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What a time for Merdeka's first-ever 'homecoming'

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Malaysiaku Gemilang

KUALA LUMPUR: Her first name will raise eyebrows in Malaysia.

More so this month as the country celebrates its 50th anniversary.

But even in Canada, where 4-year-old Merdeka Kathleen Li-Yean Miles resides, the child gets her share of attention.

Canadians are both puzzled and intrigued when they hear her first name.

They usually respond by asking: "Sorry, what is it again?" or "how do you spell that?", said her father Malaysia-born Charles Kim Miles, 34, in a telephone interview from his home in Pitt Meadows, British Columbia.

It is also common for them to mispronounce her name.

"We patiently repeat it and spell it and then wait when the name is mispronounced again," said her mother Joanna, a Canadian with an English family background.

Canadians are, however, full of praise when the couple explain that the name means "independence".

Merdeka likes her name and is proud of it although she has not grasped its connotation.

It was the first thing she learnt to write, said Joanna.

She was named Merdeka to remind her that her roots are partially in Malaysia, said Charles, who is half Baba Ny-

onya and half Caucasian.

"We wanted to make sure her heritage is woven into her name and that she understands that part of who she is comes from the values and traditions that I was exposed to when I was growing up," said Charles, a freelance cinematographer.

Merdeka, who has not been to Malaysia, is most often called "Deka" or "Deks" at home.

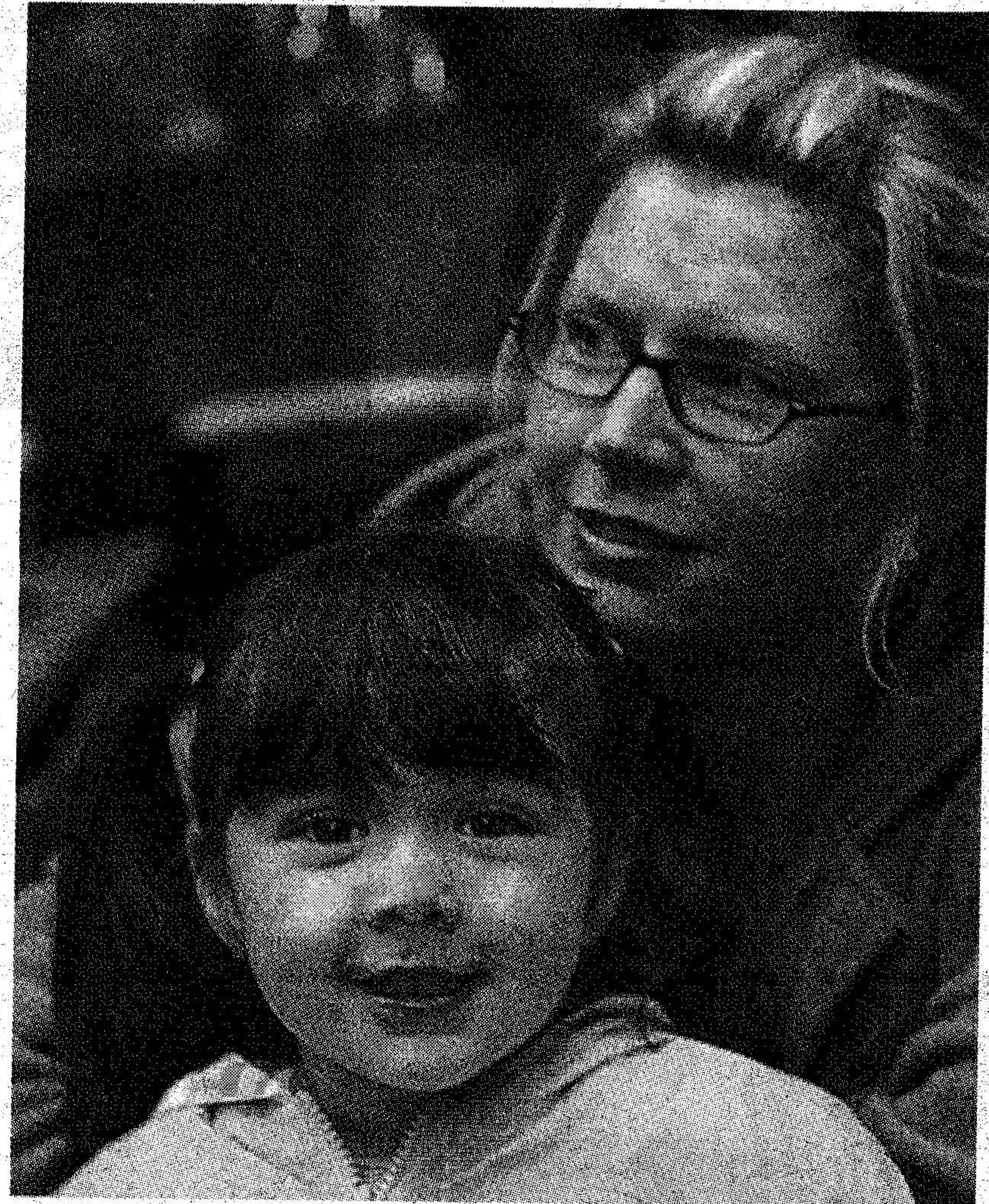
"Her pet name is Poochie but when we call her Merdeka Miles she knows she's in trouble," said Joanna.

The couple have been away from Malaysia for nearly 10 years but are trying their best to return this year.

Merdeka's paternal grandfather, Ted Miles, 80, is hoping to see his only grandchild for the first time.

"I really hope they can come. I haven't seen them for nine years as my travelling days are over," said Ted, who talks to Merdeka often over the phone and keeps three albums of her photographs.

The former principal of Taylor's College, he has laid out his plans for his first meeting



Four-year-old Merdeka Kathleen Li-Yean Miles with her mother Joanna Miles.

with his granddaughter.

He said he would take Merdeka around Bentong, where her father grew up and also where Ted spent many happy years.

Charles said he was proud of his Malaysian heritage which is always a conversation piece among his Canadian friends and colleagues.

"We can't wait to visit. I've

promised my wife we'll go to our favourite place in Pulau Perhentian and I've promised Deka that I'll take her snorkelling there, so we're quite motivated," he said.