

Growing up in **Katong** Part 2

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefler

A Jewish family lived in the last house in our lane – Uncle Solomon, his unmarried sister Ramona, and another sister, the mother of our playmates Michael and Haskell. As kids do, we played without prejudices and absolutely no awareness of cultural or religious differences. One day we learned that the boys and their mother were leaving Katong to start a new life in the new state of Israel. Uncle Solomon and Auntie Ramona did not go. Uncle Solomon supplied confectionery to bakeries and was said to have provided the recipe for the marzipan and sugar icing that made Cona's *sugee* cake a classic. Cona's, Katong's landmark confectionery, was at the top of our lane.

Auntie Ramona was a bespectacled, small woman with ample breasts that sagged to her belted frock. She was always complaining of the noise we made and the dust we kicked up, but she held the future in her hands: she was a card-reader, a fortune-teller. A VIP client used to arrive in a chauffeured Morris for her regular session. This was Mrs Felice Leon-Soh, a Member of Parliament, a rare female in the emerging political party. Decades later, someone recommended a card reader in Tanjong Katong and it turned out to be Mrs Leon Soh!

My family was not especially close to the Jewish siblings, but our immediate neighbour was friendly with Auntie Ramona. When Uncle Solomon succumbed to illness years later, I heard the details of the midnight funeral service at the Jewish cemetery in Thomson Road, and how the shrouded body was buried legs first in a standing position. Eventually, lonely Ramona went the way of her brother and with her went our Jewish connection.

Another neighbour was the Oliveiro family, whose lives we shared by looking over the common wall into their verandah and living room. This was how we discovered Eurasian culture. They, in turn, observed our lives. The family's only son was five years older than I and always took the lead in board and card games with children of his age group. His grandmother was a true Eurasian lady who taught her daughter-in-law, a soft-spoken Teochew Chinese lady, the family recipes - devilled curry, fruit cake and Sunday roasts. She also taught the Hainanese family that ran Cona's the recipes for *sugee* and fruitcakes, for which they became famous.

We children were fascinated by the Oliveiro family's Christmas tree, decorated with old-fashioned Christmas crackers, shiny glass baubles and fairy lights. Every Christmas we leaned over the wall, stretching our necks as far as we could to gaze at the mesmerising sight. One day the family decided to upgrade (the tree was a fake) and somehow we inherited the discarded one. Our childish fantasies came true when we got permission to decorate and display the tree in our living room, right next to our altar with the Buddha statue, oil lamp and burning joss-sticks.

Mickey Oliveiro was the leading Hawaiian-guitar player of the 1950s and 60s. His part-time band played in local cabarets and clubs such as the one in the nearby Seaview Hotel. This meant rehearsals on Sundays with his buddies, so my young life was filled with the tunes of *Blue Hawaii* and other hip-swaying melodies. Meanwhile, our family gramophone belted out Bill Haley, Elvis, Chuck Berry, The Shadows and other music of that era. By the time my own hit parade consisted of the Beatles and Stones, I found the melodious pull and twang of the electric Hawaiian guitar punishing. When Mickey collapsed of a heart attack, I lost the sound that had permeated my childhood. Much later, when I befriended a Peranakan girl whose father loved his Hawaiian guitar, I heard the familiar strains once again.

Several other Eurasian families lived near us. I remember in particular the Ess family, whose daughter Yvonne was especially fair-skinned and blue-eyed. The



Cynthia Wee-Hoefler with her daughter

D’Cottas had a large brood of children and they went to Katong Convent, where my older sisters had already forged friendships with the Pestana and Minjoot girls. But most of the families in our lane were Peranakan. The men greeted each other in English with some Baba Malay. The women babbled away in Baba Malay, which contained a sprinkling of trendy English phrases such as ‘for goodness sake’ and ‘gives me high blood pressure’. Their children spoke English almost exclusively.

The formality and politeness of tone with which they addressed each other marked the good breeding of Peranakan families. To address a family member properly, one followed the lead of an elder. An older male was referred to as *incik* or *ba*, an older woman as *tachi* and a younger one as *adek* or *nya*. An elderly woman was *bibik* or *umbok*. It was a definite *faux pas* to address an elderly relative as ‘auntie’, as one might if one were not Peranakan. I was once chided by Peter Wee’s mother, the regal Mrs Josephine Wee, for calling her ‘auntie’. But try as I might, I could not – and still cannot – remember the appropriate terms of address.

Baba families were very sociable and loved to party, which explains why there was rarely a quiet moment in a *baba* household. At Mummy Jane’s (my godmother), someone was always coming-a-calling or a *mahjong* or *cherki* game was in progress. Jane

was a widow who, after the war, supported two daughters and an ageing mother by collecting *tin* (pocket money for snacks) from the *mahjong* and *cherki* players. She made extra money by renting out her back room and making *nonya kueh* (local cakes) for women who didn’t have time for baking. Mummy Jane’s was my other home, the beating heart of the Katong I knew.

Mummy Jane was tiny, but very vocal, frail but hardworking. She sewed the *manek*, the beaded slippers which are part of traditional Peranakan attire, with such skill that she was always taking orders for custom slippers, even when cataracts impaired her eyesight. Every free moment was spent bent over the wooden *pidangan* (beading frame), stitching tiny beads while her ears were tuned to the gossip of visiting friends and *mahjong kakis* (buddies), or to Redifussion (the cable radio) for the winning horse race numbers.

Unfortunately, when she was near 90, Mummy Jane, like so many of her friends, gave up her beloved home in Katong. She moved to a high-rise flat in Tampines to live with her granddaughter.



Cynthia Wee-Hoefer’s relative doing needlework

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer, a women’s magazine and newspaper journalist most of her career, likes to think of herself as a *nonya* thoroughbred who promotes Peranakan culture through her writing for the Peranakan Association Singapore. As a member of Friends of the Museums, she hopes to widen her personal approach to what being a Peranakan is about.

Editor’s note: we hope this memoir of growing up in Katong may inspire others to record their memories of an earlier Singapore. Was your grandfather a trishaw driver or did your parents run a hawker business? Were you an expat who fell in love with a Singaporean during the early days of the Republic? Did you grow up with specific ethnic customs that are no longer part of modern culture in Singapore? We encourage you to submit your remembrances, even if your written English is less than perfect. We will be glad to help you with the editing process! Please send an outline of a proposed article or a completed article of no more than 750 words to Susan F. Hunter, Features Editor, at <mailto:susanfhunter@mindspring.com>