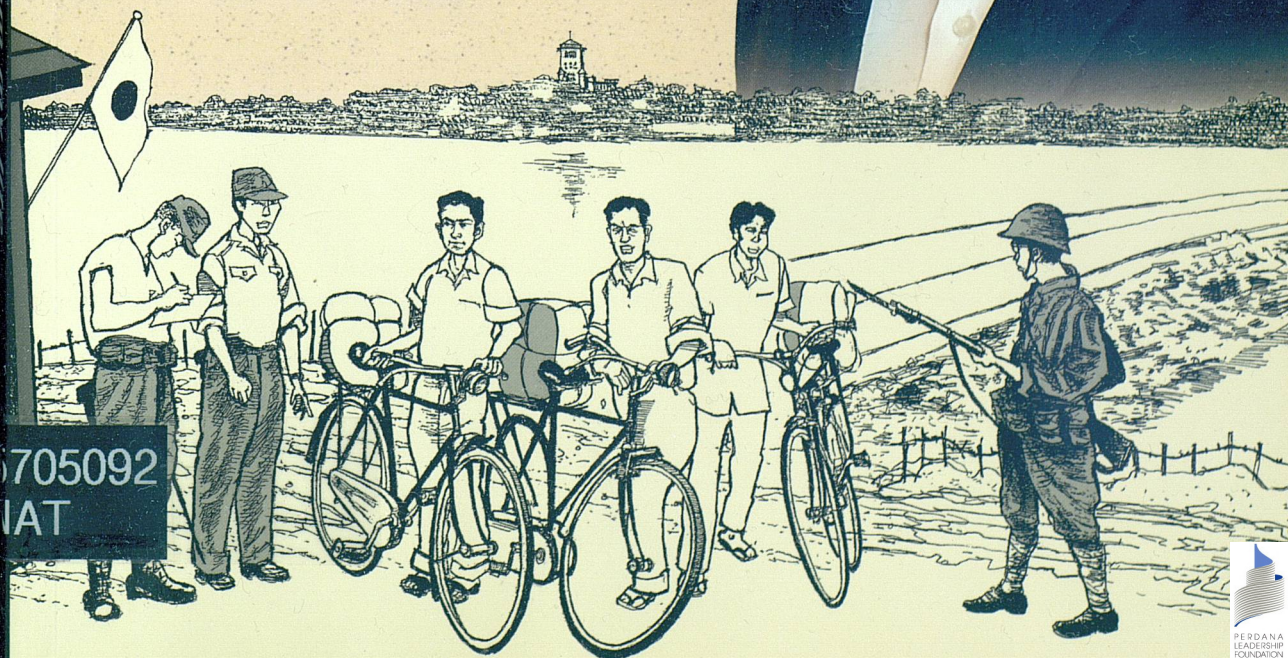


S R NATHAN

50 stories
from my life



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S R NATHAN

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from my life


To

His Excellency

Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

With my Respects and

Best Wishes

29 Oct. 2014 

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TUN DR. M. HATHIR MOHAMAD

S R NATHAN

50 stories *from my life*

S R Nathan
with
Timothy Auger

Illustrations by
Morgan Chua

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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*Dedicated with love to my wife, Umi, who has devoted herself
to providing me with the companionship, support and encouragement
I needed to walk the unexpected journey of my life.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My memoirs, *Path to the Presidency: An Unexpected Journey*, recorded a lifetime of experiences – tragedy, deprivation, struggles as a runaway. At a time when I was resigned to my fate, the Second World War changed my life. I discovered my own potential, and strove thereafter to live my life as successfully as I could. Thus began my journey of progress.

I felt that the full version of my memoirs might be difficult for young readers to read and absorb. Hence the idea of ‘50 Stories from My Life’ – shorter and more readable, and accompanied by caricatures. Where possible, I have tried to draw some lessons, which I hope my young readers may find useful in their own lives.

