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# A half century celebration

by Dr. Melva Perera

**W**hen we began our university career in the Faculty of Engineering in 1951, one year after its inception, the campus at Thurstan Road, the only university in the country at that time, was bursting at the seams.

Except for a few faculties like Medicine and Agriculture, everyone and everything seemed to be there, and even students of those faculties, like us were in the Faculty of Science in our first year. The Arts, the Classics and all the sciences mingled in a glorious profusion of intellectual, physical and other kinds of activity. In the evenings, the canteens, the cafes in the vicinity and the playgrounds were full, and those so inclined sat against the thick columns along the corridors to talk of love. It is hard to imagine that those cafes at the Bambalapitiya Junction, now largely decrepit or converted to more mundane commercial use, were once the centres of intellectual discourse.

Fifty years is a long way down memory lane, back to the days when computers were in their infancy and the simplest one occupied an entire room and calculators nowhere insight. That was the era of slide rulers and log tables, now mere museum pieces. Considering the intervening technological explosion, any talk of the academic content of the courses then would be more than irrelevant. But they were great days for us who were privileged to be there at that time, and good days for the country, independent and at peace, days worth recalling even if only to take note of how much things have changed.

Take for instance the process of entering the university. Considering that there were only twenty to a batch, the competition was perhaps as much or even greater than today. After the qualifying written and practical examinations, we were summoned to be interviewed by the eminent scientists of that time. And as if all that was insufficient, we were subjected to a psychological assessment, a suggestion which if made today, would send the entire university on strike for months on end.

On reflection, that assessment may have been some kind of research project to assess the selectors, rather than the students, to check if they had done a proper job of selecting those with adequate intelligence to study engineering. All manners of questions were asked and ink blobs displayed, and we were asked to give our thoughts on them. Some of us wrote that they looked exactly what they were, ink blobs. Whether that was a satisfactory answer, considering that it may have been a

test of imagination, we were not told. From all these encounters we had a spin off benefit, as we got to know our future colleagues.

That was useful, even at a time when ragging was just innocent fun. Unfortunately though, all our colleagues were male, compelling us to seek our romances and life partners elsewhere. The Engineering Faculty was to remain a male domain for years to come.

In those bygone days, the academic staff imparted their knowledge in all their academic glory, attired in coat, tie, cloak and some even with the cap. The Physicist, Prof. Mylvaganam, was the Dean of the Faculty of Science where we followed lectures in our first year, a stern man whose stare could send a shiver down the spine of even a hardened student. Thirty five years later this writer had the privilege of serving with him on the University Grants Commission, to discover a mischievous sense of humour behind that stern face that we could never have imagined existed.

We were taken into the world of advanced mathematics by those eminent Mathematicians, Professors Nadarasa, Caspersz, Eliezer and Amerasekera. Prof. Nadarasa was a man with magnetic energy and a booming voice that left no chance for distraction. His voice can yet be heard to declare as he invariably did then at the conclusion of a mathematical exercise, "and those conditions ladies and gentlemen are necessary and sufficient". Prof. Caspersz was by contrast a soft spoken and kindly man, hardly audible but still so effective. Prof. Amerasekera's mathematics on the other hand, sounded to us somewhat abstract, like the art, the artist that he was, produced. If it was by deliberate policy that the most senior lecturers taught the freshest students, we could not have had it any better.

We saw the Vice-Chancellor, the lean and lanky Sir Ivor Jennings, only occasionally as he strode around the Campus or when there was trouble. Sir Ivor, the Constitutional Lawyer, is credited with the authorship of the first constitution of independent Ceylon. Ever since that time and to this day, our politicians have been changing and our lawyers writing constitutions.

When we started our second academic year, Thurstan Road was all quiet and empty. The Arts students who formed the bulk of the student body had shifted to the salubrious climes of Peradeniya, to those magnificent new buildings and the five star hostels as they were at the beginning. Those of us left behind were regular visitors to that idyllic place, a dream of an ideal residential university come true. Things

have changed so much since that day. In spite of all the apparent emptiness at Thurstan Road, the Faculty of Engineering was confined to four rooms in a shed like structure, parallel to the corridor leading to King George's Hall. King George's Hall has its own long history, a venue for drama, dances, socials and a hall that has hosted many a statesman and politician who came at the invitation of the Students' Union to address and to argue with the students. They came with no security and left intact, at worst with a hoarse throat.

The imposing figure of the pioneer and first Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Prof. E. O. E. Pereira, sat with pipe in his mouth in a room in Samson's Bungalow. A small room next door containing a few books and manned a peon, doubling up as Librarian, passed off as a library. Prof. Pereira set the norms and ideals for engineering education that have inspired academics to this day. An Engineer and a gentleman, a liberal intellectual and sportsman, he was loved and admired by an entire generation of Engineers. He, on some evenings, would walk into those lecture rooms and urge toiling students to stop studying and working, and get on to the playing fields and play some games. Prof. R. H. Paul, the Professor of Electrical Engineering, was the leading technical educator of the day, having previously been the Director of the Ceylon Technical College, the premier technical institution that produced all the Engineers with University of London degrees, and before the Faculty was set up. Both he and Prof. Pereira, were Alumni of Cambridge University, not only Engineers but intellectuals, worthy of the highest traditions of University Academics.

Prof. H. B. de Silva, who took many of our lecturers, was a bachelor then, with a huge Studebaker car with beer always in the boot. H. B. Closely resembled that world famous violinist, Yehudi Menuhin and we once told him that he held his bottle of beer with the same style and grace as Menuhin did his violin. One fine feature of the Faculty at that time was the closeness of the staff with the students, probably due to their small numbers. H.B was the organiser of those memorable survey camps at Diyatalawa, three full weeks of work and fun. Housed in the army cantonment, we walked the hills and dales of Diyatalawa, surveying and mapping by day and singing and dancing by night. He was ably assisted by Daha, who joined the staff as a technical officer at the inception, when still a youngman and remained in the Faculty for the next forty five years to befriend a generation of engineers and academics.

(To be continued)