

# Keeper of the nation's history

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**W**ANT to find out more about the history of your hometown? Or of your family tree? Head down to the National Archives.

First established in Petaling Jaya as the Public Records Office on Dec 1, 1957 – the year Malaya gained independence – this national repository of our history was renamed the National Archives of Malaysia in 1963.

It moved to its present Jalan Duta headquarters in Kuala Lumpur 25 years ago, and today has nine branch offices at the state level and warehouses around the headquarters which store and preserve public records and archival treasures for reference and research.

National Archives director-general Mohd Zawawi Abdullah said previously, few were aware they could visit the archives for valuable information.

Hence, last year the National Archives started a campaign to actively promote itself as a national resource and research centre.

This year, in conjunction with the country's 50th Merdeka, the National Archives also produced a calendar with historical pictures from its collection, complete with "Today in History" facts for each month.

Of late, Mohd Zawawi told *theSun*,

## Institutions under the National Archives

1. Tun Abdul Razak Memorial in Jalan Perdana, Kuala Lumpur (opened in 1982)
2. The Declaration of Independence Memorial in Malacca (1985)
3. The P. Ramlee Memorial in Setapak, Kuala Lumpur (1986)
4. The Rumah Kelahiran P. Ramlee (the house where he was born) in Penang (1991)
5. The Rumah Kelahiran Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Alor Star (1993)
6. The Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Memorial in Jalan Dato' Onn, Kuala Lumpur (1994)
7. The Sri Perdana Gallery in Jalan Damansara, Kuala Lumpur (2003)
8. The Rumah Merdeka in Alor Star (2003)
9. The Tun Hussein Onn Memorial in Jalan Dato' Onn, Kuala Lumpur (2007)

more have become aware of the resources within the National Archives, and it has begun to attract schoolchildren, teachers, university students and foreign researchers interested in learning more about the country.

"We have a collection of material not many people know about. For example, how we celebrated National Day each year – the different themes, ceremonies, and places.

"We compile and publish such information so the public can read and see the progress the country has achieved all these years," he said.

But far more precious are the older artefacts from our past, including the oldest Malay newspaper, dated 1887, in Jawi Peranakan.

The oldest file in its original form available at the National Archives library is the Selangor state secretary records dating back to 1874.

As for files in microfilm, the oldest are marriage and birth records obtained from Dutch churches in Malacca dated circa 1600s.

The library also stores about 80,000 pictures in its system – of buildings, sceneries, modes of transportation and socio-economic activities since the early 19th century.

In line with modern technology, the National Archives has since 1997 begun computerising all its records and pictures through its online record system.