I want to record my thanks to Timothy Auger who authored my original memoirs together with me. The task of picking these stories out of the full version of my memoirs and re-telling them in this simpler form was his contribution to the production of this book. To Associate Professor Ang Cheng Guan, my former colleague from my days in the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), I owe a special thanks for reading through the drafts of each of the 50 stories and giving me and Tim valuable advice from his experience as a teacher/educator. My grateful thanks are due to Professor Arnoud de Meyer, President of the Singapore Management University, who also read the stories and drew out of them lessons that appear both in the Contents list and woven into the narrative. To him I owe a special debt.

Last but not least, I thank Bobby Chin, Chairman of my ‘Upliftment Fund’ for authorising support for the cost of the production of this book; and I must say a heartfelt ‘thank you’ to my dear friend Didier Millet for pushing me to believe that rendering my memoirs in this form was possible for the benefit of readers of school age.

I hope young people will enjoy reading this book, and find in it some lessons to think about.

S R Nathan

INTRODUCTION

5 *0 Stories from My Life* recalls a number of key episodes in the personal and official life of one of Singapore's most distinguished public servants.

The end of Mr Nathan's second term of office as President of Singapore, at the end of August 2011, was followed by the publication of his memoirs, *An Unexpected Journey: Path to the Presidency*. The book received great acclaim from both expert reviewers and the general public.

This new publication will bring some of the highlights from Mr Nathan's life to a more general audience, and particularly to younger readers. Mr Nathan lived through childhood poverty and family tragedy; learning to be self-reliant, he survived the Japanese occupation; he acquired further education in adult life; rose from the bottom to a senior rank in the civil service; worked overseas as a diplomat; ran a newspaper group; and became Singapore's elected president.

Over nearly nine decades, Mr Nathan has learned many lessons from personal experience. Some of his recollections and insights are brought together in this book, in the hope that they may be useful to later generations, and give a better understanding of how Singapore came to be the Singapore we know.

THE JOYS OF CHILDHOOD

My early childhood was very happy, and left me with many good memories. I was fortunate to have loving parents. Later in life, I never forgot how much I owed to them. I also learned that good times do not always last, and therefore one must learn to value them.

I was born in Singapore on 3 July 1924. When I was very young, because of problems connected with my father's work, we moved to Muar, a small port town on the west coast of Johor, the southernmost state in the Malay peninsula.

At that time, what we now call 'Malaysia' did not yet exist. The British oversaw the government of Malaya, including Johor. It was only after World War II that the peninsular Malay states came together to form the Federation of Malaya, which became independent in 1957.

Our home overlooked the Muar River. Our house was one of a row of shophouses, with a five-foot way, set back from the river bank. The building is still there, although its appearance has changed quite a bit. The ships that plied between

