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The Nazi Leader Who, in 1937, Became the Oskar Schindler of China

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How John Rabe helped Chinese survive Japan's horrific World War II invasion and became "the living Buddha of Nanking"



Chinese civilians held as captives of Japanese troops during the Nanking Massacre, which killed 200,000 to 300,000 Chinese civilians / Wikimedia

In the history of every war, there are always a few rare individuals who emerge as beacons of hope for the persecuted. In the United States the Quakers freed their own slaves and helped establish the Underground Railroad. In Europe during World War II, Oskar Schindler, a Nazi, expended his fortune to save twelve hundred Jews from the Auschwitz gas chambers, and Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish

diplomat, saved more than one hundred thousand Jews by giving them false passports. Who can forget Mies Giep, the Austrian woman who together with others hid the young Anne Frank and her family in an Amsterdam attic?

Dark times paralyze most people, but some very few, for reasons most of us will never understand, are able to set aside all caution and do things even they could not imagine themselves doing in ordinary times.

Perhaps the most fascinating character to emerge from the history of the Rape of Nanking is the German businessman John Rabe. To most of the Chinese in the city, he was a hero, "the living Buddha of Nanking," the legendary head of the International Safety Zone who saved hundreds of thousands of Chinese lives. But to the Japanese, Rabe was a strange and unlikely savior. For he was not only a German national -- a citizen of a country allied with Japan -- but the leader of the Nazi Party in Nanking.



Rabe at his desk in Nanking / John-

In 1996 I began an investigation into the life of John Rabe and eventually

Rabe.de

unearthed thousands of pages of diaries that he and other Nazis kept during the

Rape. These diaries led me to conclude that John Rabe was "the Oskar Schindler of China."

Prior to the 1937 Rape of Nanking, Rabe had led a relatively peaceful though well-traveled life. The son of a sea captain, he was born in Hamburg, Germany, on November 23, 1882. After completing his apprenticeship in Hamburg he worked a

few years in Africa and then in 1908 moved to China, where he found employment at the Peking office of the Siemens China Company. In 1931 he transferred to the Nanking office, selling telephones and electrical equipment to the Chinese government. Bald and bespectacled, dressed in conservative suits and bow ties, he looked like a typical, middle-aged Western businessman in the city. Soon he became a pillar of the German community in Nanking, administering his own German school for elementary and junior high school students.

As the years went by, Rabe became a staunch supporter of Nazism and the representative town leader for the Nazi Party in Nanking. In 1938 he would tell German audiences that "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."

When most of his fellow German nationals, on the advice of friends and embassy officials, departed China long before the Japanese military reached the gates of the city, Rabe chose to stay and was soon elected the head of the Safety Zone. In fact, even when Japanese embassy officials met with him and suggested more strongly that he leave, he remained. Dispatched by his superiors to protect Rabe during the fall of Nanking, Japanese Major Oka asked him: "Why in the devil did you stay? Why do you want to involve yourself in our military affairs? What does all this matter to you? You haven't lost anything here!"

" I ... had only party symbols and my swastika armband"

Rabe paused for a moment, then gave Oka his answer. "I have been living here in China for over 30 years," Rabe said. "My kids and grandchildren were born here, and I am happy and successful here. I have always been treated well by the Chinese people, even during the war. If I had spent 30 years in Japan and were treated just as well by the Japanese people, you can be assured that, in a time of emergency, such as the situation China faces now, I would not leave the side of the people in Japan."

This answer satisfied the Japanese major, who respected the concept of loyalty. "He took a step back, mumbled some words about Samurai obligations, and bowed deeply," Rabe wrote of the incident.

But Rabe had an even more personal reason not to walk away and protect himself -- he felt responsible for the safety of his Chinese employees, a team of Siemens mechanics who maintained the turbines in the city's main power plant, the telephones and clocks in every ministry, the alarms in the police stations and the banks, and an enormous X-ray machine at the central hospital. "What I only had a premonition of then," Rabe wrote, "-- but what I now know -- is that all of them would have been killed or severely injured if I had left their side."

