

Dome KLCC

Merdeka spirit lives on

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MOHAN: Cikgu, what were you doing on Thursday when they were enacting the lowering of the Union Jack on the eve of Aug 31, 1957 at the Selangor Padang, now known as Dataran Merdeka or Merdeka Square.

Zain: Watching the whole thing on TV.

Mohan: And where were you on the eve of Aug 31, 1957, fifty years ago?

Zain: In a house in a European-owned rubber estate not far from Sungai Petani in central Kedah. My father was a mechanic there.

Mohan: What were you doing?

Zain: As the Union Jack was being lowered? Sleeping. I was told to sleep early as I had to go school the next day - Merdeka Day. We had to march to the town *padang* to join children from the other schools, villagers and estate workers.

Azman: No radio?

Zain: Yes, we had this huge German set, Grundig. It could receive broadcasts from London, Toronto, New Delhi, Rangoon, Hongkong and Saigon and so on quite clearly.

Mohan: But you didn't stay up?

Zain: No. I don't think others in the estate did. Most of the workers were Indians but there were some Malays and Chinese. Only two or three families had radios. Also few were aware that there was going to be such an event in Kuala Lumpur that evening. Most were happy that they needn't work on Aug 31 - compliments of the estate owners - and on top of that get

a free ride to town on the estate lorries to participate in the Merdeka day festivities.

Azman: What happened at the *padang*?

Zain: It was a huge gathering. The only other time I was at such a huge gathering was four years earlier in 1953. I was in Year Two then.

The gathering was to mark the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. As we arrived we were given two flags -- the Union Jack and the Federation of Malaya flag - and a medal which we pinned to our shirt pocket. Someone read the speech of the queen and following that we sang *God save the Queen*. And we waved the flags. After the ceremony was over, we were each given a bun, a bottle of "Green Spot" orange juice, a 50 sen note and a cinema ticket to the Queen's theatre. Wow! For many of us it was a real treat. At once we made a beeline for the Queen's. We watched a documentary of Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest of Mount Everest and a cartoon feature, *Peter Pan*. I went home happy, and in my heart thanked the young queen for it. The medal was still where I had pinned it on and my hands still clutched the two flags as I sat in the bus taking me home.

Chong: What happened at



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the *padang* on Aug 31, 1957? You seemed to have veered off into another gathering.

Zain: Sorry. As we arrived we were each given two flags - Federation of Malaya flag and the flag of Kedah. Somebody read the Declaration of Independence. And then we sang the *Negaraku*. We shouted Merdeka seven times with lots of enthusiasm and gusto and waved our flags. We received a bun and a bottle of "Green Spot" orange juice. That's all. But that was enough as there were free food everywhere.

Everyone looked pleased and happy, especially those I met along the main street of the small town, Jalan Ibrahim. Unlike in 1953, the town was gaily decorated with bunting and flags and crowded with workers from the European-owned and Chinese-owned rubber estates and Malay villages. Most people greeted each other with raised fists and shouts of "Merdeka". Many restaurants gave free lunches, and free *air bandung* and syrup were available at numerous street stalls. And from these establishments music blared.

Chong: The happiness was real?

Zain: As far as I could tell. There was excitement and enthusiasm about running their own affairs themselves. There was hope that

all their leaders had told them and promised them about the future of their multi-racial nation was going to be true.

Chong: Did you see similar excitement, enthusiasm and hope on the faces of people you saw on Thursday and Friday?

Zain: Some. But then we have progressed. There is no denying that. We are rich and count ourselves among the top 20 trading nation in the world. There are also very few people who are absolutely poor. We have a population of about 26 million people and many universities as well -- almost a university for each million people. We are a democratic country and the holding of regular election every four to five years attests to this.