

He cooked, he talked, he opened eyes and hearts

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Merdeka didn't just happen on Aug 31, 1957. It was the culmination of a series of events, talks and protests from the 1940s till the 1950s. A 'Cikgu Buta' recalls the late 1940s in London where the young Tunku Abdul Rahman and Abdul Razak Hussein held political discussions. P. SELVARANI writes

THE cold and dreariness of autumn can be a depressing experience for any young woman alone in a foreign country.

And when 20-year-old cadet welfare officer Ann Majeed arrived in London one autumn day in 1948 to pursue a course in special education, there was no one she missed more than her parents, C.L.A. Majeed and Sophia Abdul-lah.

Fortunately for Ann, the close-knit community of Malayan students in Britain was there for her.

And among them was a young prince from Kedah whom they affectionately called "Pak Engku" (Tunku Abdul Rahman).

There was also the young (second prime minister Tun) Abdul Razak Hussein and (former Kepala Batas MP Datuk) Mohamed Sophe Sheikh Ibrahim.

"Anyone meeting Pak Engku for the first time, would have immediately found him endearing," says Datuk Ann as she recalls her first meeting with Tunku Abdul Rahman who was then in London to be called to the Bar.

"He was warm, generous and jolly, with a mischievous sense of humour to boot."



Malaysiaku Gemilang

"And when you are alone in a foreign country for the first time, it is such a comfort knowing that there is someone who cares about your welfare.

"Pak Engku filled the role of father figure."

Ann believes Tunku took a special interest in her because she was undertaking what was considered an odd course at that time — special education with particular emphasis on the blind.

"He even had a nickname for me — *Cikgu Buta* (blind teacher). And that is what he continued to call me even after he became prime minister."

She remembers how once on a visit to Kelantan as the prime minister, Tunku spotted her lining up



Datuk Ann Majeed (seated third from left) with fellow Malayan students (from left) Zulkifli Hashim, Rahmah Hamzah and Abdul Razak Hussein during a meeting with Lady and Lord Ogmore in London.

with some heads of department to greet him.

"The minute he saw me, he said, 'Oh, *Cikgu Buta pun ada disini!*'"

"I was so embarrassed but my husband (Datuk Dr Mohd Noordin Keling) told me I should be flattered because he still remembered old friends."

For students on a limited budget in Britain, Tunku was a source of comfort and relief in many ways.

"Tunku loved cooking and he had a story for just about every dish he cooked. And he always had a well-stocked larder."

"Whenever we visited him, he would cook a little extra of whatever he had and insist that we join him for a meal."

"He knew that most of us had a limited allowance and it was always difficult for us towards the end of the month."

"But in his subtle way, he would invite us for a meal without making us feel that we were in need of charity."

"That is something I learned from him as well as my parents — to give from the heart and not make the recipient feel that he or she is in need."

Ann's fondest memories are of Tunku teaching her to cook some Asian dishes in the kitchen of his London apartment.

"He had an impressive collection of pots and pans and when it was time for him to return to Malaya, he told me to give them away to students who may need them."

"I asked him for a double-sided grilling pan. He was quite amused that I wanted the pan. I liked it because it was a unique and handy utensil."

"Till today I still use the pan for grilling steaks or fish. It may have seen better days but I am especially proud to possess a piece of history."

Ann says although they were a small group, the Malay students in London forged lasting friendships with the British and other nationalities, thanks to Tunku who encouraged them to widen their circle of friends and enrich themselves with knowledge.

"Because he knew my interest was in helping the blind, he introduced me to blind British MP Sir Ian Fraser who gave me a real insight into the needs of the blind."

Ann returned to help set up the Princess Elizabeth School for the Blind in Johor Baru, which was once rated the best school for the blind in Southeast Asia.

Ann says Tunku already had plans for an independent Malaya when he was in London, and he often got small groups of Malayan students, including Razak and Sophee, together to talk politics.

"He used to remind us all that we were in London not to just get a degree, but to educate ourselves for the future of our nation."

The friendship with Tunku resumed when she returned to Malaya and was posted to Johor Baru.

"We actually became family friends as my mother was also a close friend of Tunku's wife, (Tun) Sharifah Rodziah, when Tunku was the legal assistant for the Johor government."

"Even after becoming prime minister, he was still a man of the people."

"Everyone who attended any function, including my mother's *tauhu* and *timun* (tofu and cucumber) suppliers, mobbed him, wanting to shake his hand."

"He obliged all of them. That's how much he was loved."

Ann, who was the executive director for the Malaysian Association for the Blind for several years before becoming the director-general of the Welfare Department, says Tunku was the person "who further strengthened my values and commitment to society as instilled by my parents".

She remembers growing up in a household where they were taught not to discriminate between the haves and the have-nots, and between people of different races and beliefs.

(Her illustrious siblings include Datuk Lily Majeed who was secretary of the Muslim Women's Welfare Council, physician Datuk Dr Ruby Majeed, Commissioner of Heritage Datuk Prof Siti Zuraina Majeed and Datuk Hamzah Abdul Majeed, the former secretary-general of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism.)

"We had people from all walks of life coming to our house and my parents would always welcome them," recalls the doting grandmother of five.



Datuk Ann Majeed says Tunku and her parents strengthened her values and commitment to society.