

THE FAMILY
BUSINESS

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

While Bhai Amjad was a member of the Punjab Assembly and in politics, he developed an interest in industrial production and his desire was to have the family move from military contracting towards industry. He made friends with Sir William Roberts, a colleague in the Punjab Assembly who was the first Principal of the Lyallpur Agriculture College, and a very successful cotton grower from Khanewal, with business contacts in Lancashire. Bhai Amjad entered into a partnership with Sir William to set up our first large industrial venture, a textile mill in Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalpur State. This was the start of the Abbasi Textile Mills. He and Sir William also persuaded Lever Brothers in Bombay to establish a joint venture for a vegetable ghee factory as well as a soap factory in Bahawalpur State, in which the Government of Bahawalpur was also a shareholder. In 1945, at the end of World War II, the Government of India wanted to reward those Indian States that had helped them in the War effort. One of these was Bahawalpur, the State forces of which were amalgamated into the regular Indian Army. By way of thanks, the Government of India offered permission to Nawab Sadiq Mohammad Khan to set up industries and the Nawab sent an emissary to my father to tell him of this offer. My elder brother, Syed Amjad Ali, who was the most knowledgeable in our family about industry, had suggested that we approach Lever Brothers, with whom we already had a business relationship because of our Army contracting operations. Levers had no operation in Northern India (later to become Pakistan) and here they saw an opportunity. We had already acquired sufficient land, 150 acres near the Railway Station in Rahim Yar Khan, to set up the textile mill so part of that land was offered to Lever Brothers for the ghee and soap factories. At that time, Rahim Yar Khan was a small town of no more than 5,000 inhabitants. The only burnt brick house was the Canal Rest House where we stayed on our early visits; the rest of the buildings in the city were of mud bricks.

Syed Amjad Ali was the Founding Director in the two Lever companies called Sadiq Soap Limited and Sadiq Vegetable Oil Company Limited. The marketing of both oil and soap was assigned to a third company called Lever Brothers Pakistan Limited which was 100% owned by Levers²². In subsequent years, Levers felt that it would be more sensible to amalgamate the three companies and these then came under the umbrella of Lever Brothers Pakistan Limited. In 2002, the Company adopted the name of Unilever Pakistan Limited, to be in line with Lever companies elsewhere. My connection with them lasted a very long time: in 1952, Syed Amjad Ali was posted as Economic Minister at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington, D.C. He suggested to Levers that I be made a Director in his place and I remained a member of the Board of Lever Brothers till 2006. I had the opportunity of visiting the senior management of Levers in England from time to time and witnessed the transformation of a colonial imperial company to a modern enlightened corporation. Attending their Board meetings over the years added a great deal to my knowledge of the working of a large corporation.

Within a week of my return to Lahore from the US in 1947, the welcome from the family men, i.e., my father and my brothers, wore off quickly and they were anxious to put me into harness. Our family's business had changed dramatically: prior to Partition, it was entirely connected with the British Army in India, and when the British decided to leave, the business came down to "zero", apart from our new joint ventures with Lever Brothers and Sir William Roberts. With the mass exodus of Hindu merchants from Pakistan, there was a big vacuum in

²² Subsequently the State of Bahawalpur was amalgamated into the province of Punjab and the investment by the State government in the Lever companies was inherited by the Government of Punjab.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

providing for the needs of the people of Pakistan. The new country had almost no industry except for three modest sized textile mills, one in Lahore, another in Lyallpur, and the third in Okara, all belonging to Hindus who had left for India. The production from these mills was totally inadequate for the needs of the country. The Governments of Punjab and NWFP invited my father to help them with the import of cotton textiles. We were asked to work immediately with the Pakistan Liaison Office that had been set up in Bombay to purchase them. Our responsibility was to transport imported cloth for the Governments of Punjab and NWFP. So the first business our Karachi Office was involved in was the import of textiles from India. We were paid a fixed handling fee of no more than 1% for all the financing and physical handling of the cloth till we put it on the railways to be dispatched to different destinations in the Punjab and the Frontier Province, under instructions from the Governments of these Provinces.

