

Book Review

Kaleidoscope: The Memoirs of P.G. Lim, Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2012, 367 pp.

This book is an autobiography of the late Tan Sri P. G. Lim a famous Malaysian lawyer and diplomat whose career began in the mid-twentieth century and continued into the twenty first century. She had the privilege of reading law at the University of Cambridge in 1934 and began her legal career assisting a famous Queen's Counsel in 1953 at the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, the highest court in the Commonwealth. Her diplomatic career began in 1971 when she was appointed as Malaysia's ambassador to the United Nations in New York during Tun Razak's premiership while having a successful law practice of her own. In 1973, she was posted to Yugoslavia and Austria as Malaysia's ambassador. Later in 1977, she was appointed as the Malaysian ambassador to Brussels and the European Economic Community in Brussels, Belgium. When she retired from the diplomatic service in 1980, Tun Dr Mahathir appointed her as the Director of the Kuala Lumpur Regional Centre for Arbitration in February 1982, a post which she held until her retirement in 2000.

It is the story of the dutiful daughter who gave up her dream of becoming a concert pianist to be the lawyer her father wanted her to be, but never gave up on her piano. The most favourite granddaughter of a wealthy and generous grandmother who gifted her a diamond necklace, which many years later she magnanimously parted with to help one of her sisters in need. Later, during the Japanese occupation, she was the brave sister who walked into the neighbouring home of a high ranking Japanese naval officer to seek the release of her brother who had been taken in for questioning and was not heard of for days. He returned home a few days after that meeting. It is the story of the remarkable lawyer whom Tunku Abdul Rahman credited for persuading him to introduce trial by jury in death penalty cases in the Federation of Malaya, as stated in his book, "*As A Matter of Fact*" and noted by P.G.Lim in *Kaleidoscope*.

Lim Phaik Gan or P. G. Lim as she was famously known, was born in London on 29th June 1915, the eldest daughter of lawyer and legislative councillor, Lim Cheng Ean, and Rosaline Hoalim of British Guyana. P. G. begins her book, which spans more than a century, tracing her family history and traditional customs and practices that have faded away over time. She

writes about her grandfather, who had sailed from China to Penang, looking for adventure and a better life in the British colonies. He founded the family fortune in Penang, building the first rice mill in the state in partnership with a few other Chinese businessmen.

As the eldest daughter, she admired and respected her liberal parents who treated their sons and daughters equally. She adored her independent and outspoken mother, the daughter of Chinese missionaries from British Guyana who spoke only English.

Academically, P.G. was setting precedents in her time. She was the first student at her school, the Light Street Convent, to take the London Matriculation examination in 1933. She passed the exam and also the Girton College Entrance exam to enrol at Girton College, one of the two Cambridge colleges that admitted women in the 1930s. Upon graduating in 1937, she was given a titular degree certificate by Girton College, as women's colleges were not considered part of the University of Cambridge until 1947. She received the degree of Master of Arts from the University of Cambridge on 11th June 1949. There were further hurdles to cross before she became one of the most prominent lawyers in Malaysia. It was almost ten years later after her graduation that she went back to London to do complete the Bar exams which she had postponed due to the outbreak of war in Europe.

She began her professional legal career in 1953, at the highest court in the Commonwealth, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, assisting Sir Dingle Foot as, in presenting a petition for special leave to appeal on behalf of Lee Ten Tai alias Lee Meng, a member of the Communist Party. Lee Meng had been sentenced to death in Ipoh, in the Federated Malay States (FMS), for the possession of a hand grenade in contravention of the Emergency Regulations 1948. Trial by assessor system was practised in the FMS then. The judge ordered a retrial as he did not agree with the not-guilty verdict of the two local assessors, thus raising the issue of an unfair trial in Lee Meng's case.

An appeal to the Court of Appeal in Malaya was dismissed. S. P. Seenivasagam, Lee Meng's defence lawyer, advised his client to make an appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, the court of final appeal in Malaya and also the Commonwealth. He contacted P. G. who was then in London for assistance. However, Lee Meng's petition was dismissed. She was subsequently pardoned by the Sultan of Perak and her death penalty commuted to life imprisonment.

Lee Meng's case led to legal reforms in criminal trials in the Federation of Malaya, culminating in the introduction of trial by jury in criminal cases involving the death penalty in 1957 when Tunku Abdul Rahman became head of the Federation. The jury system was later abolished on 17th February 1995.

When P.G. returned to Penang from London in 1953, she was persuaded by her maternal uncle, Ho Ah Lok, to move to Kuala Lumpur, which she says marked the turning point in her life.

It was the beginning of her journey into the legal fraternity, the Arts Council and the political scene in Kuala Lumpur. She actively worked with trade unions as their lawyer and legal advisor. She joined the Labour Party and stood for elections in Sentul in 1964 at the request of Dr Tan Chee Khoo. She lost, and being a reluctant politician, she never ventured into politics after that and resumed her busy legal practice.

In November 1967, she was offered a leadership grant and study tour of the United States. At the same time, she accepted Tunku's offer to attend the October session of the United Nations in New York, as a delegate to the Sixth Committee, a legal committee dealing with international legal matters. During that trip, she suffered from severe back ache and had to be operated at Washington University Hospital, which nearly took her life, for she was unconscious for four days, "a chilling thought" she notes. After recuperating for a week, even though she was in pain, she resumed the rest of her tour of the United States which ended in San Francisco.

In 1968, she took up the case of 13 Malaysian youths who had joined the Indonesian paratroop landings in Johor and in Perak, during the Confrontation with Indonesia. They were found guilty of possession of firearms and sentenced to death. Their appeals to the Federal Court and later to the Privy Council in England had failed. The parents of the six young men approached P.G. for legal help and were advised to petition for clemency to the Rulers of the state in which they had been arrested. Her relentless efforts to save their lives when their appeals for clemency were rejected indicates her abhorrence of the death penalty which she cites as a reason for declining a seat on the bench in later years. Their lives were spared with Tunku's intervention but she notes that the consequences gravely affected Tunku's political career, contributing to the riots of May 13 and Tunku's subsequent resignation as the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

In 1971, she began her diplomatic career which took her beyond the shores of Malaysia to the United States and Europe. After her diplomatic years, she was instrumental in transforming an ailing Kuala Lumpur Regional Centre for Arbitration into an exemplary arbitration centre of repute.

"*Kaleidoscope: The Memoirs of P.G. Lim*" is a book which is enriching and rewarding to readers interested in Malaya of the distant past and its impact on the future. It may not be an easy read for it covers a wide range of topics as well as a great number of characters who graced the annals of Malayan (later Malaysian) history. The reader who is patient and is interested to fathom the life

of a public figure who was indeed a very private person will reap the rewards it offers. It is the life journey of a daughter of Penang who was very much ahead of her time and an unforgettable Malaysian diplomat, who lived her life with grace and dignity. It is the story of P. G. published in her 96th year, which is an enduring gift to posterity.

Krishna Kumari K. Raman
Email: kk822@hotmail.com