

CHAPTER

1

Early Memories

It was in the small town of Ipoh, in a rich tin-bearing valley of the Kinta River in Perak of British Malaya, where my first recollection of anything began with a rude awakening in the dead of night by anxious adult chatter, my maternal grandmother's excited voice being distinct. The drone of invading Japanese airplanes was obvious as they flew low, and the adults were discussing about taking shelter in the tunnel below. Unfortunately water had collected in it, so no one went in. Although too young to understand the implications of all this, I could sense an element of fear, but fortunately there was no tragedy in that countryside. It was years later that I became aware that our whole extended family was then taking refuge from Japanese invaders in the home of a wealthy tin-miner friend of my parents and grandparents in the village of Tronoh (see map overleaf). Strangely, I have absolutely no recollection of the house or the environs. On that same occasion, someone mentioned that tiny maggots were growing in the rice stored for a long period of time in view of scarcity. For a young impressionable mind, this incident had created a lasting paranoid fear of creeping and crawling creatures even though those are just common weevils.



Map of Perak and Kedah, Malaysia

The name Ipoh derives from a local Ipoh tree, *Antiaris toxicaria*, the sap of which is poisonous and was used by Orang Asli (indigenous people) to coat the tips of the darts of their blowpipes. The town, the capital of the silver state Perak (silver in Malay), has variously been called 'The Town That Tin Built' or 'City of Millionaires', referring to the vast fortunes made during the boom of the tin-mining

industries. Sadly its growth had stagnated with the demise of the tin industry in the late 1970s, resulting in the migration of many young talents to cities like Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, so much so that Ipoh has since been referred to colloquially as a 'sleepy hollow', a good place for retirement, even though the city and its suburbs are expanding all the time. Tronoh located some 30 km south of Ipoh was also once a thriving tin-mining town famed for its deep-shaft mine. Today Tronoh is also a sleepy little town surrounded by oil palms although that may change, now that two universities — Universiti Teknologi Petronas (founded in 1997) and Universiti Teknologi MARA (founded in 1996) — are in the vicinity. Nearby Ipoh is the town Kampar, which is now home to Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman or UTAR, originally set up as TAR college, offering external degrees, e.g. London University External and Campbell University of U.S.A., for students who failed to obtain admission into the national public universities.

Here is a little 'aside' to my ancestral forebears. I was told that my grandparents were first generation migrants to then Malaya from Guangdong Province in China; my paternal grandfather was a Chinese physician, with a hand in tin-mining as well, while my maternal grandfather was partly a businessman of sorts and partly a tin-miner. They plied to-and-fro between then Malaya and China, returning to China when times were trying in Malaya, such as during the Great Depression of 1929. My mother recalled that the British government of the time encouraged Chinese residents to return to China with paid sea fares. This obviously was very disruptive for my mother's education, but anyway that was not considered essential for girls in those days. My mother attended private classes under the masters of Chinese language and literature in Ipoh; one of these masters was Ho Tih Ann, the father of Professor Ho Peng Yoke (physicist-*cum*-renowned historian of Chinese Science), who had held professorial positions in UM, Griffith

University and HKU, and Directorship of The Needham Research Institute of Cambridge University (see his autobiography, *Reminiscence of a Roving Scholar: Science, Humanities and Joseph Needham*, 2005, World Scientific Publishing.) My mother's cousin, aunt Yuet was not given any formal education, but incredibly managed to self-educate herself sufficiently in Chinese to be able to read novels and newspapers. My two sets of grandparents were jolly good friends and had hand picked each other's children for daughter- and son-in-law, respectively.

My father (Chung Yew) and three of his six siblings (two brothers – Chung Weng and Chung Tai and a sister Chuk Ling) managed to survive all manner of tropical diseases without antibiotics. Together with his elder brother Chung Weng, he finished well in Anderson School (one of Ipoh's distinguished schools, now just past its centenary) and furthermore he secured a Queen's scholarship to study medicine in UK. However, as fate would have it, this was recalled because of the uncertain climate during the throes of the Great Depression and an impending war, already looming in Europe. Hence his next best option was to go for free university education in Sun-Yat-Sen University in Quangzhou, China, from where he obtained a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering. I had made it a point to visit that campus, when I accompanied my husband to an '*Oils-and-Fats Conference*' in Guangzhou in 2007. During the final year of his university course he married my mother, the marriage being brought forward on account of my grandfather's imminent death (at age 49) from kidney disease arising from kidney stones. After graduation, they tried to settle down in China, my father starting work in Yunnan in 1937. It was a harsh environment there and my mother could not tolerate the living conditions there and fell very ill. So they returned to Malaya, where my father secured a government job in Penang with the Public Works Department (PWD). Their

