

He was among the thousands present at Stadium Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957. As the nation approaches the 50th anniversary of its birth, Datuk Dr Yaacob Hussain Merican speaks of his time as a student and a teacher, that momentous day and his admiration for the man called Bapa Malaysia.

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A PICTURE of the country's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj hangs on the wall of the living room behind him. It symbolises Datuk Dr Yaacob Hussain Merican's deep respect for the great man.

And that respect should come as no surprise. After all, he is Tunku's nephew-in-law.

His esteem for the man, however, dates back to his teenage days, long before his association with the family through marriage.

Born in Kelantan in 1938, the young Dr Yaacob attended Sekolah Melayu Padang Garong in Kota Baru during the Japanese Occupation.

"I remember that we had to learn Japanese, and Japanese folklore was taught in school," he recalls.

"We studied about the Japanese emperor and were told to pay homage to him."

Despite their youth, Dr Yaacob and his peers were not spared the effects of Japanese propaganda.

But even that gave rise to comic moments. "The British and their allies were depicted as evil people and the Japanese kept telling school children to beware of the bad British planes," explains Dr Yaacob.

Like many young pupils then, he took all this to heart. As a result, he caused a commotion in school and disrupted a whole day of classes when he panicked on sighting an aircraft, thinking it was a British air raid.

"The low-flying plane actually had Japanese markings but I mistook it for a British plane. I shouted and rang the school bell," he recalls with a laugh.

"Everyone ran for safety and some even hid in the drain."

The war finally ended and Dr Yaacob eventually moved on to secondary education at the Sultan Ismail English School, also in Kota Baru.

His years there were good ones. He not only enjoyed his studies but also participated actively in athletics, football and volleyball.

The people he met along the way were notable as well.

"The former minister of finance, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, was my classmate," observes Dr Yaacob. "Unfortunately, he was



A view of the field and the crowd at Stadium Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957.

not my classmate for long as he was very smart and enjoyed a double promotion from Standard Three to Standard Five."

His affiliation with his alma mater, later renamed Sultan Ismail College, continued after he completed his Form Five in 1955.

He taught there for six months before moving on to the Sultan Ibrahim English School in Pasir Mas, where he served till 1962.

Being a part of history

It was in 1956 that Dr Yaacob first crossed paths with Tunku, who was on an official visit to Kota Baru in his capacity then as chief minister of Malaya.

While just about everyone else kept their distance in awe of the great man, he mustered the courage to walk up to Tunku to ask for an autograph.

"He was very nice and humble, and he did not kick up a fuss," says Dr Yaacob.

"It surprised me that I was practically the only one who went up to him while the others seemed reluctant to move."



Dr Yaacob at Stadium Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957. With him are a very young Ramlah (left) and Rounah.

A part in history

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A young Dr Yaacob approaching Tunku, then chief minister of Malaya, for his autograph during his official visit to Kelantan in 1956. — Photos courtesy of DATUK DR YAACOB HUSSAIN MERICAN

»The euphoria was incredible and the crowd went wild when the shouts of Merdeka filled the air«

It was his admiration for Tunku that subsequently took him to Kuala Lumpur, where he witnessed the historic events that unravelled at Stadium Merdeka.

"I really respected Tunku's role when the Alliance coalition won 51 out of 52 contested seats in the first federal election (in July 1955). I was involved in ballot counting and the magnitude of their victory was astounding," observes Dr Yaacob.

"When the opportunity to see him again at the Merdeka celebrations presented itself, I just could not say no."

The experience was, of course, memorable. In a move to thank the people for their continuous support, the Government and railway authorities offered discounted train tickets to

