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PM's sister and friends recollect his early years

K. Bala

LANGKAWI, Sat. - From young, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was imbued with a 'mission possible' spirit believing that given the will and perseverance, no task is unsurmountable.

Coupled with this 'never-say-die' attitude was the desire for perfection in getting a job done quickly.

With the attitude nurtured from young, it is hardly surprising that the Prime Minister went on to motivate the nation to achieve higher technological status - from producing the national car to the ushering of the Multimedia Super Corridor.

To shed light on Dr Mahathir's growing up years in Kedah were his elder sister Habsah Mohd Iskandar, ex-classmates Osman Bakar and Hussein Abdul Rahman, and a friend, Mustafa Ismail.

They did so during a forum yesterday called Recollections of Dr Mahathir's Youth organised by the Langkawi Development Authority, through Galeria Perdana which houses the State gifts of the Prime Minister and National Archives.

A packed audience, including schoolchildren, were present at the forum opened by Lada general manager Datuk Abdul Halil Mutalib.

Recalling the early years, Habsah, 80, who lives with Dr Mahathir, said as a child, her younger brother had an inquisitive mind and never took "no" for an answer.

"He always wanted to know why certain things could not be done," she said. "Whatever he wanted to do, he would do it."

Dr Mahathir was taught to live a disciplined life by their teacher-father, Mohamad Iskandar. He only ventured out to play in the vicinity of the house.

As for hobbies, Dr Mahathir often played draughts and snakes-and-ladders.

Osman, 76, a classmate and childhood friend, told the story of their school days before the Japanese occupation interrupted their studies at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College.

"I often studied in Dr Mahathir's house," he said. "His father constantly reminded us that one would not get anywhere without education. His father would also supervise our after-class studies."

A quiet student, Dr Mahathir was an avid reader who had never stayed away from class. Besides that he also wrote for the school magazine.

The Prime Minister acquired a business acumen since young by selling cakes made by his mother.

"When our studies were interrupted, we set up a tea stall in Pekan Rabu," he said.

"While we were at Pekan Baru, he predicted that the British would return.

"He even inscribed the prediction on the pot we used to boil water for tea," he said, underscoring the foresight shown by the Prime Minister in his younger days.

Osman had the audience in stitches when he sang verses of three of Dr Mahathir's favourite songs - Rainbow on River, Midnight Serenade and South American Song.

In sports, Dr Mahathir was keen on rugby, loved to cycle around town and roller skate in Jalan Teluk Wanja, the only road which was pre-mixed.

Referring to a picture of Dr Mahathir with the Japanese Emperor

published in the New Straits Times during his recent visit to Japan, Osman quipped:

"During the Japanese occupation, he used to bow to Japanese sentries."

Osman recalled how he and Dr Mahathir drew and pasted anti-Malayan Union posters in town after the British returned.

Asked what animal the Prime Minister feared most, Osman replied:

"Snakes."

Hussein, another ex-classmate from Sultan Abdul Hamid College, said the Prime Minister had a no-nonsense approach.

"I cannot say he was a brilliant student," he said, "but he certainly was above average and very hardworking."

Dr Mahathir and Hussein parted company when the former went to study medicine in Singapore while he took up a job as a hospital assistant. They met again in the course of duty when the Prime Minister served as a medical officer in Langkawi.

Meanwhile Mustafa recalled the days when Dr Mahathir opened his private clinic in Alor Star.

At that time Dr Mahathir was deputy chairman of the Pekan Rabu co-operative society while Mustafa was the head.

"Dr Mahathir played a key role in redeveloping Pekan Rabu," he said.

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