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Puns, anecdotes, quips for Poland's cause

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THE Polish have a sense of humour that is probably incongruous in people who have seen the worst through decades of acquiescence to the political and economic demands of the former Soviet Union.

The picture becomes clearer in the singular lack of humour and colourless perspective of life that was among the high points of the Soviet brand of communism.

Polish jokes notwithstanding, they have a vast collection of witty remarks about their foibles and shortcomings, imagined or otherwise, which they share without reservation.

It is this quality of seeing the lighter side of life that has made outgoing Polish Ambassador to Malaysia and dean of the diplomatic corps, Marek Paszucha, popular within the diplomatic circle in Kuala Lumpur.

Barely hours after a gruelling 13-hour flight from Athens where he spent 10 hours daily for 10 days carrying out the duties of a basketball commissioner at a World Basketball Championship, he is still at his working best.

Fatigue is etched on his face besides revealing itself in his tired eyes. And yet, his allowance to this is just an occasional touching of the eyes - an admission, with his trademark laugh, that "it was difficult to wake up this morning".

Answering questions for this column with a smile, he is ready with facts and figures on bilateral relations with the occasional joke thrown in for good measure.

Perhaps, his demeanour exemplifies what he volunteers later in the interview about the indomitable spirit of the Poles who excel in adversity.

The 68-year-old first-time diplomat, who retires on Sept 1, has used his inexhaustible reservoir of puns, anecdotes and quips - and, of course, delicate diplomatic manoeuvring - to further the cause of Poland over the past seven and a half years in the country.

His down-to-earth approach, to even the most difficult of problems, coupled with a liberal dose of light-heartedness has touched the right chord in Malaysian officialdom, notably among Wisma Putra officials who find his style refreshing.

"I like to joke a lot," said the former Polish Sports Minister who finds that Poles and Malaysians share a love for banter, repartee and wisecracks that should rightfully break the proverbial ice between people.

But the facts prove otherwise with little achieved by way of enhancement of trade between the small and medium-sized industries of both nations. Investment has been only one-way with no Malaysian investment in Poland.

Paszucha is uncharacteristically pensive when he talks of the chasm that exists between the private sectors of both countries which have been largely unable to forge a working relationship despite the unrestrained support and encouragement of both Governments.

The limited extent of the trade relationship which is "far behind the Government-to-Government relationship which is perfect" is one unfortunate legacy that he is leaving behind for his successor.

"There is a perfect combination for 'marriage' between trade partners from both sides. The problem is that the majority of Poles don't know about Malaysia and vice-versa," says the former deputy mayor of historic Cracow, articulating a sentiment that has irked successive Polish

ambassadors to Malaysia.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Poland last year served to enlighten Polish businessmen, and government officials, on what Malaysia could offer them by way of opportunities and facilities.

To be sure, Poland has also been trying to reduce the physical and psychological distance between the two nations through visits by Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and Prime Minister Dr Wlodzimierz Cimoszewicz which also saw businessmen in attendance.

Yet, bilateral trade remained at a relatively low RM1.6 billion in Malaysia's favour last year for two countries which were as recently as the early 90s billed as "economic tigers" in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia respectively.

Malaysia exported RM1.2 billion worth of products, mainly electronic items like televisions and computer chips to Poland while importing RM400 million, mostly in construction machinery and steel products.

Paszucha feels there is hope yet for enhancement of co-operation in trade through the nascent relationship between the computer industries on both sides.

"Poland is rich in software while Malaysia has a wealth of experience in hardware. We have compatibility in this field," he said, adding that Poland could be used as a gateway for Malaysian products to Eastern Europe and Malaysia as a hub for Polish industry in Asia.

One of the stumbling blocks to better direct trade has been the absence of a legal and financial instruments to protect potential investments by SMIs.

"It is a very difficult issue to resolve. We have made much headway in this area and hope to conclude the agreements in the near future," he says.

A start has been made in respect of the proposed purchase of T92MZ1 tanks from Poland by the Malaysian Armed Forces.

There is also a joint venture between Polish company, Ekolog, and the Sarawak State Government to establish a waste water treatment plant in Kuching.

Malaysians may not know it, but most of their rail travel has been exceedingly comfortable thanks in part to Polish tracks supplied to KTMB Bhd in the 1970s.

With retirement on the horizon, what does he plan to do?

He has two options - to be adviser for international affairs with the office of the Mayor of Cracow or be foreign investment adviser to the Governor of South Poland. "I would also like to go back to my sporting activities. I hope to be involved in the Olympic Games in Athens next year," said the former president of the Polish Basketball Federation who has been an official in the Montreal and Moscow Olympics.

Paszucha's love for Malaysia, and Malaysians, is evident in two very tangible developments that occurred in the middle and tail-end respectively of his unusually-long stay in the country.

Not too long after he arrived here, he decided to make his home in Malaysia after retirement as he had come to love the pace of life, the rapid growth of the nation and natural warmth of the people.

"I would love to stay but I have to go back to be with my son in Poland. Besides, as one becomes older, the place of birth usually beckons and this is the case with me."

More recently, his office has been inundated with invitations to farewell functions from diplomats and friends who have had to be gently turned down by his staff.

Paszucha can fly home tomorrow knowing that his role in improving the bilateral relationship will not be forgotten by those he touched with his

unique personality.