Pakistan grew over a million bales of cotton, with a large number of ginning factories spread over the provinces of Punjab and Sind. In Sind, ginning factories were still owned and operated by Hindu merchants, while in the Punjab these had been abandoned and declared evacuee property. The Government of Punjab was very anxious to have these factories up and running again. The country was born in August 1947 and the cotton crop was due to come in from the Punjab fields in October. My father was asked by the Government of Punjab to organise the management of two ginning factories at Khanewal and Pir Mahal in Multan District. This was the second business we were inducted into. Syed Wajid Ali, who lived in Bombay from 1940 till 1947, had excellent contacts in the business community there. Among them was Mr. D.K. Parker, a Maratha businessman, who was closely associated with the Saksaria family. They had a very large cotton-seed oil mill in Hyderabad, Sind, the largest in Pakistan, which they wanted to sell; through the mediation of Mr. D.K. Parker, we bought it. We had no problem in finding management for these various businesses because a large number of our senior management, those who were Muslims, came with Bhai Wajid from India to Karachi and it was our obligation to give them employment.

On my return, my eldest brother, Syed Amjad Ali, pointed to the box of papers that he was carrying, pertaining to the textile mill at Rahim Yar Khan. He wanted me to get involved with it and in January 1948 I went with Bhai Amjad to Bahawalpur. We stayed with Nawab Mushtaq Ahmad Gurmani²³, Chief Minister of Bahawalpur and a close friend of the family. Nawab Gurmani was introduced to my father by my cousin, Faqir Waheeduddin, who attended school at Aligarh, where Nawab Gurmani was his classmate in the 1920s. Gurmani Sahib stayed at our house in Lahore when travelling between Muzaffargarh and Aligarh during his student days. My father took a great liking to him and was responsible for introducing him to the family of Col. Z. Ahmed of Assam²⁴, whose daughter he married.

After a few days' stay in Bahawalpur, Bhai Amjad and I motored down to Rahim Yar Khan, the site of both the textile mill and the soap and vegetable ghee plants. From Rahim Yar Khan, we went down to Karachi by train, where we had made a very modest beginning in a two-room office in Zeenat Mansion on McLeod Road, opposite the Chartered Bank building. No sooner had I settled down in Karachi than I was thrown in at the deep end

²³ See pages 223 - 225

²⁴ See footnote page 15

THE FAMILY BUSINESS



1948: Khawaja Nazimuddin, Governor-General of Pakistan, at the inauguration of Abbasi Textile Mills, Rahim Yar Khan

with the handling of the machinery for the textile mill through the port of Karachi and its warehousing and dispatch by train (at that time road transport had not developed). My second assignment was to make frequent visits to Hyderabad to provide whatever support was required by the management there to operate the oil mill. Cotton-seed was purchased by the mill at Hyderabad in consultation with our office in Karachi but the sale of their production, which was refined cotton oil and the by-products of oil cake and husk, were sold in the Karachi market. Cotton linters²⁵ was another by-product and this was sold in the Karachi cotton market. The construction of the Abbasi Textile Mills building at Rahim Yar Khan had commenced under the supervision of our engineer based there and support for materials like steel, cement, and all the other requirements was provided from Karachi, as Rahim Yar Khan had nothing available locally except bricks. So the Karachi office grew into a supply base for the Hyderabad and Rahim Yar Khan industries. Sir William Roberts had good contacts in Lancashire and we asked him to buy equipment for the Mill.

The Textile Mill ended up a failure. It was too soon after World War II and new textile machinery was not yet under manufacture in Europe as industry there had been geared towards manufacturing war equipment. We had

²⁵ The fuzz on the outside of the cotton seed after the seed has been separated from the cotton.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

to import second-hand machinery, which was not a good experience. Later, when the new textile machinery was available, we installed new equipment, but overall our management was poor and the enterprise did not flourish. Others did better than us. For example, Dawoods went for new Japanese equipment in the 1950s and they did very well. Most of the textile equipment at that time was imported from Japan – from Toyoda and Yamaha.

Our family still had a large agricultural holding in Bhopal. In 1946, we had also acquired an oil mill from a Hindu owner but we had never made it work. Another task that was given to me was to go to Bhopal to liquidate these properties and to send the proceeds to Pakistan. At that time, there was no restriction on sending money through the banking system. I went to Bhopal in the summer of 1948 and was able to sell the oil mill to J&K Group.

