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Memories by the lake

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Tun Rahah Mohamad Noah reminisces to Balan Moses about hanging out with the late PM Tun Abdul Razak at the Lake Club









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IT'S 6pm and Tun Rahah Mohamad Noah waves us off from No. 6, Jalan Eaton, Kuala Lumpur where she has just granted a rare interview, answering a melange of questions. Her ease before the cameras and in handling questions is to be expected. After all, she was once in the glare of publicity, first as wife of the first deputy prime minister, a position that Tun Abdul Razak held from 1959 to 1970, and then as the prime minister's wife from 1970 to 1976.

To each of us in the living room of the colonial bungalow, she beams that winsome smile that a few in history have been blessed with and that many are guaranteed to remember. The mother of prime minister Datuk Seri Najib is surprisingly sprightly, not looking even a bit of her 79 years despite a bout of poor health recently which she seems to have shrugged off.

Even a gruelling 150-minute interview and the glare of cameras flashing at her bespectacled eyes have not dented her good humour which many see as the hallmark of her character. She displays an extraordinary grace and poise which she is said to have always possessed.

Rahah, who even during her time as the wife of the nation's leader was inevitably in the background, leaving the limelight to her articulate and erudite husband, is still a woman of a few well-chosen words.

"My husband used to like the lobster at the Orchid Room at the Lake Club. I liked, and still like, the chicken chop," she says in a surprisingly sturdy voice.

Rahah is a study in charm: she wears her turquoise baju kurung with aplomb with her tudung of the same colour completes the ensemble. This is the moment that we, members of the Kelab Taman Perdana DiRaja's 125th anniversary book committee and club president Datuk A. Sani Karim have been waiting for these few months.

The club had assigned its co-authors, historian Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dr Khoo Kay Kim and yours truly, to interview luminaries with an intimate knowledge of the club for the book to be launched as part of the 125-year anniversary celebrations.

Of course, Rahah's name cropped up as we felt that she would have often accompanied Razak for lunch or dinner, both official and private, and her children for games and refreshments at the club.

There was optimism that she would share a choice moment or two with us about how she and Razak had enjoyed the club of which the late prime minister was the second Malaysian president from 1967 to 1976. Rahah's niece and committee member, Datuk Dr Fawzia Abdullah, who had recently written about her three aunts in her book *The Three Swans*, had been deputised to arrange the interview.

She had tried, and finally succeeded, not only in persuading her aunt to meet us but also in inviting Rahah's close friends, Tan Sri Michael Chen and wife Puan Sri Helen and Toh Puan Aishah Ong, whose husband Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin was Razak's close friend and also a past president of the club.

And so there we were in the living room of the sprawling bungalow that has been home to Rahah for 36 years since the sudden death of her husband.

"Tun Razak liked the roast beef at the club," says Chen, the lawyer-politician who is said to have been almost like a son to Razak, with perspicuity, reminiscing the high points in the special relationship with his mentor.

There is a sudden pause in the conversation as the realisation sets in that we are having the rare opportunity of looking into the lives of two people which will forever be etched in history for the role they played in a young Malaysia. We are also awed by the fact that we are talking to the prime minister's mother, the woman who sat Najib on her knee and taught him the alphabet.

"I used to take the children, including Najib, to the Lake Club for swimming lessons. Much later, I used to take my grandchildren there to swim too," Tun Rahah says.

Chen, whose memories of Razak are as vivid as ever despite the elapse of five decades, remembers that his close friend could be counted upon to dance the ronggeng which he loved to his favourite songs Selayang Pandang and Enjit Enjit Semut.

"I even remember Tun Rahah singing one day at the Orchid Room," Chen continues, dredging his memory for nuggets in his association with the Razak family.

Rahah's response to this all-but-forgotten trivia is a girlish smile that for a minute gives us a peep into the kind of young wife and mother she would have been.

Several days later, Dr Fawzia tells me that Rahah remembers being part of a group called the Empat Dara which used to sing at private functions at the club.

"My aunt told me that Tun Razak used to treat her like a young girl (she was 19 when she married the 30-year-old) and wanted her to learn to socialise. That's why she formed the group," Fawzia tells me over the phone. Did Razak walk from Seri Perdana, then official residence of the prime minister in the Lake Gardens, to the Lake Club, Chen asks?

"I don't remember. What I do remember is that Tun Razak called his friends to the club for chats and lunch."

Who were some of his close friends then, I pose to Chen?

"I remember them including Datuk Mahmud Ambak (father of Datin Paduka Seri Endon), noted oncologist Datuk S.K. Dharmalingam and one Dr Liow. Tun Razak will telephone them and they would meet for lunch at the Lake Club." What was the club like in the early post-Merdeka and post-Malaysia days?

"There were a lot of expatriates in the 1960s. The staff were very friendly. Some of them still come up to me nowadays when I go there and join me in remembering the old days," she says, a faraway look in her eyes.

She will meet them soon, perhaps next month, when Najib, a long-time member himself, is installed as a patron of the club, Sani says. The prime minister, he adds, had penned a note on the club's invitation that read saya terima.

"Insyallah (God-willing) I will be there," says Rahah, feeling the natural pride of a mother.

But then this is the club where her family took root socially and which her husband headed for nine years, six as prime minister.

The convergence of the history of the Razak family and the Royal Lake Club is something that Rahah clearly continues to treasure.