Saturday, March 10th 1945 was a public holiday in Kuala Lumpur, to celebrate Japan’s Navy Day, and the Selangor Museum was closed in company with all Government Offices. Those who had attended a ceremonial parade on the playing field in front of the Selangor Club had dispersed and half of an uneventful morning had passed when the wail of syrens warned the long suffering population that enemy planes were approaching.

Though the planes circled high above the town several times the Japanese anti-aircraft guns did not open fire nor did any Japanese fighter planes go up to attack the raiders. There is consequently little excuse for what followed.

After locating their target, which was the Railway marshalling yard and locomotive shed,—standing on the opposite side of Damansara Road from the museum and nearly 100 yards away from the old Museum building,—the ‘planes—B.29’s—dropped a succession of high explosive bombs. Some of these hit the empty locomotive sheds but one of the later salvos dropped directly on the East Wing of the Museum and destroyed almost everything which was on display in that part of the building. The planes then left for their base. The Japanese had transferred their railway engines and coaches six miles outside Kuala Lumpur some months before this air-raid. The fruits of this long distance flight thus scarcely justified the effort and expense.

The West Wing of the Museum, although not directly hit by the bombing, lost many tiles from the roof, exposing the exhibits below to sun and rain. Salvage operations were quickly started by the small Museum staff, led by Enche Bachik bin Mohd. Tahir, the Clerk-Caretaker, and in response to his appeal for help to Dr. Takahasi, the Japanese Official in Charge, fifty clerks from other Government Offices came daily to remove all exhibits to a place of safety. The place chosen was the Convent at Bukit Nanas, not far from the site of the first Temporary Museum in Kuala Lumpur sixty years earlier, and the entire contents of the Museum were locked up in a number of the Convent’s empty class rooms, where they remained until the end of 1945.

The East Wing of the Museum which was hit and largely destroyed
by the bombs had been mainly occupied by Natural History displays, including a large mounted Elephant, tigers, deer and other Malayan mammals. A comprehensive collection of Malayan butterflies, moths and insects to which the late H. M. Pendlebury—the last Curator before the war—had devoted special attention, was also a total loss. Examples of every species of sea water and fresh water fish and crustacea had been on display and these also disintegrated, as did a large collection of geological specimens and samples of every variety of Malayan timber. Few of these objects are irreplaceable, though their destruction must be deeply deplored, but a collection of 95 pieces of Ming porcelain, which were also in the East Wing and shared its fate, may be regarded as the most serious loss of all.

On the upper floor, above the East Wing Gallery, the Director’s Office also suffered severely, but by singular good fortune the contents of a number of cupboards, standing against the walls, which contained valuable books and records, emerged relatively unharmed though they were in some cases affected by rain and damp before they were salvaged; they were not able to be removed for a month after the bombing, because that section of the building was considered to be unsafe and no one was allowed to enter it until it had been temporarily shored up by the P.W.D.

The contents of the West Wing included a collection of 124 Keris and 114 other Malay weapons, over 300 specimens of Malay silverware, a varied selection of handwoven Malay cloth, pottery, fibre mats, and Malay wood carving (mainly from Negri Sembilan), a variety of ethnographical specimens used by Malayan aborigines, and many prehistoric stone implements; these survived unharmed.

There was also a large collection of mounted Malayan birds and mounted specimens of the small Malayan mammals such as mousedeer, civet cats and scaly anteaters, and the mounted heads of seladang and deer.

The rooms on the floor above were used as a store for entomological specimens and a unique collection of dried leaves from different parts of Malaysia which had been assembled by Messrs. M. R. Henderson and H. C. Robinson in the 1920’s. These were fortunately unharmed and were transferred to the Forest Department in 1953.

When the school authorities at the Bukit Nanas Convent wished to reopen the School in November 1945, arrangements were made to pack and transfer all the surviving Selangor Museum exhibits and library to the Perak Museum at Taiping and a careful comparison of the Selangor Museum inventory and the list of objects transferred showed that nothing from the West Wing had been lost; a state of affairs for which very great credit is due to Enche Bachik, the Clerk in charge and caretaker, and other members of the Selangor Museum staff,—both those who served during the Japanese occupation and those who were re-employed after the British re-occupation. The situation is the more remarkable because a number of valuable objects were stolen by looters from the Perak Museum in Taiping in December 1941 and have not been recovered.
Proposals were discussed for building a new museum as early as 1947, and H. T. Pagden, Entomologist in the Department of Agriculture who acted as Director of Museums in that year, arranged with the Government Architect to prepare an imposing plan. The advent of the Emergency caused this project to be postponed indefinitely, and it was not until February 1953 that a very small temporary building, 60 feet by 24 feet was erected on part of the original site, on the initiative of General Sir Gerald Templer, the High Commissioner.

The original Selangor Museum was completed and opened to the public in 1906, though the collection of exhibits was begun by Mr. John Klyne, then Superintendent of Public Works, in 1887. For some years before the Selangor Museum was completed, a building on Bukit Nanas which had been used for a time as Sultan Abdul Samad’s residence in Kuala Lumpur became the Temporary Museum, and in 1902 H. C. Robinson, took charge of the preparation with the title of Curator. Six years later he was appointed the first Director of Museums, F.M.S.

When the British Civil Administration withdrew from Kuala Lumpur late in December 1941 the Selangor Museum was fortunately not disturbed by looters. As soon as the Japanese entered Kuala Lumpur on January 12, 1942 they placed soldiers on guard at the Museum, but it remained closed until March. During this interval of two months none of the former staff of the Museum were allowed to enter the building. The Japanese then instructed Enche Bachik bin Mohd. Tahir to take charge and to recall such other members of the Museum staff as were available.

Their first task was to arrange for the removal of hundreds of empty boxes and crates: these had once contained tinned food and liquor which had been stored in the Museum by the British Military for some weeks before they withdrew southwards.

For the remainder of 1942 the Museum remained closed to the public, but it was frequently visited by organised parties of Japanese military personnel. In January 1943 four Japanese Museum Officials were appointed, and a month later the Museum was opened to the public. The new Museum department was headed by Dr. Iwao Hino as Director, assisted by Dr. R. Takahashi (Entomologist), who succeeded Dr. Hino on 2nd March 1945, eight days before the Museum was bombed.

‘It’s an ill wind that blows NOBODY any good’ or, as the Malay proverb expresses the same truth, “When the ship breaks up, at least the sharks get a good meal” . . . . .

If the B.29 Bomb-Aimer had aimed his bomb sights more accurately in March 1945, there would be no Muzium Negara today, and the capital of Malaysia might have suffered for years to come from the Flemish style of architecture and the Victorian type of display which were the legacy of the old Selangor Museum. A.M.S.

Muzium Negara 1963.