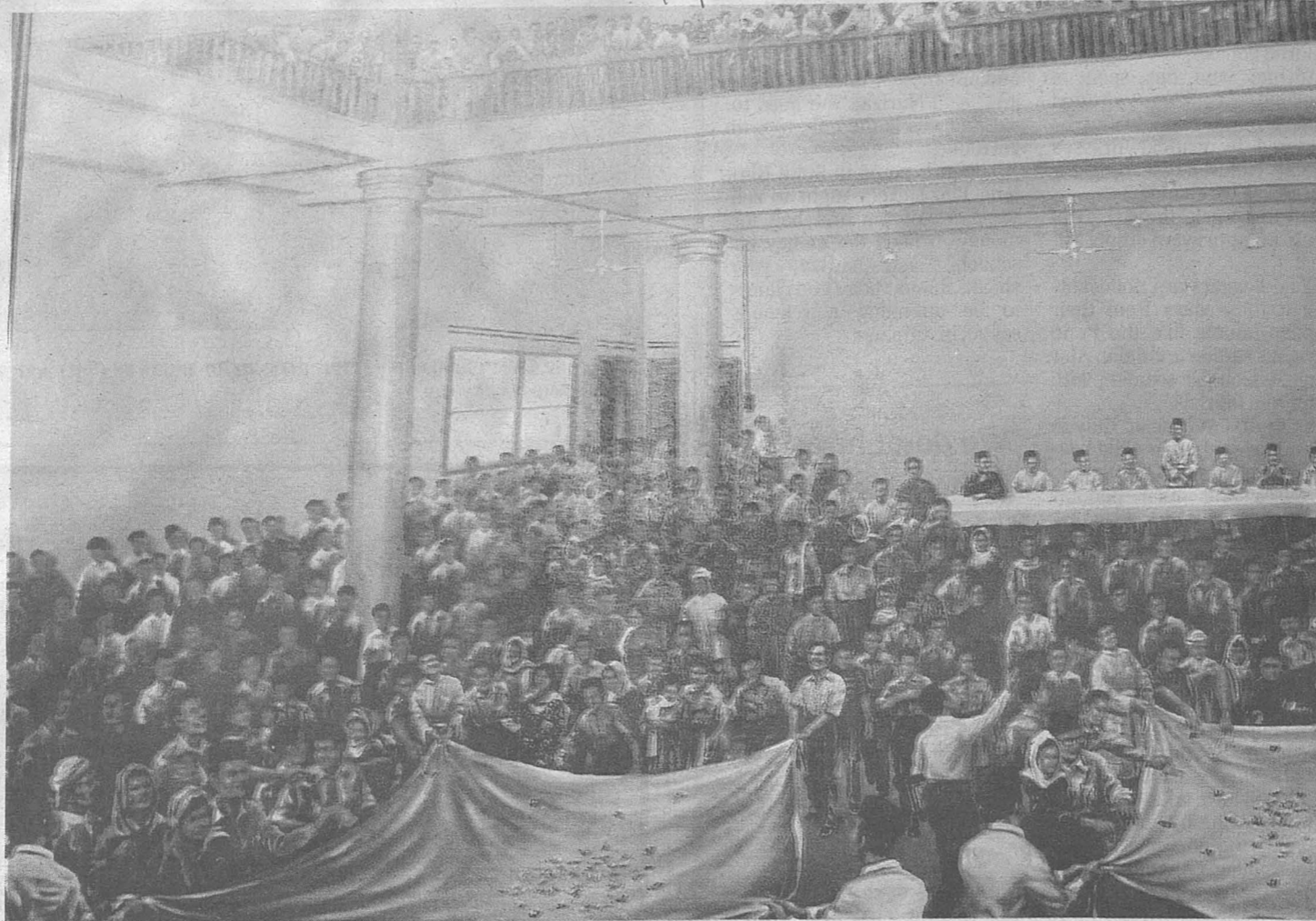


Hall where history was made

KST-22/4/2007



The Meng Seng Charitable Association Hall in Malacca has been serving the community through works of charity for the poor and needy for more than 80 years. Befitting its name, one of the most significant acts of charity which paved the way for the nation's Independence also took place in this august hall, writes P. SELVARANI



A painting at the Independence Proclamation Memorial showing the Umno gathering at the Meng Seng Hall in 1954 where the rakyat donated whatever valuables they had to enable Tunku to lead a second mission to London. — Picture courtesy of the Independence Proclamation Memorial, Malacca

IT rained gold chains, necklaces, earrings, bangles, bracelets, watches, rings, dollar notes and coins.

Eager hands from below grasped the valuables as the emotionally-charged crowd tossed whatever valuables they possessed, from the upper floor balcony.

Down below, just as many willing hearts donated what little they had to the volunteers who began spreading out sheets of cloth to collect the donations.

"I have never seen anything like that. How the rakyat spontaneously gave whatever they had... just to taste independence," recalled 78-year-old Malacca Umno veteran Datuk Wira Borhan Md Yaman.

Tears welled up in his eyes when he spoke about that historic gathering of Umno members who started an impromptu fund-raiser at the Meng Seng Charitable Hall in Malacca in 1954.