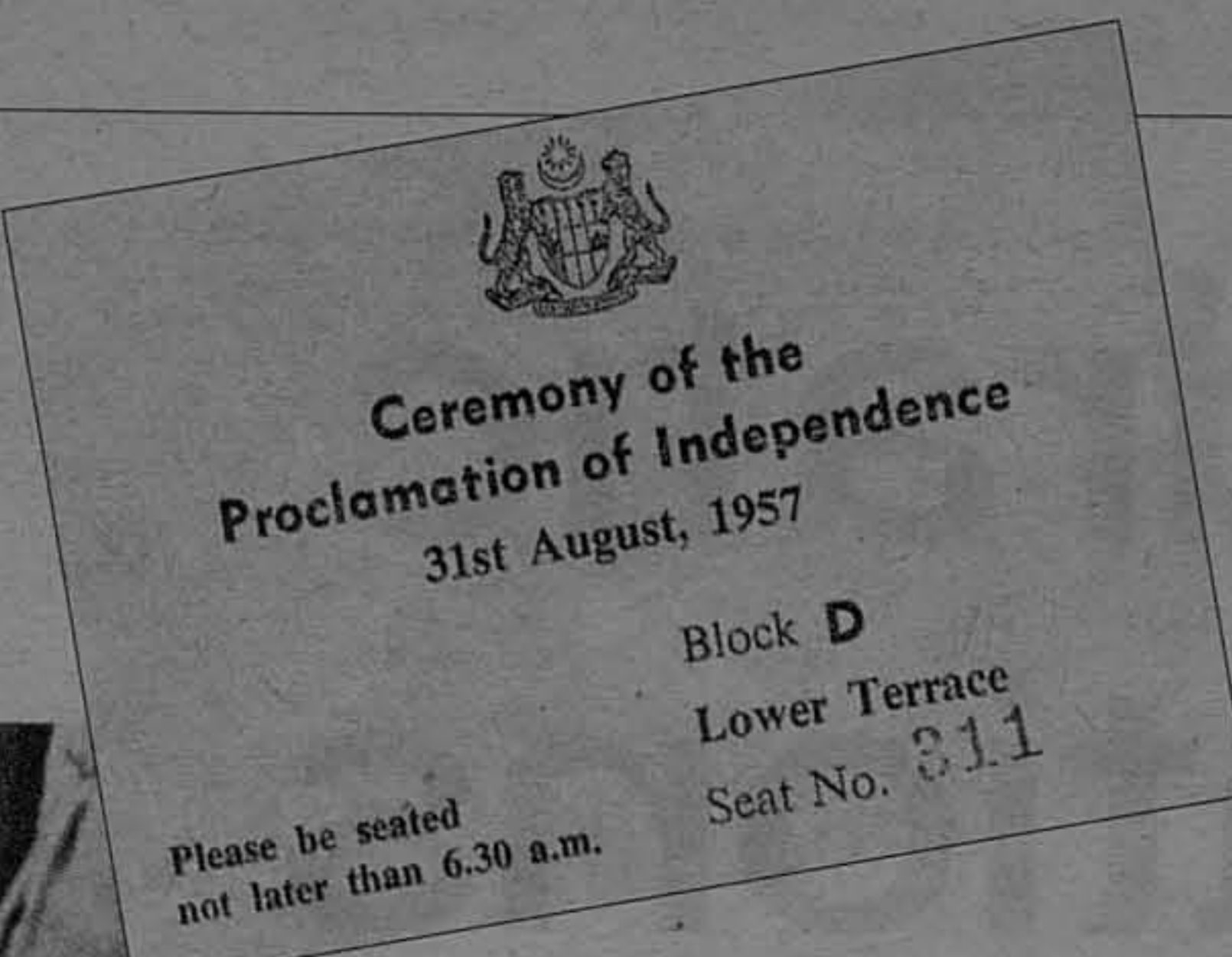
encourage those living on the east coast to make the journey to Kuala Lumpur to join in the celebrations.

So, as that all-important day drew near, the intrepid Dr Yaacob set off for Kuala Lumpur with three of his students in tow — the brother and sister pair of Bakri and Ramlah Mohd Nor as well as Rounah Salleh.

The trip to Kuala Lumpur was a reward for the three children as Dr Yaacob had promised to take them along on the trip for doing well in their studies.



Ramlah, Rounah and Bakri, together with other passengers, on the train travelling from Pasir Mas to Kuala Lumpur.



Dr Yaacob's admission ticket to observe the proclamation of independence at Stadium Merdeka.

Many parades were held and the visitors enjoyed watching them. They also had an exciting time checking out places like the National Museum, the Federal House and the Lake Gardens.

On the morning of Aug 31, they got out of bed early and started their walk to the stadium at 5am to become a part of history.