My father and brothers had the foresight to buy residential property in Karachi immediately after it was known that Pakistan was to be established. My brother-in-law, Bhai Abid Hussain, went to Karachi a few months before the birth of Pakistan and bought a property at 18 Victoria Road. In addition, he also purchased eleven acres of agricultural land in Malir City next to the railway station. Both these properties were bought from Parsi owners who were residents of Pakistan, so we did not have any problem regarding the sale confirmation. My father and brothers generously had this property acquired in my name and the payments were debited to me in the family partnership account, where I had a 10% share.

FORD AND ALI AUTOMOBILES

During 1948, we had a visit to our office in Karachi from a Ford Motor Company team from Bombay who were looking for a Muslim businessman who could be appointed as their main dealer for Pakistan. We had been recommended to them by the British banks that Ford was dealing with. In a very short time, my brothers were able to negotiate and finalize our appointment as the Direct Ford Dealer for Pakistan and set up a separate company under the name of Ali Automobiles Limited. Bhai Wajid took over the responsibility of looking after this business. The first thing my brothers considered when taking on a new project was who would run it; when Ford approached them, they asked Ford to find a manager for the project and they brought in an Englishman who had worked for them elsewhere in the world to serve as the first General Manager. They also brought in an American expert. Bhai Wajid had his hands full in developing the motor car business because a network of showrooms had to be set up in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar as well as inventories of spare parts developed for supply to the customers of our vehicles.

The motorcar industry of Europe had not been revived by 1948 and most of the vehicles came from the United States and Canada. During Bhai Wajid's stay in Bombay, he had developed a close friendship with the senior management of the Canteen Stores Department from whom most of the supplies for our business with the British Army were received. Among them were Sir John Abercrombie and Mr. Joe Quinlon, an Australian. Joe Quinlon had suggested to Bhai Wajid that we set up a razor blade manufacturing plant and he was able to establish contact with the American Safety Razor Corporation of New York. A joint venture agreement had been signed for the blade factory in Karachi and this resulted in the Treet Razor Blade Company, due to be housed in a new building at West Wharf. When the Ford products started arriving, it was decided to put this business in the building that

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

had been constructed for the razor blade industry and to move the razor blade plant next to the Sind Oil Mills at Hyderabad.

In 1950, the Ministry of Industries, Supply & Development Department, approached Ali Automobiles to procure for them a large supply of spare parts for the army vehicles. Most of these trucks were of Ford manufacture. The spare parts were urgently required and I had my first independent task, to go to the United States for three months and with the help of the Ford Motor Company to locate a supply of spare parts. The vehicles that Pakistan had inherited were of War-time vintage and they were not in current manufacture, so the spare parts were not available from Ford. Ford, however, helped us to locate the spares in Canada and I spent three months in both countries procuring the parts, giving me the opportunity to learn at the early age of 24 to inspect the goods, negotiate the price, and arrange for the packing and shipment. My father and Bhai Wajid were very pleased with my efforts, which gave them confidence that I could work independently.

From 1950 onwards, I went to Europe every summer to maintain personal contact with our Agents for cotton on the Continent and also to visit Sir John Abercrombie in London and explore with him new opportunities for business. Sir John was a dyed in the wool businessman and an ancestor of his came to India in the early 1800s as an employee of the East India Company. He himself was a successful businessman and built up his personal company under the name of Lathom and Abercrombie, which was finally bought by Forbes, Forbes & Campbell during the War, when Sir John was asked to organize the Canteen Stores Department to provide for the needs of the British Army in India. He retired from Government of India service in 1947. He visited us in Karachi in 1948 and suggested that we set up an associate company in England, which he offered to run. After getting permission from the Government of Pakistan, we opened a company in London called Wazir Ali GB Limited with Sir John Abercrombie as its Managing Director. This Company helped us in the export of oil cake and cotton to the U.K. and provided us with the supply of spare parts and other items that we required for our industries in Pakistan. He took a great deal of interest in my development in business and was very generous with his guidance and instructions.

Soon we grew out of our office in Zeenat Mansion and we rented a larger office at 140 Bunder Road in a building called "Bait ul Hamd" which belonged to a Muslim business family based in South Africa. Bhai Amjad had by now served in various Government assignments. In 1950, he had been appointed as Economic Minister in Pakistan's Embassy in Washington. My father was based in Lahore and, although he participated in the affairs of the motor business in Lahore, his visits to Karachi were confined to attending Board meetings of the State Bank of Pakistan and Imperial Chemical Industries. The four years of my stay at 140 Bunder Road Office were an invaluable experience because I had to provide support to the industry in Hyderabad, the textile mill at Rahim Yar Khan, and also our trading business, importing textiles and exporting cotton and oil cake.

