



Interview by Jemma Purdey with Abduh Pane, Melbourne, 20 December 2013

BA, Architecture, Melbourne University, 1960 cohort

(Edited transcript of interview)

Jemma Purdey: I'd like you to begin by telling me where you're from, originally, a little bit about your family, where you were born ...

Abduh Pane: OK. Well, I was born in a village called Poldung Dolok, Sipirok. It's a very small village, only about seven houses, in the valley of Gunung Sibual Buali, Sipirok, Tapanuli Selatan, Sumatera. I was a village boy, and my father was an Islamic religious teacher, so I was educated in an Islamic primary school, a pesantren ...

JP: Was he a kiai, or ...

AP: Not really, he was quite a moderate Islamic teacher, educated by himself in Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia. He originally wanted to go to Cairo to continue but my grandfather got him a girl, and he got married, so he just concentrated on Islamic education in Sipirok.

JP: Would children come from all around and live at the pesantren?

AP: Yes, and then they built little huts. It was a very conservative system of education, and he always wore a white gown, but after he studied in Padang he became more moderate and wore a white shirt and ordinary trousers. The villagers in my hometown considered him as a young religious teacher and they sometimes dumped him into the sewer because they didn't consider him to be a Muslim any more. They thought he was too modern.

My father was quite moderate, that's why I was educated until ninth grade at the pesantren. Actually my father wanted me to be like him, but he noticed that I preferred to play around with my tools and make things, so he thought I wasn't the type that was going to be religious.

JP: Had his father been a religious teacher?

AP: No, no, his father was just an ordinary farmer.

So my father decided to send me to technical school in Medan because I was a practical man, like a carpenter.

JP: Did you stay in a boarding school there?

AP: Yes, I went to Medan and stayed in a boarding school for two years. (The director of that school was Dutch.) Even though I'd been to primary and secondary school before I didn't pass because I was terribly bad at maths and physics!

After two years I went to senior technical school and I became one of the first graduates from the senior technical school to come top in North Sumatera. I had very good marks in my report.

So after that I applied everywhere for a job; I wrote letters to Caltex, to BPT, to the railway department ... Then I read an article in the newspaper that said the Australian government was offering scholarships to come to Australia. So I wrote a letter to the Australian Embassy, in my broken English, and posted it. That was the beginning.



Then I went by ship to Jakarta. I'd never been to Jakarta, never seen a ship before. My friends and I bought the cheapest tickets, you know, on the deck. We brought our own pillows and blankets, and one friend brought a guitar, and we went to Jakarta.

JP: Were your friends also going to apply?

AP: Yah, about six of us.

After we arrived in Jakarta, I noticed another offer in the newspaper to become a railway man. So I applied to be a student at the railway academy, and I passed so I got a free ticket from Jakarta to Bandung. And then in Bandung I noticed another offer – to join the department of works with a scholarship to study in the top technical institute in Indonesia, the Institute of Technology in Bandung (ITB). So I got a scholarship.

JP: All these opportunities, suddenly.

AP: Yah. At that time we had no money, you know, from our parents. We have to manage to educate ourselves without help from our parents. So about three months after I got the scholarship to the ITB, I'd taken some money from the government to buy a bicycle, a bed, pay for my board. Then I received a letter from the Australian Embassy. My application had been accepted.

JP: So it was just a letter. You hadn't really done any ... you'd just written an expression of interest.

AP: Yah! After about two or three months. The beginning of the beginning.

JP: How did they find you?

AP: I was a student at the ITB.

JP: Oh, they also knew that?

AP: Oh, I don't know. Good question. My address was my hometown near Medan. Oh gee.

JP: Yes. It took a while for the letter to find you.

AP: And the letter said I had to be in Cipayung, you know, near Bogor, in one week.

JP: Oh gosh.

AP: I had no money, no clothing. So I sold my bike, my bed and things to buy a second-hand suit, from a second-hand clothing dealer in the street. I was in a hurry because if I was to go to Australia I had to have a suit and tie. So I bought a suit (I think slightly too big) and one shirt (synthetic so when you wash it, it can be dry in the morning) and a reversible tie, so it looked like I had two ties.

JP: Very good. Practical.

AP: Then that is all I had.

There was no time to write to my father because it took two weeks to get a letter to the village.

And then with that I went to Cipayung. We learnt English in one week, especially practical English.

JP: Right. 'Hello, how are you?' 'Where is the train station?'

AP: And how to use a knife and fork for modern western-style dinner. I'd never used them before, I always used my hand for eating.

JP: What year was this?

AP: This was 1956. Yes, I think nearly '57, the end of '56.

JP: One week only. One week to learn a little bit about Australia, customs and a little bit of English. But you already knew some English.

AP: I'd never learned English.

JP: No? How did you write your letter then?

AP: Basic secondary school English, you know. Of course we learned English but only secondary level.

JP: Yeah.

AP: And then I was given a ticket to Australia. I'd never seen an aeroplane. (*laughs*)

JP: Oh, my goodness.

AP: I'd never seen an aeroplane; never been to the airport. And my family were in the village near Medan.

JP: They didn't know you were going.

AP: No. I just went to the airport with a very simple bag. And that was the beginning of what I consider the main gate to the huge, comprehensive environment that guided my steps.

So I got on the aeroplane. At that time the Olympic Games were going to be in Melbourne. And the plane was full of big, white, athletic people, huge, and I was a little dark fellow and spoke only broken English.

JP: How many in your group were going?

AP: I was the only one.

JP: Oh, my goodness. Oh no.

AP: The only one at that stage. But later on there were some others.

JP: Right. On your plane?

AP: Just me on the aeroplane and I arrived in Sydney. I think it was February or March 1957. I didn't know where to go.

JP: Nobody met you?

AP: No, nobody met me, so I followed the athletes to the bus and got off somewhere in the centre of Sydney, Pitt Street or something, and then I was stranded. There was a policeman on a horse, a very handsome policeman on a dark brown horse. So with my very careful English I said 'Excuse me, Sir, could you tell me where is the Commonwealth Office of Education, please?'

'There!' he said. It was right in front of me. So there, my legs were guided by God.

JP: Yeah, you just fell into these things.

AP: Yah.

