



## Beyond boundaries

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THE last time I interviewed Tun Musa Hitam was 15 years ago. When I saw him two weeks ago for another session, I couldn't believe that the man standing before me had celebrated his 90th birthday on April 14.

The unassuming political veteran personally greeted me at his office in Kuala Lumpur instead of sending a staff member. After the how do you dos and how are yous, naturally I had to pop the question: "What do you eat, Tun? You've hardly aged!"

He consumes very little rice, only twice a week, on Fridays and Sundays (his all-out eating day) - and credits wife Toh Puan Zulaikha Sheardin with "fantastic cooking". He eats plenty of greens too, especially ulam, a habit he has had since his younger days. He gets on a stationary bike for 30 minutes of exercise daily And he plays golf fortnightly with good friends.

"I am very disciplined. What to eat, when to eat, and when to rest, what time to sleep."

He had promised a sit-down interview but a week before the appointed date he texted me, wanting to "borak-borak" (chit chat) over lunch. I had a feeling he wanted to test me first before agreeing to sit down for an official interview.

Our chit chat and lunch lasted almost three hours, there were so

# Living life Musa Hitam's way

Not even a fall and brain surgery can keep this nonagenarian down.



**Family man:** Musa with Zulaikha, son Hanif and daughter-in-law Puteri Afiqah Mohamad Fauzi. — Photo provided

many things to ask from politics to family matters. A week later, the promised interview took place.

It was another three-hour session including lunch at a restaurant just below his office in Persiaran Raja Chilian where he holds a position as emeritus chairman of UMLand.

Musa still talks a lot - he cheerfully admits it - but when this writer asked about his family, his tone became softer. Two of his four children have passed away: daughter Mariana died two years ago, and he lost his son, Carlos Rashid, in the Highland Towers collapse tragedy in 1993.

He looked down and said: "If I talk more about this I will cry."

He says he is a bit slower these days after a fall which resulted in brain surgery last year.

One day during Ramadan last year, he had decided to visit his kebun behind his house in Bukit Tunku, Kuala Lumpur. He climbed up the small hill with cangkul in hand and had started working on his vegetable garden when he lost

his footing, rolled down, and lost consciousness. He came to some 10 minutes later, walked back home and told his wife of the incident. He assured her he was OK.

The next morning, he woke up, and as soon as he stood, his legs became wobbly and he collapsed. The next thing he knew, he was headed into the operating theatre at a private hospital for brain surgery. Zulaikha later told him the maid thought he was dead.

The effect of that fall and surgery that followed is that when he talks nowadays, there are pauses and some stammering now and then and when he tries to remember names or occasions. He apologised for this, but really, even much younger people face similar problems I feel.

Musa is proud to share that it was a local surgeon who studied at International Islamic University who operated on him.

"Oh, I am very proud of it. I never stop talking about it because he did a good job."

He is also impressed with another

## Out of politics into the joys of home

Fate seems to have played a strong hand in the life of Tun Sri Musa Hitam this last six months — the death of his son, Carlos Rashid, the birth of his second son, Hanif, and being conferred the title Tun Sri. Musa talks to MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR about these fateful happenings over the past six months and his life in retirement.



AT PEACE

I think it's wrong for anyone to think I miss life in the government. I just enough and see my plans.

TAKHIR (that was the first word Tun Sri Musa Hitam uttered to describe recent events in his life. "God takes away something and God gives us well. God took away my son and left me with my grand daughter which was a miracle. It made me happy in that sense, notwithstanding the tragedy.")

"The God asked this wonderful boy, it is just beautiful," he said of his second son Hanif.

Musa is still visibly sad when talking about Carlos, Rashid, 31, who died with his wife, Rozita, and at other victims in the Highland Towers collapse last December.

"Emotionally, the biggest tragedy is losing my son. I've gone through a lot in life, even in politics or a political process. I never had to cry. Never had to spend sleepless nights."

"The when the tragedy came, I did not ever cry so much in my life. I just cried a little."



"I just so much interest in my work since that I was recently elected president of the Government Association of Malaysia."

"I don't miss but I need to fulfill my responsibility. This is an important sport in Malaysia in view of the 1998 Commonwealth Games."

Musa has also been approached by the Badan Warisan Malaysia and Sabah Warisan Malaysia to play an active role in the movement.

"The two groups are merging. It's a very attractive activity. I have a lot of work needs to be done to build awareness among the public and the leadership in the country."

In fact, he said: "It is nice to call yourself president. Though no longer president, it's not for the sake of the post that I accepted the offer but because I like the work of activity."

Musa was the country's special envoy to the United Nations until 1997. Following that he was appointed a member of the UN Commission of Enquiry into the East Timor crisis.

One of the columnist's early interviews with Musa; this one was in 1994.

er doctor he is seeing at the Universiti Malaya Medical Centre who is a graduate of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Musa thinks some Malaysians are prejudiced against local medical graduates, especially those working in government hospitals.

"I was pleasantly surprised that UMMC is well run. The one who is attending to me is in his 40s, he listened, analysed, and explained."

The former deputy prime minister has lost some weight and is not as sprightly as before but for a nonagenarian, he is alert and still walks steadily, although he needs to be careful with his balance.

But what is impressive is his memory bank. My much younger colleague, Geraldine Tong, who met him for the first time at the interview, said listening to Musa was like watching the History channel.

Musa still keenly follows the latest political developments in the country.

When asked whether he is still an Umno member he said he is unsure because he never gets any invitations to party events. During Umno party elections in 1987, Musa and Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah in Team B were defeated in a bitter contest against Team A,

led by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba.

Musa may not hold a government position any more but he still occupies the front row at certain official events (by virtue of his Tunship), including at the recent installation of Sultan Ibrahim, King of Malaysia, at Istana Negara.

Musa doesn't believe in celebrating his birthday but others throw parties for him. In April, there was a birthday party for him organised in Johor which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim attended. Anwar, in his tribute, said Musa is a statesman and highly respected leader with high integrity.

Musa insisted there was no secret to living longer.

"My name is Musa Hitam. I am not here to impress people. I look after myself, number one health, number two faith, number three inclusivity in social context. These are the things that make me want to live."

His memoir, *Frankly Speaking*, was published in 2016 and I'm hoping he will find time to write another book. Surely for someone who witnessed so many important events in the country he still has many things to share of Malaysia's colourful history.