

THE TREASURY OFFICER and those dark days of March 1971

RASHAD CHOWDHURY

THIS is the story of my father who was a civil servant assigned as the treasury officer of Dhaka in 1971. It is a story of him and many others like him who selflessly struggled for freedom and independence of Bangladesh, who were not officially known as muktijoddahs or members of any political parties but believed in the future of Bangladesh and worked towards it.

As an East Pakistan civil servant, my father, M.A. Halim Chowdhury, could not be part of any political struggle nor could he openly express his opinion on the freedom struggle of the Bangalees that made headlines all over the world. But he felt that something needed to change so that Bangalees could get their right to freedom and speech. With that hope, he attended the historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Race Course Maidan on March 7, eluding the prying eyes of Pakistani agents to watch the great leader declare his directives for the Bangalee nation's freedom movement.

My father's hope for the declaration of independence had to wait, but upon return to his job as the Dhaka Treasury Officer, he observed that vast sums of funds were being diverted away from the Dhaka Treasury by various West Pakistan military units. He knew that this information had to be disseminated to the political leadership of the freedom struggle and he had to



COURTESY: RASHAD CHOWDHURY

M. A. Halim Chowdhury at Harvard University after finishing his assignment at Gono Bhaban 1974

act upon it. But as a civil servant, he had to do this secretly or he could face execution by the military regime. He found a way to contact then General Secretary of the Awami League and subsequent prime minister of Bangladesh, Tajuddin Ahmad. Upon hearing the details from my father, this valiant leader of the freedom struggle actually smuggled him into the home of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman one evening, so that Bangabandhu himself could hear this information.

Like many others in the government, my

father essentially followed the newly unrecognised government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, trying his best to not perform on the directive of the military regime. He explained about the funds being withdrawn and informed Bangabandhu of the fact that Tikka Khan, the "Butcher of Balochistan", was positioning the military in a more permanent manner in East Pakistan. After listening to my father, Bangabandhu directed him with that clear voice that he is so well known for, "Halim shaheb, lock up the treasury

door and disappear amidst the general public. The military will not be able to distinguish you from countless others."

I do not know what my father's exact course of action was during those days, but on the night of March 26, our government-allotted home was attacked by the Pakistani army. I was a small child then but I remember bullets flying all over and my uncle, a muktijoddha, whisking me to a room downstairs. The whole building started to burn as the army set fire to it from all directions. Ensuring the house was fully engulfed in fire, the army left the premises, thinking that no one would survive the inferno. They had guns but we had the Almighty's support on our side, as by some miracle a tank full of water and a few sand bags were discovered right outside our house. My father instructed all male adults to quickly get out of the house and start throwing sand and water on the burning building. Because of his quick action, four families were saved from certain death on that dreadful night. The families stayed in a single dark room of that half-burnt house for the next three days. Later, we evacuated to a relative's home far away on foot. The scene was not unlike the ones we currently witness on TV of refugees from Syria or other war-torn countries, seeking asylum elsewhere. Everywhere we looked, we saw burnt or smoldering storefronts and buildings in what is now known as the English Road in Old Dhaka. Later, we had to flee to our village in

Comilla, as we, along with countless others were still being pursued by the Al Badar force and the Pakistani army.

We returned to Dhaka right after Victory Day on December 16, and my father found himself being called in by then Principal Secretary Rafiqullah Chaudhury to become the administrative officer of Gono Bhaban, the office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He was dedicated to the office of the Prime Minister, and we found out later that one afternoon, while waiting beside the Prime Minister to get some documents signed, my father's appendix ruptured. But even with that excruciating pain, he never left the Prime Minister's side until all the papers were signed and organised and the Prime Minister had left the Gono Bhaban. By the time my father could get out of the office a little before midnight, many hours had passed and his condition became critical. He spent the next few days in hospital but even there, he spoke of the PM's leadership and dedication for the war-torn country with hope and enthusiasm. Due to Bangabandhu's personality and leadership, everybody had high hopes for the bright future of Bangladesh. However, even today, over four decades after our independence, the vast majority of Bangladesh's population are still waiting for that "bright future" which our fathers had dreamt of and struggled for.

The writer is an IT professional.

PROF RASHIDUDDIN AHMAD

Hands that brought life and hope

ALASDAIR MACDONALD

HE was the dashing tennis-playing neurosurgeon who brought the light back into countless lives and helped a young country build its medical institutions after its darkest hour.

To those who knew him best he was a loving father, brother, uncle and friend; to thousands of ordinary families throughout the country his sincerity and tireless devotion to his craft alleviated unbearable pain; and to those foolish enough to disturb him without good reason, he was like the most terrifying clap of thunder.

When the young Rashiduddin Ahmad entered Dhaka Medical College in the then East Pakistan in 1955, even the most basic health care provision was inaccessible to many, and so it goes without saying that access to that most cerebral of medical specialties, neurosurgery, was a far distant dream.