JP: You had no address. Did they give you a name?

AP: No, just Commonwealth Office of Education. So I went there.

JP: Did you have money, Pak?

AP: No, especially Australian money, not a penny. Just this oversized suit.

JP: Was it hot?

AP: No at that time it was very cold. I felt like I was going to freeze.

The office was upstairs, so I went up the stairs. 'Excuse me. My name is Pane, Mohammed Abdu Pane. I am from Indonesia' I said.

'Oof, ah! We've been looking for you everywhere near the airport!'

JP: They had sent somebody.

AP: Yeah, they'd been looking for me at the airport. They were angry.

So that was the beginning.

And imagine, I'm from a village with seven houses ...

JP: What did you do in Sydney?

AP: A lady, like you, from the Commonwealth Office of Education, took me to a boarding house in Mosman.

JP: Nice.

AP: Ooh, I've never seen such a beautiful house! I boarded there with a French family, with a beautiful little girl for me to play with and I could see big ships passing every time ... By the way, fifty years later I went to see the house. It's in a millionaires' quarter, very exclusive, only billionaires can stay there.

And then, the next day I was told to come again to the office. They took me shopping and asked me to choose, to buy a suit, whatever I wanted to buy. Ooh, imagine! How could they? Australians are the most wonderful people on earth.

JP: Did you know what to buy though? Did they advise you it might get cold and you should buy something warm? What did you buy?

AP: Yes, I bought a suit. I remember seeing some schoolboys going to school, in Sydney, wearing green coats and dark green trousers. I thought it must be a uniform for students so I bought green trousers and a green coat, lighter green, like pisang [banana]. They just kept quiet.

JP: They let you go and buy green.

AP: Yah.

So I spent two months in Sydney as a high school student. Everyday I walked to the ferry terminal then went by ferry to Circular Quay. I'd never seen a ferry, never been by ...

JP: And the harbour is amazing.

AP: Yes. Then from Circular Quay I went by tram to the school. The tram was very, very unusual to me. It was a wonderful thing. Everyday.

JP: There was no anxiety. You just loved every minute.

AP: Nothing disappointing.

At school I learnt the main subjects like History of science, Maths, Physics – the main technical subjects because in my application I said I want to build my country, I want to be an engineer.

JP: That's why you got the scholarship. That's exactly what they wanted, why they wanted to give the scholarships.

So this was like a bridging program.

AP: Yes. I had to pass exams.

By the way, when I was at technical school, my hobbies were maths, physics, and chemistry. I loved it. I was mostly self-educated. So, that's why everywhere I had tests, I passed.

JP: Right.

AP: So in the high school in Sydney, I passed the Maths and Physics exams, but I failed History of science. I'd never learned about Aristotle, Socrates or Newton.

JP: No. And you would have had to write essays, which was difficult for you.

AP: Yah. So that alone, I failed.

But I was given another opportunity. Some of my friends who failed didn't go to university, they were just sent to college. So I went to the library, I read again about those famous scientists and memorised it and I passed.

JP: Ah. You've got a photographic memory.

AP: Yes, I've got a very good photographic memory. I remember the page about Newton, something about an apple. So I passed the exam.

JP: Very good. How long were you in Sydney?

AP: Two months.

JP: Two months! It's not long to learn everything, study for the exams. Do you remember where the school was?

AP: No, I'm afraid not. Somewhere near Hyde Park or something.

JP: Quite central, in the city.

AP: Yeah, it was a good high school.

And then the Commonwealth Officer asked me where I wanted to go. Sydney Uni? Architecture?

JP: Oh good, they asked. Pak, had you ever heard of an architect?

AP: No. I'm a village man.

JP: At ITB it was all engineering, wasn't it?

AP: Yeah, engineering. In first year it was just general engineering.

But I said I wanted to build buildings and so the Commonwealth Officer told me to bring a drawing of a building the next morning to see if I can become an architect or not.

JP: If you're suitable.

AP: Yah, and, by the way, I'm also a painter. I like painting and I went to the market to buy paper, coloured pencils, all kind of things to draw with. And that night I drew a batak house

JP: Like the house you used to live in?

AP: Like a house I used to pass on the bus near Lake Toba with wooden stilts and space for the pigs and things underneath and nearby bamboo trees. So I drew that

JP: From memory?

AP: Just from my memory. And then in the morning the Commonwealth Officer said he'd never seen a building like that in his life and that I could do architecture, at Melbourne uni.

JP: Just like that. Oh, how exciting!

AP: Just like that. And they sent me to Melbourne. That's how I came here.

JP: So that must be mid-1957.

AP: Yeah, and for my English I had to do tutorials night and day. Also arranged by the Commonwealth Office of Education.

JP: That's good.

AP: It's Miss Cook, I remember the name, she was a wonderful lady. She was the head of the Office of Education. She helped me in every way.

JP: So night classes ... and day classes to catch up.

AP: Yeah. Practical English and English at a university standard, so night and day. I became very thin.

JP: Working hard. Where did you live, in Melbourne, when you first arrived?

AP: We lived in a boarding house in Park Street, Parkville, near Uni High.

JP: Was that the one that Helmi was telling me about, number 48?

AP: That's right, yeah, park Street number 48, together with Helmi and Esrin and some twins and a Chinese girl. I nearly got involved with the Chinese girl.

JP: You'd never cooked before? A little bit at ITB?

AP: At home I used to cook for my parents when they went to sawah, the rice fields.

JP: Did you have brothers and sisters? I didn't ask about them.

AP: Nine.

JP: Nine! Wow. That's normal though, isn't it, to have such a big family?

AP: Yah, I am the oldest. Six boys, three girls.

So, I stayed in the boarding house only about two years and then I went to International House.

JP: Oh, lovely. And it would have been quite new.

AP: Yes, new. In fact we got involved in building the new wing.

I was accepted there, I think maybe because of Hugh O'Neill and his connection with Indonesia, and maybe Mr Dimmock, who became the Australian Cultural Attaché.

So that, again, opened up the new horizons because there were Indians, Hong Kongese, Singaporeans, Malaysians, Israelis, Spanish ... all kind of nations.

JP: International House.

AP: I was the little boy from the village and managed to mix.

JP: Why did you want to move there? Did you like the idea of living ...

