FOREWORD

JOHN RABE WAS BORN in Hamburg, Germany, on 23 November 1882. His father was a ship's captain; he died while his son was still young, so that John had to leave school after passing general exams. He then worked for a Hamburg export firm, first as an apprentice for two and a half years, and then as an office clerk. At his boss's recommendation he was sent to Lourenço Marques in Mozambique, a Portuguese colony in southeast Africa, where he worked for a well-established English firm. There he learned to speak fluent English.

A bout of malaria forced him to return home in 1906, but he was on his way again by 1908, this time to Peking. In 1909 he went to Shanghai, where he married his childhood sweetheart from Hamburg. With only a few brief interruptions, he lived in China for the next thirty years. At first he worked for a Hamburg firm, and then in 1911 joined the Siemens branch in Peking, where he remained throughout the First World War, even though, under pressure from the Allies, China declared war on Germany in 1917. He was able to convince the Chinese authorities, however, that it would be in both China's and their own best interest if he continued to run the Siemens office in Peking during the war. That sort of thing was possible in China.

But in 1919, under pressure from the British, he was repatriated to Germany along with all his fellow countrymen. German competition was not wanted. A year later, however, he returned to China via the backdoor of Japan and reestablished the Siemens branch in Peking under the cover of a Chinese firm, until Siemens China Company was permitted to reopen, with its main office in Shanghai. At first he worked in Peking and Tientsin, but from 1931 on, he was the director of the Siemens branch in Nanking, which at the time was the capital of China. The firm called him home in March 1938 and transferred him to its main offices in Berlin, where, however, he was not given any position of real responsibility. In 1947, he retired at age 65; two years later, on 5 January 1949, he died.

The life of an international businessman, then, nothing unusual, nothing particularly exciting—had not John Rabe outgrown that mundane role for a period of six months when he placed, and often risked, his life in the service of 250,000 Chinese. In the Memorial Hall of the city of Nanking, there is a tablet erected in honor of his exemplary humanity. Those who may think humanity is unknown in China are wrong.

> The student Fan Chi asked the Master what "jen" (humanness) means.
> "To love men," Confucius replied.

In the philosophy of Confucius, *jen* is the central ethical concept. Confucius returns to it again and again. What he taught and what the Chinese people learned for two and a half millennia has never ceased to be a challenge to humankind.

John Rabe was a simple man who wanted to be no more than an honest Hamburg businessman. He was always ready to help, was well-liked, showed good common sense, and maintained a sense of humor even in difficult situations, especially then. He always found ways to come to an amicable agreement, never thrust himself to the fore, and was more likely to do the opposite. If he records some complaint in his diary, he usually adds: "But it's the same for others" or "Others are a lot worse off." He often writes about people who are in need, and how he helped or tried to help them. He saw that as his task, and it distinguished him from his fellows.

He had a great many friends in China, both among the Germans and the other Westerners there. We know that he spoke excellent English; but his written French is impeccable as well. He wrote a whole series of books, mostly about life in China, embellishing them with photographs and little humorous drawings. The books are mostly of a private nature and have

never been published, but the bound manuscripts are still extant. He knew a good deal about Chinese art, without ever becoming an expert. Literature, music, and the sciences were not his strong points, but sentimental poems could move him to tears. He had a soft heart, but didn't like to show it.

He was a practical man, both adept and lucky in practical matters. He was only moderately interested in politics, essentially only to the extent that it concerned China, German commerce in China, and German foreign policy in Asia. But he was a patriot, and for a long time he thought Hitler wanted peace.

In 1934, he founded a German school on his property in Nanking—and not for his own two children. His daughter was already past school age, and his son was at a boarding school in southern Germany. As chairman of the school board, which had to work through official channels of the Reich and get approval of the Nazi Party for teachers and funds, he joined the NSDAP in 1934.