But his biggest concern was not for his own personal safety or well-being but for the establishment of the Safety Zone. The committee members wanted the zone to be free of all military activity, but the Japanese army refused to recognize it as neutral territory.

Rabe sensed the need to call on higher authorities for help. On November 25, he wired Adolf Hitler to request the fuehrer's "kindly intercession in asking that the Japanese government grant the building of a neutral zone for those who are not fighting to battle for Nanking." At the same time Rabe also sent a telegram to his friend General Counsel Mr. Kriebel: "Asking cordially for support of my request of the Fuehrer ... which otherwise would make a terrible bloodbath unavoidable. Heil Hitler! Rabe -- Siemens representative and head of the International Committee in Nanking."

Originally Rabe and his colleagues hoped to reserve the empty buildings in the zone for the poorest citizens of Nanking. To avoid a rush of people, the committee had pasted posters all over the city, urging refugees to rent housing from friends. But so many people surged into the area of two and a half square miles that Rabe soon found himself with 50,000 more residents than he had expected even in the worst-case scenario. The refugees not only packed the buildings but spilled forth onto lawns, trenches, and bomb dugouts. Entire families slept in the open streets, while hundreds of mat dwellings mushroomed next to the American embassy. By

the time the city fell, the Safety Zone -- its borders lined by white flags and sheets marked with the red cross symbol within a red circle -- was a swarming "human beehive" of 250,000 refugees.

At 8:00 P.M. on December 12, 1937, Rabe watched as the skies to the south of the city glowed red with flames. Then he heard frantic knocking on both gates of his house: Chinese women and children were begging for entrance, men were scaling the garden wall behind his German school, and people were cramming themselves into the foxholes in his garden, even ducking under the giant German flag he had used to warn pilots from bombing his property. The cries and knocking increased until Rabe could bear it no longer. He flung open the gates to let the crowd in. But the noise only intensified as the night wore on. Exasperated, Rabe donned a steel helmet and ran through his garden, yelling at everyone to shut up.

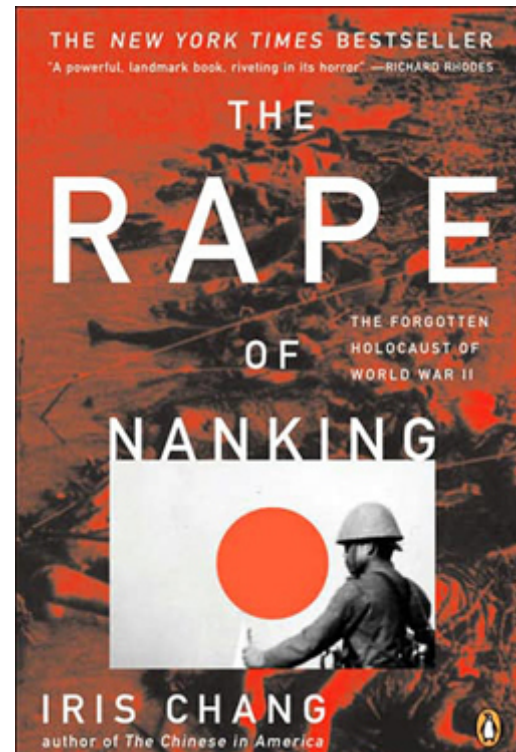
Finally, the din around his house began to diminish. The exhausted Rabe, who had not had time even to change clothes for two days, lay back in bed, trying to relax as the society he knew and loved collapsed around him. He knew that the Ministry of Communication building was burning down and that the city would fall any minute. Rabe reassured himself that things would only get better, not worse, from this point on. "You don't have to be scared of the Japanese," his Chinese colleagues had told him. "As soon as they have taken over the city, peace and order will prevail -- the rail connections with Shanghai will be quickly rebuilt and the stores will return to their normal functions." Before he fell asleep, Rabe thought, "Thank God that the worst has been overcome!"

