



THE PRETTY ONE

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A special tribute
to my late and beloved sister
Siti Jameah Bte Mohd Ali
1925 – 2020

by
Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali

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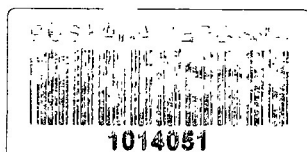


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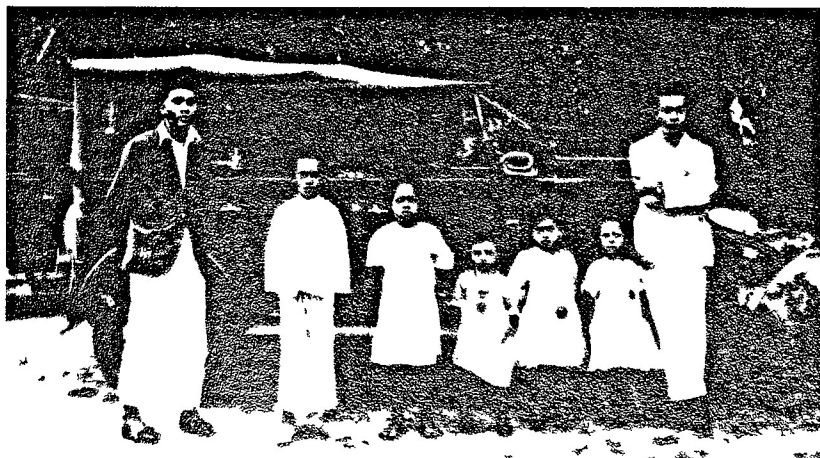
Part 1

Growing up

Like all her older siblings, Jameah was born in Kg Jawa, Klang, Selangor on 2 January 1925. She was the 5th child and 2nd daughter in the family. It was only after I was born one and a half years later that father got a transfer to Kuala Lumpur to work at the Sessions Court in Kuala Lumpur.

Jameah would not have remembered her life in Klang as she was only four years old when we moved to Kuala Lumpur. Neither do I.

Father had received his education only up to Standard VII—the highest grade in school at the time. He worked as a Chief Clerk in the Health Department, Klang. Determined to gain a higher level of education, father signed up and took the Pitman's College Correspondence



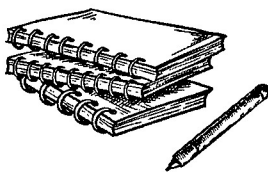
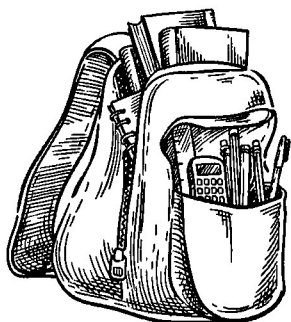
In front of the family car with our father's friend Pakcik Ahmad and his daughters, 1929. (From left) Pakcik Ahmad, our brother Ismail, Kalsom, me, Maimon, Jameah and Ayah.

Course in Law and passed it. That initiated his transfer to the Sessions Court in Kuala Lumpur where he worked diligently. This was the first step towards his career as a Magistrate.

Father worked himself up to eventually become a Circuit Magistrate, travelling to all four courts in the Federated Malay States (FMS). His service to the Government was exemplary as he rose to become the official assignee public trustee and bankruptcy for the FMS.

Setting a very good example with his passion for education, he ensured that all his children—both girls and boys—would receive the same education. At the time, there were only English mission schools. While other Muslim parents were fearful of sending their children to mission schools to learn English and be educated, father enrolled his three daughters in one. Father believed that when a son is given an education, it would strengthen his son's future; but if he educated his daughters, he would be educating the nation. He had confidence that his three daughters would do well.

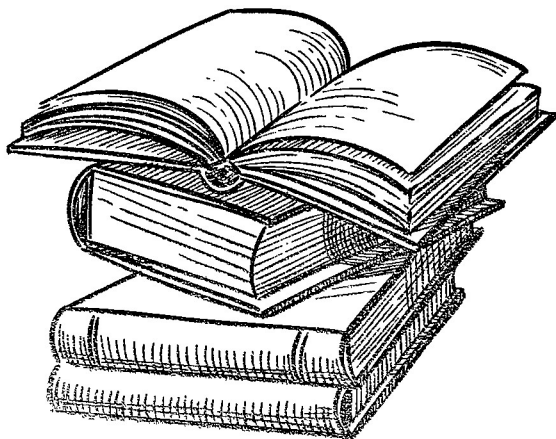
Saleha, Jameah and myself were enrolled as students in the Methodist Girls School (MGS) on Jalan Sulaiman. The school is still there but was taken over by the Government when the British left and it has since housed various government departments till today.



When we started, Saleha was admitted into Standard Five while Jameah was in Standard Three and I was in Standard One. In reality, other primary classes were really Standard Nought (kindergarten) classes.

Jameah was the prettiest of Mohd Ali's daughters. She had fair skin, long black hair and a demure, pretty face. This was unlike my oldest sister Kak Leha (Saleha) and I who had darker complexions—especially me, as I ran around with my brothers outside the house more often than all my other sisters.

