

Historic, emotional moment for Zaleha

Young, full of life and in love. And it was an unforgettable rainy August morning 50 years ago, the former politician and social activist tells P. SELVARANI



It was 3am and the rain lashed down in torrents on the zinc and at-pap roofs of the houses in Kampung Baru.

Tempting as it was to just curl up and draw the blanket a little tighter, the 21-year-old University of Malaya undergraduate knew otherwise.

She clambered out of bed, showered, got dressed in her Sunday best and walked out of her house to meet her fiancé, Abdul Rahman Ali.

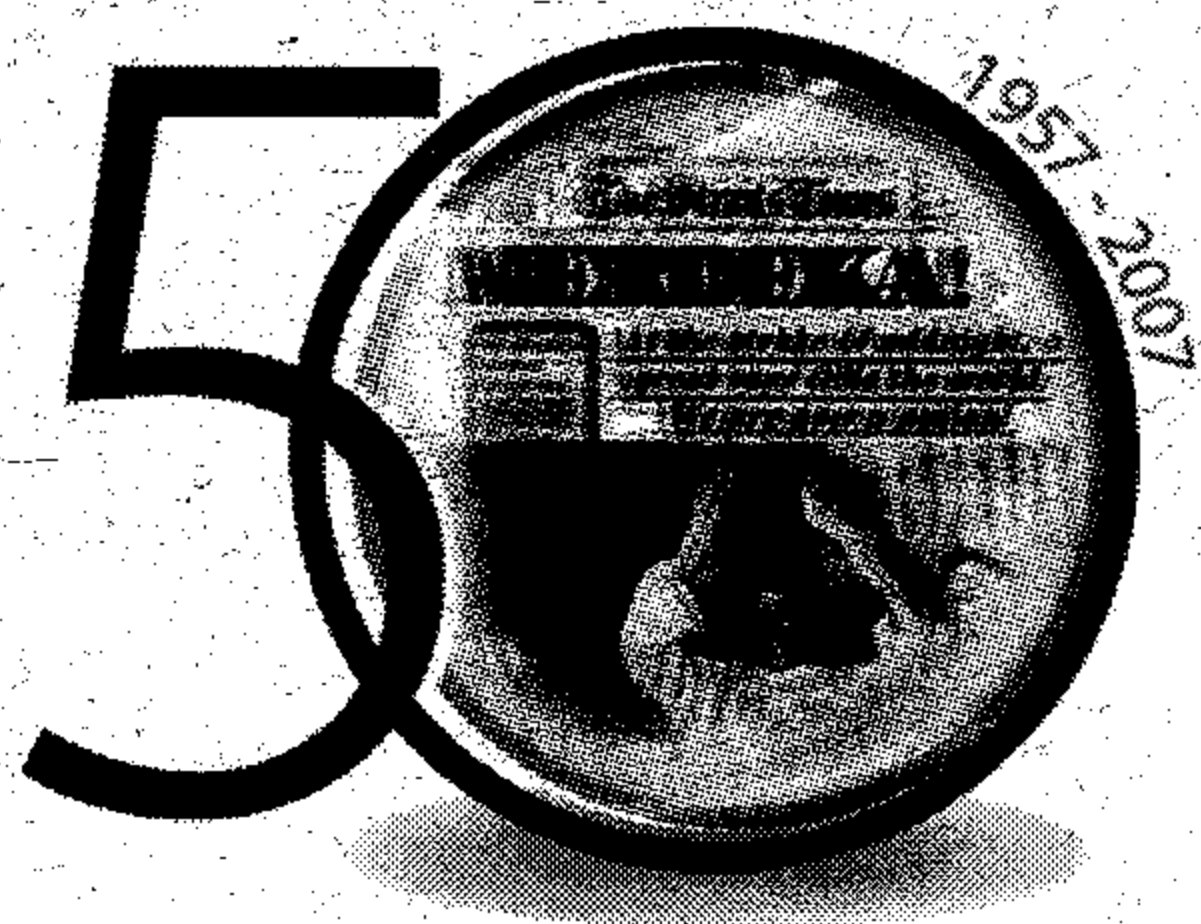
Huddled under a waxed paper umbrella, the couple joined scores of others as they walked in the pouring rain in the darkness from Kampung Baru to the Merdeka Stadium on Aug 31, 1957.

