

If the prison walls could talk



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NATION

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The Pudu Prison will soon be torn down to make way for development but the absence of the physical structure will not dim the memory of a jail that holds tales both poignant and spine-chilling.

ONE hundred and fifteen years after it was built, Pudu Prison is set to be torn apart to make way for

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Having worked in Pudu Prison for 11 years from 1975 to 1986, actor and former prison director of Taiping Prison, Abu Bakar Juah, has many memories of the place.

Malaysians may recognise him as a regular on RTM's Drama Minggu Ini in the 1980s. Ironically, despite his regular day job as a prison officer, he was constantly cast in the role of a bad guy.

Abu Bakar says that working in a prison helped him to become a better actor.

"In prison, there are thousands of people separated from society and they have unique personalities. I had to learn and understand their behaviour, so I put some of that into my acting," he says.



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He recalls an incident in 1986 when a group of six prisoners led by Jimmy Chuah took Dr Radzi Jaafar and Dr Abdul Aziz Majid hostage, and held them for six days.

"I was at the prison workshop that day when I received a call from the director. Without explaining, he told me to close it up and return all the inmates to their room," he relates.

It was a little later that he was told of what had transpired, and he was asked to be the liaison between the Prisons Department and the Police.

He remembers that it was a very trying situation and he did not manage to get any sleep over the next two days.

He also says that it was Datuk Ibrahim Mohamed, the director-general of Prisons at that time, who insisted that no firearms should be used, so the rescue team only used batons. As a result, there were no fatalities.

Abu Bakar also had a small part to play in the painting of the mural on the outside walls of Pudu Prison. (The mural was recognised by the Guinness Book of Records as the world's longest mural.)

"It wasn't my idea but it all started when I suggested making a rock garden along the length of the front wall," he says, adding that the idea to paint the walls came from another officer, Mohd Rashidi Samsuddin.

"I remember that the artist, Khong Yen Chong, completed his sentence before the painting was

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He says that there were quarters for staff across the road, which was not as busy then. The staff would assemble in the morning and march across the road, and traffic had to stop for them to cross.

Aziz says that working in the prison taught him many things – especially about how resourceful people can get.

“I learnt many things in there; for example, do you know how to open a tin can without a can opener?”

“The prisoners would rub the edge of the tin on the floor until it wore down and the top could then be easily removed.”

The prisoners were also able to use a single matchstick four times – by carefully splitting it down its length into four parts, he adds.

Aziz also remembers how bad the conditions in the jail were in the early 1980s

“Before Kajang Prison was built, it was the centre of incarceration for Malaysia. We used to get prisoners from as far away as Perak and Pahang.

“At its worst, there were 5,000 to 6,000 prisoners in a prison that was only meant for 800,” he says.

He describes the cells as being very small and meant for a single person, but they had to place 11 people in there.

“It was so bad they had to sleep in shifts. Furthermore, there was hardly any ventilation, just a window about two feet wide. They had to use a plastic pail as a toilet, and when you opened the door to the cell, the stench was overpowering.”

Pudu Prison will not be around for much longer, but both Aziz and Abu Bakar believe it is important to preserve a part of it.

“I agree that keeping the structure is a waste – the land is worth millions of ringgit. However, if part of the gate can be preserved, that is good enough. At least our grandchildren will see something to remember that Pudu Prison once stood here – just like A Famosa in Malacca,” he says.

Abu Bakar has a grander plan. He suggests that a portion of the 10ha grounds be set aside to build a “monument” of sorts. “They can build a scaled model of the prison in there so people will be able to see what it actually looked like.


“Perhaps they could have preserved the building and maybe turned it into a college,” says Pritan Kaur, whose grandfather, father and two uncles all worked at one time or another in Pudu Prison.

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She has a more sentimental attachment to Pudu Prison because that was where she met and fell in love with the man whom she married, Sukhvinder Singh Randhava.

“Her father found out that I was good at mathematics and asked me to give lessons to her brothers and sisters. Her mother asked me to join them for meals occasionally, and that was how we got to know each other,” says Sukhvinder, who worked as a records officer in Pudu Prison for nine years.

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