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Staks has staked much on better ties

By Balan Moses

THERE is just a hint of cigar smoke in the air at the residence of Juergen A.R. Staks as the outgoing German envoy to Malaysia sits back to ponder the highlights of his term in the country.

After a brief minute to reflect on an answer to a question in this regard, the 62-year-old career diplomat on his penultimate posting before retirement picks better people-to-people relations as perhaps his finest achievement.

His taste for Cuban and Brazilian cigars notwithstanding, it is probably people whom Staks hankers after most. And the house at 16, Jalan Kia Peng has seen more than its share of both over the past 3 1/2 years that the lawyer by training has served in Kuala Lumpur.

It has been the scene of dinners for large crowds or smaller groups at lunch with swirls of cigar smoke always rising above the scintillating conversation led by the loquacious Staks and wife Monika.

The ambassador designate to Croatia, always modest in underlining his achievements, does not even try to underplay the role his residence has played in enhancing bilateral ties.

"This house has seen more than 5,000 guests since February 2001 when I took over here as ambassador. For me, this house has been the focus of ties between the people of Germany, Malaysia and their friends," he said in a recent interview at the house.

It is perhaps more Staks' enviable effort to court Malaysians than the house per se that has led to this equable state of affairs. Malaysian Foreign Ministry officials, a variety of Malaysians from different professions and diplomats have a good word for the native of Bonn - and it invariably leads to his professionalism.

Staks is what many would call a consummate diplomat: one who knows his turf, understands the dynamics of the situation and is not afraid to put his ideas into practice.

Not surprising for someone who has made diplomacy his trade for the past 32 years.

"I have succeeded, in all modesty, in bringing Germans together with Malaysians in a variety of situations, among others, in politics, trade, culture and tourism," says the father of two whose daughters are at university in Germany.

One could not fail to notice the look of frequent satisfaction that appeared on the face of the veteran diplomat during the hour-long interview in a short-sleeved shirt and dispensed coffee.

An event that will forever remain in his mind (besides standing at the top of Gunung Kinabalu) when he recollects happenings in Malaysia will be the state visit of German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to Malaysia on May 19 last year.

It will be indelibly etched in his mind for it was the kind of assignment expected by many diplomats but experienced by few - in Staks' case, also unique as no German head of state had ever visited Malaysia before.

"It was at the peak of the Severe Respiratory Syndrome outbreak in the region. It was a trying time for all," he says with the air of satisfaction of one who has achieved something commendable to be remembered for life.

The ambassador's suggestion that the Chancellor make a speech in Kuala

Lumpur intended for the region was accepted whole-heartedly.

Thinking back, Staks is staggered by the level of friendship and understanding between Schroeder and former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"They were like old friends, very amicable and with an understanding between them that was palpable," he said, adding that Dr Mahathir had met with an equally friendly reception in Berlin the year before.

According to Staks, who plans to enter local politics in Bonn on retirement in three years, the good ties between both nations is also reflected in the bilateral trade relationship.

The crowning glory of this relationship is undoubtedly Tanjung PLC's "Tropical Islands" in Briesen-Brand, a federal state surrounding Berlin.

Staks, who has met Malaysian billionaire A.K. Ananda Krishnan, owner of the company, feels the project is the best advertisement for Malaysia in Germany.

"It will have beaches, tropical forests and things Malaysian to create a mini-Malaysia. I am sure the German people will find it most attractive," he says of the nearly RM400 million project that will open its doors to the public by the end of the year.

He is also particularly proud of the BMW and DHL IT centres in Cyberjaya, the BMW plant being built in Johor and the DHL regional centre being constructed in Puchong, Selangor.

No conversation with Staks can, however, end without his mentioning the RM9 billion BASF petro-chemical joint venture with Petronas, the largest German investment in the country.

He reels off other names of companies that are doing "good" business here - Siemens, Daimler-Chrysler, Osram, B. Braun and the little-known Schmitter Group that produces motor parts.

What of cross investments in Germany by Malaysian companies?

He is particularly impressed by Hong Leong's production of Zschoppa motorcycles at its plant in Saxony for the German market.

"We have been trying to convince the Ministry of Trade and Industry to encourage, with some measure of success, Malaysian companies to invest in Germany."

Staks is optimistic that Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz's visit to Germany in October will yield dividends for the trade relationship.

Of particular interest will be the signing of the agreement on the German-Malaysian Joint Commission on Economic Affairs, an instrument that is expected to pave the way for closer economic ties.

He will, of course, do the necessary legwork on the agreement on an unofficial basis while attending the German ambassadors' meeting in September.

Staks has also performed one of his last tasks as ambassador - briefing successor Herbert Gess, outgoing German ambassador in Manila, who assumes duty here on Aug 5.

A batchmate of Staks in the "crew" of 1972 entering diplomatic service, the former deputy chief of mission in Kuala Lumpur had a working weekend here recently that proved fruitful.

"Gess found that Kuala Lumpur has changed a lot since the 1980s when he served here.

"He understands the dynamics of the city and is prepared for the task ahead," he says of the ambassador designate here.

What are his plans for the next three years?

"I realise there is a life after foreign service. I intend to spend time with my daughters, travel to the former Eastern European countries, and also get to know Germany better."

Monika, who by Staks own admission "has developed quite a close

emotional relationship with Malaysia", has quietly served the bilateral relationship by being the quintessential hostess.

So also his daughters who drop by Kuala Lumpur as often as they can to look up Malaysian friends and generally enjoy a lifestyle they miss in Europe.

Is there anything that he regrets not having accomplished?

The envoy, who has made a name for himself for his thoroughness at work, thinks for a moment and shakes his head.

"No. There are a few other things but I have to leave something for my successor to do," he says with an earnestness that leaves no room for doubt about his dedication to the job.

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