In 1949, a Russian by the name of Khanetsky arrived in Karachi to buy cotton. He visited us and within a short time we became good friends and he made substantial purchases of cotton from us. I have never seen a person so well organized. He was single-handedly buying 20-40,000 bales of cotton every month for Russia. Not only that, he was selling Russian goods for the balance of payment. He ran the whole business out of his bag! In those days

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

telexes were the order of the day and I remember that he had a system in which, at the top of every message, one could see that he had sent a particular number of telexes on the subject and he had received a particular number of telexes from the other party. Thus he could trace if any messages were missing.

Russia was keen to supply textiles and some other manufactured products like sewing thread, steel nails and printing paper. They paid us a very good price for cotton, on which we made a handsome profit, so we felt obliged to import Russian goods. Our purchases from Russia were not profitable but, on the whole, we had a positive result, in that we made more on the sale of cotton than we lost on purchases from Russia. This gave me and our organisation exposure to marketing such goods, an experience that was totally new to us. By 1950, we were among the prominent cotton merchants of Karachi. We established a good reputation as reliable exporters, which continued for the next three years. Our cotton brokers and selectors were Hindus as they were experienced in the trade in Karachi in those days. They served us fairly loyally, but the cotton trade itself was speculative in nature and by 1954, we realised that we had not developed expertise within the family and, therefore, this was not a business on which we could build our future.

We sold 1,100 tons of cotton seed oil to Egypt in 1952-53. There were no shipping tankers in those days so we had to have 5,000 fifty-gallon drums. I wrote to Sir John Abercrombie and told him that the drums were not available in Pakistan. Would they be available in Europe? He wrote back that they were available in Holland, where there is a very big market in Rotterdam. I went to Holland and bought the drums, which Sir John was to ship to us. In those days you could lose 1/7 or 1/8 of the value as a duty drawback and we were working on very thin margins. I asked Sir John not to take his commission on the deal. I said, 'We will compensate you overall but don't charge us the commission. The lower the price of the cargo, the lower the duty drawback deduction will be.' I still remember sitting with him when I said this. He got up, smoking a pipe, and started pacing up and down in his small office in London before saying, 'Babar, no. I won't do it and I won't let you do it. This is how a Marwari thinks [he had lived all his life in Bombay]. This is not what you should be doing today.' What a wise lesson he gave me!

My three nephews, Fakhar Imam (my sister Fakhra's son), Tariq Ali and Kamal Ali, sons of my brothers, Bhai Amjad and Bhai Afzal respectively, were sent to England in 1960 to study at Court Street Prep School. Sir John was their guardian in England and I was their contact person in Lahore. All three nephews did well and were admitted to Clifton College, a public school in Bristol. They did well at cricket. Two of them (Tariq and Kamal) had the distinction of playing at Lord's for Clifton. A few top English public schools then had the privilege of playing at Lord's. Fakhar became the secretary of the cricket team and was a wicket keeper but he did not make it to the team that played at Lord's. Kamal did extremely well in the match as a bowler and Sir John wrote to me, 'No hat in England is going to fit Kamal Ali any more!' Sir John advised me to keep my nephews on a strict budget. He used to say, 'Nothing spoils a young man more than giving him more money than he should have.'

I was the guardian of the three boys for about five years, managing their affairs. After they had completed their 'A' level, Fakhar, who was the more forward thinking, opted to go to America and went to the University of California at Davis, Berkeley, to study agriculture. Kamal tried hard to get into Oxford without success. Tariq stayed on in London and opted for chartered accountancy.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Sir John died in 1960 of cancer and I remember going to the King Edward Hospital to see him. He was my father's age and was an excellent mentor.