AP: I don't know. Again, somebody moved my legs.

JP: I guess you were living in that house with other Indonesians ...

AP: ... speaking Indonesian all the time and spending too much time cooking and things. So maybe I wanted to move because my education was becoming higher and higher and in the third year I took a post-graduate course in town and regional planning. In the morning and afternoon I did architecture and at night I did regional planning.

JP: Was that here at Melbourne as well.

AP: Yah, at Melbourne.

JP: Wow. Extra. You needed to be dedicated to your studies.

AP: I was so ambitious because I wanted to learn how to build a town, not just a building.

JP: So you loved it, living at International House, it was perfect.

AP: Yah. And just before I graduated I became one of the senior members of International House. I became a tutor there, teaching other students. And every time we had dinner, we wore a gown and said a blessing, and I sat at the head of the table. I learnt how to be a leader, British style.

JP: So you lived there for two or three years?

AP: Three years I think, and then after I graduated I moved.

JP: And the friendships that you formed at International House, they were probably quite strong.

AP: Oh, yes. Especially, because we had dinner together and after dinner, if you were senior, you went to a common room, the senior common room, and drank brandy, whiskey ...

JP: Did you do that?

AP: Ya-ah. I learnt to do that, drink whiskey. And then we had to discuss politics and current affairs with the senior member ... it was really the British style of living for senior people. So we drank and had cheese, and that's where I discovered blue cheese, and I loved it – blue cheese and brandy.

JP: Wow, you developed a taste for the high society. Were there any other Indonesians in the senior common room?

AP: I think Esrin. Yes, Esrin ... Helmi? No.

One day General Nasution came from Indonesia, you know, he was Minister for Defence. He visited International House after Melbourne Uni. He was brought up to my room.

JP: Did you know that he was coming?

AP: No! The warden and International House wanted to show how they treated Indonesian students and I am the example. They brought him to my room. I was so nervous ...

JP: Was your room tidy? Oh my goodness, such a powerful man.

AP: They took a photo and I have that photo in my biography, 600 pages.

JP: Ooh, give me a copy. I would love to see it.

AP: It's in Indonesian.

JP: That's OK.

AP: General Nasution is from Tapanuli Selatan, where I come from, from our kabupaten [district]. So maybe that's why the warden brought him, to show that our people can also learn in Australia, and become successful. Soon I would be an architect.

JP: Do you know what year this would have been? I can check it.

AP: Yeah, '61-'62.

And later on the Foreign Minister come to Australia and all the Indonesian graduates were given an ultimatum: anybody that graduated must return home. 'We need you.' And he's a communist, you know.

JP: Who was it?

AP: Subandrio. And in Australia at that time we had an anti-communist group – anti-Soekarno and anti-communist-regime – but it's a secret, underground. And at the time our icon was Professor Doctor Subito.

And by the way, at that time, my father also joined the rebels because my father was the leader of the anti-communists in my country and he went to jail, into the jungle, chased by the government forces. You don't have to mention anything.

JP: During the revolution?

AP: Yah.

JP: So the group was just this loose group that was underground and got together to talk about politics.

AP: Yah, only among the so-called leaders. And we had a secret bulletin ...

JP: Wow. But also there was the aboveground PPIA?

AP: Yah, PPIA, Persatuan Pelajar Indonesia di Australia [Indonesian Students Association in Australia]. I was the secretary-general of the PPIA at the time.

JP: And so tell me, when the Foreign Minister came and said you all have to return home, did you feel like he was really bullying or something?

AP: At that time, I'd already met Margaret, my girlfriend. At International House we could dance, every week practically, so we'd find girls so we had a partner. International House is very close to the women's college, Janet Clarke Hall, so we looked for girls there. One of my friends had a girlfriend and I met Margaret through his girlfriend. Margaret was doing nursing at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, at that time, so it was very close.

If I married an Australian girl, maybe I could become an Australian citizen but when I came here I'd written a statement saying that when I graduated I would work for the Republic of Indonesia for five years plus the length of my stay here. I stayed here nearly seven years seven months so I had to work for the government for twelve years. As a religious man, morality came into it. I felt I shouldn't disobey my commitment. I had to go back. But before I did we got engaged.

JP: What year was that?

AP: End of '64. I graduated in 1964.

JP: With your two degrees: architecture and planning.

AP: Yes. I failed one year in town planning because I couldn't cope with planning law, that's why I had to do another year. I finished architecture in 1963 but town planning in '64 so I graduated from them together in 1964.

JP: But no work here, no work experience here?

AP: Oh yeah. As a student I had to do practical work ...

JP: But that was after, added on? Or did you do that during the year you were finishing?

AP: I had to work, to practice, in an architect's office and a town planning office in Melbourne. It was a beautiful office with carpet and a beautiful drafting machine. So I had experience here.

When I went to Jakarta the Director General of Higher Learning asked me to be a lecturer at ITB. I said 'I don't want to be a lecturer, I want to build'.

I was trained as an architect but I wanted to build Indonesian towns. I was very idealistic. Imagine going from academics to applying practice in Indonesia. Anyway, I refused and they offered me a job planning all the new universities in Indonesia. That's what I like! I said I'd love to design all those university complexes from west to east.

They brought me to the office but when I saw the office with wooden furniture scattered around, full of dust and dirty – and I had experienced working in a carpeted, air-conditioned office – I said 'No way'. If I'd accepted it I could have revolutionised it and created modern university complexes every day, but I refused.

Oh, the Director General was angry with me. He said 'OK. Go and find your own job. Go!'

Then I got a letter from my father saying that I'd been away for a long time and asking me to come home. So I moved to Medan.

At that time they didn't have a bachelor in regional town planning because officially ...

JP: They didn't recognise the bachelor of architecture.

AP: No. So I was IR, insinyur [engineer]. I had a letter from the Director General of Higher Education saying that IR Abdu Pane must work for the government for so many years according to agreement such and such.

JP: OK, so someone had to give you a job.

AP: Yah. So I went to Medan and I met a man at my boarding house who knew the mayor. And he told me to apply to the Mayor for a job. So I applied and in one week I got the job, in the municipality of Medan.

JP: You would have been the only architect working there. They had no architects.