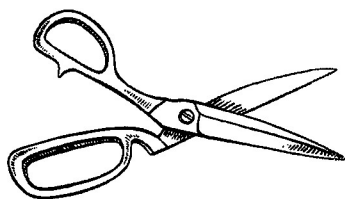
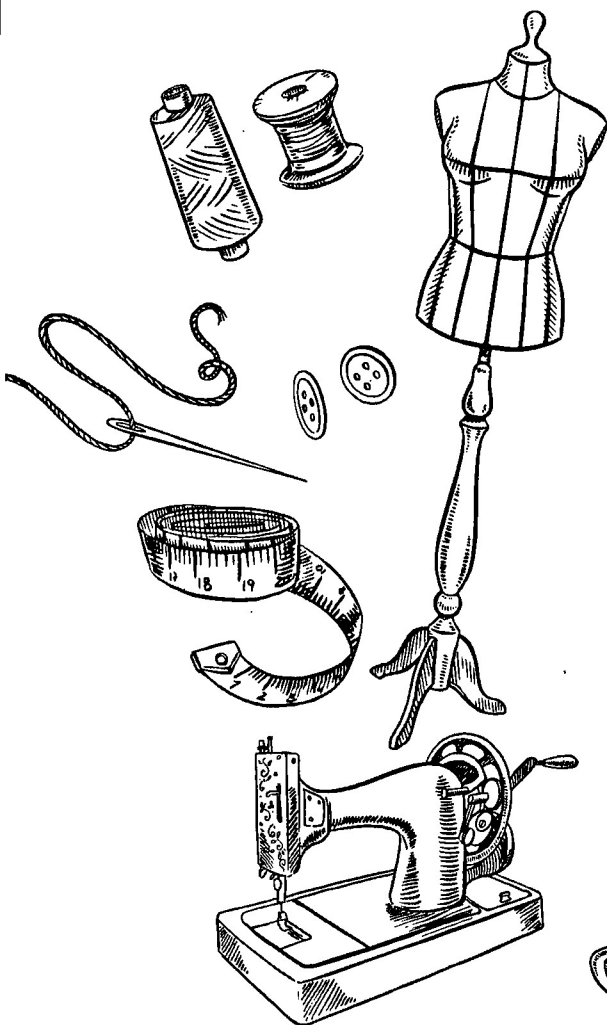
Also, very much unlike me, Jameah went about quietly and did not speak much. She was meticulous about cleanliness and looked after her possessions very carefully. Throughout our schooling years at MGS and later at St Mary's Mission School, she was very possessive of her text books which she did not want to share with me when I caught up with her in Standard 3. She wanted her books clean and because of this, father had to buy me separate text books in which I could freely scribble my side notes or underline words.



Back then, we had sewing classes in school. I did not do as well as Jameah in this subject, as she was clean and neat. She loved sewing. She knitted socks and bonnets and the pastel colour of the wool she used remained clean and crisp, while mine would become either grey or dirty. Jameah's fondness for sewing and knitting had always been there even as a child and mother arranged for a Chinese lady to come

to the house and teach her how to embroider the edges of kebayas and table cloths. She could knit pullovers and socks even through to her 80s. Jameah was really a very good needle worker. At one point, when Jameah was in her 40s, the shop in Petaling Jaya would ask Jameah to knit for customers and she was paid for it.

She confronted all situations with calmness. I believe—being her younger sister and a tomboy—Jameah tolerated my behaviour. She was always the patient caregiver to me.





Our father, Mohd Ali Mohd Taib and our mother, Hajjah Khatijah Ahmad.

I remember once, she was called out from her class to attend to me. I had been in class, when a girl sitting in one of the rows behind me suddenly shouted, “Teacher, teacher, Hasmah passed urine in her chair!” Sure enough, there was a pool of urine underneath my small chair and it was slowly winding its way to the front where Miss Rose was. (There was no disposable panties or diapers in those days).

My reaction to Victoria’s loud announcement made me angry and ashamed. My reaction was shocking. I went to Victoria and spat on her face. Jameah was called to take me home. She quietly came to me, picked up all my books and dragged me out of the class. No words were said between us but I could sense that she was angry and ashamed of me.

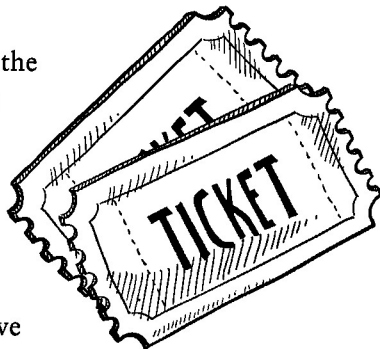
Part 2

During the Japanese Occupation

It was early December 1941, and all schools were having their final exams for the Standard Eight students. At the time, the final exams were called Senior Cambridge Exams and the question papers came from Cambridge and were sent back for marking after students sat for it.

On 8 December 1941, Jameah and I sat for the last few exams at St Mary's Hall. Father sent us to school each morning and we took the bus home.

