

Ronggeng at the Eastern and BB Park

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It was the roaring 20s of a different kind in Kuala Lumpur, watching a Bangsawan show, getting a ride in a red sports car, caddying for the Mat Salleh, fishing in the pristine Klang and Batu rivers, climbing fruit trees and generally enjoying an idyllic life as a young lad. Former director-general of Health Tan Sri Dr Abdul 'Coco' Majid Ismail, who turns 85 next month, regales P. SELVARANI with tales of growing up in the Malaya of the 20s and 30s.



IN wide-eyed wonder, the pint-sized six-year-old stood transfixed as the "most handsome young gentleman I had ever seen" casually lit a dollar bill and used the burning note to light his cigarette.

What happened next also left little Majid stunned.

The handsome man, who looked like "one of the film stars on the handbills pasted outside the Coliseum cinema", took out a fistful of dollars and threw them onto the stage, shouting "encore" as the curtains came down on the chorus girls who performed between intervals of the Bangsawan performance.

So this was the flamboyant "Doghalim" as Abdul Ghalim bin Haji Taib, one of the sons of Kuala Lumpur's prominent Malay businessman, was called.

It was the kind of life Majid Ismail, eldest of 12 children of a railway machinist, had never even dreamed of.

Doghalim, who was the brother-in-law of Majid's aunt, Mamunah, had earlier treated Majid to a grand meal at his hilltop residence at Gunong (along the present Jalan Sultan Ismail) before taking him for a spin in his flashy red open-top sports car.

Gunong later housed the St Mary's School.

"I have never seen anything like it before, or since," says the sprightly and unassuming octogenarian as he recalls his childhood in Kuala Lumpur in the 1920s and 30s.

He may have come from a relatively poor background, but growing up in Kuala Lumpur was an enriching and fun experience for Majid who was born in his grandfather's house on Nov 15, 1921 in Kampung Ujong Pasir at Kampung Baru.

"Those were some of the most enjoyable days of my life. There were lots of fruit trees to climb and games to play. We played rounders, *kaundi* and *gasing*."

"There was even a swimming pool near the present Jalan Travers police station where we schoolboys would go for a dip."

Climbing trees was Majid's "spe-

ciality" and climbing fruit trees was a treat as there were plenty of *mempelam* (mango), mangosteen and rambutan. But his favourite was climbing coconut trees.

"Why? I don't know. I just enjoyed climbing them, especially when I was thirsty," he says.

Fishing was also a favourite with the young Majid who caught *udang galah* (fresh water prawns), *ikan keli* (catfish), *ikan baung*, *ikan putih* and *ikan betuk* from the Klang and Batu rivers, and the many mining ponds in Kuala Lumpur and around Selangor.

"The rivers then were almost crystal clear. It was easy to catch fish and prawns. We would also pluck *pucuk paku* (wild greens) and *kangkong* (water convulvulus) which grew wild on the riverbanks.

He especially treasures the memories of *ikan betuk* fishing trips with Baba (his father), and his Malaccan friends. Catching *ikan betuk* was an art. One had to use the eggs of the fiery *kerengga* (red ants) as bait. How did they collect the eggs?

When lights were out, I would slide down the water pipe outside the bathroom window for a night out with some of the boys.

"My father and his friends came up with an ingenious contraption. They fashioned an *upeh* (a frond from the betel nut tree) into a funnel and tied a piece of cloth at the end of it. This was attached to a *galah* (pole) which was used to jolt the *kerengga* nest."

When the ants and the eggs fell into the cloth, the cloth would be tied and emptied into a kerosene tin. The tin would be lit and the ants and eggs would be burnt.

"We would throw the dead ants into the pond to attract the fish and use the eggs as bait. Sometimes, we caught up to 100 *ikan betuk* a day."

