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MAY 13, 1969 is nearly four score and ten years behind us.

What day of the week was it?

Alas I cannot now remember!

Perhaps it was a Friday. Friday the 13th has always had such an ominous ring to it.

It was certainly before Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad (the former prime minister) set our clocks back half an hour and thus took centre stage in our psyche. Of that I am sure.

As sure as I am that in 1969 with our Bapa Merdeka, Tunku Abdul Rahman as prime minister before he was deposed, we rose at sunrise and retired at sundown. Friday the 13th 1969 marked a turning

point in the history of our nation.

I had finished with the Fitzpatrick case at Court Hill, and made an uneventful return home a little earlier than I should. My wife and children were out somewhere in town and got back just before sunset.

By twilight, all hell had broken loose.

The shouting of a mob in full flow, seemed to be coming from the junction of Princess Road (now Jalan Raja Muda) and Circular Road (later Jalan Pekeliling and now Jalan Tun Abdul Razak) which was less than half a mile from our house on the corner of Jalan Gurney Dua and Satu. We were well within ear-shot of the commotion.

I was then out on our badminton court with my wife and children when I saw a young Malay, face ravaged with shock as he ran past us, intermittently stopping to catch his breath and then run on.

The panic he radiated was very contagious.

A few moments later, my neighbour Tuan Haji Ahmad shouted from across the road that a riot was in progress at the Princess Road junction and that we should immediately get back indoors.

Soon afterwards as the darkness set in, we saw red tongues of flame crowned with black smoke go up from the direction of Dato Kramat. From town there was a red glow in the sky of fires burning. The acrid smell of smoke was coming from everywhere. More to



by **Datuk Mahadev Shankar**

the point, the very air around us seemed to be shivering with terror.

Fearing the worst, we locked ourselves in and huddled around the TV set.

Then I heard this high pitched wail. It was a female voice in distress – “*Tolong, buka pintu, tolong. buka pintu!*” (Please open the door!)

A diminutive woman, with a babe in arms, was desperately yelling for shelter, obviously not having had much luck with the houses nearer the Gurney

Road junction.

Without a second thought, I ran out, unlocked the gate and let her in. She was wide-eyed with terror and the baby was bawling away.

The sheer relief seemed to have silenced her and she was not registering my questions. And she was not talking.

Once inside, she slunk into a corner in our dining room and just sat there huddled with her baby, not looking at us but facing the wall.

It was now evident that she was Chinese, spoke no English, and was quite unwilling to engage in any conversation except to plead in bazaar Malay that she would give us no trouble and that she would leave the next day.

Our attention soon shifted from her to the TV set.

A very distraught Tunku Abdul Rahman, came on to tell us that a curfew had to be declared because of racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese; caused by the over-exuberance of some elements celebrating their

May 13 —

The glue that

binds us

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election victories, and gave brief details of irresponsible provocations, skirmishes, and fatalities. He stressed the need for calm whilst the security services restored law and order. Well do I remember his parting words to us that night,

"Marilah kita hidup atau mati sekarang." (Let us choose to live or die now.)

As my attention once again shifted to the tiny woman and her tinier baby, let me confess to my shame, that the thought crossed my mind that living in a predominantly Malay area, I had now put my whole family in peril by harbouring this Chinese woman. It was manifestly evident from the TV broadcasts that her race had become the target of blind racial hatred.

It was an ignoble thought I immediately suppressed as unworthy of any human being.

She too had been watching the TV and perhaps even more intently was watching me, and must have seen the dark clouds as they gathered around my visage.

None of us were in the mood to eat anything. We all just sat and waited and waited and waited, not knowing quite what to expect.

Hours later there was a loud banging at our gate accompanied by a male voice shouting.

I realised then my moment of truth had finally arrived. I asked my cook Muthu, a true hero, if ever there was one to accompany me to the gate.

In that half-light, I saw the most enormous Malay man I ever set my eyes on.

With great trepidation I asked him what he wanted.

"You have got my wife and child in your house and I have come for them," he said in English.

Still suspicious I asked him, "Before I say anything, can you describe your wife?"

"Yes, yes I know you ask because I am a Malay. My wife is Chinese and she is very small and my baby is only a few months old. Can I now please come in?"

I immediately unlocked the gate. In he came and we witnessed the most touching family reunion.

He thanked us profusely and without further ado they were on their way.

In the excitement we did not ask his name or address.

What next?

I saw where my duty lay and immediately called the Emergency telephone number to volunteer for relief duty.

An armoured car appeared the next morning.

I was taken to Federal House and assigned to assist the late Tun Khir Johari (as he subsequently became) and the late Tan Sri Manikavasagam.

Our task initially was to transport and re-settle the refugees into the Merdeka Stadium and thence into the low cost municipal flats in Jalan Ipoh. We then tied-up with Dato Ruby Lee of the Red Cross to locate missing persons and supply emergency food rations to the displaced. Some semblance of law and order was restored and the town slowly came back to life.

If that baby who sheltered in our house that fateful night has survived life's vicissitudes, he would be 48 years old today.

All the ethnic races which compose our lucky nation were fully represented in our house that evening when the Almighty brought us together for a short while.

With our 50th Merdeka anniversary fast approaching, and our hopes for racial unity so much in the forefront of our minds, may I leave it to my readers to ask themselves whether there is a pointer here for all of us.

Folded into our experience of the night of May 13, 1969 was there not the glue that binds all of us with the message that we must love each other or die?

Datuk Mahadev Shankar retired as a Court of Appeal Judge in 1997. He was a lawyer in Shearne Delamore & Co at the time of May 13, 1969. He would be happy to make contact with the mother and child who sought refuge in his house on that day. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com