A simple man whom people prized for his common sense, his humor, and his congeniality, but certainly not in any way a conspicuous man—and yet he earned people's highest admiration for the way that his love of his neighbor, of his Chinese fellow men in their plight, grew and outgrew itself, for the way he not only rescued them as a Good Samaritan, but also displayed political savvy, a talent for organization and diplomacy, and unflagging stamina in their cause. Working closely with American friends and often at the risk of his life, he built a Safety Zone in Nanking that prevented a massacre and offered relative security to 250,000 Chinese during the Japanese occupation. That he also found time to keep a diary is almost incomprehensible. What he did and saw during the six months between October 1937 and March 1938 is the topic of this book.

He was highly praised by his friends, revered as a saint by the Chinese, respected by the Japanese, whose acts of misconduct he constantly resisted. And yet he remained the same modest man he had been before, who nevertheless could lose all his gentle humility when he saw a wrong being committed; who erupted into hot fury when he saw a soldier about to rape a woman, roared at him in German, held his swastika armband under the man's nose, grabbed him by the collar, and threw him out of the house. And by all accounts he was also a figure of strict paternal authority in his own home.

He was modest, yes, but now and then a little vanity shines through, as, for instance, when he sits down dressed in tails and adorned with medals to pose for a prominent Berlin photographer. Or in the hurt he felt when the

editor of the Shanghai *Ostasiatischer Lloyd* simply blue-penciled a joke with which he had spiced up an article.

He left Germany in 1909 when Kaiser Wilhelm was still on the throne. He returned in 1919 for a brief period—when the German empire had been replaced by a republic that still rested on very uneasy foundations. When the Communists took over the town hall in Hamburg, John Rabe was beaten up because—in characteristic fashion—he tried to help a man who had been trod underfoot by the mob.

In Berlin he saw machine guns appear on the street during a strike by Siemens workers. He began to keep a diary. It became his great passion, and not always to his wife's delight, for even after office hours he was often not available to the family. A constant theme of the entries is Rabe's worry that in such unsettled times the volumes of his diary might get lost. They were his most precious possession. He had preserved his times and his life in them.

He wrote about that year in Berlin:

> Then came the Kapp putsch. I knew and understood nothing about domestic politics. Only later did it become clear to me that those days in Germany were far worse than they had appeared to me at the time. To my left, in the Music Hall on Stein Platz, was the army, to my right, the Communists were quartered in the Riding Academy on Uhland Strasse, and they shot at each another during the night, so that I had to move my family from the bedroom out into the corridor.
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> It was not very pleasant in Berlin. Those were the days of the General Strike and the Organization for Maintenance of Supplies, the days when starving students became gigolos and opera singers sang for pennies in the back courtyards. Those were the days of hoarding and want. At the Siemens offices there were days for using bacon ration cards and days for using boot-resoling ration cards. I never missed a one. Herr Brendel, a friend and coworker at Siemens, had told me about a place inside Siemens where you could get cheap beans and peas. I tried to haul two large bags of peas home, but it began to rain and there were no streetcars. My bags turned soggy and I got home with about half. I really didn't fit in Berlin!
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> I shared my food on the streetcar with a young girl who fainted because she had nothing in her stomach. I remember another gross example of the misery that I ran across almost every day. Herr Braun, our bookkeeper in Shanghai, had returned from vacation and invited Herr Brendel, me, and a few other friends, to share a pint of beer and some Bavarian snacks he had brought from home—white bread, butter, and

sausage—at the Pschorr Beer Hall on Potsdamer Platz. We had all eaten our fill, and Herr Braun gave everything that was left to a little girl of perhaps eight, who carried matches in her apron and sold them for one mark a box. With a great sob the little thing let her entire stock of wares fall to the floor and ran with her treasure to her mother waiting at the door. The beer didn't taste good to us after that.

Who can blame me for heaving a sigh of relief when I received news that I would be able to return to my old workplace in China.

Over the next two decades Rabe was in Germany only twice, both times briefly—first in the twenties, the second time in 1930, when he came home to get over a "head flu," as he called it. After that he became the director of the Siemens branch in Nanking, China's new capital city. He did not see Germany again until his firm recalled him in 1938.

Nanking had been China's capital since 1927. By 1937, it had a population of about 1.3 million. Siemens had built the city's telephone system and the turbines of its electrical power plant; it had also supplied the hospitals with German equipment. Chinese technicians trained by Siemens serviced these facilities round the clock. Rabe spent his days at various governmental ministries trying to win contracts for Siemens.