VISIT TO RUSSIA IN 1952

In April 1952, the Soviets organized the first economic conference to which they invited people from the developing world with whom they were trading. They sent me an invitation. I was in America on a business trip, but Bhai Wajid called me to say that there was an invitation from my friends and that he had promised them that I would attend. I was to get to London to have my Russian visa organized. The instructions had been passed on to the Russian Embassy. I went to London and arrived at the Embassy. They asked for my passport. I asked them how I could get to Moscow. They said I should take a plane to Amsterdam and then the KLM plane to Prague, which was the hub for traveling into Eastern Europe. I missed the bus, which in those days was the normal way to get to Heathrow, and took a taxi. When I arrived at the airport, there was an MI5 man, opening the taxi door. Only then did I realize that I had been followed from the Russian Embassy because they were curious to know who I was and why I was going to Russia - this was during the height of the Cold War.

When I landed in Amsterdam, my passport disappeared for an hour. The British must have sent them a message to investigate. They were suspicious, but I was not interrogated or questioned. I then flew from Amsterdam to Prague and from there we took a Russian plane, which looked very much like a DC-3. It was a 4-5 hours flight and there were no more than 5-6 passengers in the plane. We landed in Minsk where a typical Russian met us, wearing a trench coat and a felt hat. He started asking me questions in Russian and I told him I did not speak the language. He asked how much money I had. I took out the four to five hundred dollars that I was carrying. He made a note of it.

When I arrived in Moscow I was met at the airport by a gentleman from the Economic Conference, along with a lady. He said, 'I have come to welcome you on behalf of the Conference organizers. The lady is your translator and guide.' They must have put my name in their computer and from my name they were confused and thought that I was from Iran. The guide that they had for me was from the School of Oriental Studies who spoke either English or Persian. The guides for all the other Pakistanis were Urdu speaking. Since I can manage conversation in the Persian language and spoke English I did not ask for an Urdu speaking guide. I asked 'Where are other people from Pakistan staying?' He said, 'They are staying at the Muskva Hotel.' I asked, 'Where have you made arrangements for me to stay?' He said, 'At the Muskva. But if you don't want to stay there, we can arrange somewhere else.' I said 'No, that is fine.' It was a one-star hotel and the best in Russia at that time was two-star. From Pakistan there were Mian Naseer Sheikh, Altaf Hussain (editor of Dawn), Mahmoud Haroon, Hatim Alvi, Mian Ifikharuddin, Sadri Ispahani, Muhammad Ali Dossa, and Bawany. There were some twelve delegates from Pakistan. The visitors from Pakistan had been selected on the basis of the business they were doing with Russia. These people were either buying from Russia, selling to Russia, or had an interest in Russia.

We stayed there for about ten days, during which we had meetings and then visited various museums. We were given red carpet treatment from the Russian point of view. Their circus was renowned for a bear driving a motorcycle...and I saw that. We went to the Bolshoi theatre, and we also had some business meetings.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

One thing that surprised me about the Russians was that they were very bullish about their country and told us that 'Russia is the best country in the world and there is nobody like us'. Once, walking in the street, I bought two cones from an ice-cream kiosk and gave one to my guide. She said, 'What do you think of the quality?' I said, 'It is very good, this is the second best ice cream I have ever had.' She asked, 'Where did you have the best ice cream?' When I said 'In America' her face went pale. They were not ready to accept that they were second to anyone. One day she asked me, 'Is there anybody in particular that you want to meet or see?' I said Oistrakh, the violinist. Spontaneously her first reaction was, 'Oh, that Jew!' I had not realized that there was such anti-semitism among the Soviets. That came as a surprise to me.

Moscow was very run down after the War. In April, it was still winter and there was a lot of snow on the streets. One saw elderly women cleaning the streets and instead of wearing boots, they had their feet wrapped in hessian and tied with strings. Maybe they had boots underneath but they did not have rubber boots. Russia was totally destroyed during the War and the remaining architecture was very ornate, nothing modern. Within Moscow, the roads were serviceable but there were very few cars, and these were 'Zis' and 'Zim' cars, copies of old Packards. I remember we were driven to a church outside Moscow; they wanted to show us that there was freedom of religion in Russia. We drove about 70 miles out of Moscow in a bus. I had a camera with me and I was taking photographs of ordinary huts. My guide asked me, 'Why do you have to take pictures of buildings which look so poor?'

