

The Rabe That I Knew

By Tang Ying

On November 4, 1997, I learned from an article in the “Wuhu Evening News” that the “Diary of Rabe”, which had been in hibernation for 60 years, was lucky to be published. This news triggered my profound thoughts for Mr. Rabe. I am still grateful for Mr. Rabe who saved my life 60 years ago. I can still vividly remember things that happened 60 years ago. I cannot help but take out my pen and write down some of the past events about Mr. Rabe, and hope by doing so, serve as a way to express my fond memories and respect for Mr. Rabe.

Mr. Rabe is the representative in China for the German company Siemens. Neighbours used to call him “Mr. Trumpet” as the pronunciation of “trumpet” in Chinese sounds like “Rabe”. He was tall and stocky, but a very easy-going person. But when he was angered and raging about the Japanese devils’ assaults, he could become a totally different person. His loud shouting was very frightening. After the Japanese devils slaughtered their way into Nanking, he changed to wear German military uniform, wore helmet and military boots, a “卐” sign arm band and a pistol on his waist. He looked powerful and authoritative.

In 1937, Mr. Rabe lived at No. 1 Xiaofen Qiao in Nanking. To the right was Guangzhou Road, to the left was the neighbouring Jinling University (now Nanjing University – translator). When the Japanese devils entered the city, Mr. Han Xianglin, secretary cum translator from Shandong Province, was with them (committee members of the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone – translator). Mr. Han’s chauffeur Mr. Chen Mingfeng was my good friend. (He is now 81 years of age. He retired from City of Xuzhou Motor Car Company. When I visited him in 1995, he said he had taken a picture with Mr. Rabe and the members of the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone. However, he regretted very much that he could not find it then) .

At that time (1937), I was about 17 years of age and worked as an apprentice at Deshun Shoe Shop at No. 6 Xiaofen Qiao. Mr. Rabe lived opposite to our shoe shop. My master’s name was Wu Fugui, he was the owner of the shoe shop and could speak only a few English words. He specialized in serving the embassies, foreigners and missionaries. My master made shoes for all the family members of Mr. Rabe, therefore, they were acquainted. In Mr. Rabe’s diary, he mentioned that there were a lot of people in the bomb shelter that he built. He especially talked about the shoemaker

neighbour, that was my master.

The bomb shelter that Mr. Rabe built in the courtyard was not large. But once people wanted to come in, he would never refuse them, to the extent that it became even difficult for himself to enter. Therefore, when there were no Japanese airplanes approaching the area, he usually stayed outside the bomb shelter to watch.

In December 1937, the Japanese devils entered the City. At first, my master and I still lived in the shoe shop. I narrow escaped from the atrocious acts of the Japanese devils twice. The first time, it was the afternoon following the day they entered the City. A number of Japanese devils stormed into the shop. When they saw that there was a self-made air-raid shelter that could accommodate 5 or 6 persons, one Japanese devil suddenly slapped me twice on my cheek and took me to the entrance of the shelter. He pointed at the entrance and started to speak in Japanese. I could not understand, so I used my finger to point at the sky, and to mimic the sound of the bomber engines. The Japanese devil suddenly kicked me down into the shelter with his bayonet mounted rifle pointed at me. My master was over 50 years of age that time. He was frightened and knelt down to kowtow. Hearing no movements in the shelter, the Japanese devil left. On that same day, at the intersection of Guangzhou Road near our shoe shop, two middle-aged men were bayoneted to death by Japanese devils, one of them at the road side of a makeshift air-raid shelter, another on the road. At that time, I was young and of small built, but if I were of stronger built, I'm afraid I'd be dead.

On the third night, two Japanese devils stormed into the shoe shop by kicking open the door. There were only two of us - an old man and a youngster. One of the Japanese devils pointed the bayonet at me and asked for pretty girls. I waved my hands. The Japanese devil angrily poked the bayonet around my body. Suddenly, there were cries by women from outside. The two Japanese devils hurried out. After this frightening event, both my master and me dared not stay at home. We took refuge in Mr. Rabe's house and for more than one month's time, we dared not step out of the main entrance.

Mr. Rabe's home was a western style house with courtyard. It was not intended for taking refugees. But once the refugees entered, he never refused them. At the height of Japanese devils' burnings and killings, over 600 people took refuge in the house. Some people sat, others lay on the floor and the place was full of people. It was freezing winter time. Even under extreme difficult circumstances, Mr. Rabe not only provided food for the refugees, but also got reed mats, straw and canvas canopy to keep them warm. To prevent the Japanese devils harassment in case they entered, Mr. Rabe organized a team

of people to watch their activities around the courtyard walls day and night. In case they saw Japanese devils climb over the wall, they would immediately whistle to report. Mr. Rabe would turn them away.