There was a German hotel in Nanking. The famous German bakery Kiessling & Bader in Tientsin had a branch here. The German embassy under Ambassador Trautmann had made the move from Peking to Nanking, and the other foreign embassies had set up shop in Nanking as well. Based in Nanking, the Transocean News Agency kept the world abreast of political events in China, while Shanghai remained the nation's financial center—a relationship something like that between Washington and New York.

Marshal Chiang Kai-shek, the generalissimo, governed from Nanking, and wanted to modernize a backward country that had disintegrated into spheres of influence, most of them controlled by various warlords, each in charge of his own private army, and one, the province of Yen-an, by Mao Zedong, who had set up his headquarters there at the end of his famous Long March. There were thirty to forty German military advisors stationed in Nanking, most of them retired German officers, some with their families. Chiang Kai-shek had begun to bring them in under private contract as early as 1927. They were supposed to turn his army into an elite fighting force that could resist both Mao's revolutionary forces and the Japanese.

The chief advisor from 1934 to 1935 had been retired Colonel-General

Hans von Seeckt, the former commander in chief of the Weimar Republic's army. His successor was General Alexander von Falkenhausen. They began the training of several elite divisions, which in fact were able to hold their own against the stronger Japanese for much of the autumn of 1937.

Housed in a separate colony, built for them by the generalissimo, the German officers in Nanking kept to themselves for the most part. They lived much the same casino-based life that they knew from home. They normally signed up for only a few years and had little interest in China, its land and people, its culture and history. Their main topics of conversation were their work, servants, transfers, war stories. Since these men came from very different political backgrounds, there were frequent enough serious arguments for Colonel-General von Seeckt to have to set up a court of honor.

For the businessmen of Nanking, who often did not leave China for years, home was far away. Eurasia, a subsidiary of Lufthansa, was the only airline in China, but as yet there was no direct link by air to Europe or America. The voyage from Shanghai to Genoa, where most Germans disembarked to complete the trip home by rail, lasted four to six weeks; the trip via the Trans-Siberian Railway took ten to twelve days. Most people preferred the comforts of a sea voyage.

John Rabe had no clear picture of what had happened in Germany since his last brief stay in 1930. He learned of Hitler's seizure of power, the Röhm putsch, the fundamental changes in the political landscape, only from newspapers. He read the British *North China Daily News*, China's most serious English-language daily, published in Shanghai. He also subscribed to the *Ostasiatischer Lloyd*, based in Shanghai as well, which essentially restricted itself to passing on the dispatches from Transocean and from the official German news agency. Its editorial policy therefore reflected the standard jargon of the Reich Propaganda Ministry.

This little German paper knew only good things to say about Germany, its Führer, and its party. But even the *North China Daily News* was generally rather sympathetic, if somewhat condescending, in its reports about Germany and its policies. German newspapers from home were usually two to three weeks old when they arrived in Nanking and thus of little interest. But these newspapers, too, had nothing negative to say; they reported about a new German nation that had risen up and broken the humiliating chains of the Versailles Treaty, that no longer paid reparations, and, with the defeat of 1918 behind it, that now demanded and got the same respect as other nations. The Jews were often attacked. Why?—that wasn't very

clear in China's world of international business, where you dealt daily with people of the most diverse religions, races, and nationalities. And at first there was very little in the German press about the actual measures taken against the Jews in Germany—nor in the *North China Daily News* for that matter. For years most of the foreign press treated Hitler's policy of anti-Semitism as a disagreeable topic of German domestic politics in which outside nations would do better not to meddle.

Far more important to the press were Germany's foreign and economic policy, its rearmament, and, after 1938, increasing worries about whether Hitler's policies might lead to war. In China people learned details about the treatment of German Jews only toward the end of the thirties, when increasing numbers of them began to emigrate to Shanghai. After that, however, it was impossible not to have some idea of what was going on.

