

WORLD

At the Rape of Nanking: A Nazi Who Saved Lives

By DAVID W. CHEN DEC. 12, 1996

When the invading Japanese Army overran the Nationalist Chinese capital in December 1937, soldiers embarked on a two-month rampage of looting, rape and killing that left tens of thousands of Chinese civilians dead in what became known as the Rape of Nanking.

Now a recently unearthed diary reveals an unlikely rescuer of thousands of Chinese: a German businessman living in China who was the leader of the local Nazi organization.

The businessman, John Rabe, kept a 1,200-page diary that provides a rare third-party account of the atrocities. In it, he writes of digging foxholes in his backyard to shelter 650 Chinese and of repelling Japanese troops who tried to climb over the wall, of dashing through war-torn areas to deliver rice, and of stopping Japanese soldiers from raping Chinese women. He even wrote to Hitler to complain about the Japanese actions.

"These escapades were quite dangerous," he wrote in his diary. "The Japanese had pistols and bayonets and I -- as mentioned before -- had only party symbols and my swastika armband."

Mr. Rabe (pronounced RAH-bay), who died in 1950, lived and worked in China from 1908 to 1938. His diary sheds light on a heretofore little-known man, who, although a Nazi loyalist, risked his life and his status to save people who would later become

his country's enemies. Indeed, Mr. Rabe's outspoken support for the Chinese upon his return to Germany appears to have ruined his career.

Some who have followed his case say that he, like Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who protected Jews under very different circumstances, offers another example of the durability of humanitarian impulses in the cruelest of times.

Scholars say Mr. Rabe's diary, which includes reports from other foreign observers, photos and other memorabilia, is valuable not so much for revealing new historical facts, but because it provides an unusually detailed and personal account from a German witness to an incident considered among the most brutal in modern warfare. They believe the diary to be authentic, because American missionaries in China who were Mr. Rabe's contemporaries knew of his actions and supplied similar accounts of atrocities.

The diary also offers a counterweight to claims by some Japanese officials who have long denied either the existence or the scale of the massacre in Nanking, which is now known as Nanjing.

"It's an incredibly gripping and depressing narrative, done very carefully with an enormous amount of detail and drama," said William C. Kirby, a professor of modern Chinese history at Harvard University, who has read parts of the diary in German. "It will reopen this case in a very important way in that people can go through the day-by-day account and add 100 to 200 stories to what is popularly known."

The diary has only now come to light because of the efforts of Iris Chang, a Sunnyvale, Calif., author. While researching a book on the Nanjing massacre a few years ago, she stumbled upon a few references to Mr. Rabe's humanitarian efforts. She tracked down Mr. Rabe's granddaughter, Ursula Reinhardt, in Berlin, and upon discovering that Mr. Rabe had kept a diary, persuaded the family to make it public.

That will formally happen today at a news conference at the Hotel Intercontinental in New York, with Mrs. Reinhardt among those expected to attend. The public announcement is being organized by the Alliance in Memory of Victims of the Nanjing Massacre, a Chinese-American group, said Tzuping Shao, a past

president. Eventually, copies of the diary are to be donated to Yale Divinity School Library and Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, in China.

Martha L. Smalley, research services librarian at Yale Divinity School, said Mr. Rabe's accounts are corroborated by documents on display at a current Yale exhibition called "American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanjing Massacre."

One such missionary, Robert O. Wilson, a Harvard-trained doctor who worked in China in the 1930's, wrote of Mr. Rabe:

"He is well up in Nazi circles and after coming into such close contact with him as we have for the past few weeks and discover\$(ing\$) what a splendid man he is and what a tremendous heart he has, it is hard to reconcile his personality with his adulation of 'Der Fuhrer.' "

It is not clear whether Mr. Rabe embraced the oppression of Jews and other groups in Nazi Germany. He lived outside Germany during the time of Hitler's rise to power, and there is no record of the extent of his activities in the Nazi Party after he returned to Germany in 1938, according to Ms. Chang. Because scholars, who received the diary only a few days ago, have not finished reading it, they cannot say if it contains expressions of anti-Semitism.

