

Alan Bernacchi's Malaya Childhood memories 1947 to 1952

(Refer to "Aspects of Colonial Life" by Elaine Bernacchi for more context.)

Kuala Lumpur 1947/48

I have no recollection of staying in the hotel as mentioned by our mother, but have a vague recollection of the house there. The house in my misty memory seemed to be two storied surrounding a courtyard/garden on two or maybe three sides.

I remember going to Port Dixon as a three-year-old. I was especially proud of being able to swim in the sea without a rubber ring and of being unexpectedly "dumped" by a wave!

Kuala Kangsar 1947/48?

At age 4 my memories of Kuala Kangsar are vague and my memories get a bit confused with the Batu Gajah house. It must have been at this house that I recall learning the word "tangkap". My sister Rosemary and I were sweeping leaves from the drain running beside the pathway leading from the main house to the staff wing. Our Ayah was supervising. From the trees beside the house appeared two young men gesticulating and saying loudly that it was their job to sweep the drains and we must never do it again. All this was in Malay, which by then we spoke as well as can be expected of the very young. If we swept drains again they said they would "tangkap" us, a word we did not know. The Ayah, clearly upset, said that it meant to capture. (Arrest may be a better translation?) Rosemary and I went into the house where our mother was typing upstairs. She showed no concern and went back to her typing. I was surprised at her lack of concern as we knew by then that the emergency had started and so were convinced that the youths were "bandits"! Of course they were not.

Batu Gajah 1949/50?

I remember the house at Batu Gajah best, possibly because we were there the longest, but it is still vague. It was two storied with our children's bedroom upstairs, to the front of the house and on the left as you faced the house. There was another bedroom behind that. In the centre was a large open living area and semi-divided into different areas and had a verandah type of space at the front where our mother would read Enid Blyton books to us. The living area seemed to be an airy space stretching the full depth of the house, but my memory will be inaccurate. Our parent's bedroom suite was on the right and seemed large. There will have been more rooms that I cannot recall.

The doors to our bedroom were directly off the living area. They were swing doors with a space above and below, reminiscent of saloon doors in American western movies.

The kitchen was downstairs at the back of the house with its back door leading to the covered pathway going to the staff quarters where "Cookie" and his family lived and where they would sometimes feed us children salty fish "stew" that was really delicious. There was a food "safe" in the kitchen, with its legs resting in water-filled cans to deter ants. I clambered up it once and managed to tip it over, what a mess!

We used to sit on the back steps leading down from the kitchen door and watch "Pathfinder" bombers raining flares down on the jungle in the distance, and then listen to the reverberating crumps of the explosions of the bombs that then followed. *(Rosemary says: Ah Yet would peel mangoes for us, delicious with juice running down our chins).*

The gardens seemed huge to us, with a long driveway which I think swept in from one end in a semi-circular direction to the other. We were on a hill and below us was a playground with swings, seesaws etc. The flagpole was in the centre of the lawns in front of the house.

The Emergency

We were well aware of the emergency and in particular I remember the assassination of the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Gurney, from an ambush in 1951. I think he was on his way to the Cameron Highlands? I recall lying in my parent's bed as they read the newspaper about it all, and remember their comments on his bravery when he got out of his car, knowing that he was the target, in order to save his family and all the others in the convoy. The assassination had a deep impact on the colonial community.

My parents had friends, Lionel Whittaker and his wife, who had a rubber plantation. My parents were very concerned for the Whittaker's safety during the emergency. I remember going to their plantation, seeing the rubber tree tappers at work, and being given a "tour" of the rubber "factory" including hefty machines (presses?) that produced the long sheets of latex rubber that were then stretched out to dry – does this sound right? Lionel had a brother or cousin also in Malaya, Rod and his wife Joan Whittaker, who were great friends of my parents. They had a large Great Dane that we and their two daughters used to ride like a horse.

After one visit to Lionel's plantation, our mother was driving Rosemary and me back home at night when the car broke down. We hunkered down on the floor of the car in case we were spotted by bandits. After several hours the Sais arrived and took us home in another car. Our father had sent him out looking when we didn't arrive home as expected.

I remember going to the Cameron Highlands in a long convoy on one occasion.

As our mother notes, our father was on the insurgent's "hit-list". We were provided with a military guard and I recall the tramping of the soldiers as they circled the house at night with the sound of their heavy boots on gravel.

On one occasion our father took all our family to a resettlement site as the villagers and their possessions were being loaded onto trucks to be transported to their new village. I distinctly recall the faces of the women pressed against the car windows wailing and crying and begging our mother to persuade our father to leave them where they were. While the resettlement scheme was successful, it came with a human cost that I still remember.

Our father had a big black Chevrolet which we called Mickey. On occasions when he had to travel through dangerous territory he would tell nobody, other than our mother, about when or where he was going so that information could not be passed on to the insurgents. He simply did not appear for breakfast. They say he then drove like a "bat out of hell" to get to his destination without being ambushed. We swapped to a green Hillman Minx, called Minnie of course, probably when we moved back to KL.

We must have travelled around a bit despite the emergency as I have distinct memories of Rosemary or me or both of us being violently carsick on car journeys. Our father would sometimes smoke a pipe in the car which generally succeeded in setting us off.

