked me where and I said the US. 'Why not Japan?' he asked. I was so shocked, my noodles – we were eating in a Japanese restaurant – nearly shot out of my mouth.

"He told me that if I was keen, he would arrange everything. He gave me one week to think about it. When I told my dad, he said, 'Who asked you to date his daughter? It's your decision.'

"Three days after I said yes, I was on my way to Sophia University."

Che Wan proved himself quickly: within six months, he had learned Japanese and working alongside 3,000 Japanese in Kawasho Corporation (his sponsor) where he was the only foreigner.

"He took charge of my life. He was

so confident in me," marvels Che Wan.

It was years later before he learned from his father-in-law during a fishing trip in the Indian Ocean that he had been closely monitored while he was in Japan.

"He told me that he was getting monthly reports on me! Luckily, it was all work and no play for me."

Not only that, Che Wan says that after Dr Mahathir announced his Look East policy, he was questioned on it in Parliament.

"He was asked what made him so sure it would work and he said, 'Because I sent an average boy to Japan and in six months he was speaking Japanese.' That was me," laughs Che Wan.

What they taught us

"MY parents were very strict," says Melinda. "When we were young, if someone made a mistake, they would call a family meeting and everyone would be wondering who was in trouble." And if the infraction was serious enough, their dad would wield the cane.

"We learned not to repeat the mistake. Both my parents seldom raised their voices but Dad was much more patient than Mum," adds Melinda.

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'Circle the wagon' mentality

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"When we were kids, I was the one who got whacked the most as I was breaking the rules, doing all sorts of things," says Mokhzani, who continues to thrive on adventure.

According to him, his parents' principle is simple: Educate your children enough so that they can stand on their own two feet no matter where they are.

"It was always very clear that education would play a very important role in our lives; that was how they were brought up too."

Between the two, Dr Mahathir was the disciplinarian. He was extremely particular about good table manners and dressing appropriately.

He taught by example but as the children grew older, he had his unique way of getting the message through.

"He has this look and you just know," explains Mazhar.

But there were occasions when even looks didn't quite get through. Mukhriz recalls an episode that showed this as well as how sardonic Dr Mahathir could be, even with his offspring.

"When I was studying at Mara, the school was quite lax so most of us had long hair. Once, I came back during a break with shoulder-length hair. I noticed he hadn't talked to me for a couple days but didn't think too much of it. After a few days, my mum told me to get a haircut so I did.

"When I got home in time for tea, my dad looked at me and 'Ah, welcome back, when did you come back?' I told him I'd been back for five days already and he replied, 'Really? I didn't notice.'

"That's my dad for you. You're expected to get the message; he doesn't tell you outright but you get the idea and if we still don't get it, then our mum will tell us outright. Mum has always been the communicator because Dad doesn't express himself so well when it comes to things like that."

Maizura and Mazhar confirm that their father remains fastidious about manners.

"Daddy will look at how we use our forks and spoons. I always do it the right way," says Maizura.

Chips in Mazhar: "Sometimes, he won't say anything; he'll just stare and I'll quickly correct myself."

The most amazing trick Mazhar says he's learnt from his dad is how to crack open a crab or peel a prawn with fork and spoon.

"Only a doctor can teach you such things," he laughs. When I asked him about how he figured it out, he said, 'There's always a proper way to do something'. I was asking about the crab but I think when he said that, he was referring to everything."

Public expectations

One might easily assume that with such educated and high-flying par-

ents, the offspring would be extremely competitive among themselves. This is not the case.

"We were all very close when we were growing up," says Melinda. "Our parents expected us to study hard but they never expected us to score all As."

Adds Mukhriz: "We are definitely close still but the thing is, none of us are really alike."

What's more, as Melinda points out, marriage separates siblings as in every family.

Agrees Marina: "We lead independent lives; in fact, we don't tend to know about what's going on with each other. But as Tara (Sosrowardoyo, her husband) says, if we feel there's any attack from the outside, it's a real 'circle the wagon' mentality among us.

