

John H.D. Rabe: Eyewitness of Nanking 1937-38



John H.D. Rabe (1882-1949) was a German businessman and leader of the Nazi Party in Nanking. He was chair of the International Committee for Nanking Safety Zone. He saved so many lives during the Nanking Massacre that he was called the “Living Buddha” by people of Nanking. He was awarded medal of the German Red Cross by the German Nazi government when he returned to Berlin in April 1938; he was also awarded the Order of Jade, the highest honor bestowed to foreigners, by the Chinese Nationalist government for his heroic sacrifices during the Nanjing Massacre. Nowadays, some refer him as the “Oskar Schindler of China.”

Source: Source: Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website
<http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Nanking/Rabe.html>

Excerpt from John Rabe Diary, December 21, 1937

There can no longer be any doubt that the Japanese are burning the city presumably to erase all traces of their looting and thievery. Yesterday evening the city was on fire in six different places.

I was awakened at 2:30 a.m. by the sound of walls collapsing and roof- crashing. There was now a very great danger that fire would spread to the last row of houses between Chung Shan Lu and my own house, but thank God it didn't come to that. Only flying and drifting sparks presented a threat to the straw roofs of my refugee camp in the garden and to the supply of gasoline stored there, which absolutely has to be moved.

The following telegram gives some idea of the desperate mood among the Americans. They want to send this telegram by way of the Japanese embassy, since there is no other way to forward a telegram. The text, however, is so transparent that I seriously doubt that the Japanese will even accept the telegram for sending:

Nanking 20th December 1937

Telegram to American Consulate-General in Shanghai:

Important questions require immediate presence American diplomatic representatives in Nanking stop Situation daily more urgent stop Please inform ambassador and Department of State stop signed Magee, Mills, McCallum, Riggs, Smyt he, Sone, Trimmer, Vautrin, Wilson Delivered to Japanese Embassy 20 December, with request for transmission by naval wireless. BATES

The Americans are indeed in a bad way. While I succeed in making a suitable impression by pompously pointing to my swastika armband and party badge, and at the German flags in my house, the Japanese have no regard whatever for the American flag. Whereas I simply bellowed down the soldiers who stopped my car this morning and after pointing to my flag was allowed to drive on my way, shots were fired at Dr. Trimmer and Mr. McCallum inside Kulou Hospital [Drum Tower Hospital]. Fortunately the shots missed; but the fact that we are being shot at is so monstrous that you can understand why the Americans, who have given refuge to so many women and girls at their universities, have lost their patience.

How long, Dr. Smythe asked quite rightly yesterday, will we be able to keep up the bluff that we are equal to the situation? If one Chinese man in our refugee camps kills a Japanese soldier for raping his wife or daughter, everything will fall apart; then there'll be a bloodbath inside the Safety Zone.

The news has just arrived that, just as I predicted, the telegram to the American consulate general in Shanghai was not accepted by the Japanese embassy.

I'm having the entire gasoline supply moved this morning from my house and garden to Ninhai Lu, because I'm afraid that a whole row of houses on Chung Shan Lu will be torched. We now know all the signs of an impending fire. If a largish number of trucks assembles in a given spot, the houses are usually looted and torched shortly thereafter.

At 2 this afternoon all the Germans and Americans, etc., meaning the entire foreign colony, assemble outside Kulou Hospital and march in closed ranks to the Japanese embassy. There were 14 Americans, five Germans, two White Russians, and an Austrian. We presented a letter to the Japanese embassy, asking, for humanitarian reasons, that

1. the burning of large parts of the city be stopped;
2. an end be put at once to the disorderly conduct of the Japanese troops;
3. whatever steps necessary be taken to restore law and order, so that our food and coal supplies can be replenished.

All those demonstrating signed the letter.

We are introduced to Commandant Matsui, who shakes hands all round. I assume the role of spokesman at the Japanese embassy and explain to Mr. Tanaka that we infer that the city is to be burned down. Tanaka denies this with a smile, promises however to discuss the first two points in our letter with the military authorities. As to point 3, he refuses even to discuss it. The Japanese themselves are short on rations and are not interested in whether or not we can make do with our supplies.

During our visit at the Japanese embassy, a Japanese naval officer hands me a letter from Dr. Rosen, who is on board the English gunboat *Bee*, which is anchored very close to Nanking but may not dock. They don't want any more witnesses here. I have no idea how Dr. Rosen, Scharffenberg, and Hurter found their way onto the *Bee*. Mr. Fukuda, whom I ask about this, fears that the Jardines *Hulk* has also been shelled and sunk.

