

Accept realities of a multiracial country

I WAS three months short of my 17th birthday when my grandfather and I took the midnight train from Padang Rengas, a sleepy hollow 10km north of Kuala Kangsar, to Kuala Lumpur to witness a historic event — the lowering of the Union Jack and hoisting of our colours at the Selangor Club padang the following midnight on Aug 30, 1957.

It was a long and frightening ride. Frightening, because it was during the communist insurgency and train ambushes and derailment at night were prevalent. Those were the days when scout trains — an engine and a carriage with some soldiers on it — had to travel half an hour ahead of passenger trains to ensure that the tracks were safe and not tampered with by terrorists.

When passing through black areas (communist-infested areas were labelled black, and safe areas, white), such as Sungai Siput, Chemor,

concerning the position of the Malay Rulers. “Remove the Malay Rulers and what do we Malays have,” he would always remind his friends.

The Selangor Club padang was already a sea of people by nightfall on the day of our arrival. They came in many colours — black, yellow, brown and sprinkles of white. They mingled freely and did not see each other through the racial lens. They were all in solidarity to be a part of history.

Two minutes before midnight on Aug 30, 1957, and counting. Silence and contemplation filled the air as thousands of pairs of eyes gazed at the Union Jack atop a flag pole. Then, as the clock atop the clock tower of the Selangor State Secretariat began to chime to announce midnight, the stillness of the night, seconds earlier, was torn asunder when “Bapa Kemerdekaan” Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj led the massive crowd with deafening shouts of “Merde-

Kuala Kubu Baru, Sungai Choh and Rawang to name a few, the train's speed was reduced to a crawl to prepare for any untoward incident like an ambush or a derailment. The presence of armed British and local soldiers sitting together with other passengers in every carriage bore testimony of the risks train travellers had to take, especially at night. Risks notwithstanding, my grandfather was so intent on being present at the Selangor Club padang on midnight the 31st, because, as he had always mentioned, he had waited all his life to feel freedom, to have a sense of belonging, security and pride, and not to be told by foreigners how he should run his life. He never hated the British because if he had, he wouldn't have sent his eldest son to study at Clifford School Kuala Kangsar and later to the Serdang Agricultural College (initially Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, now Universiti Putra Malaysia).

However, he was a staunch supporter of the Anti-Malayan Union movement, especially on matters

ka, Merdeka....", which echoed through the night sky. The Union Jack was lowered and our flag hoisted in tandem with the singing of the national anthem, *Negaraku*.

Surprisingly, no one had made an announcement to the gathering to sing the national anthem together. But they sang their hearts out anyway and to this day, that was the loudest unorchestrated *Negaraku* I have ever heard.

That was patriotism expressed by ordinary people, the majority of whom never had the opportunity to go for tertiary education because higher institutions of learning at that point in time were few and far between. When the ceremony was over, there were smiles, cheers, handshakes and bear hugs all round even with people of different cultural backgrounds. These gestures were a clear manifestation of their beliefs in mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance of the realities of living in a multiracial and multi-religious country.

As a statesman, the Tunku and his fellow comrades, Tun Tan

Cheng Lock and Tun Sambathan, among others, embodied the hopes of future generations of Malaysians (Malaysians now). That was then.

This year as we are about to celebrate the 57th anniversary of our independence next week, I feel the sense of patriotism is very much missing. Just visit the many websites to read how the so-called "activists" take potshots at our government, even for helping the needy, such as the BR1M scheme.

I wish I could journey back in time and take these irresponsible bloggers along on that train ride together with my grandfather, if only to see for themselves that the peace, harmony and mutual respect that Malaysians enjoy now are the legacies left behind by those people at the Selangor Club padang on that eventful night.

My grandfather's wish to see and feel freedom was finally granted. He died in November 1960. By God's grace, that was his last train ride to Kuala Lumpur.

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