While Melinda had successfully kept herself and her own family out of the limelight ("I disappeared after I got married and went to live in Japan," she explains with a laugh), the other older siblings accept the fact that they are public figures too.

"People sometimes feel as if you owe it to them to do your public duty even though we are only the Prime Minister's children. For example, I don't work for the government nor hold a political position, yet people expect me to do things like officiating at events as if I am an official public figure. We can look at this in a positive way in that if people look up to us, there is a lot of good we can do," says Mukhriz.

For him, his platform is his alumni, Ansara, which is involved in education-related activities. Marina is, of course, well-known for her work on AIDS and women's issues.

Sacrifices and misperceptions

"WHAT is life like as the Prime Minister's son? A lot of my friends ask me the same question; he's definitely a special father and I'm proud that he is my father. But people only see the so-called glamour, they for-

get that for us children, half of the time, he isn't home," says Mazhar.

Muses Mokhzani, "As a family unit, we gave up a lot so that he could do all the things he did in the last 22 years. People always think, 'Wow, those are PM's children, sure they must live like this and that.' Yes, some of it is true but for the most part, people don't see the tremendous impact it has had on us and how we had to conduct our lives."

For Marina, what she dislikes the most is that "I'm being watched all the time so I can't really be myself." She has worked hard to become a respected public figure in her own right, so the perennial question has been a source of irritation; she once threw out a reporter for asking it.

"For the longest time, that's the first thing people think of. Once a reporter came to interview me on the business of running an NGO (she heads the Malaysian Aids Council and Foundation) and the first thing he asked was 'So what's it like to be the PM's daughter?' I threw him out."

Mukhriz takes the constant reference to their father in his stride.

"It's gotten to a point that I am used to it and it's unusual if people don't say it," he says with a smile. "Now people can start referring to us as the son or daughter of the ex-Prime Minister."

"Marina reacts more strongly than us; I just brush it off," says Mokhzani. "I keep telling people that it is a temporary thing; as we all now know it's ending on Oct 31. I've been saying this for a long time so it's not something I take too hard."

The rumour mill concerning the family of course churns out plenty of gossip about them. Marina is especially amused by the ones concerning her love life.

"Before I got married, according to the rumours, my taste (in men) was incredibly varied - there was this old guy and even a minister's son. That was very persistent even though we had never met. Perhaps it was some

'We were friends with Anwar's kids'

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said the sacking of his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was his most difficult moment. The tense months following it were also the darkest for his family, as JUNE H.L. WONG discovers.

LIKE they always have in the past, the family closed ranks in the face of her father's greatest test. Everyone put on a brave front and tried their best to carry on in the face of unprecedented public hostility. Concerned friends of Datin Paduka Marina, probably the most recognizable Mahathir offspring, urged her to get a bodyguard, which she refused.

"To me, the day I cannot walk around safely, that's the end of Malaysia," she says.

But her sister, Melinda, worried about her two daughters, Anisha and Zehan, who were then studying in a school in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala Lumpur.

Recalls Anisha, 15: "Some of the kids told us our grandfather was stupid."

Melinda advised her daughters to ignore such taunts, explaining that it was obvious the schoolmates were merely echoing their parents' sentiments.

"I told them that this was just adults talking and they should just

people's wishful thinking!"

She is also wryly amused by how gullible people can be.

"People are always asking me about that piece of land or that project that I'm supposed to have. What's more ridiculous is that anything with the word 'marina' on it must be mine. I mean, like, 'I wish!'

concentrate on their studies."

Still, it was difficult to ignore the situation when the girls' tuition teacher didn't want to tutor them anymore.

Melinda admits that at one point she even feared for their safety. But being the most low-key member of the family helped ease the tension and anxiety.

Mazhar Mahathir, 19, now a second-year student at the Multimedia University, recalls the difficult period in 1998.

