

Monument to freedom, friendship

How Tunku's 50-year friendship with Austrian gave birth to Tugu Negara

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KUALA LUMPUR: The historical importance of the Tugu Negara is well known, but what is less known is how two men from disparate backgrounds came together to make the monument a reality and established a long friendship thereafter.

The five-decade friendship between Austrian-born sculptor Tan Sri Felix de Weldon and Malaysia's founding father Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj came to the forefront yesterday as Felix's son spoke passionately about their union.

Daniel de Weldon, 51, said the friendship between Tunku and his father was one of mutual understanding on the struggles both endured during World War II, which led to their fateful meeting.

"Tunku met my father in an arranged meeting in October 1960 after he was impressed by his work on the Iwo Jima Memorial in Virginia, which depicted one of the most hard-fought victories in World War II.

"Tunku was in awe of the realism of the monument, particularly on how it captured the US Marines' determination as they claimed victory after fighting an intense 36-day battle to take Iwo Jima, which became a critical turning point in the war and a key moment in history.

"My father had lost both his home and parents in Austria during the Nazi invasion of Europe in



which my grandparents were executed at a Nazi war camp, while Malaysia (then Malaya) had also suffered from the Japanese occupation in WWII.

"Being fellow survivors of war led to an instant connection between Tunku and Felix that blossomed into a lifelong friendship of trust and empathy as they felt deeply connected to war casualties and veterans, with both having survived two world wars and my father serving two years in the US Navy during WWII," he said in an emotional recollection at the launch of a Tugu Negara exhibition at the Memorial Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra here yesterday.

Daniel, now an actor in the United States (Felix and his family moved from Austria to the United States in 1937 following the Nazi's invasion of Austria during World War II), said the Tunku entrusted his father with the task of immortalising the sacrifices of the 11,000 Malaysian heroes who perished in pursuit of freedom.

"Freedom, independence and national sovereignty were what connected Tunku with my father," he added.

He said his father planned the public unveiling of Tugu Negara on Feb 6, 1966, as a sort of present to not only Tunku, whose 62th birthday was on the same day, but as a

gift to the Malaysian people in recognition of the country's sovereignty and independence, which Malaysia gained over a decade earlier in 1957.

Daniel also passionately spoke of the time when he was saddened after learning of the fate of his father's first sculpture titled *The Spirit of Youth*, which became the stepping stone for Felix's career as a world renowned sculptor at the age of 20.

"The bronze sculpture depicted four children between the ages of three and 16 standing side-by-side with one arm raised. It was created by my father to commemorate the children who died in World War I.

Remembering history: (From left) TV personality and social media influencer, Nurul Syuhaida Ariffin speaking to panellists Tunku Zain Al-'abidin Ibni Tuanku Muhriz, the second son of Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, Launer, Daniel and Tunku Mohd Taufek during the launch of the Tugu Negara exhibition. — RAJA FAISAL HISHAN/ The Star

"In 2013, I could not find the statue at its location and was further disheartened after learning from a local sculptor that the piece had been melted down by the Nazis during their invasion of Austria," he said.

The 15m-tall sculpture of Tugu Negara consists of seven bronze soldier figures. To ensure the detailing of the figures' uniform and weaponry, Tunku arranged a photo shoot with 24 soldiers and policemen of various racial origins wearing their jungle patrol uniforms and sent the photographs to Felix.

The bronze figures, which were cast in a foundry in Rome, were shipped to Kuala Lumpur in June 1965.

Felix, who died in 2003 at the age of 96 in Washington DC and bestowed the Tan Sri title in 1964, was also the creator of the monumental statue of Tunku in front of Parliament as well as several busts of the country's first prime minister.

Daniel said that he was working on a biopic and theatrical screenplay of his father's life and pledged to continue his legacy of building bridges between humanity through art.

The exhibition, which will go on till the year-end, was launched by National Archives director-general Datuk Jaafar Sidek Abdul Rahman and Austrian Ambassador to Malaysia Andreas Launer.

Also present was Tunku's son Tunku Datuk Seri Ahmad Nerang Putra and Tunku's grandnephew Tunku Mohd Taufek Tunku Mansur.