

My dear Bunny...

• By Rina De Silva
news@nst.com.my

KUALALUMPUR: From an ordinary English working-class woman, Nancy T. Simmons became an overnight celebrity. All because of the Tunku.

The first Prime Minister had invited her to Malaya to witness the proclamation of Independence in 1957 and that sent me media into a frenzy.

She was then a single 40-year-old Londoner living in a one-bedroom flat, earning a monthly salary of \$300 as a government driver for dignitaries.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj was one of them. And they became good friends, corresponding with each other.

The growth of their friendship can be traced through letters they had written to each other and newspaper articles.

Many of these are now in the hands of a Malaysian.

Newspaper articles about her visit to Malaya, photographs and Tunku's letters to her dated between Feb 23, 1956 and Dec 1, 1975 were purchased by publisher and collector Datuk Mohamad Zaki Ahmad for a "very expensive price" in 2003.

There were five other bidders for the historic items in London. Zaki learnt before the bidding process that Simmons' had died as a spinster five years earlier.

The letters indicate that the Tunku regarded his driver as a good friend who served him well during his visits to London to negotiate Independence for Malaya.

She became a "hot news" item even before leaving for Malaya as British reporters tailed her while she prepared for her journey to Malaya.

The reports even documented what she had bought: gay-printed cotton frocks, an icy-blue cotton evening gown with an off-the-shoulder neckline and small sleeves.

She went through Athens, Karachi, Calcutta, Bangkok and Singapore to get to Kuala Lumpur. And the Press followed her while she was in Kuala Lumpur, detailing almost everything she did.

"She had rice and curry for lunch," cried out one headline in the British Press. "Nancy Simmons V.I.P.: Just an ordinary girl, but for two weeks Nancy knew the thrill of fame" another headline flashed.

She was certainly given VIP treatment, staying at the Federal Hotel—the newest hotel at that time built specially to house visiting dignitaries. There she was served "an exotic meal with Eastern specialities" and given a bottle of champagne placed in an ice bucket.

And for a change, she was chauffeured around Kuala Lumpur.

Simmons was also reported to have been granted an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

She also met Cabinet ministers and princes and attended state banquets, garden parties and a water pageant.

The Tunku apparently confided in Simmons — affectionately known as 'Bunny'.

He spoke to her about his concern over the May 13, 1969, incident, his health



ABOVE: Simmons was invited to witness the proclamation of Independence in 1957. LEFT: Zaki bought the letters and news articles for a hefty sum.

worries and asked her to find an affordable house in London for him to buy.

The Tunku even asked Simmons, through a letter dated Oct 7, 1966, for a good bakery in London from which to order a cake for a friend.

He also told her on Jan 28, 1970, that he had to scrap his plans to buy a house in London after running low on funds.

The Father of the Nation remembered Simmons as a kind and charming VIP representing the British working class at the Merdeka celebrations.

Zaki, 52, said he knew of the documents after making a request to his network of dealer friends

"I admired the Tunku very much since meeting him personally after he retired," he said.

Zaki said the letters showed that Tunku was a humble, sincere and honest man while being a politician, a prince and a leader.

"I think he was instrumental in fostering racial harmony from the start," said Zaki.

Zaki plans to reveal the documents at a public exhibition soon.