He was in boarding school, Kolej Yayasan Saad, Malacca, and for the first time, a Special Branch officer came to brief him and a few other students of high profile parents on what to do concerning their personal security.

No one tried to physically harm him but he had to endure taunts and insults, especially from his seniors.

"It wasn't easy at all. But the worst part was we were friends with Datuk Seri Anwar's children," he says, adding that both he and his sister, Maizura, also 19, had grown up with Anwar's second daughter Nurul Nuha and only son Ihsan.

Maizura, 19, had to face a white ribbon campaign that was held in sympathy with Anwar in her school where Nuhul Nuha was also studying. It was an extremely awkward situation for her.

"She (Nurul Nuha) didn't know what to do that first week after her father was sacked. She didn't say anything to me. Then she said hello to me in the second week. I of course responded but we never spoke again. It's very sad because we used to go home from school together."

Adds Mazhar: "We kids had nothing to do with it but it affected us just the same. Nobody can be blamed but I hope that in the future we can be friends again."

'Marina' means the sea; it's a facility for mooring boats and you know what's funny? I must be the most misnamed person around because I don't have any real affinity for the sea. My parents picked it probably because it sounded nice and it starts

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with M.”

(The Mahathir family has a tradition of picking names beginning with M because, according to Dr Siti Hasmah, her late father-in-law felt a child with a name beginning with a letter in the middle of the alphabet would be best off during examinations, especially oral tests – he or she won’t be called first nor last.)

Then there is all the juicy speculation about the overseas bank accounts....

“According to the Internet, we’re supposed to have Swiss bank accounts with billions stashed away with our passport numbers listed – even that they can’t get right, mind you. I remember that on the day they claimed my FD was maturing in the Bank of Israel, I sent out an SMS to my friends to say ‘Eh, maturing already! I’ll take you guys out for a kosher dinner.’ At least I had a good laugh over that one.”

Post retirement

In the immediate future, Dr Siti Hasmah says they will need to organise themselves and begin a new life.

After that?

“He hasn’t said anything,” says

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Daddy’s home

Mukhriz but all the children have a fair idea of what to expect – he will write his memoirs, as he has said in interviews, and continue to travel as he goes on speaking engagements.

Home will be the house in Mines

Resort City on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur and the one in Country Heights near Kajang.

Mazhar says Dr Mahathir likes the Mines house because it’s windy and overlooks a lake.

“The location is good and it’s

quiet. He likes to sit outside on the balcony and write.”

Idyllic as that sounds, nobody can imagine Dr Mahathir becoming a home bird.

“I bet he’ll still be going around everywhere with his clipboard and sheets of A4 paper and black pen, making notes and writing away,” says Mazhar.

Opines Mukhriz: “He has to be waking up to something. The way I see it, vocal as he is now, there have been many occasions when he actually had to hold his tongue because he was still representing a country. Once he is no longer PM, he can really go all the way and speak his mind.”

Like Singapore’s former Prime Minister and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew?

“Maybe. But he’ll be able to do all the things he couldn’t because he was bound by the norms or rules as a head of a government. Now as an individual, he is still respected for what he stands for and he will be

able to act and speak accordingly. To me, it’s a new horizon opening up for him.”

The children have actually teased their parents about the Great Unknown.

“I expect they will miss the support staff they have had; people doing everything for them,” says Mukhriz.

Marina is more merciless: “I’ve teased my dad about using the public phone and now for the first time, if he goes anywhere, he’ll have to check in and go through immigration by himself. He has never done that and he has no idea how we normal people suffer.”

But for the children who had to make appointments to see their parents, what they all look forward to most is simply spending more time with them.

“We’re getting our parents back,” says Mazhar, a sentiment repeated by his siblings.

Where they are concerned, life will go on, come what may.

Says Marina, “I shall carry on in exactly the same way but it’ll be interesting to see people’s reactions. If they act differently, then it’s them who is making the difference, not me.”