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# Stamp of memories

Despite being so immersed in the corporate world, Alfred Paulsen still makes time for his precious hobbies, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**T**HE basement carpark is dimly-lit and functional. The ride in the lifts to the lobby of the year-old midscale hotel, Dorsett Putrajaya, located in the Federal administrative capital of Putrajaya, is equally nondescript.

However, when the hotel's lift doors open on level 9, the vista is quite something else. Set against the hotel's infinity pool, the backdrop is the Putra Mosque, Putrajaya International Conventional Centre and Putrajaya Lake.

If this isn't a big enough surprise, then comes another — Alfred Paulsen, the hotel's genial general manager who, despite having a western-sounding name, has features that are decidedly Chinese.

"I'm used to it," he says.

"When I give (people) my name card, they look at me, look at the card and then look at me again. I can see them thinking, 'Wrong name, wrong card.'" Gleeefully, he adds: "I've been called to give a speech. People think it's a high-sounding name. A Caucasian name. Then they see me."

When I hazard a guess as to the origins of his name, he throws me a perplexed look before asking in awe: "How did you know?"

As it happens, my guess was correct. He had indeed been named after his paternal grandfather, a Danish man who worked as an estate planter in Malaya.

Quick to add, he says: "My grandmother was Chinese and my father married a Chinese."

And since his wife, Esther, is also Chinese, he adds with a chuckle: "The Chinese genes are strong."

To escape the mid-morning heat, we decide to adjourn to the cool interior of the hotel. Once he's comfortable, Paulsen shares that he grew up in the small town of Teluk Intan, Perak.

The elder of two sons of a postmaster and housewife, he reminisces about his

childhood with much fondness.

His eyes then narrow a smidgen, comprehension dawning that perhaps, he, rather than his brother, was sent to boarding school as punishment to set him on a straight and narrow path.

Still, the five years he spent at Horely Hall, Anglo Chinese School, he enthuses, resulted in the formation of many lifelong friendships.

#### FOSTERING A BOND

Boarding school aside, Paulsen speaks with much fondness about his childhood and youth, and of the bond he shares with his father.

In fact, it was his father, he confides, who fostered his love for stamps and collecting them.

"At one point," he recalls, "we stayed in the quarters above the post office."

Rubbing his thumb and forefinger, Paulsen says that he can still smell and feel the glue on stamps.

He speaks enthusiastically about how he learnt to remove a stamp gently from an envelope, dry it and handle it with care.

For the future, this affable 50-something is already dreaming about having grandchildren despite the fact that neither of his two 20-something-year-old daughters has indicated that they're interested in settling down.

Still, Paulsen is steadfast in his belief that he will succeed in fostering this same passion for collecting stamps with his yet-to-be-born grandchildren.

When the possibility that life may throw him a curve ball and there may be no grandchildren to speak of, his voice drops to barely above a whisper. "I don't know. Maybe I'll sell them all off. Or give my nephews or nieces," he says, his voice replete with disappointment.

#### INDIRECT IMPACT

Shaking his head as if to banish the thought, Paulsen changes the direction of our chat and says that the multitude of stamps he's collected has had an indirect impact on his job.

*I want to get a bigger house. Have a big corner room, all by itself. To store my stamps. It's my ultimate dream.*

Alfred Paulsen

people pulse



Collection of stamps from many countries in the Commonwealth.



Collection of stamps from India.



Stamp s from the Straits Settlements.

Sometimes, when hotel guests arrive from other places, he's able to connect with them based on the general knowledge he's acquired from his stamps.

Stamps from India, for instance, help him understand the importance of the British Raj in the 20th century. Stamps from Thailand give him an insight into its history and monarchs.

This passion for collecting stamps drives his determination to increase the size of his collection.

For example, say he has stamps from Malaya dated 1957. If he's missing the 5 sen one, he'd be spurred to go in search of that one stamp. And his usual hunting grounds? The flea markets at Amcorp Mall and the Internet (eBay in particular). The most he's ever paid for a stamp, he confides, was RM200.

Once the search is over and he's acquired that sought-after stamp(s), he has another growing problem — where to store all these stamps. While many of them are carefully placed in albums, there are just as many that are left loose.

"All I have is a simple Billy Bookcase from IKEA," he laments, shaking his head. His daughters complain that his stuff is taking up too much space in their condominium unit.

"That's why," he adds wistfully, "I want to get a bigger house. Have a big corner room, all by itself. To store my stamps. It's my ultimate dream."

**ALWAYS COCA-COLA**

The current lack of space in his home



hasn't stopped Paulsen, who prides himself on having started off in this industry as a kitchen helper and worked through rank and file to reach his present position, from indulging in yet another hobby—collecting any memorabilia related to the Coca-Cola brand.

"We have more than 300 cans, the bottles, key chains, anything," he says.

Where the stamps are his hobby alone, the pursuit of collecting Coca-Cola memorabilia is something he shares with his wife.

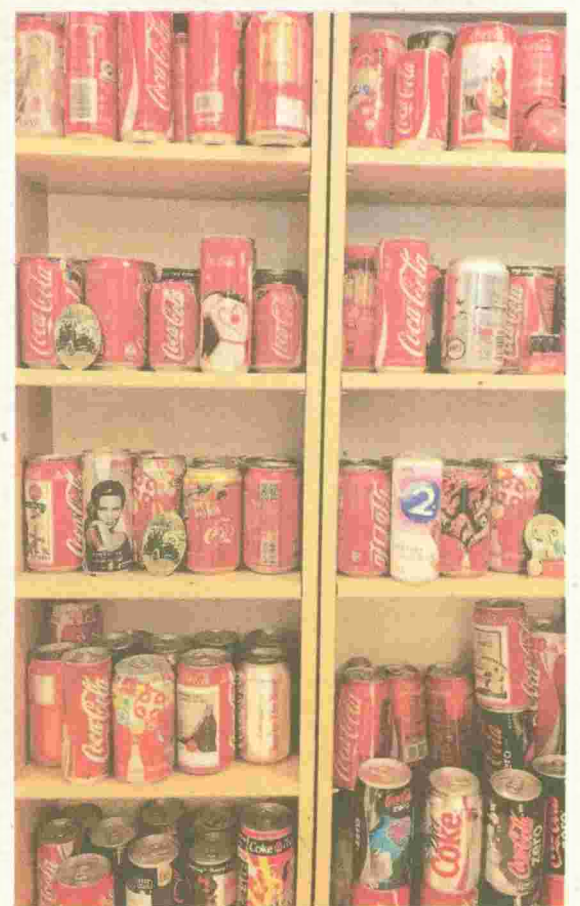
They started it some 18 years ago when wife Esther first suggested he bring back

something from overseas.

Over the years, the collection has grown and now occupies many a shelf in his home. In fact, they are considered part of the decor.

Spending about an hour or so each weekend maintaining his collections, Paulsen says that if pushed to downsize his collections, he would find it hard to get rid of his Coca-Cola memorabilia.

That said, he will never get rid of his stamp collection again before concluding with conviction: "They're priceless."



LEFT AND ABOVE: Alfred Paulsen's collection of Coca-Cola memorabilia.