

Msian independence fighter Lim Kean Chye turns 100

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By Balvin Kaur

GEORGE TOWN: Lim Kean Chye sat in his wheelchair, calmly filling his pipe with tobacco and puffing away, as his close friends around him were reminiscing about the good old days.

It was the afternoon of his 100th birthday and the New Sunday Times caught up with the man who was once at the forefront of the “left-wing” radicals.

“I’ve no secrets to a long life. I don’t believe in diets.

“That’s all rubbish. You either live or you don’t, so do what you enjoy,” he said matter-of-factly, to a question on his secret to staying healthy.

Lim was the founder of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), which fought for Malaya and Singapore’s independence.

The Cambridge-educated lawyer was also part of the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action (AMCJA), which drafted the People’s Constitutional Proposals for Malaya in 1947 as the basis for independence.

Lim's fight for independence and his involvement in an anti-British coalition of political and civic organisations in Malaya, had incurred the wrath of the Imperialist power, forcing him to flee from Malaya and seek refuge in China for nearly 10 years.

The centenarian shared his memories living in Penang and Singapore, his life in exile, his return from China and his subsequent ban from politics.

INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

"I was very close to Ahmad Boestamam, a youth leader who formed the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (API) and Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy of the Malay Nationalist Party (PKMM).

"We were working together for Merdeka."

API and PKMM were part of AMCJA.

Lim said when the British dissolved the council, its leaders were arrested but he escaped because of the arresting officer's mistake.

"The officer had a photograph of me and my address, but he wanted to make sure he had the right person.

"When he came to my house, he asked, 'Are you Lim Kean Chye?' I said 'yes' and pointed to my picture.

“He then asked, ‘Is that you?’ and I said ‘yes’.

“But then, he said, ‘Okay, wait here while I confirm if you are the one we want. I’ll be back.

“When he left, I decided to escape,” he said, with a chuckle.

Lim drew laughter from his friends when he said he had been hiding in another house nearby while British officers searched his home.

He said the British later put a \$10,000 reward on his head, which forced him to flee from Singapore.

LIVING IN EXILE

Lim said he hitched a ride on a smuggler’s opium boat from Singapore to Medan, Indonesia.

From there, he boarded another boat to Java.

“From Java, I took another ship to Hong Kong because I wanted to practise law there, but the British refused to let my ship in.

“We had to disembark in China where I was stuck for a few years.”

He said upon disembarking in Canton (Guangzhou), he had to write his entire life's history for the Chinese officials.

After checking his background, the officials gave him permission to travel from Canton to Beijing.

Lim said he was at a loss because he was not conversant in any Chinese dialect.

"The staff of the Chinese Foreign Office told me that they would grant me a foreigner status to do translation work.

"They did not pay me for my work, but gave me food and a bed in a dormitory instead.

"China was so poor then that we got to eat only one dumpling a day."

He said he stayed in China for many years despite the difficulties as he had nowhere else to go.

Returning to Singapore or Malaya would see him arrested.

He said it was in China that he learnt to speak Chinese.

Lim said when Singapore's first chief minister David Marshall met him, he was delighted to learn that the Chinese government had recognised him as a refugee and not a Chinese national.

“Marshall first went to the Chinese quarters but he couldn’t find me there. He then searched the foreign office.

“He was impressed because it was the first time that the Chinese government had recognised a Chinese (ethnic) as a foreigner.”

RETURNING HOME

When Lim Yew Hock was appointed Singapore’s chief minister in 1958, he decided to return home.

“I knew Yew Hock well. So I decided to try my luck by returning to Singapore.

However, Lim was immediately arrested by the British.

“I made an appeal for release. The Appeals Board comprised three judges, all of whom were my friends,” he said with a laugh.

Lim said the board decided that he could remain in Singapore but he was banned from getting involved in politics.

His return to Malaysia was on the request of the first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

“I knew Tunku well as we were friends and practically stayed together when we were studying in the University of Cambridge.”

Lim fondly shared that while in Cambridge, he used to drive around the city in Tunku's car at night.