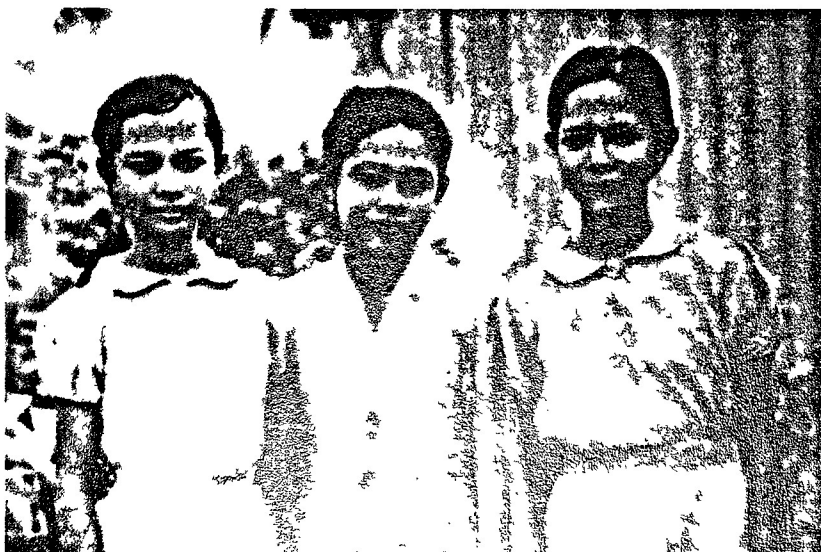
We had also planned to go to Penang during the December holidays and school children were given concession train tickets if we had a letter from the Principal.



There were about 20-25 students in the hall that morning. When we passed our papers in, my sister and I walked out and we caught sight of both our Principal Miss Pring and her assistant Miss Carpenter waiting for their students. I went up to them to ask for the concession letter. Miss Pring assured me that they would give us the letter later. Thanking them, Jameah and I walked to the school porch to take the bus home. To our surprise, father was waiting for us. He bundled us into the car and told us that war had begun. The Japanese had bombed Singapore and were landing at Pantai Berahi, Kelantan. We were scared and started crying. Our biggest concern was for our brother, Aziz, who was at Raffles College, Singapore, then.

Aziz could not come home because of the bombing and had to stay with friends in Singapore. A bomb exploded near the King Edward VII College of Medicine and had killed a medical student. As fellow students were helping to bury their friend, another bomb that was dropped killed another 10 in the group. A memorial plaque still hangs at the entrance hall of the Administration Building with the heading “Lest We Forget”, with the 10 names of the students killed.

Throughout the Japanese Occupation, our parents did not allow their three daughters to attend school. Besides, we had completed our primary education and universities were not open then. Jameah was 17 years old and I, a year younger. Kak Leha was older and very independent. She asked father to allow her to work and she did so in the same court as father. As an officer of the law, father was well respected by the Japanese officers.

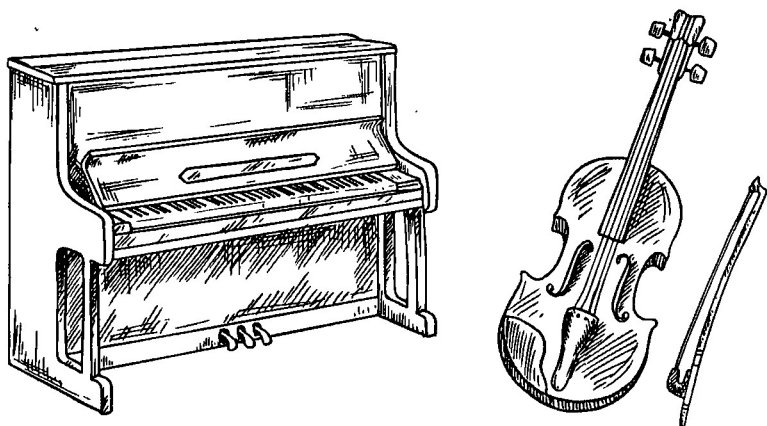


The three sisters (from left) me, Saleha and Jameah

During the early days under the Occupation, mothers were very protective of their daughters. We were always hidden when soldiers were seen close by. So, to keep us entertained in the house, mother taught us how to cook and organise the home.

Jameah and I took turns with the household chores and lessons. When I worked in the kitchen and made the beds, Jameah would have her music lesson; and vice-versa. Father insisted that his three daughters learned to play music during the Japanese Occupation. We had an upright piano in the house. So, father wanted Kak Leha and Jameah to learn to play the piano, while he directed me to play the violin. Our teacher was a Eurasian originally from Goa, India. Mr Bernard Gomez was a professional music teacher who came to teach us every day. He taught us with patience and yet was strict so that we would learn to play our instruments well.

From 1941 to 1945, Mr Gomez taught Jameah to accompany me on the piano while I played the violin. Kak Leha was also on the piano but she preferred singing. We played so well that Mr Gomez arranged for us to perform over Radio Malaya as the “Ali Sisters”. This was in 1944.



This went on throughout the Japanese Occupation and all three of us were very happy. Our grandmother would curl herself up in a chair to watch and listen to our music and praised our talents.



