

VISITORS FROM GERMANY

As often when a family lives abroad, entertaining became a way of life. Guests came, guests went, and the house was always in a busy bustle of friends, relatives from home, business partners or other people who arrived at the “shores” of King Albert Park like driftwood. From important industrial executives, politicians and diplomats to freaked-out artists and film producers, hippies, lovesick au-pair girls - a plethora of interesting subjects populated our living room, easy prey for us children to study.

Among this colourful crowd were Fritz & Elfi, a young adventurous couple from Berlin, whom the German Embassy had passed on to my parents for accommodation. They stayed with us for several weeks. Fritz was a painter. I recall an oil canvas propped up in the guestroom with jagged, abstract reds on a grey background. Elfi, unusually for the time, was a camerawoman and budding film producer. They were travelling with Rosa von Praunheim, the trailblazing, gay filmmaker of the 1970s, who had just unsettled Germany with his pro-homosexual awareness activities, thus heralding the advent of several political movements. His real name was Holger, but he called himself Rosa, after the pink triangle that homosexuals had been forced to wear in Hitler’s concentration camps. They were a fun and interesting bunch and I was thrilled to have them sleeping just across the corridor in the guestroom.

Instead of sitting on chairs, they lounged about comfortably in cross-legged position on their mattresses, made jokes, wore Hindi shawls and jumped around in Balinese temple masks. Once, Fritz took out a woven Indonesian basket, opened the lid and showed me his “riches”. There were many one *rupee* and one *ringgitt* bills, most of them old and tattered

at the edges. Suddenly, Elfi reached into the basket with both hands, grabbing as many bills as she could, and threw the lot high into the air above her head, throwing her head back with laughter. The bills flew and fluttered all around us. Quickly the scene evolved into a wild, hooting frenzy: the four of us picking up the money and throwing it into the air again, dancing under the paper rain like mad dervishes, giggling all the time. It took us hours to pluck the last paper snippet out from under the mattresses and out of the cracks of the door jamb, when all the madness had ended.

One day, after Rosa, Fritz and Elfi had taken a trip to Bogey Street in downtown Singapore; they appeared in our living room with armfuls of Chinese Opera costumes. They dressed up in these gaudy garments, painted their faces and started dancing around in our living room to loud Chinese music. Mr Yeo, our greengrocer, who had just arrived on his weekly delivery round, had unloaded his van and was carrying a crate of oranges to the kitchen, when he became an involuntary spectator to this unlikely “performance”. Freezing in his tracks, the crate of fruit came crashing to the ground, his face a picture of horrified bewilderment. Oranges bounced in all directions and the dogs, sensing that something was amiss, were startled out of their mid-day lethargy and started leaping up at him, barking wildly in confusion and anger. Poor Mr Yeo was overwhelmed – he ran for the gate, tumbled into his van and took off as if the devil were chasing his soul.

Later he told Lily that he thought ghosts had invaded our house and that we were haunted. It took some persuasion and coaxing for him to continue his services to King Albert Park and from then on, he rounded the corner of the driveway cautiously, always glad to see Lily and relieved to reach the sanctuary of her kitchen.

Aminah and Noaini, our amahs, soon became accustomed to all the strange people who frequented our house. If they thought anything of it, one could never tell. They were of an

endless, gentle patience, always smiling or humming a tune as they wandered through the rooms. Discarded clothing or dirty towels were picked up effortlessly without stooping. They grasped things lying on the floor with dexterous toes, flipping them upwards by kicking back slightly and catching them with a pert little *swish* of their sarongs and a *tinkle* of golden bracelets.

But circumstance would have it that even their best demeanour and most balanced temperament was one day put to the test.

Hail the arrival of Bodo and Gila from Germany! Friends of my parents, they had decided to spend a few days in Singapore before continuing on their travels in south-east Asia. Tea was served on the porch and my parents spent the afternoon exchanging news from home, discussing world politics and sharing cultural observations. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's stringent law and order policies attracted special interest, for they were so far removed from the social democratic leadership style in Germany. And this became apparent in one particular law that in many cases literally turned into a hair-raising experience. The free-flowing student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was bringing droves of young Europeans to the sun-swept beaches of Malaysia and Indonesia. They came, dressed in baggy jeans and washed out denim shirts and leather bangles, looking for the free and easy life and new, borderline experiences or simply getting high. Open drug peddling in Singapore, this clean, limited Island State, would have presented a disaster. For the Government the solution proved close at hand. Hippies were associated with long hair, so Lee Kuan Yew introduced a short hair policy. Notice boards were put up in Changi Airport depicting proper and acceptable male grooming. Any hair that grew below the shirt collar and over the ears was too much. Two thick red bars crossed this image out decisively. Woe to the unsuspecting young male tourist who wore his hair in the style of the times – cascading down his shoulders or tied in a

ponytail at the back. The airport authorities would nab him, lead him into a room near Customs and, with a few deep hums of the shaving machine, trim his locks into a neat, short crew cut. Westerners were appalled at this intrusion into what they regarded as basic rights of the individual. Young Germans especially were against any kind of uniformity. The horrors of the Third Reich Regime were still too close and conformity considered tantamount to dictatorship. To them it smacked of militarism and autocracy. Whichever way you looked at Lee Kuan Yew's policies, however, they were effective.

My parents warned all our young visitors, students on the thoroughfare, artists and cameramen, beforehand. So, fortunately for them, there were no nasty surprises.

Here now were Mum and Dad, chatting away with Bodo and Gila who were sipping their tea from our Chinese porcelain cups. But why were Aminah and Noaini so cheerful? Running to and fro, under the pretence of picking up stray newspapers and runaway toys, they spent a suspicious amount of time in the living room, peeping at Bodo and Gila when they thought no-one was looking. Then, suddenly, my mother caught a distinct glimpse of them, doubling over in fits of laughter behind the folding doors of the veranda. At first, she thought she must have imagined it, but then, when she went into the hall on her way to the toilet, she saw them again, the contours of their bodies clearly outlined behind the billowing curtains leading to the left wing of the house.

Finally, the dam broke.

It was enough for my father to address his guests with a jolly

“And now Bodo, tell us about your latest travel plans!”

to send the two young women into fits of barely-contained laughter, hysterically heightened when my mother mentioned Gila's first name. No amount of telling-off could calm them. Not even my father's sternest look could put an end to their mirth. My mother, who was a master in the art of distraction,

launched into a seemingly endless monologue about the merry, carefree nature of our servants.

“You know, they are such a happy, good-natured nation, the Malays – always telling jokes!” she harped on, her voice strong with forced conviction.

Gila smiled doubtfully as her disconcerted husband strained his neck to get a view of the source of commotion behind his back.

When Bodo and Gila finally departed, the secret for such mirth was brought to light. My mother, who had been studying the language for several months with the help of a private tutor, realised to her amazement that the words “*bodoh*” and “*gila*” mean “stupid” and “crazy” in Malay.

No wonder Aminah and Noaini had been in stitches behind the curtains. What a funny, crazy household for my amahs to work in!



Taking a visitor for a rickshaw spin