The "emergency gathering" (*perhimpunan tergempar*), Borhan added, was mooted by the Malayan Umno Youth to get the people's mandate on the next course of action following Tunku Abdul Rahman's failed mission to London that same year to discuss the possibility of holding elections

for the Federated Malay states.

Malacca was chosen for historical reasons. It was where it all began and it was the oldest colonised state in the country. As such, the Umno members felt that it was only appropriate to hold such an important event here.

And the Meng Seng Charitable Association Hall at 99, Wolferston Road (now Jalan Bendahara) was the only venue which could accommodate a gathering of 200 Umno members from all over the country then, said Borhan, who was then the secretary of Malacca Umno Youth.

He recalled how the people, including ordinary members of the public, came in droves from all over the country to hear what Tunku had to say.

Among them was Ahmad Badawi, the father of our current prime minister, who was present as an Umno Youth representative.

"The hall itself wasn't very big. So some people had to cram into the balcony on the top floor of the Meng Seng hall to hear Tunku speak."

Borhan said Tunku touched a raw nerve in the crowd when he told them how insulted (*terhina*) he felt when the British did not pay much attention to the Malayan delegation.

And when the crowd heard that it was not that easy to send another mission to London because of financial constraints, they went into a frenzy.

"Before we knew it, people from the balcony started throwing whatever valuables they had.

"Women removed their chains, necklaces, bangles, bracelets, *kerosang* and earrings. And the men threw in their watches, wallets, rings... whatever they had of value.

"It rained valuables as everyone chipped in. Some of the women gave us their *selendang* and *tudung* to help collect the items.

"It was amazing because everything was spontaneous, it came straight from the heart.

"It just showed how much the people yearned for freedom. How much Independence meant to us."

He said the Meng Seng Hall event spurred similar donation drives in other parts of the country after that.

"The collection was not much but whatever little the people donated helped. It was this spirit of nationalism that helped us gain our freedom."

Today, many go past this nondescript grey building situated at the junction of Jalan Bendahara

and Jalan Munshi Abdullah, totally unaware of the role the Meng Seng Hall played in charting the course of our nation's Independence.

But those who do, know that acts of charity was the basis for its very existence.

The Meng Seng Charitable Association (MSA) was set up in 1923 in Lorong Bukit China by the Chinese community as a social club where members gathered for cultural activities.

"People came here to sing, play Chinese classical musical instruments, stage Chinese *wayang* (opera shows) and perform acrobatic shows purely for entertainment," said MSA secretary Datuk Soon Kim Hock, 65.

"There was no other form of entertainment for the community in those days."

It wasn't long before the association members began doing little acts of charity such as providing free cultural lessons and *sinseh* (Chinese traditional medicine practitioners) treated the poor, regardless of race or religion.

"Our free clinics, which are still operating today, were appreciated by the public. Even the Indians and Malays would come to seek treatment."

Soon recalled meeting an el-



The hall is still used for social activities and charitable work.

derly *mak cik* several years ago who claimed she had been a regular at the clinic since she was young.

"She told me how she used to travel in a bullock cart from her kampung in Merlimau, leaving at 2am to reach the Meng Seng Hall at 6am!"

From a small shoplot in Lorong Bukit China, the MSA moved to slightly bigger premises in Jalan Kee Ann and Jalan Bunga Raya before finally settling at its present location in Jalan Bendahara.

The Meng Seng Charitable Association Hall was completed in July 1941 and before the members could even warm their seats in the new building, the Japanese invaded Malaya.

Believing that members of the MSA were funding the communists in China, the Japanese seized the building and several leaders of the MSA were executed.

"They turned the hall into the *Kempetei* (Japanese Military) headquarters where they tortured and beheaded many people, including our members," said Soon.

"People say you could hear the screams of the victims from as far as the Old Rex theatre."

And it was an unspoken rule that anyone passing by the MSA hall during this time would have to bow their head as a mark of respect to the *Kempetei* before travelling on.

"If you were cycling, you would have to dismount from your bicycle several metres away, push your bicycle along and bow your head. You could only mount your bicycle a few metres after passing the building.

"Anyone who defied this practice was asking for trouble."

With the departure of the Japanese, the MSA members resumed their cultural and charitable activities with renewed vigour.

"We had a brass band and an acrobatic team. We organised games, talent shows, dancing classes and even hosted mass weddings for the poor.



Datuk Soon Kim Hock is secretary of the Meng Seng Charitable Association

"Our most valuable contribution to the public to this day is our free clinic for the poor," said Soon who mastered the saxophone when he became a member of the MSA brass band as a schoolboy.

The free clinics, which are open to the public, are run by a team of *sinseh* and accupuncturists between 8.30am and 10.30am from Monday to Saturday. Patients pay a RM1 registration fee and the medication is free.

"The Malacca government has been very supportive of our clinic as it has been giving us a generous donation every year," said Soon.

Today, the MSA continues to assist the needy while still operating as a social club, organising karaoke competitions and line dancing sessions, among others.



Datuk Wira Borhan Md Yaman



The Meng Seng Hall...the silent witness to many historic events.