Schools

From my old school reports I note that the schools we attended were:

School	Term ending	Teacher
Montessori	16 August 1949	Janet James
High Trees	July 1950 to March 51 (3 terms)	Eileen Ryves
High Trees	Summer term to 27 July 51	Margaret Robertson
Alice Smith School, KL	24/4/52	D Muir principal
and		
K Holmes, class teacher		

Some reports will be missing as there are gaps. The High Trees school had a classroom on the veranda of the house with large gardens to play in. Then Eileen must have left or something and the school was transferred to the Robertson house, with the classroom on a lower level. It was dingy with red painted floors. We did not like it.

A roster of mothers used to drive us to school in Ipoh as our mother comments in her notes but I do not recall her driving through an ambush or another mother packing a pistol. The Alice Smith school in KL seemed to me to be very large with far more facilities, including music teaching. It seemed to have a central hall with classrooms around the sides. I remember a couple of French sisters (twins?) who were very good at French of course.

Kuala Lumpur 1951

We were not in KL for very long. My memories of the house are a little indistinct except that it was single storied. It was requisitioned from the owners who were not pleased.

The best part of KL was the swimming pool at the Golf Club. It had a high diving board that our father dared me to dive off at the tender age of seven. I did so, but only after he did it first! The top diving board seemed to be a huge height, but looking at photos now it seems to have shrunk! The pool had concrete steps with thin spaces between them inset into the side of the pool at the deep end. I used to climb down to the bottom then up again just for fun. I once managed to get my foot stuck in the gap between the steps. My mild panic made me a bit more careful from then on. The Club was a social hub for the expats and their children and was greatly enjoyed by all. Hot chips and chocolate milk for the young, and something stronger for the adults, rounded a great day out. *(Rosemary: The hot chips were dipped in tomato sauce)*

A KL memory was the seller of iceblocks who would bike up the street selling his wares from a freezer box attached to his bike. The ices on a stick were fantastic, especially the white ones with a really great flavour, possibly lemon but different to any other lemon I had tasted before or since. *(Rosemary: could this have been soursop?)*

I remember lying in my parent's bed one morning as they discussed all the pros and cons of staying or taking up the Resident Commissioner role in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. I can't exactly remember my feelings, but it was a sad moment when they decided to leave. I still wish that we could have stayed longer.

Staff

For most of the time in Malaya our staff were Cookie, his wife, two daughters and son. Cookie did the cooking of course. Their elder daughter called AhYet helped with the house and looking after us children. I guess she would have been in her late teens. The younger daughter AhLin would have been in her mid teens and helped out occasionally as well. The son was around my age and we were very good friends. The whole family was marvellous. I am not sure if they were with us in Kuala Kangsar, but certainly were there in Batu Gajah and came with us to KL. They were kind and generous to us children. I presume we still had our Ayah but am not sure where she fitted in and for how long. *(Rosemary: We only had Ayah at the beginning, then we had Amah)*

We also had an Indian Sais who acted as driver and did some gardening. He was the one who rescued us from the jungle when we were travelling back from the Whittakers. We were friends with his son. The Sais was a really nice man and we were very impressed at his skill in swishing a scythe when cutting the lawns. *(Rosemary: I think Ali who appears in photos with us, may have been the Sais's son)*

We distinctly remember going to Ah Yet's wedding. Rather than the bubbly girl that we remembered she sat there looking wide-eyed and somewhat stunned. It was a very formal occasion.

Languages

As children do, Rosemary and I became as fluent as young children can be in Malay. Malay must have been a common language amongst children of all cultures as I cannot recall problems in conversing with other children, whether they were Malay, Chinese or Indian. Rosemary and I could also get by in Chinese, I presume Cantonese. This was helpful if we wanted to talk secretly in front of our parents! AhYe even taught me how to write a few Chinese characters. We used to flick between languages without really noticing, although we could sometimes mix up the different grammars of each.

A big factor for staff working for the British was that their children could learn English. On one occasion Cookie asked our mother to get me to speak English when talking with his son. We did try but it was difficult, and he and I would often revert to Malay.

I now remember nothing of the Malay or Cantonese languages apart from the occasional word. They all disappeared within months of returning to NZ due to lack of use. Obviously young children can lose a language as quickly as they can pick one up. Losing Malay and Chinese is a huge life regret for me.

Random memories

- Driving past tin mines and watching water cannons firing into cliffs to extract the ore. Once, with a friend and without permission, creeping up an eroded road and on our stomachs peering over the edge of a cliff that seemed very perpendicular and very deep. I recall the vertigo I experienced before inching back to safety.
- The Sultan visiting the house at Batu Gajah on an official visit. This was a very important occasion which my parents took very seriously and with careful planning. I remember the preparations, the Sultan's arrival in full regalia, but nothing else. We were probably banished to the back rooms to be out of sight.
- We used to visit another colonial officer who had a cat called Alan that I struck up a friendship with. When Sandy was posted elsewhere I took over the cat. Rather than having two Alan's in the house we of course renamed him Sandy. When we left Malaya Rod and Joan Whittaker took him over, which was a bit of a wrench. I suppose finding new homes for pets was one of the challenges of colonial life.
- Santa arriving on a gajah at a children's Christmas party. Despite the disguise Rosemary and I recognised the elderly gent as our father, despite our mother's unconvincing denials!

(Rosemary: Mangosteens and rambutan – rediscovered in Singapore in the early 2000s. Utterly delicious)