next move was a transfer to Ipoh, hometown of my maternal grandparents. Unfortunately for my father and indirectly for the family, degrees from Chinese universities were not recognized by the British government, and so my father had to settle for a position of technical assistant, below his qualification status, subordinate to a British principal engineer. It was in Ipoh where my parents settled and brought up their family of six children, amongst whom I am the eldest.

Other than that vivid recollection of the night in Tronoh of low-flying Japanese warplanes, memories of my earlier years are scant in detail. I only remember skeletons of episodes in that little semi-detached government bungalow in Greentown, Ipoh. My teenage aunt (Yan Sin) had to dress up as a boy on occasions to be 'safe' in those days of Japanese occupation; in my childhood naivety I thought that was to avoid being beaten up or attacked because boys were supposedly stronger. It was later that I was not spared some recounts of atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers. Years later in secondary school, we learnt of the Ipoh heroine Sybil Kathigasu, nurse and wife of a doctor, arrested and horrendously tortured by the Japanese Military Police, the Kempeitai, for giving medical treatment to the anti-Japanese resistance fighters hiding in the hills of Papan, a small town near Ipoh. She became the only Malayan woman ever to receive the George Medal, a British civilian award for bravery, before she died in 1948 (at age 49) from injuries sustained (broken skull, jaw and spine and paralysed legs), despite numerous operations in Britain to fix her broken body. Her story is engraved in the heritage of Perak; her memoirs finished just before her death, the ending sections by dictation when she could not write anymore, was published posthumously in 1954, and recently re-published to mark the sixtieth anniversary of her death. (*No Dram of Mercy*, Sybil Kathigasu. ISBN 983-2197-22-8, Prometheus Enterprise, 2006).

Indeed, those were times of hardships and scarcities. Many like the Kathigasus had to farm for food. I remember we also grew some of our own food in the limited land around the house. My father's cousin (on his maternal side) who was living with us with his newly-wed wife, once harvested buckwheat from our small front yard and we were overjoyed, awaiting the biscuits to be made therefrom! One day my mother gave me a hard-boiled chicken egg, a relatively rare food item, and I was to learn that it was because of my birthday. Come to think of it, I cannot remember having chicken meat for regular meals during my early school years. Pork was relatively more available, but chicken meat was a luxury reserved only for festive days. This was mainly because chickens were difficult to breed in those days when vaccines were unavailable. Because of that, the few chickens in our yard were closely watched, and slaughtered as soon as they refused to feed — a prelude to sickness — to which they would all succumb one after the other in a matter of days, much like, though not as serious as, the present day H5N1 contagions. In those days of food scarcity, it was no wonder that our maid coveted a treasured chicken egg, but she was spotted hiding it in an unused charcoal stove by the wife of my father's cousin. Not knowing about kleptomania in those days my mother had to ask her to leave for that and also upon finding that she had hidden bags of buckwheat among her belongings. In one of those days, I had flung away a sweet potato as far as I could, as a worm crawled out while I was scraping it. I have a vivid recall of my father coming home to relay the news that the Japanese had surrendered. We learnt that there was much rejoicing in town because the war had ended. The next few days, my father told of bags of Japanese 'banana' currency discarded in the streets.

We were very fortunate to have survived the war years but other trials remained. My brother Cheong, two years my junior, contracted malaria which was to weaken him

so badly that any slight attack of fever would bring on an onslaught of fits. I used to watch in fear, as my mother tried to force a spoon between his teeth to prevent him from biting his tongue. Indeed, my mother kept tender loving watch on him every moment of his feverish days. Such incidents persisted till his school age. Having been accustomed to such protective care, his first days in school must have been clouded with fear, and like some other boys, he ran homewards once an accompanying aunt was out of sight during the first days, bringing his teacher running after him.