

SPIRIT OF NATIONALISM

# PIVOTAL MOMENTS THAT SPARKED THE IDEA OF MERDEKA

Alan Teh Leam Seng revisits milestones in Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj's formative years that helped sow the seeds of independence for our nation

**A** FRIEND came by the other day to drop off a bag by the gate. Keeping the conversation brief before driving off, he roused interest in the history buff in me by mentioning that the contents, which the family no longer saw any point in keeping, were inherited from an uncle who used to be a teacher.

Welling with pride for being given the honour as trusted custodian, I lost no time in carefully perusing the varied mixture of documents and photographs. Half way through, it became obvious that the items, dating as far back as the 1950s, were primarily related to Sekolah Kebangsaan Teroi, a rural Malay school located by the northern foothills of Gunung Jerai, the highest peak in Kedah.

Standing head and shoulders above the rest was a rare exercise book distributed to schools throughout Malaya to celebrate Merdeka on Aug 31, 1957.

The book, filled with interesting entries pertaining to newspaper and other miscellaneous purchases from shops located at nearby Guar Chempedak town, has an eye-catching cover featuring the image of Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj flanked on both sides by the original 11-striped Jalur Gemilang representing the nine Malay states and two former Straits Set-



tlement colonies of Melaka and Penang.

The sight of our much respected Father of Independence proves to be a golden opportunity to turn back the hands of time and revisit Tunku's crucial formative years where a string of events eventually sowed the seeds of unbridled desire for Malayan independence.

## EDUCATION FOR A PRINCE

As the seventh son of the then reigning Kedah monarch Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah, Tunku enjoyed a happy and unfettered early childhood, often venturing beyond palace walls to mix freely with peers who came from all walks of life. After briefly attending school in Alor Star, he and two other siblings, Tunku Yusof and Tunku Badlishah (later Sultan Badlishah), furthered their studies at Debsirin School in Bangkok, Thailand. The untimely demise of Tunku Yusof due to pneumonia and the raging epidemic in the Thai capital forced the two remaining princes back to Kedah in 1915.

After short stints at Alor Star's Jalan Bahru Malay School and Penang Free School, Tunku gained entry into Cambridge University in 1920 with a Kedah government scholarship.

Initially, university life proved to be exciting for the young prince. Things, however, began to change after permission was denied to participate in the freshmen's soccer trials. Devastated to no end for not being able to take part in his favourite sport, Tunku vented his frustration by attending the May 1923 British Motor Show at the Olympia Exhibition Centre, London, as he was equally passionate about automobiles.

Just into its third edition after World War 1 interruptions, the show drew record crowds as Britons began to take motoring more seriously compared with the pre-war years. Enamoured with the huge diversity of cars on show, Tunku threw caution to



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj signing the independence document in the presence of the Secretary of State for the Colonies Alan Lennox-Boyd at Lancaster House, London, on Feb 8, 1956.

the wind and purchased a Riley super sports convertible. Tunku's flashy vehicle, unfortunately, drew ire from university officials, who introduced sweeping traffic laws that sought to prevent undergraduates from driving cars during lecture hours.

## COLLEGE INSULT

Weeks later, disappointment regarding St Catharine's College residential room allocation brought on an even larger repercussion. With his application passed over not once but twice, an exasperated Tunku made his unhappiness known. In reply, university authorities remarked that allotment was exclusive to Englishmen.

The point-blank rebuke struck a raw nerve and, almost immediately, an intense anti-colonial feeling began to well deep within the Kedah prince. There and then, it set Tunku along the path to seek independence for Malaya. All fired up, he, as the only Malay student at Cambridge then, began attending meetings and participated in activities organised by Indian students seeking independence for their homeland. Over time, the effective anti-British measures adopted by famed freedom activist Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his mentor, Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, began to influence Tunku's aspirations for a free Malaya.

On a more personal level, Tunku was not one who took things lying down. A report which he despatched to the Kedah government regarding the racially biased incident resulted in William Peel, the northern Malay state's British adviser, making a surprise visit to Cambridge. Under pressure, university authorities eventually agreed to make an exception under the pretext that they did not know that Tunku was the son of the reigning Kedah monarch.

While expressing gratitude towards the gesture, Tunku politely turned it down by explaining that he did not expect to be given any special treatment as it had always been his intention to attend Cambridge as an ordinary student and not a prince. With that, Tunku stuck to his principles and resided off-campus for the rest of his Cambridge student days.

## PEOPLE-CENTRIC POLICIES

Upon his return, Tunku began serving out his scholarship obligations as a Kedah civil service cadet, first at the Alor Star legal adviser's office before moving to various district offices including those in Kulim, Padang Terap and Langkawi.

