

Cyril Gardiner: Tycoon who mellowed with the years

Posted on

by Manik de Silva

Cyril Gardiner carried a small empty suitcase to the Malalasekera Mawatha headquarters of the Institute of Chartered Accountants when he turned up there a few weeks ago to serve as a judge at the annual contest for the best corporate reports. He and I had been serving the judges' panel chaired by Justice Mark Fernando for the past several years and this year, as in the past, he said: "Manik, I want your reports when you are through".

He made that request of most of the other judges as well and as, in previous years, had quite a pile of company reports to carry off when the judging was done. Taking them away last year had been a bit of a problem. Hence the suitcase this time.

Cyril Gardiner was a businessman who had an insatiable interest in how the corporate wheels both at home and abroad were turning. Hence his interest in the annual reports of as many companies as he could lay his hands on. He did not collect them for a quick skim through the chairman's review and a cursory glance at the balance sheet and profit and loss accounts. He was very interested in how each and every company was doing and would pore over the reports he took away, absorbing a great deal of information.

He also enjoyed attending meetings of companies of which he was a member. He often spoke on these occasions and whatever he said, always penetrating and never unpleasant, commanded attention. It was not very long ago that a shareholder who was droning on endlessly at a company AGM was impatiently reined by another who said: "Why don't you stop now so that others also could have a say? I see Me Gardiner here and all of us are interested in hearing him."

Objective

Cyril relished the corporate scene, hence his interest in the annual contest run by the Institute of Chartered Accountants. Many years ago he gifted the trophy

annually awarded to the overall winner. It is no secret that Hayleys, among the bluest of the blue chips on the Colombo bourse, would have liked to donate a grander trophy and name it after the late Lal Jayasundera, acknowledged as the finest business leader to emerge in the contemporary Sri Lankan scene. But Cyril Gardiner had got there first before the corporate reporting awards had acquired their current importance and prestige.

Gardiner was, of course, synonymous with the Galle Face Hotel (GFH) which he liked to say was “132 years young”. He (and companies he controlled) owned about 90% of the equity of the Galle Face Hotel Company Ltd. and there are few people around town who have not heard of the characteristic signs he sprinkled around that venerable pile. The most quoted of these was one against smoking. “Don’t smoke in bed”, it warned, “the ashes we find may be yours”. There was another by the GFH’s ancient lift which sagely advised patrons to use the stairs because it was good for their health!

There is no doubt that Cyril Gardiner has long sat on one of the biggest real estate assets in Colombo and done little about realising what many regarded as the true potential of the GFH which credibly claims to be a “resort within the city”. This was partly due to his abhorrence of debt, which he disliked as much as alcohol and tobacco, and his fidelity to tradition. There were two occasions when he appeared to be moving with the times: the first when he reached what turned out to be a disastrous agreement with Regent International that nearly landed him in jail on a contempt of court charge, and the other more recent deal with DBS Land of Singapore which redeveloped the Raffles Hotel whose history could be matched by the GFH.

Even that turned sour for various reasons, principally Gardiner’s conviction that the objective of preserving his hotel’s old world charm while providing patrons with today’s comforts, could be achieved at a fraction of the “foreign” price. But there seems to have been no hard feelings on the other side judging by the fax that Mrs Mavis Gardiner and their son Sanjeeva, received from Richard Helfer, President of Raffles Holdings and Chairman and CEO of Raffles International. “Cyril was a man of strong principles who participated fully and passionately in everything he did. Exuding great warmth and sincerity to all he met, he had grown to become a very good friend over the last seven years”, Helfer said.

There were similar messages from other Raffles executives and international hoteliers no sooner news of Gardiner’s death went on the news wires on September

17th. Even the *Financial Times* in England expressed interest at his passing. Had he known, this would have tickled Cyril as pink as the newsprint on which that respected paper is printed. He revelled in the reputation of his much publicised “eccentricity”, often boasting that he had never hosted a cocktail party on his life. He did serve drinks at one dinner he hosted sheepishly defending himself when I railed him on it saying, “otherwise no one would have come!”

Gardiner could be a doughty fighter in a boardroom and the share market and his thorough knowledge of company law and courtroom experience equipped him well for that. It was not very well known that he qualified as a chartered secretary over 25 years ago. In the early eighties when the Colombo share market was a very sleepy place with perhaps a dozen transactions reported weekly Gardiner did mighty battle with his relatives in Ceylon Theatres for the control of Millers Ltd., the venerable old department store company which is now nearly 150 years old. Millers, together with its subsidiary, Cargills, owned (and owns) very valuable real estate property in Colombo Fort, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Bandarawela and the battle for control of this company resulted in its share price going through the roof.

In the middle seventies, an eight rupee Millers share had been traded at Rs 2.25. The Gardiner - Ceylon Theatres battle for control had the price going up to over Rs 100. Ceylon Theatres won the day, but as even Gardiner’s worst detractors had to admit, he helped establish the true value of the share. So also in the case of The Finance Co. Ltd., which owns a solid chunk of Ceylinco Ltd., a modestly capitalized company that owns Ceylinco House in Colombo Fort.

Efficient

Older Lankans might remember other court room battles between Gardiner and Ceylon Insurance during the time of Mr Justin Kotelawela. Gardiner eventually exited Ceylon Insurance and that company pulled out of the Galle Face Hotel. The swap was done with Lalith Kotelawela at the helm of Ceylinco. Kotelawela today speaks most affectionately of Gardiner and his family. The combativeness of Cyril’s salad days had mellowed over the passing years and broken fences mended in later years to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Cyril Gardiner who maintained a simple lifestyle was obsessively mindful of his health. He was a nonsmoker and teetotaler, careful about what he ate and exercise conscious. “I preach what I practice” he would often say and proclaim the exercise value of ballroom dancing. He was a very good dancer and he used to say that

there is no better way to exercise than on the dance floor with a beautiful woman in his arms. Ironically, he suffered the first of the heart attacks that eventually led to his death exactly a month later while dancing at a niece's wedding.

Tragically, that stopped him from attending the much looked-forward-to wedding of his own son the next day. But Cyril insisted that everything went on as planned. He was recovering nicely after the first attack and nobody could have known then that the end was so near. But more attacks were to follow and he died on Tuesday night, September 17th after emergency by-pass surgery had been completed.

Foreboding

Last March he accompanied members of the Foreign Correspondents' Association of which he was an associate member, and to which he had recently given generous facilities at the GFH, for a weekend at Bentota Beach. He noticed Tania Arnolda, the prettily efficient young woman who handles PR at the hotel's water sports and entertainment facility, chain smoking. Before leaving for Colombo next morning, he had left her a sealed envelope. It was a tightly argued case on the dangers of smoking printed on a leaflet which must have been part of his baggage.

The previous night the hotel had hosted cocktails and a barbecue by the river. Walking back to our rooms quite late, Cyril and I had trouble finding our way back into the hotel building as all the doors seemed to be shut. It took a lot of walking (and stumbling) in the dark before we got in and both he and I were a little breathless. The phone rang soon after I got into my room. It was Cyril who asked "are you alright?" I assured him I was fine. He may have had a foreboding that the end was near because at breakfast next morning he told me: "I thought I was going to die all alone in my room."

It was not very long ago that Sanjeev Gardiner told me that he had wanted to marry quickly "so that my children can know my dad." Although that is not to be, what better compliment can any man earn from his son? Cyril certainly deserved it.

Courtesy: Sunday Observer