AP: The only architect and town and regional planner in Indonesia, maybe. No, it's very unusual to have both degrees. And I was placed in the section of town planning of Medan. It was just being created under the Department of Works. So I was placed there, and in one year I became the head of town planning for the city of Medan.

JP: Wow, after one year. You were the most qualified. Many challenges?

AP: O-o-oh, that's a long story. You have enough time?

So I tried to plan the city of Medan. The only map of Medan was of a very small area from the Dutch time and the highest level of education of my staff was senior technical school. Somehow I got to know the geographer of the Kodam Bukit Barisan, the army. They have their own topographer, making maps. Secretly, I paid him, personally, to make a map (the army got all the maps, you know) of the larger Medan area with my name in it. That was the beginning of making the master plan of Medan. I developed Medan five times larger than the Dutch original perimeter. Five times.

We worked together with the councillors of Medan, and they were so excited about it because Medan would become five times larger. It took about five years, you know ...

JP: Is that all?

AP: Four or five years for the planning and passing through regulations and law. In Indonesia I had to follow the regulations. Every time I proposed something they said my thinking was too westernised, terlalu kepala belandaan [too Dutch- or white-headed]. So I had to use the planologi, the town planner, from ITB as a consultant – under my direction, but the name is ITB. And then later on I had a graduate, also from ITB planning, as my deputy. So that was the beginning, we planned the master plan of the city of Medan, five times larger, until the year 2000.

JP: So this was 1970, or something, that you were doing this planning and you were looking forward thirty years.

AP: Yes, thirty years. And it was approved by the mayor, the council, the council of North Sumatera, the governor and the Minister of the Interior and the Department of Works. It was a very long process because it all had to be approved. The process took about two years, so in 1972 the master plan we created was approved by the minister and become the official guide for the development of the city of Medan.

After that my employee level, you know golongan pegawai, couldn't get higher if I stayed in Medan, so somehow or other I moved provinces. I had done my job; the master plan of Medan was already done so the time had come to go upstairs.

At that time the governor was General Tambunan, he was educated at Point Cook, Australia. See, it's all connected to Australia. So, I visited him, with my history of education and practice. At that time the government had just created a regional development planning board and the chairman was Professor Doctor Hadibroto, an economist, and the deputy chairman was the ex-mayor of Medan. So General Tambunan appointed me as just ordinary staff of the Regional Development Planning Board of North Sumatera, called Bappeda (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah) Sumatera Utara.

After six months there I was appointed as the secretary of that planning board. That's second echelon, a higher level, the same as the mayor. So that is when I got involved in regional planning.

Regional planning must also be according to the laws and regulations of Indonesia. My job, practically, was to coordinate and to balance the wishes of the minister, the governor, the mayor, the bupati [district head] and all others, you know the Department of Plantations, Department of Works, electricity, water ... So my work was to coordinate those, and I had to be neutral. This is the job of the secretary. The chairman just signs, yeah?

JP: What a challenge. And what was happening in North Sumatera at that time? Was there a lot of development and investment, or not?

AP: After two years I became the deputy chairman, and during that time I received a lot of offers from overseas, like from the United States. The State Department invited me to study in the United States, to go on a study tour about urban planning and urban government. We practically visited all the United States, meeting with councillors and town planners. It broadened my depth again after the main gate opened in Australia.

The study tour was financed by the United States. I knew the Consulate General of the United States in Medan and one day he asked me if I'd like to go to the United States.

'Oh sure' I said.

'You'll have to pass an English test' he said.

'What do you mean an English test?' I said. 'I'm a graduate from Melbourne University!'

'Oh, oh, sorry, sorry. It's OK.' And he gave me tickets and arranged it all for the United States.

JP: You went on a big tour.

AP: Right. Chicago, Minneapolis, Washington, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans ...

JP: Did you go to the city councils and ...

AP: Yes, together with other groups from Portugal, Spain, the Philippines, Japan, China, Malaysia ... Again international.

JP: How long was this for?

AP: Two months. It was wonderful. And after that somehow I was appointed as chairman, from deputy chairman of the planning board to chairman of the investment board. I had to promote North Sumatera to investors. That was the benefit of being international. The Indonesian government thought of sending me to do things for the country, you know.

Sometimes we had to go to promote North Sumatera overseas, together with the National Investment Board in Jakarta. So I came to Australia to promote to investors, and to Singapore, of course because it's close, there were a lot of investors there, and then to the United States.

JP: They were the main places, Australia, Singapore, the US. And was it mostly for mining, plantations ...

AP: All kind of things including fish industries. I also dealt with Norwegian investors in fish industries. If I hadn't come to Australia this wouldn't have opened. It's a global environment. Through the gate ... Imagine, how lucky I am.

JP: So you enjoyed that job?

AP: Tremendously.

JP: Were you doing enough of the planning? You'd left building things behind but it was a different kind of building, I guess.

AP: That's another story. After that, I somehow became the chairman, the governor appointed me as chairman of the planning board. I became the chairman of the Regional Development Planning Board of North Sumatera.

JP: Back to the planning board. You were secretary before.

AP: Yeah. At that time the authority of the planning board was third after the government and the governor, so the number plate on my car was number three, UK3A. So I was the third man in North Sumatera.

JP: Ooh. The power.

AP: At that time I was invited by the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) in Den Hague, Netherlands. So, again, I was invited to study local authorities overseas. We studied in The Hague, in Holland, and did comparative studies in Dublin, Ireland, London and Berlin. We studied planning and the local government systems, not the central government, in those countries.

JP: Lovely, touring cities ...

AP: Practically seeing the whole world, and then returning home.

As chairman, every year I had to make a yearly budget, for all kinds of projects. The government left it to me. So, you know, the money from the central government, from the provincial government, from the local government, the mayor, the bupati, and from all these different agencies – perkebunan [plantation], pertanian [agriculture], electricity, gas, everything. Every year it was my job, for five years.

JP: Oh, that can really make a difference. So the central government didn't really have any control or say, you were the one who made the decisions, they just funnelled the money in?

AP: No, I had to be careful to meet in their needs and wants and regulations. But I had staff; in my department I had physical development, economic, agriculture, law, and research. The five. I was really a manager, not really a town planner.

