President Nathan speaking to the media at the Istana last week on his book, Why Am I Here?, an account of challenges he faced as a seaman welfare officer in the 1950s. ST PHOTO: NOOR NURUL HUQ

Mr Nathan, the welfare officer

President’s book on his experiences as seamen welfare officer launched

BY NUR DIANAH SULAIMI

Before becoming President, Mr S R Nathan was known for his notable career in the civil service.

Yet, few knew that for six years from 1956, the young Mr Nathan worked as a seamen welfare officer helping trouble-stricken sailors and port workers.

Mr Nathan had two children, a son and a daughter, with his first wife, Madam Adeline Cambrell, a former student of the University of Singapore.

The 120-page book is a personal account of his work and struggles as a welfare officer and the effort that he and others made to help workers overcome problems, which he said he learned from discussions to pay and family issues.

Speaking to the media at the Istana last week, ahead of the launch, Mr Nathan, 85, said he was encouraged by friends to recall his civil service experiences.

While he had a varied and distinguished career, he chose to focus on this period: “I decided to sit down and write this particular book because it was the first challenge I had,” he said when asked about the book and what readers could draw from it.

“They should, when they read it, get to know many lessons of how human tragedy can disrupt the family, how some human problems are formidable and how important it is for us to show a sense of compassion and concern for others.”

He was picked for the job by then Chief Minister David Marshall, who told Mr Nathan’s dissertation for his diploma in social studies at the University of Malaya was on the nature and extent of problems faced by seamen in Singapore.

But apart from his title of “seamens welfare officer”, Mr Nathan had no other information about his responsibilities at the Marine Department.

He had gone into an area where nobody had worked before: “It had no brief. I had to create my own brief.”

While on the job, he had to deal with long-winded seafarers, gangsters and communities trying to control the unions.

In one account, Mr Nathan wrote of how he was almost sacked by then Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee after he could not resolve an issue concerning the sackings of ill-disciplined seafarers who worked on a Swedish vessel.

The book title Why Am I Here? was inspired by a Catholic chaplain, identified as Father Fox, who gave him moral support at a time when frustrations on the job made Mr Nathan consider quitting.

Father Fox made him reflect on the larger purpose of his job.

Not only did the words make Mr Nathan reconsider quitting, but many times throughout his career, when faced with a challenge, he would ask himself the same question: “Why am I here?”

Mr Nathan took about a year to complete the first manuscript and in 2006, sent it to the newly-inaugurated Centre for Maritime Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

At the book launch attended by some 70 guests at the NUS University Hall yesterday, he said that he was initially reluctant to have it published as he did not think anybody would read it.

But as he told reporters earlier, he relented because centre director Bernard Tan was persistent about publishing the manuscript after reading it.

Said Professor Tan yesterday: “There are many lessons in the book which can be learnt by a younger generation of Singaporeans today.”

NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan said the book was an intensely personal, yet nationally important, piece of narrative.

“At one level, the book is a valuable record of a fascinating and important part of Singapore’s maritime history. At another level, readers of the book will be instantly engaged in President Nathan’s narration of his experiences in dealing with the struggles and problems of the seafarers,” he said at the launch.

The book is published by the centre with a grant from Keppel Corporation.

“Three thousand copies have been printed and distributed to public and university libraries.”

Copies are also being sold exclusively by the NUS Co-Op bookstore at $26.60, from today.

Mr Nathan indicated that more books could be in the pipeline if he would like to do one on the National Trades Union Congress. He worked at its labour research unit from 1952 to 1956.

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