

Melwani Grandpa

Dear Grandchildren,

I arrived in Singapore on 7 June 1941. My duty in Singapore was to take over the import-export work from Mr Das who was leaving for India on 22 June.

Most of the work was connected with the import-export office of the government in Fullerton Building. It included going to shipping companies to get the delivery orders for our imported goods; going to Harbour Board (P.S.A) to get the surveys of damaged cargo; locating goods which could not be found by the clearing agents; looking after the godowns for in-and-out deliveries; and correspondence. Normally the paper work for all this work was done in the office.

Our shop was located at 52 North Bridge Road. Our godown was in Chin Nam Street which was almost opposite our shop. (Chin Nam Street was a street connecting North Bridge Road and Hill Street. This street does not exist anymore). Although 52 North Bridge Road was a shop, our wholesale business was conducted by the manager from the same premises. The fitting room in the shop was also used as an office for office work. If a customer wanted to use the fitting room, the person using the office had to come out to allow the room to be used as a fitting room.

All the staff (about 11 people) used to stay above the shop while the manager and 1 staff member was staying at the company house in Sophia Road.

We arrived in Singapore at about 10am on board the ship from Calcutta, 5.5 Cumsang. I was allowed to rest for a while and came down to shop at about 5 pm. Mr Das had just come back from his outside work and explained to me the paperwork for Import-Export & Shipping.

On 8 June, after getting ready, I came down and Mr Das was already in the office. He collected the necessary papers and we left for the Import & Export office at 9:15am. We delivered our permit to the office and Mr Das told me that the permits will be ready only in the afternoon.

From the Import & Export office, we went to the shipping office and handed in our documents. Mr Das told me that the papers will be ready only in the afternoon and by the time we finished our work it was 11:30am. I asked Mr Das if we could go back to office. He told me that if we go back to office we will be given some additional work. He suggested that we take a look around Raffles Place and pass time, and go back to the shop only at 1pm for lunch.

As suggested by him, we went back to the shop at 1pm. After lunch, we went back to Import- Export office and shipping offices. Although we had finished our work by 3:30pm, at his suggestion, we went back

to the shop only at 5:15pm. (5 pm was the time when all the offices were closed). After having our tea upstairs, we went down to our office to attend to our correspondence and get the paper work ready for the next day. To work undisturbed, we kept the office (fitting room) door closed.

We finished all the paperwork, correspondence by 7:30pm. Since the shop hours were up to 9pm., Mr Das suggested that we do not open our door until 8:55pm. He felt that if we go out, we will be given additional work not pertaining to our department.

So for the next two weeks, I followed his instructions.

After he left for India on 22 June, I returned to office around 11:30am. Naturally our manager was surprised to see me and asked me as to why I was back so early. I explained to him that I had finished my morning work and since the permits and other documents will not be ready until 2:30pm., I will go back after lunch.

It appeared that our accounts was in arrears and the manager asked me if I could help. I willingly accepted the work. While helping the accountant (who was also stationed in the shop), whenever I saw the shop crowded, I used to get up and attend to the customers. The same routine followed when I came back from my outside work at 3:45pm and when I finished my office work at 7:30pm. This gave me experience in accounts and sales.

War started on 8 December 1941 and some of the staff decided to go back to India. With that, we are left with only 8 staff. During the period of 8 December to 15 February when the bombing was taking place, there was practically no business.

After the Japanese occupation of Singapore on 15 February we opened our shop.

There was no import-export and shipping work but the Japanese wanted monthly a list of statistics from us for our stocks. I was naturally given this job but after finishing my work as quickly as possible, I continued to help in sales and accounts.

During the occupation in Singapore, local time was changed to the same time as Tokyo which was about 2 1/2 hours ahead of Singapore time. This meant that we had to start early and close our shop early. We were asked to close by 6pm Tokyo time which was in fact 3:30pm Singapore time. This meant that when we closed our shop, there was still plenty of daylight.

The business pattern also changed. We used to get a lot of Japanese customers. The Japanese could not speak a word of English. We did business by sign language and writing the price of goods on a piece of paper.

Considering the importance of Japanese language, since we had lot of spare time in the evening, I decided to join the Japanese language

class. Very soon I was able to speak enough Japanese language to attend to Japanese customers in their language. This resulted in better sales for the company. In fact whenever we got Japanese customers, I was called in by the other salesmen to attend to them.

In early 1943, since business in Singapore was not good, the company decided to open our office in Kuala Lumpur where the scope was better. The manager decided to go to Kuala Lumpur and the result was that the post of the Manager for Singapore became vacant. The question was who should be the manager? Since nobody could come from India to Singapore, the person had to be one from Singapore. The post required knowledge of accounts, sales and correspondence.

Although I was the most junior, the management had no option but to give the post to me. Thus at a young age of 20, I became the manager of the company. That was my first big break. Once you become a manager, you come in touch with other managers and bosses. Since then I have never looked back.

All this was possible because I worked beyond my call of duty.

So my advice to you is that if you work beyond the call of duty, you will definitely be promoted earlier than your other colleagues.

Love,

Dada Naana

* Dada means father's father and naana means mother's father.