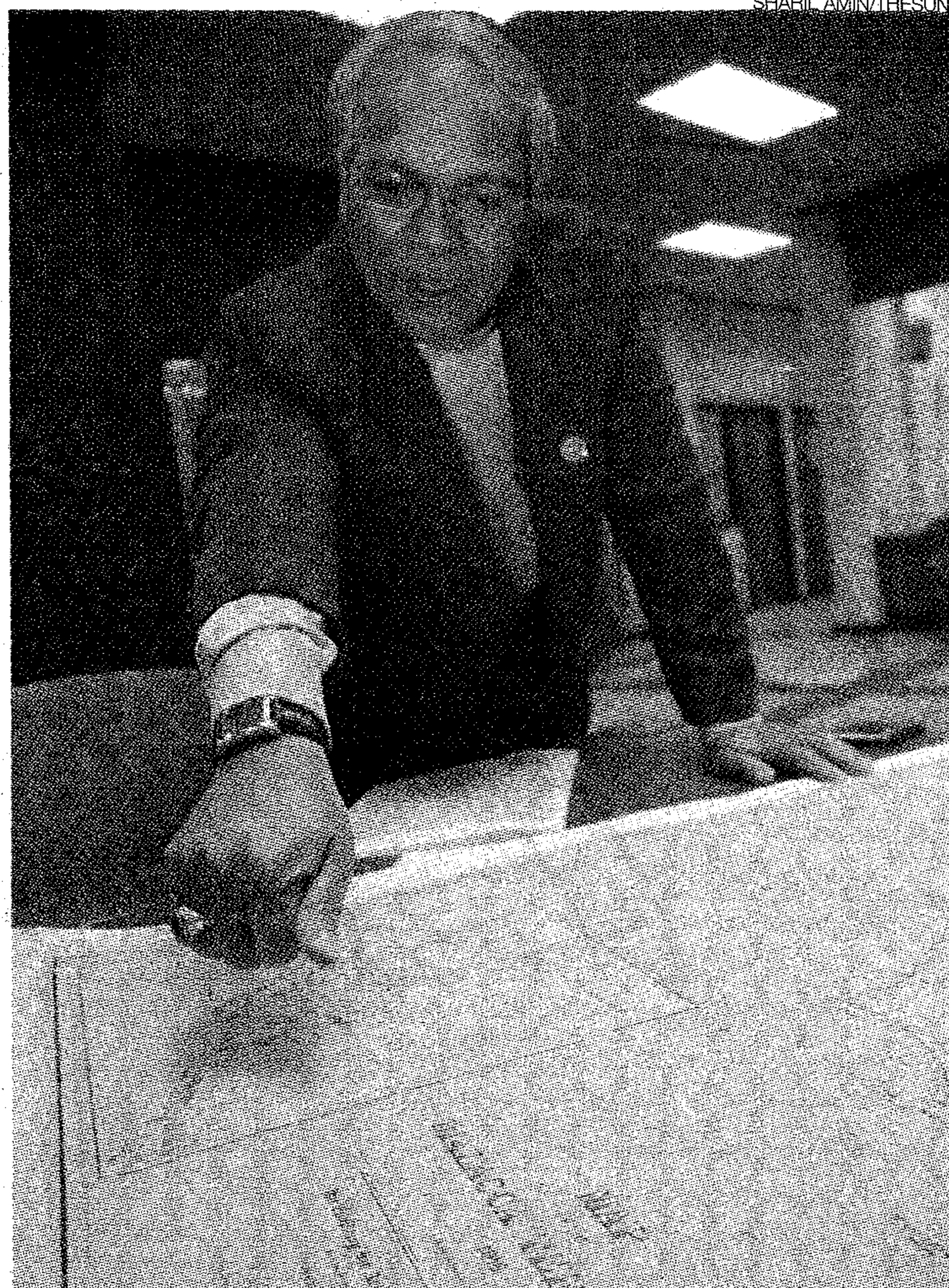
## Embargo on sensitive material

The archives' library is open to the public from Monday to Friday with no admission fee. A nominal fee is charged only for copies of records or documents.

Mohd Zawawi said all materials in the archives, aged more than 25 years, are accessible to the public and can be used for research.

However, there are embargoes on sensitive materials such as those which could provoke racial sentiment or threaten security.

"The embargo is set by the agency which created the record in the first place. When it transfers the record to us, until and unless we get clearance from the agency, we cannot release it for public access," he explained.



Mohd Zawawi points to an old map of Malacca that is stored at the National Archives.

Apart from educational research, there are also people who visit the archives to know the history of their family or birthplace or hometown.

"There are also foreigners who would like to trace information on family members who once served this country before independence, such as where they were born or buried.

"We may not have all the information but we can help put the pieces together," Mohd Zawawi said.

He said the archives also enriches its collection by sending its officers overseas to conduct research and obtain material.

Countries such as Britain, Holland, Indonesia and Thailand would have records on Malaysia because of our shared history, he noted.

## Remembering our leaders

The National Archives headquarters is not the only source of our nation's history.

The archives administers nine institutions which include memorials, galleries and houses related to past prime ministers as well as entertainment legend Tan Sri P. Ramlee (see box).

The Tun Hussein Onn Memorial on Jalan Dato' Onn in Kuala Lumpur, for example, has nearly 16,000 collected items related to the nation's third prime minister.

The building, the latest addition to the National Archives, opened in February this year.

It houses and exhibits various memorabilia of the late Bapa Perpaduan (Father of Unity), his office when he was prime minister, his biography and family roots. It even has a bluish aura to commemorate his favourite colour.

Recently, the government announced it would set up five more memorials – for former deputy prime ministers Tun Ghafar Baba and Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, former MCA presidents Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun Tan Siew Sin, and former MIC president Tun V.T. Sambanthan.

Apart from the National Archives, there is also the Perdana Leadership

Foundation (PLF) in Putrajaya.

Set up in 2003 as an independent non-profit organisation, the PLF aims to collect information on Malaysia's leaders; analyse and research their policies and approaches; and stimulate debate and research by making materials publicly accessible.

It has a library which aims to become a comprehensive resource centre on Malaysia's history of nation-building.

The library, with its 20 staff, including volunteers, is now building up its collection of books, news clippings, speeches, policy papers, biographies, video footage and sound recordings.

"For Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad alone, we have managed to catalogue 50% of his records so far. We need at least three staff at a time to do this since his administration was the longest," PLF general manager Zarina Abu Bakar said.