"Although there was no dress code, many turned up in traditional costumes to reflect their national pride," Dr Yaacob recalls.

While Tunku's speech was inspiring, it was his leading of the declaration of Merdeka seven times that really got the crowd going.

"The euphoria was incredible and the crowd went wild when the shouts of Merdeka filled the air," says Dr Yaacob.

"I know for sure that Tunku was excited but he had an air of calm determination that day."

New beginnings

Armed with new resolve after witnessing that historic moment, Dr Yaacob went back to his teaching duties with greater vigour.

Although he had started out teaching Standard One children, he took on higher classes eventually and by 1962, he was teaching English and English literature to Form Five students and was their form master as well.

But the need for a new challenge in life saw him signing up for a specialised course in teaching the blind at Cheras in 1963.

"An American representative from the American Foundation for the Blind was working together with the Education Ministry to introduce a programme for blind students," he reminisces.

"The objective was to make blind students comfortable in a sighted class and qualified teachers were needed to cope with the new situation."

Apart from learning braille, Dr Yaacob had to be familiar with the life of a blind person, and the term "walking in another person's shoes" took on a new meaning.

"I was blindfolded and I had to learn how to use a cane, cross roads and open doors," he says.

"The blind are dependent on their hearing and I had to experience their difficulties in order to better connect with them."

On completing his training, he returned to Kelantan and took up his role as special educa-

Dr Yaacob with Rounah (left) and Ramlah during a break in the train journey to Kuala Lumpur.



Dr Yaacob and Dr Sofiah re-enacting the braille lessons that led to them falling in love in 1964. — RICHARD LIM / The Star

tion teacher at the Zainab Secondary School, Kota Baru, where there were six blind girls.

If 1963 was special for Dr Yaacob, the following year proved to be even more so.

The ministry was looking for more volunteer teachers to read to the blind and Tunku's niece Tunku Datuk Dr Sofiah Jewa was among those who responded to the call.

Fresh from her teacher training at Brinsford Lodge, Wolverhampton, Dr Sofiah met Dr Yaacob at the Zainab Secondary School as she wanted to learn braille.

Since reading braille requires one to identify the different letters represented by a combination of six embossed dots, he held her hand to guide her during the lessons.

And as it turned out, the holding of hands kindled the fires of romance — they first met in January 1964, got engaged in June and exchanged marriage vows in August the same year.

This lends weight to a tongue-in-cheek observation from Dr Sofiah, who says: "He had ulterior motives all along when I was learning braille."

Moving on

The marriage was even sweeter for Dr Yaacob when it received Tunku's blessings as that meant the world to him.

Although Dr Yaacob and his wife taught with dedication, establishing a close rapport with their visually impaired students — who included International University College of Technology Twintech vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ismail Md Salleh — their days as educators finally came to an end.



Dr Yaacob and Dr Sofiah and their two sons, Megat Sufian (left) and Megat Shaharuddin, seen with Tunku in 1990.

Financial considerations eventually came into play.

"Teachers were only classified as third division government servants then and the pay was not great," says Dr Yaacob.

"People in the army, police and the state civil service were all in the second division and received better pay."

He and Dr Sofiah left for Britain to read law in 1965 and graduated in 1970. Both their children have followed in their footsteps and are also legal practitioners today.

Looking back, Dr Yaacob has no regrets over his years as a teacher.

"I will always remember my teaching days as I could make a difference to the community, and the way Tunku made a difference to the nation inspired me," he says.

Tunku's personal life, he continues, was exemplary as well.

"He excelled not only as a statesman but also as a family man, and his life exemplified balance and commitment."

When asked to cite some words from Tunku that have particular significance for him, Dr Yaacob mulls over this for a while before rushing upstairs to get a compilation of the man's quotes.

A moment later, he is back with the book opened to a page that holds these words:

"I have given and will continue to give 75% of my life and endeavours in the service of my country, my God and my people and keep that 25% for myself and my family to do what I like with it.

"If others can find fault with that, then let it be, for Allah is all knowing and all forgiving. Men, on the other hand, are forgetful."



Rounah and Ramlah outside the National Museum in 1957 during their trip to Kuala Lumpur.