After leaving the idyllic island archipelago, Tunku became the district officer of Sungai Petani, the second largest town in Kedah after Alor Star. In keeping with his people-centric policies, Tunku kept his house open round the clock to those who required assistance. During his tenure, Tunku often raised the ire of Alor Star officials for not toeing the line when it came to implementing official directives that were deemed unfair to the people. Threats of disciplinary action by British adviser J.D. Hall stiffened Tunku's freedom of thought and, inadvertently, rekindled his aspiration to seek independence.

Things came to a head when Tunku advised Sungai Petani taxi drivers to ignore a government directive to become members of an untested Kedah police commissioner-initiated transport company as livelihoods would surely come under severe threat once their individual licences were surrendered. The move won him undivided loyalty from the grateful rakyat.

## NEHRU VISITS MALAYA

Just before the state secretary was pressured to transfer Tunku back to Kulim,



Exercise books commemorating Merdeka such as this was distributed to schools throughout Malaya.



turned out for the 1937 event, which had Butterworth Padang bursting at its seams.

Public affection once again came to the fore soon after when Nehru was about to disembark from the Penang ferry. Reception committee members were taken aback when the superintendent Captain Shipwright insisted that their esteemed guest alight from the car and walk like a commoner.

The stand-off was finally resolved when Shipwright relented after ferry guards and attendants, in a rare show of near mutiny, decided to put up a hostile front. Everyone erupted in thunderous applause when Nehru waved in gratitude as he was driven across the ferry ramp. Later that evening, the gardener at the place where Nehru was staying insisted on standing guard under his bedroom window the entire night. Both these incidences steeled Tunku's resolve for independence as he was sure that Malaysians would go to even greater lengths for the freedom of their own country.

**ASIAN UNITY AND ROAD TO FREEDOM**

In the early days of World War 2, Nehru visited China and met Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek, who had won worldwide admiration of heroically standing up to Japanese aggressions while faced with numerous limitations. Despite the odds, the Chinese military, with help from brave mechanics and drivers who volunteered from all over Southeast Asia, successfully established new transportation routes and supply lines to bypass the Japanese blockade. This emerging spirit of Asian unity did not go unnoticed by Tunku. Together with the subsequent British defeat at the hands of the Japanese, this show of co-operation proved that the time was right for Malaya to cast aside the yoke of imperialism and chart its own future.

The world had a different view of Nehru when he set foot again in Malaya soon after the Japanese Occupation. A triumphant leader of soon-to-be-free India, he was accorded a warm welcome befitting an honoured statesman. After all, Britain, which was heavily indebted to India for its invaluable assistance during World War 2, had promised independence once peace returned.

Unrestrained, his speeches about inevitable political change and the end of im-

where it was perceived that he would be less of a thorn in the flesh to the British, a telephone call came from Penang for him to be part of a reception committee to welcome Nehru who had included Malaya in his tour of several countries. Tunku immediately agreed despite knowing that the act would rob him of future career advancements in British Kedah. After all, the Indian National Congress president was well-known for his anti-colonial opinions, which included aspirations for a free India. In the eyes of young aspiring politicians throughout colonised Asia, however, Nehru and Gandhi were seen as pillars of strength and true nationalists. Throngs of people from all walks of life



Tunku posing with his father Sultan Abdul Hamid (seated left) and mother Che Menjalara (seated right) at Istana Kampung Bharu Alor Star.

perialism left deep impressions on all Malaysians, including Tunku. Crowds swamped major towns scheduled in the visit and chanted "Jai Hind" (victory to India).

Tunku and Nehru enjoyed a close relationship that lasted long after Malaya achieved independence in 1957. In the eyes of our Bapa Kemerdekaan, both Nehru and Gandhi were partly responsible in sparking the nationalism flame that set many

Asian nations along the path of self-rule.

This Merdeka, we are once again reminded that great men and women come and go but their underlying greatness and resonating legacy continue to live on long after they are gone. In honour of Tunku's ideals and principles, let us strengthen ties with each other and work for the betterment of our beloved country. Selamat Hari Kemerdekaan ke-64 fellow Malaysians!



People of all races joined in the festivities to celebrate Merdeka.

www.alpha-white.com

ALPHA WHITE

# Smart Sonic+ Electric Toothbrush

**4 EASY MODES**

- Clean
- White
- Polish
- Gum Care

**>33,000 vibrations/min**

**Wireless Charging**  
A full charge will last about **90 days**

**3 different level of vibrations can be switched**

**SPECIAL OFFER NOW**

Website QR Code

alphawhite\_

AlphaWhite.TeethWhitening

Alpha White  
202003310273 (003101730-H3)  
6, Jalan Permata 1,  
Taman Permata Indah,  
14000 Bukit Mertajam,  
Pulau Pinang