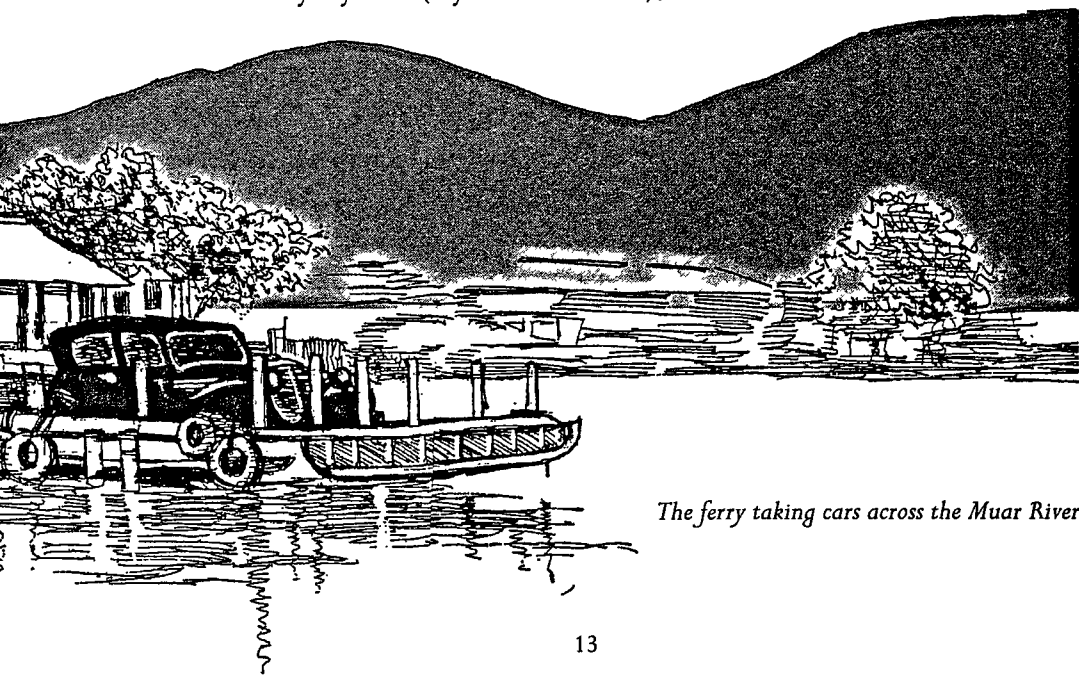


Muar and Singapore would come over the horizon and sail past us on their way to the dock. Every time one appeared, my sisters and I would rush to an upstairs window and watch – the ships seemed to grow bigger and bigger as they approached.

We also watched the comings and goings of the Muar ferry. In those days the ferry was the only way people and their vehicles travelling between Johor Bahru and Malacca could cross the river. There was no bridge. Cars and lorries drove up planks to board the craft. When it was fully loaded, a wooden pole was placed across the end. The ferry was then pushed away from the bank, and a motor launch would haul it across to the other side.

Several of the shophouses were occupied by firms of lawyers. My father, whose name was Sellapan, was a lawyer's clerk. Besides my mother, Abhirami, the family consisted of two older sisters, Paruvatham and Amurtham, and me, Ramanathan.

I did have another sister, Sivayogam, the eldest. However, there is a tradition among Tamils that, if the omens are not favourable when a child is born – for example, if the horoscope and the time of birth are not satisfactory – the parents give him or her away. The baby is taken to the temple and the priest carries out a ceremony. The child is 'handed over to God'. In this way my mother gave away my eldest sister. She was to be cared for by my aunt (my mother's sister), whose name was Pakiam.



The ferry taking cars across the Muar River.



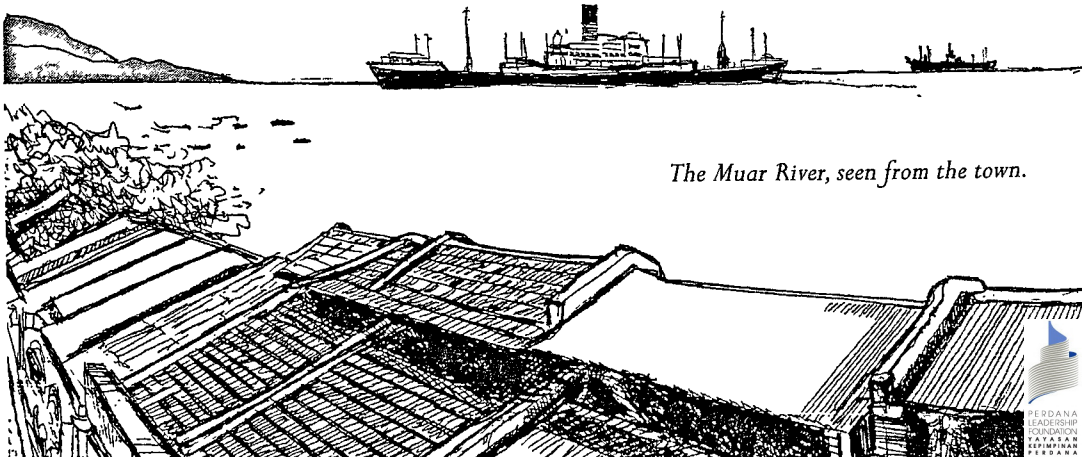
My sister and I enjoyed watching the ships come and go on the Muar River.