Rashiduddin was born in Cox's Bazar in 1937, his father being posted there as a magistrate while serving with the then Bengal Civil Service. With the family moving to Dhaka in 1946, he completed his schooling at St Gregory's High School and Notre Dame College, maintaining lifelong ties with both of these prominent educational establishments and his closest school friends from those early days.

He passed his MBBS from Dhaka Medical College in 1960, and following his surgical residency under Prof Asiruddin, went to the UK in 1963 to pursue his chosen surgical specialty. There, a golden opportunity presented itself to work at the world-famous Department of Surgical Neurology, University of Edinburgh, under the renowned British neurosurgeon Professor Francis John Gillingham.

The rising young surgeon married his Dhaka Medical College classmate Dr Quamrun Nahar in 1966 in Edinburgh, and their first child, Rashida, was born there two years

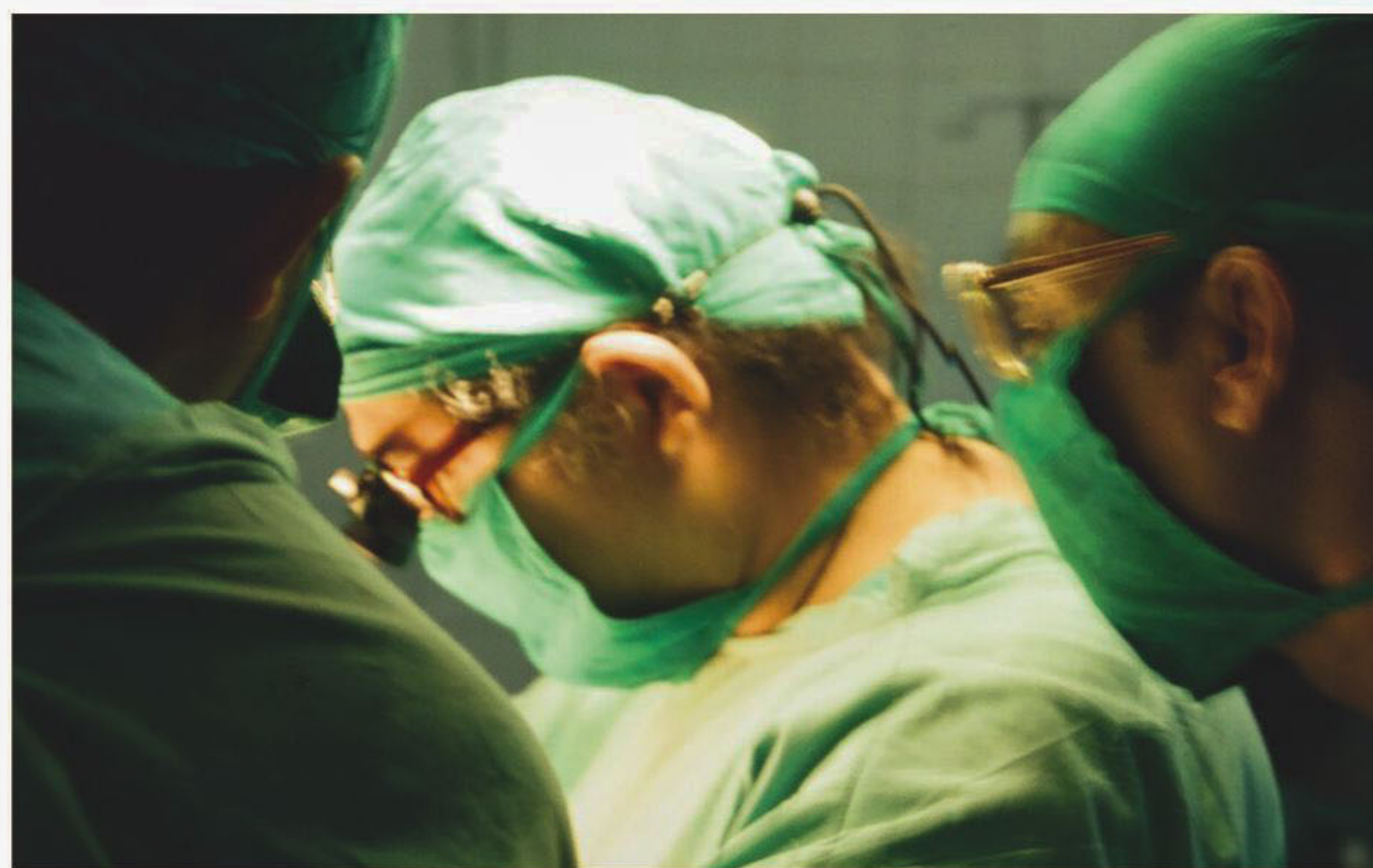
later. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1967. While working in Scotland, he was involved in ground-breaking research on the earliest form of treatment for Parkinson's disease. He co-authored several papers with Prof Gillingham and fellow researchers, which are still cited in leading medical journals around the world to this day.