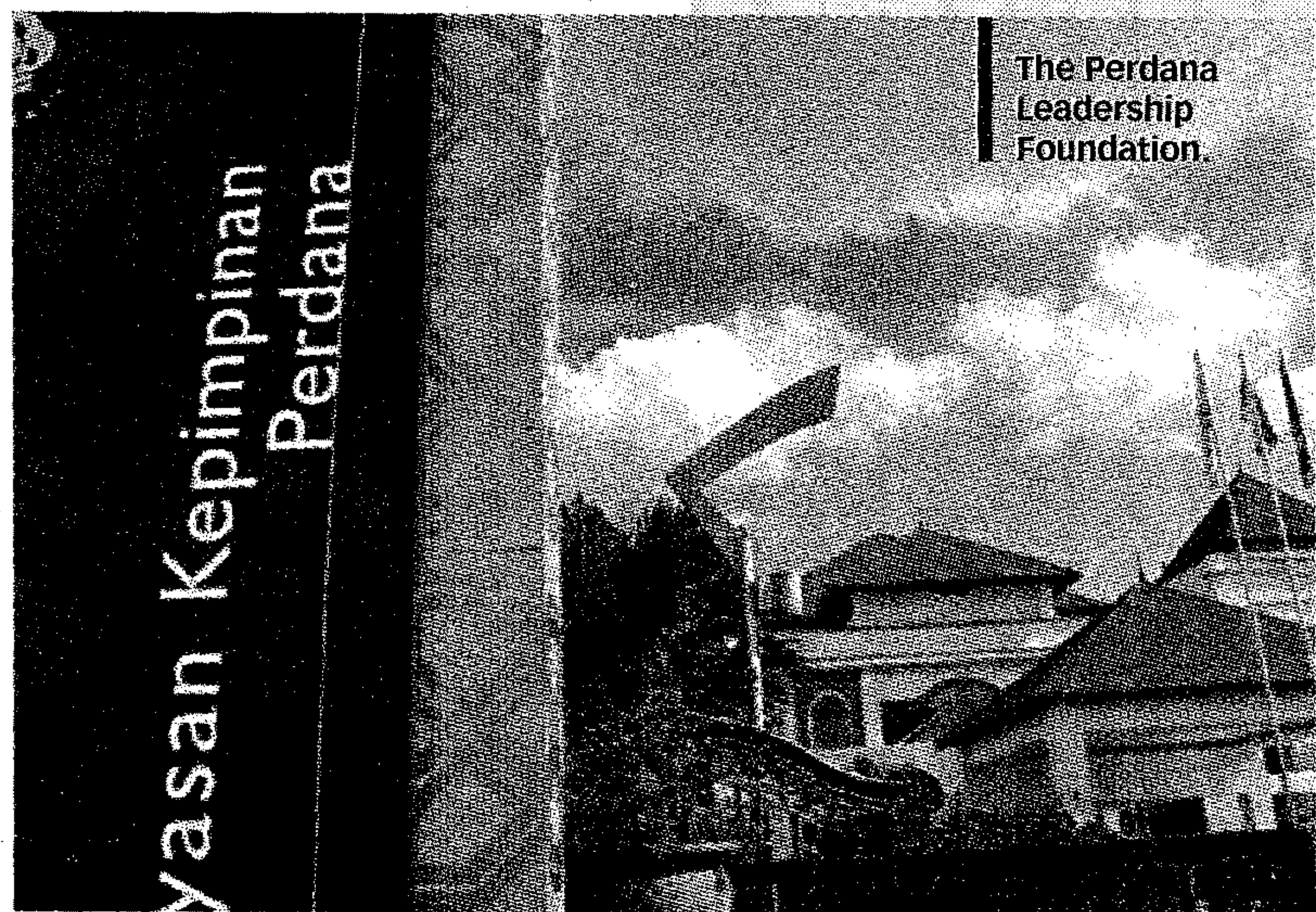
She said as PLF honorary president, Mahathir has been very helpful. Up to 80% of the 8,000 books in the library were donated from his personal collection.

The library also has over 200,000 digital titles comprising clippings, speeches, journals, articles and books.