I was 26 years old then and in the evening I would go out night-clubbing. I still remember that in the foyers of the clubs, inside the front entrance, there was nothing but drunken Russians lying on the floor! They had been thrown out of the dance hall. When you went inside, there were girls sitting there, waiting to be asked to dance. I walked up to a girl and asked for a dance. We were dancing and I said, 'Do you speak English?' The minute I said that, she left. She was scared, as she had probably thought I was from Central Asia till I spoke in English! Probably, their training had been that every foreigner was a spy and there to destroy them. At that age, one could not care less. The clubs were simple and good. There was music and drinks. I don't drink so I cannot tell what it tasted like.

On our way back, Mian Naseer Sheikh and I travelled together to Prague and then to Geneva. I had a very good personal relationship with Mian Sahib. As a young man, he came to our house very frequently. He was a member of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce before Partition and was then the Head of that Chamber with a handful of other people.

IGI INSURANCE

I have been associated with IGI Insurance from its very beginning. When we started our trading business in Karachi, all goods that we were importing had to be insured. The insurance business was conducted solely by agencies of foreign insurance companies. I don't remember any local insurance company in the early fifties. My eldest brother, Syed Amjad Ali, wrote to Alliance Assurance in Calcutta and asked if we could represent them in Pakistan. We thus became chief agents for Alliance Assurance, a U.K. based Company. They then sent one of their staff from Bombay to run the office in Karachi. We knew nothing about insurance but we provided the facility in

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

our office. When the time came to set up an insurance company in Pakistan in 1952, we asked Alliance to be our partners. I was the first Managing Director of the Company and Alliance sent in an Englishman who looked after the business. We had 75% ownership of the company and Alliance owned the remaining 25%. Initially, our Group companies were growing so fast that we confined ourselves to insuring our own companies. We decided to take only external business when we could be sure that our client followed ethical practices. Alliance ran the Company for about ten years and then they were taken over by Sun Insurance Company of South Africa who had no interest in Pakistan. They wanted to exit and we bought them out, thus becoming 100% owners of the Company. We decided to go public soon thereafter because most of our other companies were public limited companies, but as I explained earlier IGI Insurance had also become a sort of a holding company for the family.

IGI has two streams of income: one from underwriting and the other from investments. These investments have done extremely well. We started with a paid up capital of Rs. 5 million. In October 2013, IGI's market capitalisation was Rs. 14 billion. IGI pays well and follows ethical practices. We avoided the malpractices of the market. For instance, when importing goods, it is possible to issue a cover note, meaning that the goods are legally covered but when they arrive, the cover note is torn up. No premium is paid because the goods have already arrived!

Because of our ethics, we have generally been able to find good managers. For insurance, you need specialists and you have to support them by helping them learn more and improve their capacity. You keep on investing in people, enabling them to enhance their knowledge. In most of our companies, the management is home grown, but in insurance, our people are easily targeted because of our track record. Our people have thus been enticed away by other companies who double or triple their salaries. When we look for people, the first thing we look for is integrity. Competence comes next. You can always make up for a person's lack of competence by reinforcing and providing support, but integrity has no substitute.

IGI was listed on the Stock Exchange in 1987 and it has developed well. We have resisted the temptation of enlarging its under-writing business, which has a lot of pitfalls because of unethical practices in the general insurance market. Its investment portfolio has been meticulously monitored and today it owns a substantial portion of shares in the publicly owned companies in our Group.

By the early 1950s we had four ventures: the soap and vegetable ghee company in Rahim Yar Khan with Levers, the razor blade plant with American Safety Razor Corporation at Hyderabad, the insurance company with Alliance, and Abbasi Textile with Sir William Roberts. We were comfortable with our foreign partners because the partnerships were based on mutual trust and confidence. We were also exporting oil cake from Sind Oil Mills to the United Kingdom at the rate of over 1,000 tons every month. In one good year, we shipped over 20,000 bales of cotton to Russia alone! Our annual shipment to destinations in Europe and Japan was substantial.

MY FIRST HOUSE

My parents were very keen that I should have a house of my own in Karachi, built within the compound of 18 Victoria Road, as there was sufficient space available. In my search for an architect, I was very happy to make the acquaintance of Mehdi Ali Mirza who was introduced to me by Sharif Moloobhoy, a very good friend of Bhai

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Wajid when he was in Bombay. Sharif and Mirza had studied at the J.J. School of Arts in Bombay. Subsequently, Mirza went to England and got his ARIBA and joined the Pakistan Public Works Department as the Chief Architect.