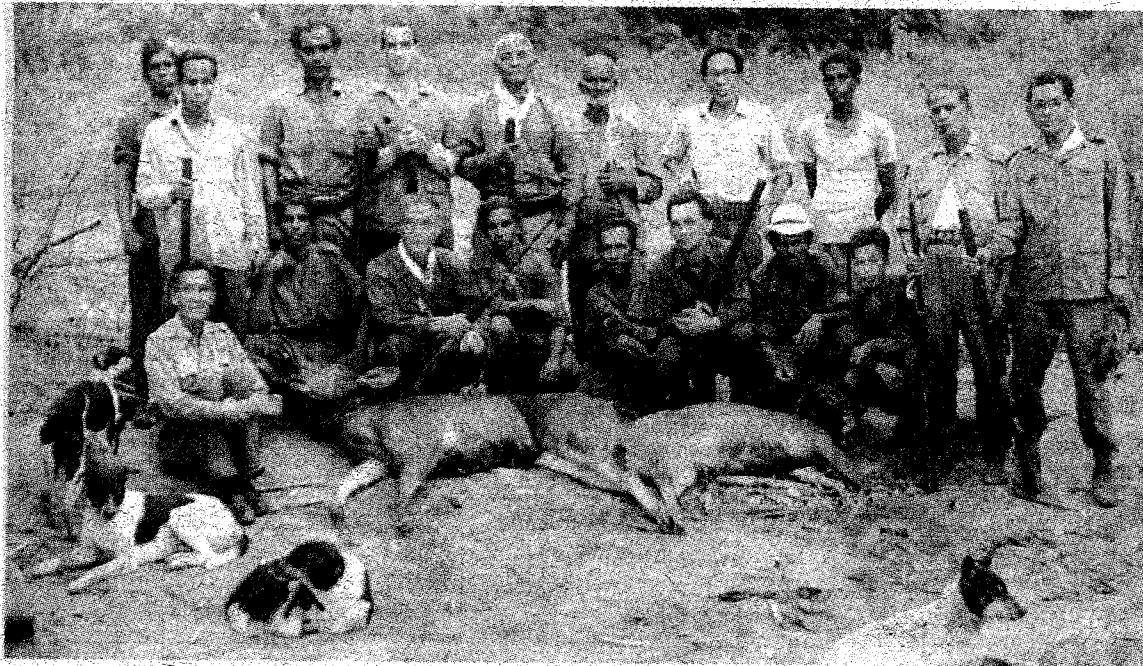
"It was delicious, cooked *masak lemak cili padi* style, which was one of my mother's specialities."

Majid's love for golf was nurtured when the family moved into the Sentul Railway quarters. There, he spent many an evening caddying for the British *tuans* and *mems* at the Sentul Golf Course.

Caddy duty involved not just lugging the golf bags and clubs around the course. He also fashioned the tee from little mounds of clay, and later polished the clubs with Brasso until "they gleamed so bright I could see my teeth reflected on them".



Majid, in the St John Ambulance Brigade district surgeon's uniform, with his wife Khairany after Lady Mountbatten reviewed the Brigade at the Jalan Besar Stadium in 1947.



Majid (standing, fourth from right) and his hunting pals at Pudu Ulu where they shot two deer.

Majid was paid 10 cents, a princely sum back then, considering a packet of *nasi lemak* cost only one cent.

The golfing skills he picked up as a caddy stood him in good stead as several decades later, in 1961, he became the first Malayan champion of the Sentul Golf Club.

Being one of the brightest Malay students from the Segambut Malay School, Majid was awarded a Selangor government scholarship in 1932 to study at the Maxwell Boys English School. The scholarship was worth 10 dollars a month, with seven dollars going towards board and lodging at the Malay Boarding House in Kampung Baru.

A boisterous chap and one of the more mischievous boys, Majid enjoyed hostel life, and his exploits extended to the night.

"When lights were out, I would slide down the water pipe outside the bathroom window for a night out with some of the boys.

"My exasperated monitor (Tan Sri) Sheikh Hussein would lament: "*Budak Majid ni jahat, aku tak boleh jaga dia* (This boy Majid is so naughty, I can't control him)."

It was during this time that Majid learnt the *ronggeng* and ballroom dances from the "taxi dancers" at the famous Eastern Cabaret and BB Park, something he still enjoys. Even today, he never misses an opportunity to twirl on the dance floor with his wife.

Majid's excellent grades saw him entering the prestigious Victoria Institution.

In VI, he joined the scouting movement and spent many hours in "productive and enjoyable" pursuits like camping and jungle trekking.

Majid came out tops among the Malay students in his school for the Senior Cambridge examination.

Like the rest of the high achieving Malay boys, Majid had no say in the choice of a career. It was decided by the Secretary to the British Resident, Raja Uda Raja Mohamed.

"*Awak Majid, awak pergi Singapura belajar jadi doktor* (You Majid, you go to Singapore and study to be a doctor)," said Raja Uda.

"The question of whether we actually wanted to be doctors or engineers never arose, because as government scholars, we were obliged



Playing golf with Tun Abdul Razak, Lee Kuan Yew and (former Singapore deputy Prime Minister) Goh Keng Swee at the Bukit Timah Golf Course in Singapore in 1962. — Pictures by Shiraz Ali, from Majid's book, *An Old Man Remembers*.

to accept whatever the government told us to do, and be grateful for it."

Did he want to be a doctor?

"No, I wanted to be a district officer. Then I could get close to the people. I was invited to join politics by Datuk Onn Jaafar but I told him that I would be wasting my talent as a doctor if I were to become a politician."

Not surprisingly, Majid was made social secretary at medical college and his college days were filled with games, social dances and picnics. But all that was temporarily halted by the Second World War.

Majid returned to a hard life in Kuala Lumpur where he and his cousins grew tapioca in the jungles of Jalan Duta and around Kampung Pandan. The enterprising boys sold tapioca, kerosene, dried fish and sparrows (as pets for rich children).

When the war was over, Majid returned to Singapore to complete his medical studies. He met his wife, Khairany Mahyuddin, in Singapore, and the couple has three children and 10 grandchildren.

During his early years as a medical officer, Majid took up hunting. The jungles of Pudu Ulu, which were outside Kuala Lumpur, and Kajang were favourite hunting grounds where Majid and his friends shot wild boar and deer.