JP: You had to have the big vision.

AP: Yeah, I had to coordinate and everybody came to report to me. At that time, now it's different, but at that time, every time the ambassador or consul-general came from Jakarta, before they visited the governor, they would visit me. I was very important, because I could speak English and the governor couldn't.

Sometimes they only had time to see me and asked me to be with the governor to explain about the parliament and everything in North Sumatera.

JP: And the governor changes frequently whereas you've had this long time working in the government.

AP: I had four governors, generals in the army ...

JP: So they had no idea.

AP: Oh, the army generals ... an order is an order, it has to be obeyed.

After that my ranking is at the top, I was already sixty years old and I was golongan empat A [level four A]. Empat A is the same as a full-grown general. So my level was the same as a general and I had to be retired – compulsory retirement at sixty – unless I wanted to be a lecturer. So I became a lecturer for the Department of Education and Training, in North Sumatera but appointed by the Minister for Education in Jakarta.

These lecturers are called media *suara* because they're experienced officials. So my job was to educate personnel to become more senior. My lowest student was a camat [sub-district head]. And my other students were doctors, engineers, lawyers, so the system of education is not like teaching at university. Merely dialogue, discussing my experience and what they want to know, not just textbooks, it's based on experience. So I did that for five years.

JP: So you travelled around the whole of North Sumatera doing this, going to workshops ...

AP: The whole of Indonesia. I took my students to Jogja, Surabaya, Bandung, and then ...

JP: Like you were doing in America, you took them on a study tour.

AP: Yes, took them and gave them guidance.

JP: In town planning, in urban planning, in ...

AP: My first subject was budgeting in government projects, then I was asked to teach strategic planning and then, later, environmental management, environmental administration.

JP: That was something that people were only beginning to think about later.

AP: Yes, it's something now that's still a big problem, the environment. Training of trainers, then, we did in Jakarta. My training about the environment was from Australia.

JP: But so much travelling in doing that.

AP: Yah, mainly local, in Indonesia. But because of that I could retire at sixty-five.

JP: Let's go back to Medan, When did Margaret join you?

AP: Is it part of this story?

JP: Yah! This is the main part ... connections.

AP: Yeah, it's amazing. She is the bravest woman on earth, very brave.

We were engaged in Melbourne and when I went to Indonesia, we had an agreement that when I found work and a house she would come and see, and decide whether to get married or not. In Melbourne I had already explained to her about the conditions in Indonesia, like me having a bath in the river in the village, eating meat once a month, and what Islamic religion is. I explained gradually, prepared her not to be shocked.

So when I went, I got a job in Medan and I lived in the pavilion of a house. She bought a return ticket, to Jakarta and Medan, and told her father she was going to Indonesia. He told her she must be crazy, that Indonesia's a very poor country and communist. My father-in-law didn't approve.

JP: Had you met her parents before?

AP: Yes. You want to know how? *(laughs)*

JP: Tell me how you met them. What it was like. They're from Ballarat, right?

AP: Yes, Margaret was born in Ballarat.

One day her father knew she was going with an Asian boy and he came in his car and parked in front of International House.

JP: He was looking for you.

AP: Looking for me. And when I came out he said 'Sir, sit in the front.'

JP: Oh, in the car?

AP: In the car! Then he asked me when I was going to separate with his daughter. My heart was pumping.

JP: What do you say?

AP: 'Sir, I think it depends on Margaret.'

JP: Good answer.

AP: Anyhow, it didn't take very long and my future father-in-law left. Then not long after that I went back to Indonesia.

JP: Margaret was determined.

AP: Yes, but at that time I was somehow a naughty boy. Margaret was sick and she went home to Ballarat. But I didn't know and I thought because of what her father said ... So I played around with a Dutch girl. She was a Jew, didn't believe in God, but she was very nice and very friendly with me, she brought me to her father's house in the country, sleeping in their house.

Somehow there was an Indonesian ship here and we were invited with some girls who also knew Indonesia. Margaret came and I was so surprised, I hugged her and kissed her in front of everybody. I was in a group of many Australian girls.

JP: Not the Dutch girl?

AP: No, she didn't go. So that was the beginning.

JP: Another beginning.

AP: Another beginning.

After that we got engaged, and later she came to Medan.

JP: She was just going to have a look. See if she liked it.

AP: Yes, during that time the communists were in power. '65, you know that time.

JP: It was a difficult time.

AP: So we decided to get married but no departemen agama [religion department] or khatib, you know, dared to marry us because she was a colonialist. But my father knew someone who was brave enough to marry us, a government official.

JP: How did your father feel about you marrying a westerner?

AP: My father said 'You will marry her if she becomes a Muslim'.

JP: Easy.

AP: She became a Muslim – vows, shahada – then we got married, but the ceremony was in Sipirok. Sipirok is a small town but quite famous because many government ministers in Jakarta originally come from Sipirok. Big shots. And when we got married there was so many people that the service had to be in the school. The whole village came to see me marry a Dutch girl, orang belanda, a white person. There, any white is Dutch.

And the bathroom in the school, was a public bathroom, every time Margaret went to the bathroom everybody followed her.

So anyhow we got married and then I was trained to be in army, I have to wear a uniform ...

JP: Because you were a pegawai [official] you had to do that?

AP: Yah. So somehow I managed to become the architect of a famous contractor, during the daytime I worked and at night I designed buildings. Sometimes from one design we could buy furniture, and then we could rent a house. We practically started from minus zero.

JP: Margaret didn't have anything. Didn't bring anything with her, just arrived.

AP: Of course, it's impossible. Also, I have nothing. Sometimes we borrowed chairs from the main house.

JP: If you had friends come.

AP: Yah. She was very patient, she could stand it, and ...

JP: Was she able to work?

AP: No. She just went to the market and did the shopping and later on she managed to socialise with the wives of government officials. Every time the governor's wife wanted

to meet the wife of the ambassador Margaret had to be with her, she became an interpreter for the wives, that group of elite women.

JP: So she probably helped your career.

AP: Very much so.

JP: You kept going up, thanks to Margaret.

AP: Imagine someone like me having an Australian wife; I was considered not an ordinary man.