But Mr. Rabe was outspoken in his support for Nazism. In a lecture he delivered after his return to Germany in February 1938, he said, "Although I feel tremendous sympathy for the suffering of China, I am still, above all, pro-German and I believe not only in the correctness of our political system but, as an organizer of the party, I am behind the system 100 percent."

Born in Hamburg in 1882, Mr. Rabe spent much of his life in China working for the Siemens Company, rising to become its top representative there, selling telephones, turbines and electrical equipment. His children and grandchildren were born in China, and he had many Chinese friends. He spoke Chinese fluently.

But by 1937, Hitler's Germany was shifting its loyalties away from China and toward Japan. So when Japanese forces converged on Nanjing, many Germans who were working in China felt torn, Professor Kirby said.

Mr. Rabe was ordered by Siemens to leave for the safer grounds of Wuhan, a few hundred miles west on the Yangtze River. But he refused. Instead, he became chairman of a group of about two dozen German and American missionaries, doctors and professors who established a neutral zone in Nanjing as a haven for Chinese refugees.

It was a daunting task. Mr. Rabe witnessed people who were shot, doused with gasoline and burned alive. He saw bodies of women lanced with beer bottles and bamboo sticks.

In his diary entry for Jan. 1, 1938, Mr. Rabe wrote: "The mother of a young attractive girl called out to me, and throwing herself on her knees, crying, said I should help her. Upon entering \$(the house\$), I saw a Japanese soldier lying completely naked on a young girl, who was crying hysterically. I yelled at this swine, in any language it would be understood, 'Happy New Year!' and he fled from there, naked and with his pants in his hand."

In another entry, referring to the Chinese he had hidden, Mr. Rabe wrote that it was hard to sleep with 650 people snoring in his backyard. On Dec. 10, with water and power failing and the city ringed by fire, he noticed that his canary, Peter, sang in rhythm to the sound of gunfire.

Upon his return to Germany in February 1938, Mr. Rabe wrote a letter to Hitler, asking him to persuade Japan to stop the atrocities. But he was arrested by the Gestapo, interrogated for three days and ordered to keep silent on the subject.

From there Mr. Rabe's life headed into a downward spiral. Between 1938 and 1945, Mr. Rabe worked on and off for the Siemens Company, including a brief stint in Afghanistan.

As World War II intensified, Mr. Rabe wrote increasingly in his diary about hunger and the ravages of war; he and his family in Berlin had to eat nettles and acorn soup.

Because Mr. Rabe was one of the about 9 percent of Germans who were members of the Nazi party, he had to petition to be de-Nazified by the Allies after the

war in order to hold a job. His first petition was denied, and Mr. Rabe had to appeal.

Ultimately, in June 1946, Mr. Rabe was granted de-Nazification status because of his humanitarian acts in China, according to Ms. Chang. But the investigation proved draining, and he died of a stroke in 1950.

"He was humiliated because he had to go through de-Nazification," Mrs. Reinhardt said in a telephone interview from her home in Berlin.

Mr. Rabe's diary may bolster the efforts of Chinese organizations like Mr. Shao's alliance, who contend that as many as 300,000 Chinese were killed in Nanjing massacres, to extract an apology, or possibly war reparations, from the Japanese Government. Unlike Germany, Japan has been perceived as resisting responsibility for wartime atrocities. Some high-ranking Japanese officials, including a former Minister of Justice, Shigeto Nagano, maintain the incident never happened.

Ms. Chang, whose book, "The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II," is to be published next year by Basic Books, said of Mr. Rabe: "I think he felt that he could make a difference, that if Germany knew what Japan was doing, then maybe Germany could have influenced Japan to stop it. It may have been naive. But to me, John Rabe is the Oskar Schindler of China, another example of good in the face of evil."