Majid rose up the ladder to be-

come the director-general of Health in 1971. During his tenure as director-general, he was largely responsible for bringing healthcare to the rural areas and introducing polio vaccination for children.

Does he have any regrets in life?

"The fact that I am not a greedy person," he says with a twinkle in his eye. "If I had been, I could be owning many prime properties in KL."

A Chinese businessman, whose daughter he had treated for pneumonia, was so grateful that he offered to sell him some parcels of land in the city for a song.

"I told him I had no money and I did not want to take a loan because I did not want to be in debt. As civil servants, we just did our job and did not expect any monetary rewards or gains."

But Majid has been amply rewarded, in career and life. He also recently published his memoirs, *An Old Man Remembers*.

For someone his age, Majid still leads an active life, heading several voluntary organisations such as the Malaysian Heart Foundation. He is also the founder/chairman of the Selesa Health Farm and Golf Resort in Bukit Tinggi. He attributes his good health to his active youth and a healthy diet. "And I exercise three times a week."

Of course, that exercise is golf.

On family, school, society and Coco the chimpanzee

Health

Childhood illnesses that appear to be more and more prevalent in this modern day and age seem to have escaped me. Once, I had a severe puncture wound on my foot from a rusty nail and I was bleeding quite profusely.

Cikgu Hamid Yassin calmly washed my cut, bandaged it and sent me home on his bicycle. I wasn't given any injection or medication but within a week the wound had healed. I can only attribute my resistance against infection and illness to the hardy, active lifestyle I led and the abundance of raw, green vegetables in my diet.

Racial integration

Our living conditions (when growing up at the Sentul Railway quarters) were most challenging by any standards. Despite that, there was no animosity in our little community. We accepted our hardship as part of life and tried to be as neighbourly to each other as possible.

There seems to have been a greater tolerance in those adverse times than in the relatively affluent living conditions our country is so fortunate to enjoy today.

The children in the Railway quarters mingled with each other and that was how my *Nya* (mother), my siblings and I learnt to speak some Tamil and Cantonese.

"*Nya* learnt to cook several Indian dishes like *putu mayam*, *putu bambu*, *vadai*, *murukku* and various curries from the mothers of Suppan and Maniam. From the Chinese neighbours she learnt to make *yong tau foo* and, from the Punjabi family, *chapati* and *dhall*."

Family

There were certain principles of behaviour that *Nya* did her best to instil in her children. For instance, basic good manners such as giving and receiving things with one's right hand, having respect for the elders, being kind and helpful to everyone, and, most importantly, a sense of responsibility and affection towards one's brothers and sisters.

Education

When I started school, there were no exercise books or pencils. We used slate boards and a stick of *kalam* (made of slate material) to write. Sometimes there were not enough desks and benches and we had to sit on the floor. We went to school six days a week, except Friday.

The syllabus was elementary as it was intended to (according to the Colonial Government's Annual Report of the FMS for 1920): "...make the son of the fisherman or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot in life fits in with the

scheme of life around him".

In addition to learning to read and write, we were thought a bit of arithmetic, some gardening and even basket weaving. *Bersenam* (physical exercise) was a must and I enjoyed it.

(On his school days at the Victoria Institution) Each year, during the school concert at the end of the first term, the top boy from each form would be given the honour of reciting a poem before the whole school.

Sadly, I find that many of the young people today, including my own grandchildren, are not taught to appreciate the beauty of poetry. This is, in part, because of the structure of the current day school curriculum. But also, I find, because television has successfully quelled any inclination among the young to enjoy the written word.

The teaching profession

The teachers those days were much more dedicated. In fact, it was the same for every other profession. Everyone was dedicated to their job and carried out their duties with responsibility.

I remember teachers like Cikgu Hashim, and Mr Ganga Singh who was so strict that we students would be shaking in our shoes when he started to speak.

There was Mr F. Daniel from the West Indies who taught us Science, a strict man who demanded nothing less than full attention.

Another Science teacher, Mr Lim Eng Thye, always wanted to be sure everyone knew what he was teaching. He would often turn and ask: "Do you understand, boy, what I am talking about?"

I enjoyed geography, especially map reading and map drawing. I really don't know how geography is taught today as none of my children and grandchildren seem to be able to draw a decent map of Malaysia. They even have difficulty locating certain key towns.

Sports

Sports played an integral part in our education at Victoria Institution. I was not particularly agile in sports but I was good at cross-country as I had a lot of stamina.

In those days, it meant running on laterite ground in a cloud of red dust. It was next to no effort for me to run five miles round the periphery of Kuala Lumpur from VI, past Petaling Hill and the old Chinese graveyard, along Lake Gardens and the picturesque white-domed building of the Selangor Museum.

On how he got the nickname Coco

One of the seniors (at King Edward VII Medical College in Singapore) decided that freshies should re-enact scenes from the movie *Jungle Princess* starring Dorothy Lamour. I got the role of "Coco", Dorothy's pet chimpanzee. The name has stuck since.