Letter from Legation Secretary Rosen to John Robe

Near Nanking, 19 December 1937
On board the HMS *Bee*

Dear Herr Rabe:

We have been just outside the city since yesterday, but cannot enter it. Please let me know how you all are and whether any German buildings have been damaged. I can wire the ambassador directly from on board ship. We've been through a lot ourselves, more about that in person later. I will attempt to get this letter to you via the Japanese (and hope that your answer will arrive by the same route).

With many greetings and Heil Hitler,
Respectfully,
ROSEN

Sources: P84-86 *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe translated by John E. Woods*

John Rabe Diary: December 24, 1937

This morning I carefully packed up the red advent star that we lighted yesterday evening and gave it as a Christmas present, along with a Siemens calendar notebook, to the ladies of Kulou Hospital [Drum Tower Hospital]. Dr. Wilson used the opportunity to show me a few of his patients. The woman who was admitted because of a miscarriage and had bayonet cuts all over her face is doing fairly well. A sampan owner who was shot in the jaw and burned over most of his body when someone poured gasoline over him and then set him on fire managed to speak a few words, but he will probably die in the course of the day. Almost two-thirds of his skin is burnt. I also went down to the morgue in the basement and had them uncover the bodies that were delivered last night. Among them a civilian with his eyes burned out and his head totally burned, who had likewise had gasoline poured over him by Japanese soldiers. The body of a little boy, maybe seven years old, had four bayonet wounds in him, one in the belly about as long as your finger. He died two days after being admitted to the hospital without ever once uttering a cry of pain.

I have had to look at so many corpses over the last few weeks that I can keep my nerves in check even when viewing these horrible cases. It really doesn't leave you in a "Christmas" mood; but I wanted to see these atrocities with my own eyes, so that I can speak as an eyewitness later. A man cannot be silent about this kind of cruelty!

While I was at the hospital, Fitch kept watch for me. For now, I cannot leave my house unguarded without running the risk that marauding soldiers will break into it. It was my firm belief that about 350 to 400 refugees had found asylum with me. After an exact head count by Mr. Han, it now turns out that a total of 602 people are camping in my garden (with its 5,500 square feet), my office, etc.: 302 males and 300 females, including 126 children under ten years of age. One child is only two months old. Not included in this census are 14 servants and employees of the firm plus their families, so that the total number probably comes to about 650.

Chang is beaming: His wife was released from the hospital this morning; we've just picked her up in the car. She'll be sleeping from now on in the attic with her children; there's no other place left in the house for them.

Everyone's competing to make this a happy Christmas for me. It's really touching! Chang bought some Christmas roses and has decorated the house with them. He even managed to find a fir tree that he wants to decorate and he just came around grinning with joy carrying six very long candles that he rounded up for me somewhere. Everybody likes me suddenly. And it used to be, or so I thought, that no one wanted to have much to do with me, or might I have been wrong there? How strange, my dear Dora, my dear children and grandchildren! I know you're all praying for me today. I feel as if I am surrounded by loving thoughts. That does a man boundless good after all that I've had to go through these last two weeks. Believe me, I have a prayer in my heart for all of you as well. The terrible crisis that has overtaken us all here has restored my childlike faith. Only a God can protect me from these hordes whose deadly games include rape, murder, and arson.

We've just had news that new troops will be arriving today who will restore the order we've been longing for. From now on, all crimes are to be severely punished at once. Let's hope so! By God it's time there was a turn for the better. We're very near the end of our tether.

I'll close today's entry with this prayer in my heart: May a gracious God keep all of you from ever having to face a crisis like the one in which we now find ourselves. I do not regret having stayed on here, for my presence has saved many lives, but all the same, my suffering is indescribable.

Note: Underlines are added by the editor.

Source: *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe translated by John E. Woods, p.92-3*

Digital image of the **Letter from John Rabe, Chair of the Safety Zone, to the Japanese Commander of Nanking, December 14, 1937** (2 pages) on Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website
<http://divdl.library.yale.edu/ydlchina/images%5CNMP0144.pdf>

Digital image of the **Letter from John Rabe, Chair of the Safety Zone, to the Imperial Japanese Embassy, December 20, 1937** (1page) on Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website <http://divdl.library.yale.edu/ydlchina/images%5CNMP0161.pdf>

Digital image of the **Address by John Rabe at the farewell party given by staff of Nanking Safety Zone on Feb, 1938** (4 pages) on Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website <http://divdl.library.yale.edu/ydlchina/images%5CNMP0210.pdf>

[More John Rabe documentation in digital image on Yale Divinity School Library, the Nanking Massacre Project website
<http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Nanking/findingaid.html>]