Mirza was among the people who have had the most profound impact on my life. He came from Hyderabad Deccan. During World War II, he went to England and was among the 'Bevin Boys' who were conscripted to work in factories to replace the English youth who were serving in the British Army. He stayed on in England and married an Estonian lady while studying in the U.K.

Some six years later when I decided to build a house in Karachi, I approached my friend, Abdul Qayyum, an engineer who worked in the Pakistan PWD in Karachi and he connected me to Mirza who was PWD's Chief Architect. I requested Mirza to design my house in Karachi and gave him a free hand, not only in the design of the house and the furniture, but also in the selection of contractors and workmen. He was very knowledgeable in all branches of construction and in picking skilled artisans with whom he worked day and night for two years to complete my house, which, still looks as new and modern as on the first day.

I met many important architects through Mirza – both Pakistani and international. Among them were Richard Nuetra and Edward Stone. Stone designed the Kennedy Centre in Washington D.C., the President's House in Pakistan, and WAPDA House. During one of his visits to Pakistan, I asked Edward Stone if he knew Frank Lloyd Wright. Frank Lloyd Wright was, of course, considered a god to architects. Edward Stone said, 'Yes, Frank Lloyd thought I was a hopeless architect. He used to tell me, "Ed, you better give up architecture." But when I married Maria [Maria was a vivacious lady, very good looking], nothing could go wrong with Edward Stone, I was the best architect after I married Maria!'

Mirza Sahib was a gourmet and enjoyed good food. In the evenings, he used to stay away from home. He was in the drinking crowd. I was not a part of that but we spent time together. We would talk about poetry, calligraphy, and similar things in which he got me interested. He was interested in design, furniture and art, and had a big influence on my interest in things that are not expensive but rich in design and quality.

At that time I was toying with the idea of getting married and Mirza once recited Iqbal's line: 'Bay-khatar kood purra aatish-e-Namrood mein Ishq.'

He said don't think too much about it and do not calculate. That was the turning point. I still remember my parents were very much after me to get married but it was Mirza's recitation of Iqbal's line that helped me take the big decision!

One of the oft-quoted remarks of Mirza was: 'A doctor buries his mistakes. but an architect leaves it on the ground for at least a hundred years and if he has done a bad job, he continues to get flak from the people.'

Apart from being perhaps the best architect that Pakistan has so far had, Mirza was a person of fine qualities. We became good friends and he took immense interest not only in designing my Karachi house but spent many

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

hours every day for almost two years supervising the minutest details in the construction of the house. I had given him a free hand in respect of the selection of materials, the craftsmen, and the budget. The house was nearing completion in 1954 and he had that year visited America and Scandinavia. He urged me to go to Finland to buy the light fittings for the house as nothing suitable could be found locally. Mirza Sahib had been much impressed by what he saw in Scandinavia, especially Finland, and he suggested that I should go there to buy them. I used to visit Europe anyway every summer because I had to meet cotton merchants who were buying from us. It was only because I was going to Finland to buy light fittings for my Karachi home as recommended by Mirza Sahib that I contacted Åkerlund & Rausing with whom we created Packages Limited.

One day in 1961, Mirza and I were sitting at Packages during the time that our Lahore house was under construction. He said, 'I do not know whether your house will be completed in my lifetime.' I said, 'What has happened to you?' He said, 'I have cancer.' I said, 'Where is it?' He said, 'Tongue'. Since tongue in English and leg in Punjabi are pronounced the same way, I thought it was in his leg. I asked him to show it to me. He pointed to his mouth and said it was there. I asked him to get into the car. A very dear friend of mine was the head of the Dental Hospital. This was Dr. Haider Ali, son of Syed Zulfiqar Ali, former Principal of Aitchison College. Haider and I were very close friends. He was an outstanding swimmer and had held the All India breast-stroke swimming record. I took Mirza to the Dental College where surgeon Dr. Riaz Qadeer was already present. Haider and Dr. Riaz Qadeer had one look at Mirza Sahib and said that he should go to England straight away. I brought Mirza Sahib back and that very evening I took him to Karachi and arranged for him to go to England. Two days later, I put him on the plane to England. He was operated upon and came back after about a month but I noticed that he was still smoking. Soon thereafter, there was a relapse. We arranged for him to go to England again and this time he never came back. This was about the time my father passed away.