Lessons from a caring heart, 50 years ago

By CHUANG PECK MING

WITH the book out in print now, President SR Nathan still feels it should not have been published. Why Am I Here?, his first book, recalls his first job as a seamen’s welfare officer in the mid-1950s.

Why the reluctance? It won’t make the bestseller list, according to him. “It’s not an earthshaking story,” he said in an interview with reporters last week at the Istana. “It’s about 50 years ago. How will your readers react to it?”

The president agreed to write it only after friends persuaded him it would serve as a record of his public career in the civil service. “We keep no notes, we don’t have any documents. Whatever experience (we have) is stored here (pointing to his head),” he said.

The president disclosed he had only memory to rely on in writing the book. “Sometimes you’re walking and suddenly you (remember), ‘Oh my god, I forgot about that one . . .’”

He didn’t have the luxury of time to do it either; there were his presidential duties to attend to. “(So) you write at whatever time you can find.”

President Nathan, 84, was persuaded to write the book by Bernard Tan, a professor and director of the Centre for Maritime Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Prof Tan had kept insisting that it should be published, after reading a manuscript of the book.

Why Am I Here?, launched yesterday, recounts the president’s first public role as a protector and defender of Singapore’s seafarers, an exploited community in the early days. They often had nobody to turn to because their families were still in China or India. So they came to the seamen’s welfare officer for help.

Mr Nathan showed that he was caring and a fighter for the underdog — traits that have come to define his long career. Yet he almost gave up what seemed like a thankless job.

He was threatened by thugs; and Goh Keng Swee (then the finance minister and later deputy prime minister) wanted him sacked.

This was in the politically charged early days of the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) rule, after a local crew member of a Swedish vessel was dismissed for serious indiscipline.

When Mr Nathan failed in his appeal to the Swedish consul general to overturn the discharge, Dr Goh demanded that the officer be thrown out of his job.

“What he failed to see was that neither Singapore government nor I had any jurisdiction in a matter where the sole authority lay with the consul general,” President Nathan writes in his book. “Foreign relations was outside the purview of the Singapore colonial government, as the British colonial govern-

ment in Singapore was responsible for Singapore’s external relations. I had no way of standing up to the consul general.”

But it was the unreasonable demand of a young seaman who took his case to Lim Chin Siong (the political secretary to the finance minister) which got the young seaman’s welfare officer so depressed that he came close to quitting.

Luckily, a Catholic chaplain came to him with moral support and urged him to think through the most important question of his career: a question that helped him discover the purpose of his existence.

The question — why am I here? — came to be adopted as the title of his book.

President Nathan said he chose to write about his days as a seaman’s welfare officer in his first book because they posed him the earliest challenges in his career.

There are moral lessons for young Singaporeans to be learnt from the book.

“They will get to know how human tragedy can disrupt a family . . . how important it is for us to show compassion and concern for others,” said Mr Nathan. “I’m sure in daily life there are many such happenings.”

His next book is likely to be on the labour movement, he said, when asked. Some day, the president added, he would also sit down to write his memoirs.