It was a happy time. My father was doing well in his job. We lived comfortably with the occasional little luxury. Sometimes we enjoyed British biscuits and other goodies. Some of my toys were ordered from Robinson's in Singapore, the famous department store, which occupied a big building in Raffles Place. I had a wooden rocking horse. Once I cut off its tail, thinking it would grow again. We played football in a field near the house – my sisters used to wear normal shoes tied round with string to make them look like proper football boots.

When I was around six years old, I went to a nearby primary school, run by a Tamil schoolmaster. It was in a small bungalow, near the courthouse. All I can remember about my lessons is the excitement of learning my ABC. The class was quite small – about ten. At school, I met other children and enjoyed myself. One of my sisters was in a school nearby, so the whole experience was fun.

At home we spoke Tamil. In my father's office, he and his colleagues spoke only English, and I myself started to pick up some English at school.

My father's family, originally from southern India, had been in Singapore for two generations. He was quite athletic, and used to play for a Malay football team in Singapore. My mother dressed in the Malay style. In fact, in our daily lives, we did not identify ourselves particularly with India. We were very localised.

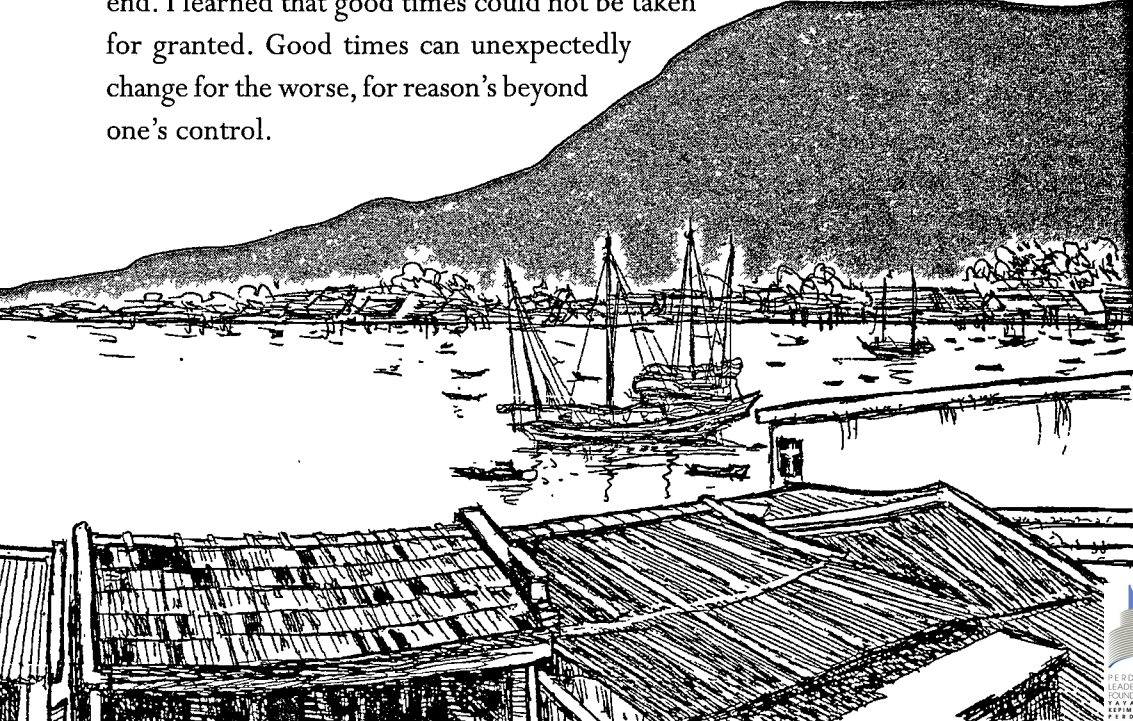


The Muar River, seen from the town.

We did go to the Hindu temple in Muar. Sometimes there were festivals. We would watch the silver chariot pass in front of the house, and we loved the fireworks. The temple events were organised by the Chettiars, Indian merchants specialising in money-lending and banking. My grandmother on my mother's side had married a Chettiar, so my mother had links to their community.

