



He was young and on an important education mission for the nation that was soon to gain its independence. MALINA JAYA PALAN listens to that not-so-young man about the important news on independence he heard from the man himself, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj speaking to the Kirkby students training to be teachers on Feb 7, 1956. The Kirkby students were the first Malaysians to learn that the country was to get her independence on Aug 31, 1957.

He was there when Tunku said it

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THE leisurely thosai and chutney breakfast at the nearest banana-leaf restaurant is a Sunday morning ritual for Zainul Arshad Zainul Abidin and his wife, Jane Wong.

And when the freshly brewed hot coffee comes after the thosai, the Arshads settle down to talk, usually about their five grandchildren, or an upcoming trip abroad, like the coming short holiday to Phuket.

With the nation preparing to celebrate its 50th year of Merdeka, Arshad's mind these days regularly travels back in time to the heady days of the mid-1950s when talk of independence was thick in the air.

And you could say that Arshad was in the thick of it all.

He will always remember Feb 7, 1956.

Arshad, who is 70, was 19 years old then and training to be a teach-

er at the Malayan Teachers' Training College in Kirkby, just 10km from Liverpool, England.

The details of that day have been etched into his memory as it was that very day that Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, then chief minister and minister of home affairs, and the Malayan delegation visited the college to announce "important news".

"Our principal, G.J. Gurney, told us that morning that we were to decorate the college because some important guests were expected," remembers Arshad who now lives in Subang.

"We didn't have a clue who they were but we got to work. We placed bunting and flowers all around the assembly hall and the entrance leading to it.

"Then about 300 of us students waited in line to greet the 'impor-

tant' guests.

"We were dressed in our best, some in ethnic costumes, lending an air of colour and brightness to that cold February mid-morning."

It was around noon when Tunku, accompanied by Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein (later Tun), the minister of education, and Sir James Mountford, vice-chancellor of the University of Liverpool, were escorted into the hall by the college principal.

The Malayan delegation was in London for independence talks. Those were the days of no hand-phones and text messages, no Internet and the British national papers hardly paid any heed to the colonies.

The local newspapers, meanwhile, were more into greyhound racing, football league results and council news. The Kirkby students were not in the loop, so to speak.

There was lunch first before the students trooped into the assembly hall.

"Tunku told us that after a recent meeting with the British government, it was agreed that Malaya would gain her independence on Aug 31, 1957," remembers Arshad.

As his voice resonated across the room, the full impact of his announcement did not quite register with the students.

"We were really happy to hear about independence, but the significance didn't really sink in."

The Kirkby students were the first Malaysians to know that Malaya was to get her independence on Aug 31, 1957.

"Tunku said that he wanted us to receive the news first because he



Students from Kirkby College on a field trip. They are (front row, from left) Razak Mohd Noordin, William Jones (geography lecturer), Maheswary Cumaraswamy, Kamaladevi Rajasundram, Koh Puay Neo, Inom Yon, Maggie Tay and Musalmah Satiman; and (back row, from left) Abdul Hamid Abu Bakar, Raja Ahmad Raja Harun, Zainul Arshad Zainul Abidin, Soh Kai Yin, Mohd Pirdaus Badiuzzaman, Phung Tuck Yoon, Ahmad Dahan, Mohd Salleh Abdul Jadid and Latiff Shamsuddin.

felt that as teachers, we would be spearheading the development of education in the 'new Malaya'."

After the announcement was made, the students crowded around Tunku and Razak to pester them with questions about independence.

After two years at Kirkby, Arshad returned to Malaya in late 1956 and was posted to Brunei.

"They were short of teachers, so I was sent there," says Arshad.

He returned to Malaya in 1960 and was assigned to the Abdullah Munshi secondary school in Penang that same year.

It was in Penang where he met Jane, who was working in Radio

Malaya, and married her. Jane is 67 today.

Arshad didn't stay long as a teacher. He joined Tourism Malaysia in 1973 and four years later was posted to the London office, where he served as the director till he retired in 1988.

During his London days, he visited Liverpool regularly to meet up with the people whom he befriended during his Kirkby College days.

"I still remember how warm and friendly they were.

"During our Kirkby days, we invited locals to our 'Malaya gatherings' where they were served Malayan food and we entertained



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj (right) and Tun Abdul Razak Hussein arriving at Kirkby College, escorted by college principal G.J. Gurney (left). Zainul Arshad Zainul Abidin is behind Gurney.



The Straits Times article dated Feb 8, 1956 announcing that Kirkby students were first to find out about Merdeka.

them with our traditional dances.”

The locals reciprocated by inviting us over for tea during the weekends.

“We referred to the college as *Kampung Kirkby*, and we mixed freely among ourselves without a thought for race or religion. The years spent at Kirkby were the best two years of my life.”

Arshad, the youngest in a family of 12 children, was not the first teacher in the family.

His father, S.M. Zainul Abidin, was the first Malay to obtain a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of London. He was a teacher and encouraged Arshad to also become a teacher.

His mother, Wan Rashidah Merican, taught him how to cook and this served him well at Kirkby. Cooking is something Arshad still enjoys and he is also into travelling.

“My wife and I travel as much as we can. We just returned from Sydney a few days ago where we

walked across Sydney bridge to celebrate the 75th year of its construction.”

Arshad, who is in the midst of preparing for a holiday to Phuket, says: “I book all my holidays online, you know. So I don’t have to go to the travel agent.”

The grandfather of five is into video-editing and spends a lot of time in his computer room editing his travel videos. He recently helped a nephew put together a family video of his brother’s 50th wedding anniversary.

Although their children, Sintia, 44, Lina, 42, and Zainul Alamshah, 40, and the grandchildren spend a lot of time with them, Arshad and Jane still find time for friends.

Arshad still keeps in touch with those who attended Kirkby College like Datin Siti Rohani Ismail, Moira Hu (who lives in Ipoh) and Monica Lai.

And they meet up regularly for high tea, a hangover from the Kirkby days.



Zainul Arshad boarding the BOAC Argonaut, a plane with four propellers, for Kirkby on Aug 29, 1954.