"We left our houses at 4am as we were afraid the stadium would be packed," recalls Tan Sri Zaleha Ismail of that historic day.

Thousands like Zaleha and Abdul Rahman made their way to the Merdeka Stadium to hear the nation's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, proclaim "Merdeka!"

"In fact, I hardly slept the previous night as I was so excited to be going to witness the historic event," says Zaleha, 71.

She remembers sitting diagonally across the VIP podium at the stadium which was already packed with people hours before the day's pro-



ceedings started.

"The event was supposed to start at 8am but because of the rain, it began an hour later."

Fifty years on, the memory of the proclamation of Merdeka still makes Zaleha's eyes glisten with tears.

"I may have been too young to know much about politics then but I know that that day was one of the most precious moments in my life.

"Seeing the Malayan flag going up and hearing the Tunku made us so proud.

"It was a very emotional moment for most of us," remembers Zaleha at her office at the National Population and Family Development Board where she is the chairman.

Zaleha, a mother of three boys and grandmother of 11, did not show any inclination for politics when she was young. During her

school days, she was a member of the Girl Guides and St John Ambulance movements, and was involved in drama.

After graduating with honours in Malay Studies, she joined Radio Malaya (now Radio Televisyen Malaysia) in 1961, and served in various capacities, including a stint as controller of the English service.

Zaleha was no stranger to Radio Malaya as she had been a part-time announcer and deejay for the Malay section since she was 15.

"All this was thanks to Tan Sri Aishah Ghani and her husband, Aziz Abu Hassan, who were also from Kampung Baru."

Aziz was with Radio Malaya and he asked the teenager to audition for a part-time announcer's job which lasted 10 years even while she was in university. Zaleha also acted in radio dramas during this time.

In 1968, she joined Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. By this time, Zaleha and her family had moved from Kampung Baru to Gombak.

Zaleha was also active in social work in Gombak and this came to the notice of the local Umno secretary, who invited her to join the party.

"I was already involved in many voluntary organisations and I thought joining Umno would be like serving another voluntary organisation. The thought of getting actively involved in politics never crossed my mind."

During this time, Zaleha had lost touch with Aishah until a chance meeting in 1970. Aishah was then the vice-president of Kaum Ibu and attended a Setapak Kaum Ibu meeting where Zaleha was a member.

"She was surprised to see me. And soon after, she was appointed Minister of Welfare Services and made me her political secretary."

For the 1978 general election, Zaleha was nominated to contest a

state seat in Selangor. Aishah told Zaleha that if she won the seat, she would be made a state executive councillor.

Zaleha declined the nomination, saying that "people always say exco members are corrupt".

"I eventually accepted after being persuaded by (then Selangor Menteri Besar) Datuk Hormat Rafei and Ibu Enjah Mohd Ariff (Selangor Kaum Ibu leader).

"My husband also encouraged me, saying that it was an opportunity to serve the people."

And serve the people she did in her capacity as an officer of the government and a member of various non-governmental organisations.

Zaleha had served as Deputy Transport Minister and Minister of National Unity and Community Development, and her involvement in the NGOs saw her holding the presidency of the National Council of Women's Organisations from 1989 to 2003.

She has also been the president of the Malaysian Child Welfare Council since 1978 and was appointed LPPKN chairman in 2000. Raising her sons and juggling her time between politics and voluntary organisations was difficult but Zaleha had the unwavering support of her husband.

"He was very co-operative. In fact, in all my years of service, he did the marketing and the cooking as well, and he is a good cook.

"But when I am at home on Sundays, I do the cooking."

Despite her age, Zaleha is full of energy and shows no sign of slowing down. And how does she relax?

"I don't relax. I am up at 6am and in the office by about 9am. The rest of the day is filled with meetings, although there are fewer late nights now.

"My father, Ismail Wok, always encouraged me to work for the people. And I will continue to do that for as long as I can."



Tan Sri Zaleha Ismail (extreme left, standing) with her college mates and lecturers at the University of Malaya in Singapore.

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