

OCCUPATION OF SUMATRA BY THE JAPANESES by Alfred Leclair

On the 12th of March 1942, Malaya and Singapore has fallen, the invasion of Sumatra by the Japanese was expected daily. At 5:30 am the fish truck from Kisaran, a small town 20 miles away from the port of Tandjong Tiram has returned empty 15 minutes after passing my bungalow which is 6 miles from the port, the driver shouting to everyone on the road "the Japs have landed in Tandjong Tiram". I could hear the hum of many aeroplanes circling over the port to cover the landing of the troops. The Dutch army including every available white man enlisted by them, had retired and concentrated in Siantar, a town near the mountains 50 miles away. Like all Managers of Estates I had received an official decree ordering me to remain on the Estate to maintain order and to feed the Estate's population consisting of 1700 souls. A stock of food had been built up and was sufficient for three months.

At 5:45 am I was called on the telephone; the District Officer with head-quarters 3 miles from the port was inquiring whether the Japs had already arrived at my place. On my negative reply he said "They will be there in a few minutes, about 20 on bicycles have bypassed my place and are on the main road in your direction". From my window near the telephone I could see a long way on the road and I said "Yes, I see a whole crowd coming; if possible I'll phone you up later". In 1938 I had made a trip to the U.S.A. via the Pacific and would spend a few days in Japan. To enable me travel freely the Japanese Consul handed me a special Passport with my photo attached and this was still in my keeping. So I prepared this document to prove that I was not Dutch and waited.

Actually there were only 12 soldiers sent out on forage for cars and trucks. They came in my garden and made straight for the garage at the back of the bungalow where I had three cars: an Overland Whippet, a big Hudson family car and a practically new Peugeot 403 for my Estate work, social affairs and long distance travel respectively. Behind the soldiers were about 50 Malays also on bicycles; they invaded the bungalow and started to loot everything they could lift. At that time an officer arrived on a motorcycle and drove to the back. After a lot of arguments with the soldiers he came in via the back door with his great big boots hitting the tiled floor as hard as he could. He appeared menacingly at the door of the living-room and I handed him the old Japanese Passport. He read it with a frown and appeared to be very disappointed. He said "Francess deska?" (Are you French?) I said "Yes". He then shouted a car-load of words to his soldiers, got hold of the telephone and spoke, but the exchange was already occupied.

In the meantime I heard a big commotion in all the rooms; the soldiers were shouting, slapping and kicking out all the Malays, others had got on their bicycles and chased those who had already left and urged them back with their loot with kicks. Later a car arrived with two officers, one spoke very good French and introduced himself as general Takagi and presented his companion as colonel Midzu who spoke quite understandable English. The general said he was sorry his soldiers invaded my house; he will give a letter stating this bungalow is out of bound for all officers and troops except when invited. The colonel wrote the letter with a small paint brush the size of a pencil. The ink was a hard black block on which he poured a few drops of water and by rubbing his brush on the block he obtained what we call "Chinese ink". In the meantime the general told me that his troops were very well disciplined and that I need not have any concern on the subject but that when he will depart inland he will be replaced by the "Kem Peh Tai" (K.P.T. = Japanese Gestapo). These were very bad men, robbers and murderers but "have no fear of them" he said, resist all their demands, even when

threatened for they, like all of us, have strict orders not to molest Neutrals (Petain did not declare war to Japan). He then tried to pump me on the Dutch army and its position. I said "General, I know nothing of the Dutch nor of their army but even if I did, how do you expect me as a Neutral to act as spy to you". He said "Excuse me, you are quite correct but I have done no wrong in trying".

He then took out from the inside of his garment two little silver boxes (akin to a box for a cigar holder) attached to a long chain. Inside each box was a piece of round ivory about three inches long, at the thick end of which some Japanese designs had been engraved. This he soaked on a small piece of cotton imbibed with red ink contained in a tiny compartment in the box. He pressed it at the bottom of the letter and did the same with the other which had green ink. Surprisingly Japanese have no signature; they all carry their so called private stamp(s). At parting he said "Take out some vital parts off your cars and hide them as they may be stolen by the K.P.T. when you are not at home". I said the Dutch had already done that and the cars are not in a running condition. I may explain here that a month before the invasion the Dutch had taken away the carburettors and distributors of all the cars and trucks in the country after helping themselves for all their needs. A few were left for special uses including doctors' cars and ambulances. The parts were put in individual boxes and a number and letter were painted on them. Mine was 7 T D. These were stored, or rather assembled, at a place and at the last moment, would be dumped in the Prapat Lake. However the order to retire in the hills was so sudden that the boxes were left. The store was looted by the Malays and later I bought back my box from them for £ 30 (before the era of the Republic of Indonesia the natives of the East Coast of Sumatra were Malays, now they are Indonesians).

After the foraging teams had completed their work - that is looting all the available cars and trucks including those of the doctors and the hospital ambulances - the army left for the interior and were duly replaced by the K.P.T. The first thing they did was to collect all the Dutch and British managers left on the Estates and promoted the head-bookkeepers as managers (these were "Mendelings", actually descendants from the Bataks but now of Moslem religion and very keen on education). My bookkeeper was very sore, all his colleagues were now managers and he, was still just a bookkeeper. However two weeks later the arrested men were again released because the labourers were getting out of hand. These are all Javanese and did not accept to be bossed by Mendelings. They banded from six to ten together and at night broke into Estate's stores, Chinese food shops, empty bungalows etc. and stole anything they could carry.

The next thing was the collection of all the Radios with the information that Radio Receivers were prohibited and severe punishment will be meted out to whoever infringed this order (and to my knowledge the cruelty of these punishments in some cases beat the Nazis). This however did not deter me. In 1924, in the "Shelmsford" days I had studied and constructed many short-wave receivers and to date I had still lots of parts and valves stored up. I had a "His Hastens Voice" cabinet gramophone and at night when all the servants were in bed I would work a couple hours fixing a receiver inside the cabinet; just one detector and two amplifiers, I connected the grid of the first amplifier to an old pick-up but I had no loud-speaker, only head-phones, so that I could not work the pick-up. If the Japs ever discover the rig up, I could always say the loud-speaker was sent to Medan for repairs but has not come back.

The valves were of those days and required 110 volts D.C. Coincidentally I had my own electric plant with accumulators, that is: 60 great big glass jars of two volts each, so that only a few dry cells could be connected to the grids and to a length of cordon wire ready to be plugged in the receiver and to one of the numerous plusses in the house. When the job was still only half way ready, my wife fortunately discovered our no. 2 boy looking into the open top of the cabinet. We never knew whether he was spying or if it was just another coincidence. So this was the end of this idea; I took out everything I had put in and thought for days for a safe place.

I had a "Grandfather's clock" of varnished teak wood with chains and weights at the end and a long pendulum enclosed in a high cabinet. Opening the door in front of the face I saw that between the mechanism and top cover there was quite a large empty space. One day when all the servants had gone to an ambulant cinema I dismantled a small table of the same wood and colour and cut a piece out of the top to nicely fit inside the clock just above the mechanism. I then unscrewed the top cover and found I had a space 12 x 8 x 4' deep. Then, always at night, I constructed a receiver with one detector and one amplifier only, both valves and the transformer were laid down instead of the usual orthodox standing up manner then I added a very small adjustable condenser with one movable blade only and adjusted the length of the areal coil until I got BBC. on 16 metres. Small differences due to heating of the valves etc. could be compensated by this condenser. The completed instrument fitted the space nicely; I then closed the cover with false screws.

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