So as an architect, I designed buildings and from one project, I could buy a car – a Holden Premier car. The mayor had a Holden Premier car, and would go to play golf and I, also with a Holden Premier car, went to play golf with my wife.

JP: And children, when did they come?

AP: Hmm. It took four years. Couldn't have children. We got medicine from the United States but it didn't work, we couldn't get pregnant. But my grandmother was a dukun, a healer using natural medicine, and somehow she took a root and made a drink and Margaret got pregnant. After four years we had Epita. Then, not even one year later, the second one, Elissa was born.

Elissa was with us in Medan but I sent her to Brisbane, to TAFE, where there is a catering course, hospitality. And Epita managed to get a scholarship to study a master's degree here from the University of North Sumatera.

JP: She got a scholarship from the Indonesian government to do a master's.

AP: Then after that, she came back to Indonesia and after two or three years applied to do a PhD and got a scholarship again. Now my grandson has become a student at Melbourne uni. My grandson is 18. Epita has two sons, one is doing science but will major in medicine; he wants to be a doctor. That's the second one. The first one wants to study the environment and it looks like he will go into regional planning, urban planning. I was so happy.

JP: Amazing! So they live here obviously. But Epita and Elissa are Indonesian citizens, were born in Indonesia?

AP: Yeah, both Indonesian citizens.

JP: But Epita's children they'll be Australian citizens, were they born here?

AP: Kind of permanent residence.

My third grandson managed to pass English with 94.5 per cent, that's why he's been accepted into Melbourne uni. He went to Mount Alexandra High School. It's considered to be ...

JP: One of the selective schools.

AP: No, it's low class, just an ordinary high school. But he likes Harry Potter, he read those books and his English is better than his mother's, a master.

JP: Yeah, because he's speaking it like a native.

AP: Yeah. If you can read Harry Potter books you must speak good English. And the second one is very sociable, he's very good at mixing with people. And he managed to cross the Kokoda trail.

JP: So he joined a group. He likes the outdoors.

Will they stay here permanently? Is Epita's husband Indonesian?

AP: Her husband is also Indonesian. He has a scholarship from DT, in Jakarta, to do a PhD. He got his master's degree from Melbourne uni, with Epita.

JP: Also dentistry.

AP: No. He's a civil engineer. Mainly in water engineering, but his supervisor advised him to change and now he's doing research into how to use the dust from burning coal. He's doing that at RMIT. He applied to go to Melbourne uni but the topic wasn't right.

JP: So they're both doing PhDs.

AP: My daughter is working at the Dental Hospital. She just submitted her thesis. And I thought she would get her aggregation sometime this month but not yet.

JP: And your wife's family? Obviously you must have taken the children to visit them in Ballarat.

AP: Oh yah. And they've come to Indonesia. After we had two daughters my father- and mother-in-law came to Medan. We gave them first class service. We already had our own house, a big house, and a Holden car to take them to Lake Toba, to Jakarta, to Jogja. And after they had granddaughters everything was normal.

So I went to Melbourne uni, my daughter went to Melbourne uni and my grandson.

JP: Three generations. And as you say, your father's generation could never ever have dreamt of that.

AP: I'm the luckiest man on earth.

JP: And what about your siblings? Did they get the opportunity to study like you did?

AP: My brother did even better. The brother under me also went to Jakarta and tried to get money by writing. He managed to go to ITB and studied geology. He got a job with Pertamina, the government oil company. One day he disagreed with the oil company in North Sumatera that was run by the army and they kicked him out by sending him to Germany to study.

So my brother was educated in Germany and when he came back to Jakarta he became a big shot in the oil company. Pertamina mixed with Mobil Oil, Caltex ...

JP: In the 1970s?

AP: Yah, all this big stuff.

JP: Boom time.

AP: Sometimes he went to conferences in the United States, Latin America, London, Australia and he was even involved in the laws about national border lines related to oil.

JP: And he writes as well?

AP: No time. If you are working in an oil company you get dollars and dollars. You don't think in rupiah. He has plenty of money. And his first son is not terribly interested in education but the second one finished civil engineering at ITB and then did a master's degree and PhD in Michigan, United States. And he has worked in Norway, Switzerland and Cambridge as a researcher. After that his father said 'Enough. Come home.'

I advised him not to come to Indonesia. I told him they wouldn't use a man like him properly. My brother was angry with me. So anyhow, my nephew is now a lecturer at ITB, he's the head of the laboratory at ITB. He gets all the projects from all of Indonesia to analyse construction and has become a consultant. He's a rich man now.

And his other second son managed to get a scholarship to Japan. He's also in engineering and he got a scholarship to do a master's degree in computers, trying to analyse how to use your body heat to generate electricity to run your mobile phone. He got a job with BP and then the professor in Japan invited him to do a PhD. So he went back to Japan, with his wife, a dentist – she's also doing a PhD.

Their children want to go to school in Japan. They don't like Indonesian education. At home in Jakarta, when his children fight they speak in Japanese. My nephew translates cartoons from Japanese into Indonesian. His professor in Japan said his language skills were better than a Japanese person.

JP: Indonesians love Japanese comics and cartoons, don't they?

AP: Yah. So he gets money just from translating cartoons.

JP: Wow, that's so amazing.

Did your daughters go to local schools in Medan? They didn't need to go to an international school?

AP: Yes. In Medan there is a class where they learned English. So maybe that's one of the basic requirements. My grandsons came to Melbourne, with their mother, for secondary school. They rented a house. And when they came back they had to learn Indonesian again.

My second brother's daughter did a master's degree in the United States.

JP: Nobody wants to stay in Indonesia.

AP: And his second daughter graduated from Queensland. So our family is an international family.

JP: You don't want Epita to go back to Indonesia? You're happy for her to stay here with the children?

AP: At the moment, the political situation with the system of education in Indonesia is very low. There is no hope. If you want to have a job in Indonesia you have to pay, it doesn't depend on your expertise. It's also political.

JP: In your government roles, you must have been very good at negotiating all these different groups. You said your brother couldn't handle the army when he worked for Pertamina in North Sumatera, but you must have been very good at negotiating these groups, the army, the politicians and all of that.

