

NEW STRAITS TIMES

IT is to Tan Sri Yahaya Ibrahim's eternal regret that he was not at his alma mater on Feb 7, 1956, when Tunku Abdul Rahman announced for the first time that Malaya would be granted independence on Aug 31, 1957.

Penang-born Yahaya had graduated from the teachers training college in Kirkby, England, and had been posted to the Bandar Hilir English School in Malacca two years earlier.

But, he got the chance to witness the Tunku do it a second time, 13 days later, at the Bandar Hilir padang.

"Many of us rode our motorcycles, and some even bicycles, to the Batu Berendam airport to welcome the Merdeka delegation from London," recalls the 78-year-old pro-chancellor of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim.

"The crowd at the padang was massive. They came from far and wide to witness the event.

"I could not understand how they managed it because some of them arrived two or three days before the event.

"It reflected how important that event was to the people."

To his astonishment and delight, Yahaya was given the opportunity to take part in the actual Merdeka day celebrations a year later.

"I was quite astounded to be appointed as a protocol officer for the Merdeka celebrations," recalls Yahaya, who has a master's and doctorate in Science Education and Staff Development.

"We were to serve the many foreign dignitaries invited to witness the birth of a nation. I was fortunate to be one of the two chosen from Malacca.

"We went for a week's training on protocol and security and familiarised ourselves with the routes we would have to travel with the delegation."

Yahaya was assigned to take care of the Japanese delegation and he was sent to Singapore for three days to learn some basic Japanese.

The 12-member Japanese delegation was led by Momboku Ono,

First at Bandar Hilir, then Merdeka Stadium

NST- 15/7/2007

It was not just Malaysians who shouted 'Merdeka!' as the Malayan flag was raised on independence day 50 years ago. A former teacher tells P. SELVARANI that the Japanese delegation also joined in to shout 'Merdeka!'

the head of the Japanese Diet.

"I was lucky as he was the only non-English speaking member of the delegation. All the others spoke English so I did not have much occasion to speak Japanese."

The delegation, which arrived a week before Merdeka and left a week later, stayed at the Federal Hotel.

The hotel had been completed just in time to house dignitaries attending the celebrations.

As Yahaya recalls, he was the second guest to be registered at the Federal, after Ms Bunny of London.

She was Tunku's chauffeur during his official visits to London before Merdeka.

"We went through a lot of rehearsals and I had to brief the Japanese delegation.

"There were many activities lined up during the two weeks, including dinner parties and banquets to commemorate the occasion."

Being in charge of the Japanese delegation, says Yahaya, was quite a daunting challenge as anti-Japanese sentiment was still strong so soon after the Occupation.

"A convertible car, BE 57, was reserved for Ono's use and he loved to travel in the open-top car.

"I sat next to the driver and I used to pray that no untoward incident should happen.

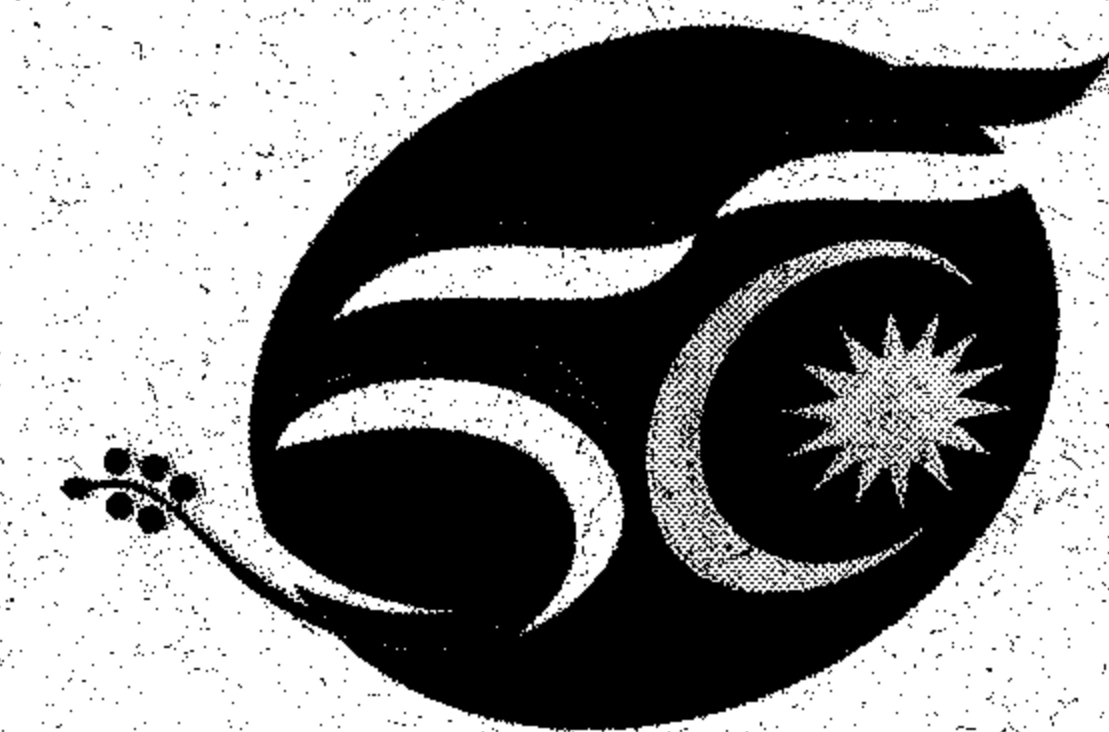


Tan Sri Yahaya Ibrahim feels privileged to have witnessed the declaration of independence 50 years ago

"On the final day of their visit, the Japanese delegation went around giving cameras as gifts."

On Merdeka morning, says Ya-

haya, almost everyone, including local and foreign delegations, reached the Merdeka Stadium late because of the mammoth crowd



Malaysiaku Gemilang

thronging the streets leading to the venue.

"Traffic and crowd control was very difficult, despite all the rehearsals earlier.

"There was a sea of people everywhere, filling every corner of the stadium. Some just sat on the ground to witness the event.

"The foreign delegations were in awe. They could feel the excitement of the people."

Yahaya has a very vivid memory of that historic moment when Tunku shouted "Merdeka!" with the raising of the Malayan flag.

"Each time Tunku cried 'Merdeka!', everyone, including members of the Japanese delegation, shouted 'Merdeka!'"

"I was lucky to have witnessed the events leading to independence, and be involved in the Merdeka celebrations.

"For those of us who went through it all, our 50th Merdeka anniversary is a great thing," he adds.

Yahaya was later appointed Inspector of Schools in the Ministry of Education.

He has served as an educationist under five prime ministers and 16 education ministers.