However, his calling was always to his own land. He returned to Dhaka in April 1970 and, first as an Assistant Surgeon then as an Associate Professor at the Institute of Post Graduate Medicine and Research, started the first ever neurosurgical unit of the then East Pakistan. From just six beds in those very early days, today the same neurosurgical department, in what has now become Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, has over one hundred beds.

Soon, however, along with the rest of the country, Prof Rashiduddin was swept up in the violent winds of the shifting political landscape. Barely a year into his new work, the War of Independence was raging and he was treading the perilous path of treating freedom fighters by day - including Kazi Kamal, Jewel, Bodi, and Azad - while being commanded to treat Pakistani soldiers by night. When he received such commands, his family never knew if the Pakistani forces had discovered his work with the freedom fighters and whether he would return home alive.

Eventually, in the last week of September that year, he was forced to flee the country by boarding a hay-filled boat on the outskirts of Dhaka in Jatrabari with a small force of guerilla fighters heading to Khaled Mosharraf's camp in Agartala. Tragically, his elder brother Ghiasuddin Ahmad was taken away and killed on the night of 14th December 1971, during the horrifying purge of intellectuals by the Pakistan Army.

Prof Rashiduddin returned to Edinburgh, joining his wife and baby



Professor Rashiduddin Ahmad (centre), Bangladesh's pioneer neurosurgeon, performs life-saving surgery at BSMMU in 2002.

PHOTO: ALASDAIR MACDONALD

daughter who had travelled back earlier. He continued to work in Scotland as a senior registrar for another five years, before going on to work as senior registrar and then consultant neurosurgeon at a number of hospitals in England and Wales. It was during this period that his son Reza was born, in Bristol in 1974.

In 1976, he returned permanently to Dhaka to resume his life's work of developing neurosurgery and neurology in this country, becoming Professor of Neurosurgery at IPGMR in 1979, and later a consultant neurosurgeon at the Combined Military Hospital with the honorary rank of Colonel.

In 1987, he became the founding General Secretary (and later President) of the Bangladesh Society of Neurosciences. By 1994, neurosurgical and neurological units

had been established in all eight medical colleges of the country. Then in 1998, Prof Rashiduddin became the founding President of the Bangladesh Society of Neurosurgeons and was one of the driving forces behind establishment of the National Institute of Neuroscience in 2012.

Further afield, Prof Rashiduddin was a founder member of the Asian Congress of Neurological Surgeons. He became the second President of South Asian Association of Neurological Societies, was an Honorary President of the Asian Australasian Society of Neurological Surgeons, and has published and presented over 50 scientific papers in national and international journals and conferences throughout his career.

In 1999, he received the prestigious Independence Day Award for his contribution to the field of

medicine in Bangladesh. He also received a Mother Theresa Gold Medal in 2009.

Never far from his heart throughout his later life was his dear brother Ghiasuddin, or Bachhu as he was affectionately known, a much-loved professor in the History Department at the University of Dhaka when the War of Independence broke out. In 1996, Prof Rashiduddin established the Shaheed Ghiasuddin Ahmad Girls High School in honour and memory of his brother, at the family's ancestral home of Belabo in Narsingdi.

For anyone who knows the professor personally, his biography would be only half-complete without mentioning the other great passion of his life, second only to, if not on a

par with, neurosurgery. As many, both close and not so close to him, will know, he was a national level sportsman. His first love was basketball, and he was selected as the first captain of the East Pakistan National Basketball Team. It was tennis, however, that truly obsessed him, and in 1989, he captained the Bangladesh Davis Cup Team. The many tennis courts of Dhaka and beyond have resounded with the thud of his beloved tennis racket through the years. But it was the Dhaka Club tennis complex that might genuinely be said to have been his second home.

His other loves included contract bridge, a game suited to the turn of his mind, and during which he could become rather stern with fellow players at the regular get-togethers with nephews and nieces that ran late into the night. Woe betide any bridge partner who caused a promising hand to collapse! Chess, especially in his earlier years, was another favourite pastime, and his love for that 'game of kings' he passed on to his son.

Round the dinner tables of family and friends alike, Prof Rashiduddin loved nothing more than to recount some interesting fact from one of the many history books he kept piled by his bedside, or perhaps he would talk about the latest sporting match he had managed to catch that day as he relaxed in the OT resting room with fellow surgeons between a surgical procedure and evening chambers. He would rarely mention his working day outside the hospital, nor tell others of the many people he helped daily in their direst moments of need. Others spoke, and will continue to speak, of his innumerable achievements, but he was to the end the least self-aggrandising among the heroes of this nation.

•Professor Rashiduddin Ahmad, Neurosurgeon, born 27th August 1937; died 19th March 2016.

The writer is Prof Rashiduddin's son-in-law and a former journalist.

QUOTABLE Quote



ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

Dearer to me than a host of base truths is the illusion that exalts.



26th March
Independence Day

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We salute our brave freedom fighters for their fearless and selfless sacrifice which culminated in the birth of our beloved nation.

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