John Rabe, who had lived in China for almost thirty years, was more at home there than in Germany. He was one of the fabled "old China hands," who could speak fluent English but no Chinese, conversing instead with the Chinese in Pidgin English, and yet who could think like locals and who understood, admired, and loved the Chinese. These old China hands were an inexhaustible source of anecdotes and experiences, living pieces of history who could offer vivid accounts of the Chinese and China's otherness. When they returned home to Europe, however, they found it difficult to settle back into a homeland that now felt strange. The same thing happened to John Rabe.

His home in Nanking was open to every guest. I was there in the autumn of 1936, returning from studying at an American college, traveling on a shoestring through Japan and China, and wanting to see and know everything.

In Shandong province I had visited Herr Klicker, a remarkable German who lived far in the interior, where life was made insecure by army deserters and bands of thieves, including those who had pulled off the legendary robbery of the Shanghai Express—later to be turned into a successful movie. He was the director of a mining company owned by a Chinese corporation and had provided the workers of this large enterprise with many social services and benefits, so that it would have been considered a model operation even in Germany. He had given me a letter of introduction to John Rabe. I could stay with him, and he could tell me a great deal about China.

By the early light of dawn on a November morning, I arrived in Pukou by train, took the ferry across the Yangtze, rode a ricksha through an im-

posing gate of the Nanking city wall, and pulled up before Rabe's house, a modest villa with an office attached. Everyone was still asleep. I walked up and down the street and didn't ring until breakfast time.

John Rabe and his wife immediately had a third place set at their table and a bed made up for me in the guest room. They kept me with them for over a week, longer than I had originally planned. We went to the movies once and saw an American film. Otherwise our evenings were spent sitting in the living room, while Rabe talked about his years in China, about the Chinese, their ways of thinking and living, about China's curious domestic politics, the regime of Chiang Kai-shek, the corruption, the German military advisors. He had even experienced the final years of the Ch'ing dynasty and the infamous Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi, the Imperial German "Kiaochow protection zone," and the building of the city of Tsingtao.

John Rabe spoke in concrete terms, emphasizing and explaining for me what is often incomprehensible about the Chinese. He read from his diaries: humorous verses or observations on the life of his servants and their families or on business practices in China. In those days before television, people had much more time for conversation.

I had to tell him about the United States and my trip through Manchuria. He was outraged to hear that Japanese army trucks were racing with impunity about Peking, even in the legation district to which the Chinese government had granted extraterritorial status.

Like all Germans in China, he was worried that Hitler was making approaches to Japan. The Anti-Comintern Pact that Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German ambassador in London, had initiated and signed without any participation of the Foreign Ministry, proved it. Nonetheless John Rabe did not believe the rumor that Hitler would withdraw German military advisors from China, for they had all signed private contracts with the Chinese government. (Hitler did it all the same in 1938, and von Ribbentrop threatened the advisors and their families with "serious consequences" if they did not return posthaste.) We did not talk much about conditions in Germany itself—back then it was a faraway place for him Nor did he mention that he was a member of the NSDAP or that he had temporarily stood in for Legation Councilor Lautenschlager as the party's local group leader. He probably saw it as a formality not worth mentioning. I heard of it myself only long after the war.

The Rabes took touchingly good care of me. I had exchanged some of my money in Shandong. But the currency was not accepted anywhere in

Nanking, because it had been issued by a northern Chinese warlord. John Rabe found a bank, or so he said, that would exchange it for valid currency. Nowadays I ask myself if he didn't simply replace my currency with money out of his own pocket.

The Rabes drove me out to the tomb of Hung-wu, the founder of the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century, to the huge mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the republic, and to Nanking's other historical monuments; or they simply let me roam the city alone, which in some places did not even look like a city. There was a center, where new large ministries had arisen along with broad avenues and squares, like the ones that the Nanking Germans called "Potsdamer" or "Leipziger Platz." But wide expanses of fields, lakes, ponds, and thickets, where not a house was to be seen, were also part of Nanking.

