President Nathan and the seamen

By Koh Chuein Ying

A young civil servant in the 1950s, one of President S R Nathan’s first assignments was to mediate between aggrieved seamen and the various organisations they had to deal with.

Apart from the practicalities of the issues he faced, he had to deal with seamen’s problems with compassion and kindness, as he describes it in his first book, which goes on sale today.

For instance, a Hainanese seaman once walked away in a huff, before completing an account of his problems, after Mr Nathan – Singapore’s first Seamen’s Welfare Officer – interrupted him mid-sentence.

“I knew what he wanted, I knew what was his problem,” recalled Mr Nathan, 85, in an interview last week. “But he wanted to tell (me) everything.”

In spite of initial difficulties, Mr Nathan learnt that dealing with the seamen’s problems required different approaches. And learning how to leave people feeling that they they had been properly listened to and served him well ever since.

“All the President’s Men:” President S R Nathan describes many memorable episodes as “friend and defender” of seafarers in the 1950s in his book, Why Am I Here?

“Sometimes you are able to lend a helping hand. Sometimes in a state of helplessness, you can’t do much to console the person. But it is important for us to show concern for others,” he told reporters last week.

Mr Nathan describes many memorable episodes as “friend and defender” of seafarers in his book, from confronting shipping firms on matters like unpaid wages, to calling in favours from friends to hire sons of seamen who perished at sea.

He recounts how – receiving no appreciation from his superiors, who felt he was exceeding his “terms of reference”, and feeling unable to solve many of the seamen’s problems – he once seriously considered quitting.

Then a Catholic chaplain for seamen, Father Fox, marched into his office. Mr Nathan unburred himself and Fr Fox urged him to think through a question that he has asked himself many times since: “Why am I here?”

It is also the title of Mr Nathan’s book, as he feels it taught him to always think of the “larger purpose”, and of the effect of human problems on one’s life.

The book, launched yesterday at the National University of Singapore (NUS), is published by the NUS Centre for Maritime Studies with a grant of about $65,000 from Keppel Corporation.

Yet at the Istana last week, Mr Nathan surprisingly revealed that he sometimes still thinks the book should not have been published: “I’m not too sure to what extent all these experiences will be relevant in today’s world, although I have my own ideas on some of them.”

He had written a draft manuscript in 2005, intending it to be for his personal use. But when he showed it to Professor Bernard Tan, director of the NUS Centre for Maritime Studies and a friend of over 30 years, the don recognised the book’s “great intrinsic historical value (and) its intensely personal and compassionate nature”.

He kept working on the President, urging that he get the manuscript published. Relentingly, Mr Nathan worked at improving the manuscript for another year.

Last week, the President said the hardest aspect in writing the book was trying to recall details of what happened about 50 years ago. “Those of us who were in the civil service then kept no notes or documents,” he said.

But forgotten details would emerge from his memory. “Sometimes you’re walking and you realise, ‘Oh, I forgot about that’. As I wrote, the thoughts came out.”

Just 3,000 copies of Why Am I Here? have been printed. Limited copies are on sale at the NUS Co-op at $29.90 from today.

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HELPDESK 我的字典
Mediate: 调解 tiáo jiě
Chaplain: 牧师 mù shī
Intrinsic: 本质的 běn zhì de
Manuscript: 原稿 yuán gǎo