

Tribute to Toh Puan Uma
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SHE was always sought out for her views on the nation's pulse, memories of the past, and the way forward.

Fittingly so.

Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan, who died on Jan 31 aged 90, was much beloved by many and a friend to every Prime Minister in the last six decades.

She was one of the torchbearers when history was made in 1957. On Aug 31, 1957, a young Uma stood with the founding fathers of Malaya – the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun VT Sambanthan and Tun Tan Cheng Lok – when independence was declared. In the last 63 years, she never lost her passion for this country.

Uma was a natural storyteller. She talked about a Malaya that we would love to have been a part of, a Malaya where racial harmony came naturally. She had a distinctively precise memory of the nation's history, from its British rule, the Japanese Occupation, Merdeka and other major events like the separation of Singapore and the formation of Malaysia.

And while in conversation she could checkmate any one of us with detailed facts. For instance, she corrected documented history: "Merdeka did not happen at the stroke of midnight, as it has been reported, but a little later. This was because Tunku was delayed by ardent supporters who wanted to bestow him with a title."

Her understanding of the Merdeka event had a depth of multidimensional levels.

“When the Union Jack was lowered and our flag was raised, I thought how ironic it was that our independence ceremony was held in Dataran Merdeka, next to the Selangor Club where ONLY the British were allowed.

“Throughout the event, I was very thrilled that we were finally free to think for ourselves and free to lead our own country with a system that didn’t oppress people. Till today, when the national anthem is played, I get nostalgic over being liberated from the colonial regime.”

Uma was born in Beruas, Perak. Her father, OM Subramaniam, was a senior officer with the Public Works Department and her mother, Jayalakshmi Swaminathan Sastrigal, was a homemaker. Both were very supportive of Uma’s education. In 1941, Uma attended the Anglo-Chinese School in Sungai Siput, Perak, where she won the Best Indian Student of the Year scholarship for 1942. However, her education was interrupted by the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945.

After the Occupation, she graduated with a first class BSc degree

in Chemistry from the Madras University in India and was awarded a scholarship to study for a Masters degree at the Presidency College in Chennai, India.

On returning home to Muar, Johor, she taught Science at the Princess Alexandra School in Singapore while waiting to continue a postgraduate research degree in Germany. She was applying for a scholarship for which a reference was needed. Sambanthan was Labour Minister in Kuala Lumpur at the time.

“His family and my parents were close friends. My father suggested that I ask him for the reference. That is how I met my husband in February 1956, during the Chinese New Year season.

“He did not give me the reference. Instead, he sent a proposal for marriage. We were married in May, three months later, at our home in Muar.

“From being someone who had been practically married to my chemistry laboratory, I now had to learn to work with people. Our home was open to MIC members and people from my husband’s constituency all the time.

“The women had to be mobilised to play their role in nation-building. My husband emphasised that I should do voluntary work with multicomunal women’s’ groups. He gave me great support and guidance in my activities.

“I improved my Malay language skills. In my work, I tried to bridge the gap between the races and the urban and rural divide.”

From the last quarter of 1956 till the 1970s, Uma worked with the National Association of Women’s Institute, organising proper nutrition and healthcare for kampung babies, reviving local recipes, and on income generation in general.

Uma was also the chairman and director of the National Land Finance Co-operative Society, which was set up by her husband in 1960 to mitigate the fragmentation of foreign-owned plantations and loss of employment then.

Uma spoke fondly of Tunku Abdul Rahman as a leader who truly believed that Malaysia belonged to each and every Malaysian irrespective of race or religion.

On the 10th anniversary of Merdeka, that is, midnight of Aug 30,1967, the Merdeka celebration was re-enacted.

“Dataran Merdeka was filled with people of all races in colourful clothes – like a beautiful garden,” she recounted.

“The programme went on till late, past 2am, and when it was over, we saw Tunku to his car and left for our home. Early the next morning, we went to Tunku’s residence to give our felicitations for the occasion. We were met by his wife, Puan Sharifah Rodziah, affectionately called ‘Ma Ungku’, smiling her welcome. When Tunku came down and after wishing him, my husband asked him whether he managed to get any rest after such a late night.

“The Tunku replied, ‘How to rest, Sambanthan? I saw all those wonderful people gathered there, and came back and prayed for them.’”

Like her husband – who died of heart disease in 1979, aged 59 – who was well-known for his interest in educating the people, Uma was also active in the area, organising the infrastructure for the first government girls’ school in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, and the first government primary school in Selayang Baru, Selangor, using facilities available from the government.

The Sambanthans’ daughter, Kunjari, recalls that the principal feature common to both her parents was their commitment to self-improvement.

“My consistent image throughout my life was of them reading – books, magazines, not novels – relating to subjects ranging from science, astronomy, philosophy and the works of great thinkers to spiritual texts from Hinduism, Sufi thoughts, etc.”

My memory of Uma will always be of an image of her surrounded by stacks and stacks of books on almost every topic. The last time I saw her in her home, she was reading the Bengali version of the gospel of Paramahansa Ramakrishna.

The passing of Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan marks the end of an era. She leaves behind in the rest of us women a sense of pride that we knew her.

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Note: The writer was mentored by Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan and kept a compilation of her conversations.

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