



Dr Albert Winsemius Singapore's trusted guide

By Sumiko Tan



ON A chilly evening two months ago, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong called on Dr Albert Winsemius at the latter's apartment in a quiet neighbourhood in The Hague.

For over an hour, the two men chatted, with Mr Goh, who was on an official visit to The Netherlands, showing the wheelchair-bound Dutch economist photographs of Singapore.

The visit was as symbolic as it was nostalgic.

For 25 years from 1960, Dr Winsemius, who died of pneumonia on Wednesday at the age of 86, was Singapore's trusted guide through economically uncharted waters.

He worked closely with the country's first-generation leaders, like Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and, indeed, was at times regarded as part of the Old Guard. Over the years, he also got to know second-generation leaders like Mr Goh.

Through him, Singapore quietly borrowed ideas and strategies which had worked for The Netherlands and other developed nations. Today, the Republic's economy is flying high, thanks in large measure to his sound advice and patient counsel.

Over the years, many phrases have been used to describe the economist.

Newspaper headlines have tagged him Singapore's Dutch Uncle, the Father of Jurong, the Republic's economic guru, the Dutchman behind Singapore Inc, and Singapore's adviser-turned friend.

The high regard which the Government held for him was evident in March 1984, three months after he retired as the Republic's economic adviser.

The Government invited Dr Winsemius, his wife, his three children and four other members of his family as guests of the Government for two weeks so that the economist could say his farewells to the people he had worked with over the years.

At a cocktail reception held in his honour, then Health Minister Howe Yoon Chong remarked: "It is not very often that my rather frugal government extends a public acknowledgement and appreciation to the extent that we have today to a person."

But then, Dr Winsemius was a special person, for he had, in Mr Howe's words, changed Singapore from a "poverty-stricken, post-colonial-era independent society...to what it is today".

A modest man with pinpoint sharp memory

Tall, bespectacled and with a slight hunch, Dr Winsemius was known to be modest with a pinpoint sharp memory. He had a candid manner, a good sense of humour and the ability to get to the heart of any issue.



He spoke English with a marked Dutch accent, and his voice was low and gravelly, no doubt because of the unfiltered cigarettes -- usually Player's Senior Service -- that he always had within reach.

He was born in 1910 in The Netherlands, and his father had a cheese wholesale business in Leeuwarden.

Speaking about his hometown in an interview in 1984, he quipped about how it was not only famous for its porcelain, but also because Mata Hari, the famous World War I spy of Dutch-Indonesian extraction, had been born there.

"As a matter of fact, she lived in a street just round the corner. I never knew her, of course," he said.

He became aware early in life of lessons he was to impart to Singapore -- the importance of education and the need to offer value-added services.

He recounted how, as a teenager, he worked as a cheese-maker after school.

"Then I discovered that working with your hands usually doesn't pay too well.

So I became a salesman -- of cheese because I knew cheese well. Later on, I became a little wiser...and I discovered that I had to go to school once more, to university."

Times were hard in the 30s, and he found a job in The Hague, which was near several universities.

He at first wanted to do law as he thought it was "the easiest course", and applied to Leyden University when he was 26. "But I had to first pass an examination in Latin, and decided to skip it," he said.

He went to Delft University, but "my secondary school mathematics was inadequate. They wouldn't take me".

Finally, he went to Rotterdam University where he explained to the dean that, because he had no money and had to work, he could not attend lectures.

"But I had seven days vacation a year and hoped the seven days would be sufficient for my examinations. The dean said I could always try it, though I probably wouldn't be a success. So I started, and that's how I became an economist."

During that time, he also got married and wrote his thesis. Just before World War II broke, he became Holland's price controller, and was in charge of keeping prices frozen when there was a scarcity of goods.

He remained in this job until the middle of 1943. After the war, he worked with the Ministry of Finance and, as he once put it modestly, "spent some time making the guilder healthy again".

As director general of industrial development, he was in charge of mending

his country's war-shattered economy. He did short assignments occasionally for the World Bank and soon built a reputation for being a development economist. He was at one time offered the post of Minister of Defence, but turned it down because he was "not a political man".



In 1960, he was asked by the United Nations to lead a mission to Singapore, which had gained independence a year earlier.

His wife was for the idea, and so, on Oct 5, 1960, he arrived here to conduct a survey on Singapore's potential to industrialise.

Although he became known as Singapore's economic adviser later, there was never any letter appointing him as such.

Every year for the next 25 years, he visited the Republic two or three times to review economic performance indicators and discuss macro-economic strategy with government planners.

"In our opinion, Singapore has the basic assets for industrialisation. Her greatest asset is the high aptitude of her people to work in manufacturing industries. They can rank among the best factory workers in the world."

-- Dr Winsemius wrote in a development plan that his team presented to Singapore in 1961.

He retired as economic adviser in December 1983, at the age of 74. Of Singapore, he said then: "I leave with a saddened heart. It has become part of my life, more or less. It can do without me. It could do without me years ago. But it became part of my life. So I will shed a few tears, imaginary tears."

For his contributions to Singapore's economic development, he was conferred various honours.

In 1967, he was awarded The Distinguished Service Medal by President Yusof Ishak. Three years later, he was conferred an honorary degree by the University of Singapore. In 1976, he received the National Trades Union Congress' highest award, the May Day Gold Medal of Honour.

Upon his retirement, the grandfather of eight said he would spend most of his time "filling out tax papers, which I do for the whole family...I am the central banker of the whole family".

On his life as an economist, Dr Winsemius, who often used "we" when referring to Singapore, once said: "There is quite a lot of satisfaction, perhaps not like that of, say, an architect who can look at something and say 'I made it'. But there is that satisfaction in knowing that you have contributed to the well-being of people you don't know..."

For Singaporeans today, a huge debt of gratitude is owed to the Dutch economist.

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