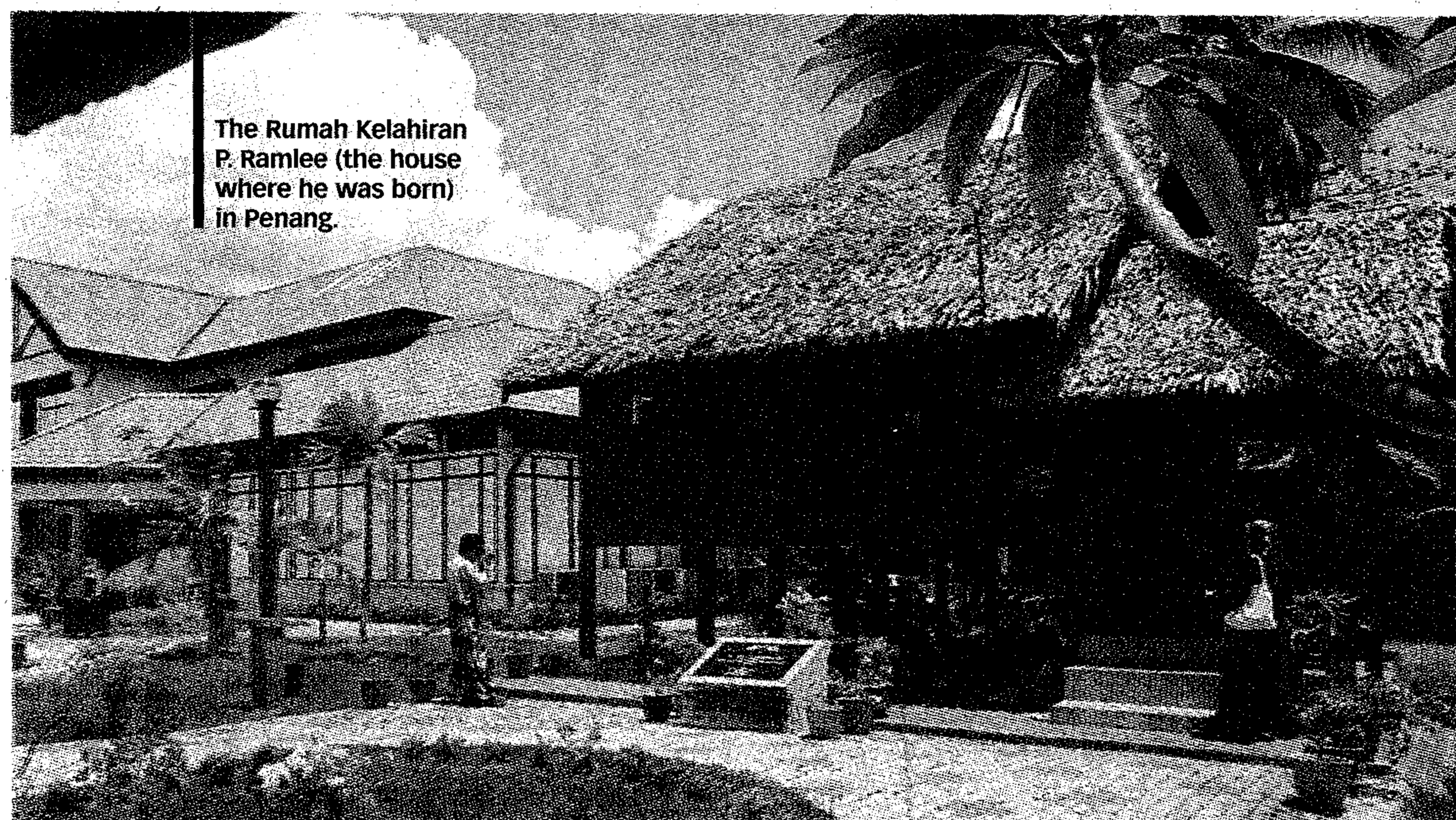
Additionally, Zarina said the foundation searches for and buys restricted or rare second hand books from junk bookstores. To date, they have 91 such books including *The Story of Malaya* (1941), *Colonial Labour Policy and Administration* (1960) and *Battle for Merger: A series of 12 Radio Talks* (1961).

Meanwhile, the PLF exhibition hall at its lounge displays, among others, replicas of the appointment letters for the prime ministership of Tun Hussein Onn and Tun Abdul Razak, depictions of past important events, as well as gifts made to Mahathir including a self-assembled motorbike from a Sentul bike shop.

The public can visit the library from Mondays to Fridays from 8.30am to 5.30pm except on public holidays – but Zarina encourages people to utilise the online facilities, including e-mail to get in touch with the foundation's librarians.



The Perdana Leadership Foundation.



The Rumah Kelahiran P. Ramlee (the house where he was born) in Penang.