One of the earliest events I can remember is going off to school in Singapore. My father took me there by taxi, together with my sisters, so that they could all attend the wedding of one of my cousins. My only recollection of the journey is my first sight of Newton Circus, in those days just a roundabout. Flyovers were a thing of the future. My father and sisters returned to Muar, and in the weeks that followed, I missed my family dreadfully.

Many of the clients of my father's firm were rubber planters and smallholders, and they were badly affected by the slump that hit the rubber industry in the 1930s. The firm's income dropped. Because of stress, my father developed a drinking problem, and ran up debts. Before long the whole family was evicted from our home by the Chettiar moneylenders. They had to leave Muar in a hurry and join me across the Causeway in Singapore. For my family, the happy days had come to an end. I learned that good times could not be taken for granted. Good times can unexpectedly change for the worse, for reasons beyond one's control.



TOUGH LESSONS FOR A YOUNG BOY

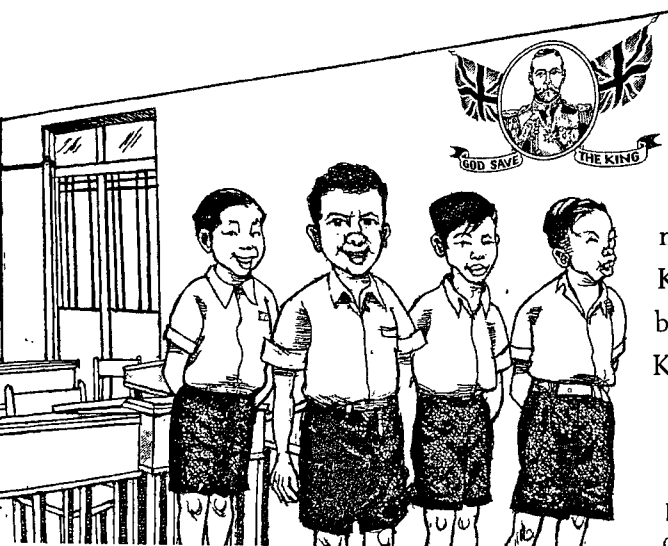
When I was still very young, I was sent away from Muar to school in Singapore. There I learned that life is not always fair. What matters is the way we face the challenges we meet. Children often do things with disastrous consequences. In dealing with them, adults must practise what they preach.

For a while, I lived with the family of one of my uncles, in Hooper Road. I entered the Anglo-Chinese Primary School, in Standard One, and soon moved up to Standard Two. The school stood where the National Archives building is today. We had fun climbing the steep slope of Fort Canning Hill, until one boy suffered a tragic fall. Every day I travelled to school on the trolley-buses. These were electric buses, picking up their power from overhead cables, rather like trams.

I enjoyed my lessons. The school was run by Methodists. Methodism is a form of Protestantism, part of the Christian tradition. Although I was Hindu, I went to

chapel with all the other children.

My mother said, 'God is the same whoever you are ...'. This was still the time of British colonial rule, and we had to sing the British national anthem, 'God Save the King'. Because King George V had a beard, we used to sing 'God Shave the King' instead!



We sang the British national anthem, changing the words to 'God Shave the King'.

A few months after I came to Singapore, I was joined by my parents and sisters. I was overjoyed to see them again, but behind their move lay a sad story. In Muar, my father had run up debts with the Chettiaris, which he couldn't repay. My family was thrown out of their house and had to leave. So they also came to live in my uncle's house.

After we had all been together at Hooper Road for a month or so, my parents sensed that my uncle and his family did not want us to stay. Perhaps the house was too crowded. We were then taken in for a while by my aunt Pakiam, my mother's elder sister, after which we moved to a little attap house in what is now Rambutan Road.

My father tried desperately to find a job. Because of a slump in the rubber plantation business, there were few vacancies in lawyers' offices. Finally he began working for a granite-quarrying company in Changi. It was not a happy time for him. Perhaps because of stress created by his debts, perhaps because of difficulties in finding work, my father had taken to drinking too much alcohol, often wasting most of his wages. One Sunday he brought home some fresh crabs, and we had a wonderful lunch. However, later that day, tragedy struck. In the evening, after my father had returned to the quarry, we received a message from the police. He had committed suicide. My world fell apart.

