

Scholarship Boy

INTI College Chairman, Tan Sri Abdul Majid Ismail, takes EQ on a trip down memory lane...

Now in his 80th year, Tan Sri Majid, exhibits the sprightliness of a far younger man. After a distinguished career as an orthopedic surgeon he finished his public service as Director-General at the Ministry of Health. There is a sense in which the more censorious and sanctimonious younger generation of Malays frown on their anglicised elders. This is a shame since they have a great deal to learn from the older generation's tolerant 'live and let live' approach to life. Perhaps this, along with a keen sense of humour and an evident enjoyment of life (along with plenty of golf) is the key to his longevity.

Earliest memories

Born in Kampung Baru in 1921, one of his earliest memories is of the heavy KL floods in the mid 1920s. "I remember taking a rickshaw ride up Yap Kwan Seng to Bok House (now Le Coq d'Or Restaurant) and being up to my neck in water. I know people complain about the floods today but it's nothing compared to back then," he says. Another early recollection, one of many, involves visiting the Bangsawan (a type of Malay opera that sadly no longer exists) by the river near the Standard Chartered Bank. "A family friend took me along as a treat and I remember being terrified by the firecrackers, bells and strange costumes. Going to dinner afterwards was an eye-opener for me. It was also the first occasion I'd ever seen whisky and chocolates, but I was only 6 at the time."

Primary school

Although educational opportunities for Malays were limited during colonial days, it was not uncommon for both boys and girls to attend Malay primary school before the authorities creamed off the top students for English medium schools. His earliest schooling was in Segambut, a typical 'atap-roofed' establishment, where he completed Standard Five, followed by Maxwell and then Batu Road schools. After attending Special Malay Class 1 and 2, a crash course preparing students for the transition to the English system, he won a scholarship to Victoria Institute in KL.

Victoria Institute

"V.I. was the top school back then, it had tradition and class, and was the first to run sci-

ence subjects. Even though I lived in Kampung Baru I still had to stay in the V.I. hostels," he recalls. "In fact, your grandfather, Bahauddin (EQ editor, Nina Adlan) was school captain during my time and was monitor for my hostel." The school had a reputation for sports and developed a close rivalry with KL's other two leading schools, St John's and MBS, which stood for "Monkey Breath School," according to Tan Sri Majid. After sterling results in his School Certificate (Senior Cambridge) he, along with the other two top scorers, was summoned to the headmaster's study and told (not asked or offered or invited) that he was being sent to Singapore to study Medicine.

"In those days the issue of choice never entered our heads," he says. "Today, I sometimes think that students have too much choice." What about concerns that not enough students today are opting for the sciences? "The problem, particularly with the Malay boys, is that they'll always take the path of least resistance. You've got to push them; keep their noses to the grindstone. We were just pushed into it - no questions asked," he says.

War-time studies

The class of '39 in Singapore featured a roll call of famous names like Tun Razak, Ungku Aziz and Lee Kuan Yew. Tan Sri Majid's university career, however, came to an abrupt halt with the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1941. "The bombing began at 4.00am," he recollects. "It was a beautiful moonlit night and at first we thought it was a drill." But the bombs that fell on Chinatown, the Railway Station and Changi presaged 4 years of occupation, during which he remained in Singapore working in a Chemistry lab where his job was to conduct analyses of the water supply.

He recommenced his medical studies in 1946 (joined by a group of 'freshies' that included Dr Mahathir and his future wife Dr Siti