In my memory, the Japanese devils had harassed over dozens of times. The most frightening one was one evening 10 days after they entered the City. Not long after Mr. Rabe drove out of the house, 3 Japanese devils came in by climbing over the wall. Each had a bayonet dangling behind their butt. They went grabbing women like cruel beasts of prey. All of a sudden, there were women screaming and children crying, it was heart wrenching to hear. At that point, the lights were suddenly out. (It was only known afterwards that Mr. Cao, a Tianjin cook of Mr. Rabe, turned off the light.) In darkness, the Japanese devils could not make out man from woman. One of the Japanese devils grabbed my hair and dragged me to the entrance of the shelter. When he realized that I was not of female gender, he returned to the crowd to grab again. At this exciting moment, Mr. Cao made a clever and daring act. He took advantage of the opportunity when the Japanese devils were busy taking women, plucked away their bayonets stealthily. None of the Japanese devils was aware of this. Eventually, the Japanese devils got two women from the crowd and tried to leave by climbing over the courtyard wall. Because these women defied with all their might and tightened their grip on whatever they could get hold of, and, their family members also tried to pull them back, a lot of people were kicked by the Japanese devils. This stalemate situation lasted for some time.

Just when one of the dragged women almost reached the courtyard wall, suddenly, there came the horns of a motor car. Co-incidentally, all people shouted and these sudden yelling confused the Japanese devils. I could not make out what did we shout, but realized that our savior had come. And, in the minds of the refugees, Mr. Rabe was their living Buddha, their savior.

Suddenly, the light came back and a motor car entered the main gate. All the Chinese people approached to surround the car, some of the senior people knelt down to kowtow. When Mr. Rabe was informed that the Japanese devils climbed over the wall and tried to snatch people, he was furious and howled at them loudly. To one's surprise, the Japanese devils stood sheepishly before Mr. Rabe and indicated that they would leave by the main gate. Mr. Rabe disagreed and shouted, "If you came through the main entrance, I would see you off by the main entrance. But you climbed in here over the walls, then you can only leave by climbing over the wall." Secretary Han realized that the Japanese devils did not understand what had been said, so he could only use hand signs to show the Japanese devils that they had to leave by the walls. The Japanese devils refused and still wanted to leave by main gate. Mr. Rabe

was furious. He howled at them, drew out the pistol from his waist holster, approached the Japanese devils, pointed at the courtyard wall and signaled them to climb over the wall. The last Japanese devil to climb the wall slipped down from the wall twice before he could get out of the premises. To save the Chinese refugees before those senseless Japanese devils, Mr. Rabe gave no consideration of his personal safety. He was a noble and truly respectable person.

About two months after the Japanese devils entered the City, refugees gradually left the refugee camps. There were even pedestrians on small lanes. One morning, two women, one old and one young, were walking on XiaoFen Qiao. Suddenly, a Japanese devil grabbed the young woman and dragged her towards the roadside. Because the young woman held on to the old woman, who also did not release her hold on the young woman, the Japanese devil kicked and hit the old woman ferociously. Eventually, the old woman was kicked free and the Japanese devil dragged the young woman into a house near the roadside. (At that time, there were about 30 or 40 people on the road watching at a distance, but they just could do nothing and dared not come forward to stop it.)

Just at that time, Mr. Rabe returned by car. All the people approached to surround his car. The old woman knelt on the road, kowtowed and shouted for help. When Mr. Rabe was told what happened after disembarking the car, I did not know what he said to the people inside the car, but saw that a Japanese lieutenant got out from the car. He shouted a few words at the house by the roadside. That Japanese devil ran out of the house and stood in attention before the lieutenant. The Japanese devil officer immediately slapped and scorned him, while the Japanese devil repeatedly shouted “yes sir”. Mr. Rabe realized that this officer was just putting up a show for him. As the matter had had been dealt with, he asked the Japanese devil lieutenant to get back into the car and left. The young woman was spared. If not for Mr. Rabe, even if they met with the Japanese devil officer, this woman could not avoid the adversity.

I also remembered one time, when Mr. Rabe’s chauffeur Liu Hanchen returned from his journey (it was about 6 or 7 days after the Japanese entered the City), he told the refugees that if not for Mr. Rabe, many people would meet with disaster that day. As it happened, four Japanese devils arrived Jinling University by truck and grabbed women from the refugee camp. Although the American and British committee members of the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone resisted strenuously, they were beaten up by the barbarous Japanese devils. In the nick of time, Mr. Rabe’s car drove into the refugee camp (his car flew a flag with “卍” sign). Seeing such acts, he

approached angrily to stop them and the Japanese devils left grudgingly.

In early 1938, Nanking had quiet down a little bit. A lot of Chinese people who had received Mr. Rabe's protection organized themselves spontaneously to deliberate how they can express their gratitude to Mr. Rabe for saving their lives. This was somehow known by Mr. Rabe. He resolutely expressed that he would not receive any kind of gifts. People have no alternative but to make a canopy-like umbrella used in regal procession, to express their gratitude to Mr. Rabe for saving their lives. Mr. Rabe accepted it.

It is 71 years since the Japanese invaders' slaughter of Nanking. I am already 88 years of age (in 2008). However, a lot of past events about Mr. Rabe are still fresh in my memory. When 《The Diary of Rabe》 was published in 1997, I wrote this article and it was published in 《Wuhu Evening News》 on December 11, 1997, as a way to cherish my memory and, more so for eternal commemoration.

Mr. Rabe will always live in the hearts of the Chinese people.



Mr. TANG Ying in 1997

Mr. TANG Ying shared this article with the Canadian educators who met him during the 2008 Peace & Reconciliation Study Tour organized by BC ALPHA & Toronto ALPHA.

(Translated by David Kam)