AP: It started when I became the secretary. After several years as a secretary I learnt the tricks, the techniques, how to negotiate. I couldn't be too hard, I had to be diplomatic and

understand their wishes. Maybe it came from our family, my father is like that, so maybe it's in my blood.

JP: And also this role he had as a community leader was something you easily took in your work and also in Melbourne when you were secretary general of the PPIA and at International House.

AP: When I was secretary general of the PPIA I hid a lot because lots of journalists came to see me about Indonesia and I tried to avoid them.

JP: Helmi was telling me that he and some of the others were part of a musical troupe that used to go around Victoria, to regional centres, and perform and talk about Indonesia.

AP: Yes, we were together. We did that at Melbourne uni also, on special occasions we would sing.

JP: Oh great! Hugh O'Neill told me about the architecture review and your wonderful performance. You became famous.

AP: Also in the Moomba Parade, International House took part in the parade. We hired a float and had all the international flags.

So all those things accumulated to create my own way of thinking.

JP: Yah, and what you were doing was public diplomacy here. You were ambassadors from Indonesia, talking about Indonesia, educating Australians really.

So you were a singer, were you? Or guitar? What did you do?

AP: You know, when I first arrived in Sydney I was invited to the town hall for the first social gathering of Indonesians in Australia. And somebody asked me to sing. At home I always had my mouth organ and when I was lonely I would play. So I used my mouth organ in the town hall in Sydney.

JP: Was it a tune people knew?

AP: Yeah, I played Waltzing Matilda. Oh, they were all excited. And then I played 'Dari barat sampai ketemu ...' which sounds like the French national anthem. So everybody stood up. They thought I was playing the French national anthem!

After that I was invited to many places. My brother wanted to play the mouth organ. In Bandung he played suling, the flute.

JP: For money?

AP: No. Just at wedding parties because he could play the flute and then get to eat chicken.

JP: He was an entrepreneur. I love that everyone had some music and that it was a great communicator. It could reach across cultures.

AP: Yah. Nobody taught me to play, I just learnt by myself.

JP: So you were part of that group. But you studied hard. Helmi tells me that he didn't really study, that he was always playing music, distracted ...

AP: Yeah, he plays guitar very well.

JP: And another man I met, Mustapha Sabarudin, he was also in a band, at Monash, and it was more like rock 'n' roll music. People were busy doing other things, not necessarily studying hard. And you had Margaret, so you were busy having a girlfriend.

AP: For four years there was no time to have a girlfriend, only when I was near graduating.

JP: You were serious until then. And now, you said you come every year to Melbourne. You must catch up with lots of old friends.

AP: Yeah, like last time Epita and Ergon, her husband, had a seminar in Japan so we came to look after the kids. This September Ergon is going to a seminar in Czechoslovakia and Poland, so we will come out here. It depends, but mostly every Christmas and New Year my wife wants to go home. Fortunately we have money. I have investments in real estate so from rent for a house and shops we get some money, enough to come here. Otherwise we couldn't. And now we live in a house with land about 4200 square metres, one acre. We grow big trees, fruit trees – it's like a jungle.

JP: Is it in the city?

AP: It was outside the city, it's in the middle of the city now.

JP: Your five times larger Medan, is it part of that or even outside that?

AP: At the time it was still outside Medan. But now the price of land is very high. Medan is growing very fast. It's beyond the master plan we created. During my time we created Medan metropolis, about four million population, now it's much bigger with satellite towns.

JP: And how's the infrastructure, public transport?

AP: Traffic jams. The growth is beyond our expectations, much faster than we anticipated.

JP: So going back to that decision when you heard Subandrio say you have to come home. You don't have any regrets about making that decision.

AP: No. No regrets and I don't feel guilty.

JP: Yeah, well that's the main thing, you've fulfilled your obligation.

AP: Because the government paid for me, to go to Australia, and I think I've done my best for Margaret.

JP: In looking after her well. And that was the Australian commitment, they said to Indonesia they would train your people and send them back so they can contribute to building the nation.

AP: So, when I read in the newspaper that Tony Abbot is going to revive the Colombo Plan, I am so pleased because that is the way of opening the world. You can imagine, it's impossible for me to order an army to attack Australia. It's unimaginable, Melbourne is my second home town.

JP: Yeah, so the more people who have that level of contact. You know, the Foreign Minister himself is an alumnus from the ANU, Marty Natalegawa, and it didn't stop him from getting quite angry at Australia.

AP: But in his heart ...

JP: Yeah, it was about feeling like a friend had betrayed you, it's quite a different thing.

AP: Our vice-president is from Monash. He just came here. Did you meet him?

JP: I didn't. I was in Adelaide at Flinders University. But that's it, there's all these people in very senior positions now, like yourself, they're running the government and they've had this exposure to Australia. We hope that it means they, like you, have a deeper sense of who we are, if nothing else.

AP: It's a very good idea. The only thing is there should be more Australians to study in Indonesia.

JP: That's what the reverse Colombo Plan is.

AP: Vice versa. Like you.

JP: It'll be post-graduate.

AP: Like Susan Rogers, the anthropologist, she spent four years in Sipirok studying music and aural communication.

JP: So it is good. We just have to convince Australians to go. There's people like me but we're very few. We have to convince the broader community.

AP: Also high school exchange, maybe for one or two years. It could make a lot of difference. But not only in Jakarta and Jogja. When I talked to the officer for foreign education here he told me I was a regionalist, not a nationalist, I prefer there to be study in different parts of Indonesia.

JP: I hope they do. They're just planning it now so I'm not sure what it'll look like but it's going in the right direction. So do you keep informed about Australian politics and current affairs, do you follow it much?

AP: Every day, we have satellite TV. My wife watches football in Medan.

JP: Does she? Who does she barrack for?

AP: Always Geelong. Practically every day we can watch the ABC. Also CNN and BBC, all kinds of overseas news. We seldom watch local TV.

JP: You're a true internationalist. You're saying you're a regionalist but your world has a true global outlook there.

AP: My environmental horizon is, I think, very wide. And I'm very grateful for that, and the main gate for that is when I came to Australia. And now, every time I come here I spend most of my time in the Baillieu and State libraries reading about the environment.

JP: That's your passion now.