The next morning Rabe explored the city to check out the extent of the damage. In the streets lay numerous Chinese corpses, many of them civilians who had been shot in the back. He watched a group of Japanese soldiers push their way into a German coffeehouse. When Rabe chastised them for stealing, pointing to the German flags on the house, an English-speaking Japanese soldier snapped: "We are hungry! If you want to complain, go to the Japanese embassy. They will pay for it!" The Japanese soldiers also told Rabe that their supply column had not arrived, and

they could not count on the column for any nourishment even if it did arrive. Later Rabe learned that the soldiers looted the coffeehouse, then set it afire.

That day Rabe encountered the remains of the Chinese army -- hungry and exhausted stragglers who had failed to cross the Yangtze River to safety. Driving through Shansi Road Circle, he met 400 Chinese troops, all of them still armed, marching in the direction of the advancing Japanese army. It was then that Rabe had a sudden "humanitarian impulse" that was to haunt his conscience for months, if not years, afterwards. Warning them about the Japanese troops to the south, Rabe advised the Chinese soldiers to throw away their machine guns and join the refugees in the Safety Zone. After a short discussion, they agreed and followed Rabe into the zone.

Similarly, when hundreds of Chinese soldiers found themselves trapped on the northern side of the city, unable to secure passage across the river, many broke into the Safety Zone, begging the American and European administrators to save their lives. The committee members were uncertain as to whether they should help them. After all, they had created the zone as a sanctuary for civilians, not soldiers. The committee tried to resolve the dilemma by addressing the issue with Japanese army headquarters but got no further than a captain on Han Chung Road.



Moved by the plight of the soldiers, the committee eventually caved in to their pleas. Like Rabe, they told the soldiers that if they laid down their arms, the Japanese might treat them mercifully. Then they helped the soldiers disarm and housed them in various buildings within the neutral area. In the confusion, many of the soldiers stripped off their uniforms and mingled with the civilians in the zone.

But relief turned into horror when the Japanese betrayed Rabe and seized the disarmed soldiers for execution. If Rabe had hoped that the Japanese would not be able to separate the troops from the hundreds of thousands of civilians, he was sorely mistaken. The Japanese detected virtually every one of the former soldiers by examining their hands, knowing that the daily use of guns caused calluses on certain areas on the fingers of soldiers. They also examined shoulders for backpack marks, foreheads and hair for indentations from military caps, and even feet for blisters caused from months of marching.

During a staff conference the night of December 14, the committee learned that the Japanese had rounded up 1,300 men in a Safety Zone camp near the headquarters to shoot them. "We knew that there were a number of ex-soldiers among them, but Rabe had been promised by an officer that afternoon that their lives would be spared," George Fitch, the YMCA representative, wrote in his diary of the incident. "It was now all too obvious what they were going to do. The men were lined up and roped together in groups of about 100 by soldiers with bayonets fixed; those who had hats had them roughly torn off and thrown to the ground -- and then by the lights of our headlights we watched them marched away to their doom."

For the next few days Rabe watched helplessly as the Japanese dragged thousands more soldiers from the zone and executed them. The Japanese killed thousands of innocent men who happened to have calluses on their fingers, foreheads, or feet -- men who were ricksha coolies, manual laborers, and police officers. Rabe later witnessed the Red Swastika Society, a charitable Buddhist organization in the city, pull more than 120 corpses from a single pond. (In a later report, Rabe pointed out that several ponds in Nanking actually disappeared because they were so filled with corpses.)

Finally, with only his status as an official of an allied nation for protection, Rabe did what now seems the unthinkable: he began to roam about the city, trying to prevent atrocities himself.

