

# A fairy-tale life at Istana Iskandariah

**REMINISCENCE:** Most of us grew up dreaming about life in a palace. One of the most majestic palaces in the country is Istana Iskandariah in Kuala Kangsar, the official residence of the sultan of Perak following its completion in 1933. Raja Khalidatul Asrin talks to the children of the late Sultan Idris Shah II, who lived in the palace from 1963 to 1984

**D**REAMERS always connect palaces to a magical experience of a fairy tale. An example of a place that seems to have popped out of a fairy tale is Istana Iskandariah at Bukit Chandan, Kuala Kangsar, Perak.

Located on a majestic hill and facing Sungai Perak, the white palace, with its glorious domes, evokes fantastical images. It is not hard to let your imagination run wild and wonder if genies had lived there, just like in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

Istana Iskandariah was home to the 30th ruler of Perak, Sultan Iskandar Shah, and his family from 1934 to 1938. It was his idea of building this palace to replace Istana Negara on the same site.

After him, other sultans had also stayed there. The last ruler to have used the palace as a royal abode was Sultan Idris Shah II, the 33rd sultan of Perak.

After all, it was his father who built the palace, hence, the name, Istana Iskandariah.

Raja DiHilir Perak Raja Iskandar Dzulkarnain Sultan Idris Shah reminisces: "I was 7 when my family moved to Istana Iskandariah. Although it was huge, it was home. We occupied the left wing of the palace's two wings."

One of his fondest memories was when he and his brother built replicas of a train set with their father in a room near the dome, on the top floor of the palace. He also remembered his father's music room on the same floor.

Recalling his years growing up in the palace, he said there were five huge bedrooms then, with the main living room being called the "Red Room". There were also the throne room and halls. Each room was so spacious that it came with a dedicated dining area.

There were two kitchens in the palace and, at the time, wood was still used for fire.

The children of the sultan of Perak during that era led a normal life. Back then, the palace was opened to public and people from all walks of life would visit the premises, especially during the weekends. The sultan's children would play with their schoolmates freely, without the need for supervision from bodyguards.

Permaisuri Johor Raja Zarith Sofiah Almarhum Sultan Idris Shah said her favourite time was watching TV shows in the corridor outside the room of her mother, Raja Muzwin Raja Arif Shah.

"It was so much fun watching TV with my sister, my aunts and our maids. Our favourites were popular TV

series like *Dr Kildare*, *Highway Patrol* and *The Partridge Family*. Sometimes, my mother would ask me to sleep in her room and I loved those times," she said.

"My room was on the first floor, next to my mother's room. I could always hear my father arriving or leaving because our rooms were nearest to the porch. I loved cycling around the palace every afternoon, below the big, shady raintrees," she reminisced.

"I would also go to the staff quarters and look for the daughter of my mother's driver, so we could play *masak-masak* (cooking) together. I would sit in her parents' room and chat with them.

"My younger brother, Raja (Datuk Seri) Jamil Arrifin and I would also go outside one of the palace gates, where the other staff quarters were. Our friends were the staff's children," Raja Zarith Sofiah said.

"My brother's (Raja DiHilir's) room was above mine and I would often hear the records he played, because he had it at full volume.

"So I started to like Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, Creedence Clearwater Revival and other bands," she said, adding: "I also liked many other singers, because I was so used to hearing their songs."

Her elder sister, Raja Halimahton Shahrin, said her room was on the second floor.

"I either took the lift, which is truly ancient, walked up and down the side stairway, or slid down the curvy banister," said Halimahton.

She said the palace had two huge kitchens.

One was run by "Cookie", who whipped up Western fare, such as chicken pie and beef steak, while the other traditional kitchen catered to everyone — with dishes, including curries, *asam pedas*, *gulai tempoyak*, *sambal* and other local delicacies.

She recalled that there were enormous pots and pans, as well as other traditional kitchen utensils, such as *batu giling* and *lesung batu*.

"Everything was huge!" she said.

She also remembered a huge tree with massive branches, where, she said; "I would swing like Tarzan".

"Dad bought a bicycle each for Zarith Sofiah and I. Although I scraped my knees and legs and fell into drains, I finally learned how to ride a bike. Everyday, we would cycle around the palace grounds.

"Eventually, I cycled to town with school friends from Bukit Chandan. One day, as we were cycling, I saw Dad's car and my friends and I jumped into the drain, bicycle and all, to hide, because I was not exactly sure if I was allowed to cycle out of the palace," she said.

The palace was lively because relatives and friends would come and go as they pleased, making the life of the sultan's children fun and interesting.

When asked if there were ghosts in Istana Iskandariah, Raja Iskandar Dzulkarnain laughed, and said: "The maids often made up ghost stories, but I have not encountered anything out of the ordinary, nor a ghost, for that matter."

According to him, his father loved orchids, and the Istana Iskandariah garden was full of different species of orchids.

"We also had a mini zoo at the compound. The animals were presented to my father, so he kept them," he said.

The animals became an attraction for the villagers and they would visit them during weekends.

Sultan Idris passed away in 1984 and his family left Istana Iskandariah 100 days after his demise. The palace will always be remembered as home by his children.



Raja Halimahton Shahrin (left) and Tuanku Zarith Sofiah with their father's orchids.



(From left) Tuanku Zarith Sofiah, Raja Halimahton Shahrin, Raja Iskandar Dzulkarnain, Raja Nazhatul Shima and Raja Jamil Arrifin.



Tuanku Zarith Sofiah