AP: I was accepted to do a PhD at the Queensland University. My topic was environmental development strategy and human settlement. The subject was too big and my supervisor was Professor Singh, he's a lecturer at Melbourne Uni now and was one of the innovative architects at Queensland University. So I did that as a part time external. Every time I went to Europe or the United States I would pass through Brisbane to consult with my supervisor.

After a while I asked permission, because I had to have permission from the governor, and the governor at the time said 'Do you want to be a doctor or a pegawai negeri [civil servant]?' So I had to terminate my studies.

JP: You had to make a choice. That's short-sighted, isn't it? You should be encouraging your staff to be furthering their education. They wouldn't give you time off to go and do it, then come back?

AP: No. I had to steal the time when I was travelling. But I wrote a fairly thick draft of my thesis and the supervisor said your draft is too fat and too governmental, not scientific. That's what I wanted to show, though, how they do things in government not just in academia. But they didn't accept it.

Later on they changed my supervisor and said I could continue if I wanted to but that my draft was too fat and I could skim the fat off. One supervisor said we could write five theses from my draft. After that I became too busy, it was impossible. So now I'm continuing my research. I've done hundreds and hundreds of pages of a literature search into the environment from the ecological, economic, political, built environment, architectural and legal points of view.

JP: Are you looking at a particular case? In Medan?

AP: No, mainly journals from the US and Oxford.

JP: That's very big. You need to focus it.

AP: I thought I'd focus on human settlement.

JP: Human settlement where?

AP: Just why human settlement is where it is. Why, for example, did human settlement start originally at the ends of rivers. I was the chairman of the environmental analysis committee when I was on the planning board. Every project must go past me from the environmental point of view and I became more and more interested in the environment.

JP: There wouldn't have been much regulation.

AP: In Indonesia the regulations are so complicated.

JP: Do people just ignore them? Is that what happens?

AP: Yeah, it doesn't work. Poor people don't care about the environment. Like in Jakarta ...

JP: And big companies know they can get away with it ...

AP: Yeah, they can bribe, you know. The regulations are perfect, very good, but they're not implemented, the department that's supposed to look after it don't enforce them.

JP: Is there an environmental protection agency?

AP: Now there is an environmental board for North Sumatera. During my time I was the chairman and my secretary was from the environmental department of the governor. Anyhow, now, every time I come here I copy documents onto my tablet to read later.

JP: Have you noticed that architecture graduates have much more interest in the environment and environmental sustainability. That wouldn't have been something that was on the curriculum when you studied it, was it?

AP: Now they have to pass a Bachelor of Environment before they become an architect. Architecture is a speciality.

JP: Are you and Margaret involved in any organisations in Medan that have Australian connections? Is there a group of Australian-Indonesian couples?

AP: I was the chairman of the Australian Alumni of North Sumatera for thirteen years. After that I thought it was enough and time for someone else to take over. The organisation's not running very well now.

JP: Was that something the alumni organised themselves or did the embassy help? How did that work?

AP: We did it ourselves. When I was chairman I practically financed it. Our main function was to welcome the ambassador. If the ambassador came we organised a party, made a speech and gave presents.

JP: You've met all the ambassadors then.

AP: Yes, and my wife, and we've given them all kinds of presents. I don't know where many of them are now.

JP: Is there an Australian consulate in Medan?

AP: There was. Now they call it the Australia Centre, it has some consular services. Many students want to come to Australia and their applications are processed there. Also promotion and things, it's very successful.

JP: When were you chairman of the alumni group, what years?

AP: I've forgotten now. I think when I was the chairman of the planning board, maybe until 1984. When you come to Medan I'll show you my personal autobiography, not for publication, just for friends because my wife doesn't like it, it's too personal.

JP: And you said the group's not really active now?

AP: Now there are more Chinese-Indonesian graduates from Australia, they have their own group.

JP: They're private students who paid for their own studies.

AP: Yeah. And lately they're mostly PhD and higher graduates, they become lecturers in universities in Medan and they are too busy.

JP: There's something called the Alumni Reference Group. The embassy has set up these groups and they have chapters all around Indonesia, there would be one in Medan, and it's for people who were scholarship recipients. They call them Australia Awards Alumni, they've changed the name. They appoint someone every two years to look after it and then the embassy come and run workshops and professional development days. It's just to keep people networked.

AP: And maybe for the ones who are still working, and I'm retired. But even since I've retired I always get letters from Melbourne uni asking for donations. Sometimes I send something and sometimes I don't.

JP: That's very good of you. But if I came to Medan you could introduce me to other alumni.

AP: Yes, for sure. I think that would complete the research, there would be quite a few people: different people different experiences. And then you can see Esrin Ardi in Kuala Lumpur, I've met him there. We are getting old. But he's on the internet, you can look him up.

JP: I will. Helmi couldn't find his email address for me but I should be able to find it.

We have this webpage for our project. And we have a survey that we can fill out if you feel like it where we just ask you a few questions.

AP: And also Jamil Wahid, in Kuala Lumpur, he's a very rich businessman. He's from Aceh but has become Malaysian. He was my classmate here but he did commerce. You'll get him through Esrin, he's his friend. He's a palm oil tycoon. His daughters graduated from London. That's a different story again.

There's other graduates in Medan, also doing commerce, agriculture, all different. I know many from when I was chairman. I don't know how you can write a book, they're all different.

JP: But that's what we want. It's a collection of stories. So you're going to have a whole list for me in Medan. Next year I'm going to come. Can I email you?

AP: You know, I'm not really good on email. That's usually my grandson.

JP: So far Epita has been my person on email, she's very good on the email, very quick.

AP: Yes, yes. She communicates daily with all kinds of patients. She has patients booked for next year. Amazing!

JP: Yeah, there's a big demand for dentistry here.

AP: And also friends in Indonesia, like my birthday, I received lots of happy birthdays.

JP: Email's amazing. So Margaret's here too and she's looking after the grandchildren.

AP: Yeah, on Friday my daughter and son-in-law are working so she looks after the grandchildren. She loves it.

JP: She must miss them when you're back in Indonesia.

AP: We communicate with this thing ... skype. We talk to them every day, hear their little voices.

JP: I was in Jakarta a few weeks ago and a friend there, her daughter's in America, and they do that, talk every night. It's quite amazing, isn't it.

END