Whenever he drove through Nanking, some man would inevitably leap out and stop the car to beg Rabe to stop a rape in progress -- a rape that usually involved a sister, a wife, or a daughter. Rabe would then let the man climb into the car and direct him to the scene of the rape. Once there, he would chase Japanese soldiers away from their prey, on one occasion even bodily lifting a soldier sprawled on top of a young girl. He knew these expeditions were highly dangerous ("The Japanese had pistols and bayonets and I ... had only party symbols and my swastika armband," Rabe wrote in his report to Hitler), but nothing could deter him -- not even the risk of death.

Rabe was appalled by the rape in the city. In the streets he passed scores of female corpses, raped and mutilated, next to the charred remains of their homes. "Groups of 3 to 10 marauding soldiers would begin by traveling through the city and robbing whatever there was to steal," Rabe wrote in his report to Hitler.

Determined to save Chinese lives, Rabe sheltered as many people as he could, turning his house and office into sanctuaries for Siemens employees and their families. Rabe also harbored hundreds of Chinese women on his property, permitting them to live in tiny straw huts in his backyard. With these women Rabe developed a warning system to protect them from Japanese rapists. Whenever Japanese soldiers scaled the wall of his yard, the women would blow a whistle and send Rabe running out into the yard to chase the offenders away. This happened so frequently that Rabe rarely left his home at night, fearful that Japanese intruders would commit an orgy of rape in his absence.

Fortunately, his status as a Nazi caused several Japanese soldiers to hesitate before committing further mayhem -- at least in his presence. George Fitch, the local YMCA secretary, wrote that "when any of them objects [Rabe] thrusts his Nazi armband in their face and points to his Nazi decoration, the highest in the

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country, and asks them if they know what that means. It always works!" The Japanese soldiers appeared to respect -- at times even fear -- the Nazis of Nanking. While the Japanese privates did not hesitate to beat up the Americans, charge at them with bayonets, or even to push one American missionary down a flight of stairs, they exercised considerable restraint in their dealings with Rabe and his countrymen. Once, when four Japanese soldiers in the midst of raping and looting saw Eduard Sperling's swastika armband, they screamed "Deutsche! Deutsche!" and ran away. On another occasion, the swastika probably saved Rabe's life. One evening Japanese soldiers broke into his property, and Rabe confronted them with his flashlight. One of them reached for his pistol, as if to shoot Rabe, but stopped when he realized it would be "bad business to shoot a German subject."

If the Japanese respected Rabe, the Chinese refugee community revered him. To them he was the man who rescued daughters from sexual slavery and sons from machine-gun fire. Rabe's very presence sometimes touched off riots in Safety Zone camps. During one of his visits to the zone, thousands of Chinese women flung themselves to the ground before him, weeping and begging for protection, declaring they would rather commit suicide on the spot than leave the zone to be raped and tortured.

Rabe tried to keep hope alive for his refugees in the midst of their terror. He hosted little birthday celebrations for the children born to refugee women living in his backyard. Each newborn received a gift: \$10 for baby boys and \$9.50 for baby

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girls. (As Rabe explained in his report to Hitler -- "Girls in China aren't worth as much as boys.") Typically, when a boy was born, he received Rabe's name, and if a girl was born, she received his wife's name, Dora.

Rabe's courage and generosity ultimately won the respect of the other members of the International Committee, even those fundamentally opposed to Nazism.

George Fitch wrote to his friends that he would "almost wear a Nazi badge" to keep fellowship with Rabe and the other Germans in Nanking. Even Dr. Robert Wilson, a man thoroughly repulsed by Nazism, sang Rabe's praises in letters to his family: "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.' "

Excerpted from Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II* (Basic Books).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



IRIS CHANG, a journalist and historian, published in 1997 what became a definitive but controversial history of Japan's occupation of Nanking. Though she died in 2004, her life and work were the subject of two biographies and a documentary film. *The Rape of Nanking* remains widely discussed and read, most recently in a new paperback edition out in January 2012.
