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SIXTY YEARS AND GROWING

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The country's history tells us stories of our forefathers' struggle for Independence; we need to be reminded of their sacrifices so it can be passed on to future generations

I WAS born five years after Tunku Abdul Rahman proclaimed Malaya as "a free and independent partner in the great community of nations" in his speech at the Proclamation of Independence at the Merdeka Stadium 60 years ago.

So, when Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Said Keruak announced that there was going to be a re-enactment of the 1957 Proclamation of Independence at this year's National Day celebration, themed "Negaraku Sehat! Sejawa", I felt quite excited.

The re-enactment at Dataran Merdeka will "bring Malaysians back to that historic day when we celebrated Merdeka 60 years ago".

"This is also to remind all Malaysians to appreciate the sacrifices of our forefathers and educate the younger generation on the spirit of independence," he had said at a press conference after chairing a meeting on the National Day and Malaysia Day celebrations recently.

Exciting, yes, as we would relive that moment in the country's history.

My mother told me she was at Padang Pahlawan in Melaka on Feb 20, 1956, when Tunku first announced the date of the country's Independence Day. He had just returned from London after three weeks of negotiations with the British. My mother was 16 years old then.

She was barely a year old when the Japanese invaded Malaya in 1941. The Japanese invasion not only left a deep wound in my maternal grandmother's heart, but also an ugly scar on her left arm.

After her husband died in Muar when he was knocked down by a Japanese army's truck, my grandmother and her three children, including my mother, left for Johor Baru. In an air raid, a

bomb exploded near my grandmother, which left her injured.

Friends of my grandmother also remembered their "zaman Jepun" days, where they had to take their daughters into the jungle whenever they hear of the Japanese approaching their villages. Female family members as young as 11 were taught to lie flat on the ground, for fear of being found by the Japanese army.

Then, there was the communist insurgency. My mother remembered having to eat tapioca back then as food was scarce.

She spoke of taking refuge from the communists in the Kempas jungle in Johor Baru back then.

When she told my niece and nephew about this, they didn't want to believe it at first. The

Kempas they know is a neighbourhood with modern amenities, such as Starbucks, McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets at the nearby Setia Tropika. In fact,

Kempas is now part of Iskandar Malaysia. My mother told us of

women giving up their jewellery to help finance Tunku Abdul Rahman's trip to London. I

later found out about Datuk Siti Rahmah Kassim, who had spontaneously offered her gold bangle, a wedding gift from her father, during an Umno conference back then, when Tunku Abdul Rahman lamented that the party did not have funds to send him and his delegates to Britain for negotiations. She inspired so many other people to contribute their valuables, including rings, bangles, gold wristwatches, dress pins and brooches to fund the trip.

I consider myself lucky that I grew up with grandparents, parents and elders who lived through the struggles to gain Independence. I listened to their many stories. And these stories are passed on to the next generation as we want them to



Tunku Abdul Rahman during the Proclamation of Independence in 1957. There will be a re-enactment of the proclamation at this year's National Day celebration.

relive what our forefathers had gone through back then. We want them to source information on the country's history from all avenues. We certainly don't want them to be an ignorant lot.

What I know of that day is from history books, newspaper articles and stories told to me by my grandparents, parents and elders. The Union Jack was lowered at the stroke of midnight at Dataran Merdeka on the night of Aug 30, 1957. I read that it had rained that night. It was about half an hour before the ceremony signifying the end of British rule in Malaya that the rain stopped.

"It was as if the skies had fallen silent to honour the historic moment," the newspaper report said.

The new flag for Malaya was raised as the national anthem *Negaraku* was played. Tunku Abdul Rahman gave a speech hailing the ceremony as the "greatest moment in the life of the Malayan people".

On the morning of Aug 31, 1957,

some 25,000 people filled Stadium Merdeka to bear witness to the country's Independence. I have watched old video footages of Queen Elizabeth's representative, the Duke of Gloucester, handing over the constitution instrument to Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaya.

Tunku Abdul Rahman then read the Declaration of Independence. "Today, as a new page is turned, and Malaya steps forward to take her rightful place as a free and independent partner in the great community of nations, a new nation is born and though we fully realise that difficulties and problems lie ahead, we are confident that, with the blessing of God, these difficulties will be overcome and that today's events, down the avenues of history, will be our inspiration and our guide," he said.

He also said that, "...while we think of the past, we look forward in faith and hope to the future; from henceforth we are masters

of our destiny and the welfare of this beloved land is our own responsibility. Let no one think we have reached the end of the road. Independence is indeed a milestone, but it is only the threshold to high endeavour — the creation of a new and sovereign state. At this solemn moment therefore, I call upon you all to dedicate yourselves to the service of the new Malaya, to work and strive with hand and brain to create a new nation, inspired by the ideals of justice and liberty, a beacon of light in a disturbed and distracted world. High confidence has been reposed in us; let us unitedly face the challenge of the years. And so, with remembrance for the past, and with confidence in the future, under the providence of God, we shall succeed".

Selamat Hari Merdeka, Malaysia.

fauziah@nst.com.my

The writer, a United Nations journalism fellow and Wolfson College Cambridge press fellow, with 30 years of experience as a journalist, is Associate Editor, Lifestyle