All of it—Purple Mountain, Lotus Lake, the rock formations of the Stone Citadel—was enclosed within the magnificent city wall that the first Ming emperor had ordered built around his capital, the largest and longest city wall in the world, the work of two hundred thousand people over twenty years. It is twenty-one (some say more than twenty-five) miles long, and from North Gate to South Gate measures six miles. The wall was already too big for the city when the first Ming emperor had it built. It would have taken an entire army to defend its circumference. Despite its wall,

Yangtzekiang and the Nanking city wall

Nanking has been conquered and razed several times in its history. The last time had been in 1864. Even in 1936, it still had not completely recovered from that most recent devastation.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, a village school teacher in southern China, had a vision in which he was told that he was the younger brother of Jesus. He collected about him a group of fanatically religious revolutionaries, and their number quickly grew. They soon constituted a small army, and moving northward, they defeated the Imperial forces sent out against them and took Nanking. This "brother of Jesus" now called himself "Heavenly King" and named Nanking the "Heavenly Capital" and his empire *Taiping Tienkuo,* the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace." It was, as we would call it today, both a fundamentalist theocracy and a cruel dictatorship.

The leaders of the Taiping Rebellion (1852–1864) came close to conquering the whole empire and toppling the Imperial dynasty. But the Imperial government raised new armies and, after a long series of battles, finally defeated the "Taipings," whose leadership was now falling apart. It was the most deadly civil war in world history; some thirty million Chinese died in the struggle for the Heavenly Kingdom.

When Imperial troops retook Nanking in 1864, they engaged in a bloodbath that lasted for days, not only slaying the Taiping rebels, but also murdering almost all the inhabitants of the city, looting their homes, and finally burning everything to the ground. Nanking perished. Only what was made of stone remained.

The Taiping rebels had themselves already blown up the Great Pagoda of blue, green, and red porcelain, with its one hundred fifty bells that rang in the wind, one of the wonders of the world in the early fifteenth century. A small portion of the palace in which the Heavenly King had perished, plus a little park and lake, still remained, but at the time were considered Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's official residence and could not be visited.

Taking Rabe's advice, I took a stroll along the city wall, which in some places is over fifty feet high and up to forty feet wide across the top. The city gates were themselves great fortifications, each containing a sequence of gates and courtyards, so that troops who broke through one gate would find themselves facing yet another and surrounded on all sides. The top of the wall was wide enough for two wagons to drive abreast easily.

About two-thirds of the wall was still standing. It led almost down to the Yangtze, which is three-quarters of a mile wide here, yet far upriver from Nanking still remains navigable—for a total distance of well over six

hundred miles from its mouth at Shanghai. There is a bend in the river here, and in that bend, as if in a protecting hand, lies Nanking. From the wall you could look out over the city, which was almost lost in the green of trees, meadows, fields, and ponds.

I saw a child's bright red cap lying in the tall grass growing on top of the wall, picked it up, but then dropped it again at once in horror. Beneath it lay the half-decomposed head of a child. The worst part were the fat white maggots.

That evening when his wife had gone out, I told John Rabe about it. He was very upset.

"In Shanghai," he said, "that sort of thing happens every day—dead bodies of poor people who die on a cold night are lying in the streets come morning. But not in Nanking. There are no dead bodies lying around here!"

The next morning he called the chief of police. That was at the end of 1936. About one year later, he was to write in his diary: "We literally climbed over dead bodies. It was worst at Christmas."

But during that December of 1937, *he* was, as he wrote this, to all effects the chief of police, indeed the mayor of the city of Nanking.

And how that came to be is what he describes in his diary, from which the following chapters have been taken. He typed a clean copy of it during the war and added certain materials: documents, public notices he had himself written, notes to embassies, proclamations, newspaper clips, letters, and photographs. As a way of protecting himself from the Gestapo, who had forbidden him to write or speak in public, he added a foreword to his final copy:

> This is not intended to be read for entertainment, though it may perhaps look like that at first; it is a record of facts, a diary, which was not written for the public but for my wife and the closest circle of my family. Should its publication, which for obvious reasons has at present been prohibited, ever seem appropriate, that should be done only by permission of the German government. All reports and correspondence of the International Committee of the Nanking Safety Zone to the Japanese embassy have been translated by me from English into German, which is also the case of correspondence exchanged with American authorities.
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> Berlin, 1 October 1942