



Our man in malaysia

STORY 40

As a schoolboy, Syed Hussain Syed Mohamed used to admire a sports car that went past his house every morning. He wanted one too. He obtained his driving licence while still in school and as soon as he finished schooling, he joined Wearnes in Malaysia, where he sold cars and drove cars. Everyone, including his father who worked for the government, told him he was crazy and should, like other bumiputras, join the civil service. But he recalls how even the government then was encouraging young Malays to go into business or join commercial firms.

Now 68, the semi-retired Managing Director of Sisma Auto – the sole importer and distributor of Jaguar cars in Malaysia – says he learnt the trade on the job. “In those days they sent you to various departments – the store, service station and finally sales. As a manager, they sent you around Malaysia. They also sent you for training in Australia and Britain.”

At first, he sold the Morris Minor and Mini, visiting canteens to talk to office workers and teachers. He was promoted to manager and started selling Rolls-Royces to the Sultans – a job made possible because of family connections. “You need to know them personally. Otherwise it is difficult. One Sultan bought about 15 cars from me over a period of 20 years. Every time a new model came out, I’d go and see him.”

Apart from royalty, the market for Rolls-Royces was limited. “Even if the well-to-do could afford them, out of respect for the Sultans, they would not buy a new one and if they did it would be a second-hand one from the Sultans. Now however, some of the super-rich don’t hold to this, but the Datas (titles conferred by Malaysian royalty) still refrain from buying a new one.”

He no longer handles Rolls-Royces, but has kept the Jaguar dealership, something he took over after Wearnes exited most of its auto opera-

tions in Malaysia.

“A top-end prestige car like the Jaguar,” he says, “is the ambition of most executive men because it has an image that says ‘you’ve made it’. In fact, some *towkays* (big bosses) who can buy, don’t, for that reason. They reckon people will think they’re so high up that they won’t do business with them.” There is a new line of smaller, lower-priced Jags now to capture the young professional market.

This father of four and grandfather of eight has two sons and a nephew working in the business with him. He says they have the professional qualifications and experience to take it to the next level.

He acknowledges that business is tough, not just here but worldwide. “That’s why I’m semi-retired,” he laughs adding that he remains overall in charge. He still holds weekly meetings to be brought up to speed and to keep an eye on things. “If something goes wrong, I’ll jump in.”