The next day I was going to school on the bus. When I was about to pay the fare, an Eurasian neighbour told me to put my money away, and paid for my ticket. She must have heard what had happened. I was too young to know how to thank her, but that small act of kindness has stayed in my memory ever since.

My aunt Pakiam also showed great kindness, taking us back into her house in Ceylon Road. It was quite small, built of wood, and had an attap roof. At the back there was a large wooden platform used for storage, and there we squatted on the wooden floor and ate our food. Cooking was done over a wood fire. We ate mostly Indian food – vegetables, a bit of fish, on special occasions a chicken. We couldn't have imagined the quality of food available to Singaporeans today. There was no electricity. At night a kerosene lamp gave me just enough light to do my homework and study for exams. Life was simple.



Meanwhile I progressed well at school as a 'free' student, exempt from paying fees. I reached Standard Five. At that time many boys followed boxing, collecting pictures of champions and pasting them into exercise books. My enthusiasm led me into trouble. To increase my collection,

I foolishly bought newspaper cuttings from my classmates on account. My debts mounted, and I could not pay them. When a couple of boys threatened me, I tried to get my own back by taking two of their schoolbooks, selling them, and paying them back. They reported me, and without any questions being asked I was expelled from the school. I was in the wrong, but I felt then, and I still feel, that the principal did not show much of the compassion his religious teaching required.

Now aged 12, I was sent away again to live with my relatives, who had moved from Hooper Road to Race Course Road. My cousin got me into the Rangoon Road Afternoon School. I did well, and transferred to the Victoria Afternoon School at Standard VII-A, and then to



Aunt Pakiam had an attap house in Ceylon Road.

As our working relationship developed over time, I had a sense that he felt I would understand what he wanted. He was an excellent writer and expected the same of others. He expected notes of meetings to be concise, no more than four pages, double-spaced. At MFA my first direct working contact with him arose when I was asked at short notice to take notes for a meeting he was having with the visiting Thai foreign minister. I grabbed a necktie, put on a jacket and rushed to the meeting. On my arrival at the door, Lee came towards me. In a paternal way he smiled, straightened my tie and said, 'You must remember you are no longer in the labour movement.' I cherish that memory to this day. My note of that meeting was done from memory, immediately afterwards. It was well received. My next one was based on copious and detailed notes, and did not go down so well. Lee called me up and said, 'Do you think I have the time to read all this?' Despite the pressures, he was not bad-tempered, although he could be impatient, and I did occasionally witness a tongue-lashing given to someone else – thankfully I escaped that experience.

Lee's mind was at work 24 hours a day. If he travelled anywhere, he was always asking if something he saw could be applied in Singapore. He would grill anyone he met for ideas that could be useful – many a time I saw foreign dignitaries or other experts emerge from a meeting with him in a state of exhaustion, after he had pumped them for ideas and information. He very rarely had a purely social conversation. He was intensely focused, all the time.

Because I felt instinctively in tune with Lee's political aims, I found it easy to work with him. When he decided to accept separation and the creation of a totally independent Singapore in 1965, he showed great statesmanship. During my subsequent career in the public service, which lasted over half a century, I never had any reason to change my high opinion of the man who, more than any other individual, created modern Singapore. I feel privileged to have worked with him.

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S R Nathan is one of Singapore's most distinguished public servants. Born into poverty, he survived family tragedy, destitution and the Japanese occupation. After getting a university diploma as an adult, he worked his way through the civil service ranks to become successively a mediator in trade union disputes, a foreign affairs expert, chairman of *Straits Times Press*, a diplomat and a two-term president of Singapore.

He has been an eyewitness to Singapore's history before and after independence, with an insider's view of many key events at home and abroad.

It is easy for the younger generations of Singaporeans to assume that the good fortune they now enjoy was easily won. For them, and for anyone interested in Singapore and its history, Mr Nathan has selected 50 episodes from his personal and official life, which offer insights from which the up-and-coming generation will benefit.

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