"I came back to Malaysia as Tunku wanted to see me.

"But he did not want me to go to Penang as he said I would create trouble there.

"So, he asked me to stay in Ipoh.

"Every time I wanted to go to Penang, I had to get a permit from the police.

"I had to give all sorts of excuses, such as my father had the flu or my mother was ill."

He said in Ipoh, he started practising law and became close to former finance minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, who was then a deputy public prosecutor.

Lim said he was allowed to remain in Malaysia on the condition that he did not participate in politics.

"I had expected this when I came back.

"So I was not sad about it. Politics is like that — a lot of ups and downs."

POLITICAL CONVICTIONS

Coming from a wealthy and prestigious family living in a mansion in Northam Road (now Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah), dubbed “the millionaires row”, Lim’s early anti-British political convictions were considered radical.

His father, Lim Cheng Ean, was a leading figure in the Straits Settlement as a legislative councillor.

His brother, Lim Kean Siew, went on to become a noted lawyer and politician, while his sister, Tan Sri Lim Phaik Gan (famously known as P.G. Lim), was the first Malaysian woman to study in Cambridge.

She was also a noted lawyer and a diplomat.

“I was the only one considered anti-British in the house.

“I used to be very loyal to Britain when I was an officer in the cadet core in Cambridge.

“But I gradually became anti-British when I saw the way they treated us.”

Lim said certain establishments in Britain, such as pubs and coffeehouses, did not allow Asians and non-Caucasians to enter, which he found highly offensive.

“The British treated us like donkeys.

“Once when my friends and I were at a bar, an Englishmen sitting on the other side of the room shouted at us without provocation. They had no manners.”

As an appreciation for his fight for independence, the British had wanted to honour him with the Order of the British Empire (MBE), but he declined.

“They wanted to give me the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) citation — the third highest ranking Order of the British Empire award — as I had fought for Merdeka.

“I told them I didn’t want it. I even tore the papers.

“I didn’t want any recognition.”

LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST

Lim, who described himself as an upbeat person, said his indomitable attitude and zest for life was influenced by his experiences.

He said the time when he fled to China and the subsequent experience there showed him the importance of perseverance and survival.

A frightening episode with German U-boats later on taught him to appreciate life as it comes.

“I was on board Queen Elizabeth II heading towards India, where I was supposed to take another ship to return to Malaya.

“I could have stayed back in England after finishing my education in Cambridge, but I wanted to go back as I wanted to be with my family in case a war broke out.

“I got a place on the ship because many had cancelled their journey out of fear as the German U-boats were responsible for sinking many English ships.

“Out of 40 ships crossing the Atlantic, only 10 were given permission to pass through.

“The rest ended up in the ocean.”

Lim said many regarded British sailors as war heroes, but not many talked about the Indians whom he felt were the true heroes.

“The Indian sailors went up and down the stairs carrying coffee and cakes as if nothing was happening.

“They were the real heroes. I had never seen people in the middle of war with boats and ships sinking around them, looking so calm... as if nothing was happening.

“That to me was the ultimate bravery.”

When asked how he coped on the ship, Lim laughed and said: “I followed the way of the Indian sailors.

“They drank coffee and ate cakes, and went on with their normal lives as if nothing was happening.

“If you sink, so be it. What’s important is to live to the fullest before you die.”

DON'T WASTE TIME WORRYING

When asked for his advice to the younger generation, Lim said: “Do not waste time worrying about anything.

“When you encounter setbacks and difficulties, be practical and rational, not sentimental or emotional.

“Because in whatever you do, you will either succeed or fail.”

Lim advised the younger generation to take an active interest in politics.

“You must have control of your life, so it is important that you have a say in politics.”

He advised Malaysians not to give up on Jawi writing and reminded them of the importance of preserving the script.

“Every nation has its language.

“Jawi was once the script for the language of Malaya.

“Why should it be given up?

“Imagine the English giving up English (Roman alphabets) or the Chinese giving up Chinese (scripts).”

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