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When Tun Razak met Toh Puan Rahah...

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SMITTEN: He first caught sight of bride-to-be at her school in Johor

On the evening of March 23, 1975, the then prime minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein threw a dinner at his official residence at Sri Taman to mark the wedding of his political secretary, Annuar Jusoh.

My wife, Hamidah, and I were sitting at the same table as Tun Razak and his wife, Toh Puan Rahah Noah, as well as other guests, including the then Malayan Banking Bhd chairman Tan Sri Taib Andak, the then Dewan Negara president Tan Sri Ong Yoke Lin and his wife, Puan Sri Dr Aishah Ong, Umno stalwart Tun Syed Nasir Ismail, his wife and Daiman Jamaluddin, who was the then Customs director-general and relative of the bride-to-be.

Conversation at the table was light-hearted, and the guests were in a celebratory mood. Taib, who was Tun Razak's close friend and always a gregarious presence at social gatherings, regaled everyone with stories about the prime minister.

The two men had known each other since they were law students in London, and Tun Razak had appointed Taib as Felda chairman from 1958 to 1971, entrusting his old friend to create homes and livelihoods for Felda settlers.

At some point, Taib told everyone that he had been responsible for arranging Tun Razak's marriage to Toh Puan Rahah. Tun Razak, who was in a good humour that night, was happy to

let his friend tell the story of how he had met his wife.

Taib said in late 1951, Tun Razak's father, Datuk Hussein Mohd Taib, had summoned him while Hussein was hospitalised at Bangsar Hospital, one of the oldest government facilities in the neighbourhood at the time.

Hussein told Taib that it was time for Tun Razak to be married and he wanted Taib to find his son a suitable bride. Tun Razak was then working as state secretary of Pahang. Hussein's only caveat was that his future daughter-in-law had to be from Johor. Arranged marriages were the norm at the time, and Taib, who was already married with four children, agreed to take on the task.

A few days later, Taib brought Tun Razak to Convent Holy Infant Jesus in Johor Baru on the pretext of picking up his daughter, Kalsom. Taib's real intent was to let Tun Razak catch a glimpse of Toh Puan Rahah, then a 19-year-old Form Five student at the same school.

Toh Puan Rahah was the youngest child of Mohamad Noah Omar, who was the then Johor Umno chairman. Tun Razak must have been smitten by the sight of Toh Puan Rahah because not long after the visit to the school, Taib and his wife visited Toh Puan Rahah's parents to make a formal marriage proposal on his behalf.

As Toh Puan Rahah told others later,

when her parents showed her a photograph of her suitor, she thought he looked slim and handsome. She accepted the proposal. The two were engaged for nine months and were strictly chaperoned the few times they were able to meet during that period.

When Taib finished telling the story, Tun Razak told his guests that it had not just been his father who wanted him to marry. Pahang Sultan Abu Bakar Riayatuddin Al-Muadzam Shah had also told him that it was time for him to settle down.

The sultan had pointed out that as all the state's district officers were married, it was *sumbang* (inappropriate) for Tun Razak, as state secretary, to remain a bachelor.

Tun Razak and Toh Puan Rahah married on Sept 4, 1952, and went on to have five sons, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

In an essay she contributed to the book *Tun Abdul Razak: A Personal Portrait*, Toh Puan Rahah described her husband's down-to-earth nature.

"He was always kind and so calm, very seldom ruffled," she wrote. "There was a lot of give and take between us. He hardly ever raised his voice — not to me, not to his children and, certainly, not to the household staff. He would advise rather than reprimand, showing us where we went wrong. He won our hearts, and it was easy to win his."

By the time Tun Razak died in 1976, the couple had been married for 24 years.

The writer, a trustee of the Tun Razak Foundation, was the first director-general of the Implementation, Coordination and Development Administration Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, responsible for monitoring the progress of programmes and projects under the New Economic Policy, reporting directly to the prime minister. He was also Tun Razak's special assistant.

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A PAGE FROM MY DIARIES

