

PART 2

JOHN RABE IN HIS
GERMAN HOMELAND

CHAPTER 12

BETWEEN THE NANKING AND BERLIN DIARIES

BEFORE RETURNING HOME, John Rabe held a press conference in Shanghai, which was reported in all the newspapers in China and by almost all the large news agencies from around the world. Rabe spoke of his close cooperation with American missionaries, university teachers, and doctors. It had indeed been only these Americans and three Germans, John Rabe, Christian Kröger, and Eduard Sperling, who had remained in the city when the Japanese stood at the gates and whose International Committee had provided 250,000 Chinese relative security inside the Safety Zone. At this press conference Mr. Rabe spoke about the shortage of food in Nanking, about the plight of its citizens, but he said nothing about the excesses of the Japanese soldiers in order not to worsen the relationship between the International Committee and the Japanese army. The *Ostasiatischer Lloyd*, Shanghai's little German newspaper, published some excerpts from his diary, but only those about the Japanese air raids and the shelling of the city of Nanking before it was taken, and nothing of the horrors that everyone

was waiting to hear about. Rabe was celebrated as a hero by all the papers and press agencies. He found that amusing.

On 15 April 1938, he and his wife, Dora, arrived in Berlin. The German press took no notice whatever. He was, however, received by Ernst Wilhelm Bohle, the leader of the Nazi party's "district abroad," who was likewise a high official in the Foreign Ministry, where he was the party observer. Bohle awarded John Rabe the medal of the German Red Cross for which he had been nominated by Ambassador Trautmann. The Chinese government presented him with a very prestigious decoration, the star of the Jade Order on a blue, white, and red ribbon, although it was not given to him until some time later. Rabe had himself photographed in tails and wearing both these medals: the splendid photograph, it would appear, of an important diplomat, which would look good in a silver frame atop the grand piano at some diplomatic cocktail party. Yet it bears little resemblance to the John Rabe who waved his swastika armband to intimidate an armed Japanese soldier and thus prevented him from raping Chinese girls.

John Rabe was proud of his decorations. But the German press was not allowed to mention them either. Rabe gave several lectures, the first on 2 May in the Great Festival Hall of Siemens's Schuckert Administration Building in Berlin-Siemensstadt. His American friend, the missionary John Magee, had given him a copy of his film about the victims of the Japanese occupation; it was screened on this occasion. Over the next few days, other lectures followed: one at the foreign policy office of Reich Führer Alfred Rosenberg; another at the Far East Association; a fourth before the SS of the suburb of Siemensstadt, which was attended by one of Himmler's deputies, or so Rabe claimed; and finally a lecture at the War Ministry on Tirpitz Ufer, where only the film was of interest.

He had worked long and hard on the text of his lecture at the Festival Hall in Siemensstadt. His descriptions of events in Nanking are lively and vivid. Rabe illustrates his comments with concrete experiences, some of them drastic and shocking. From the way he occasionally casts his material in an ironic or humorous light, it is obvious how much the British style of storytelling had become part of him after thirty years of living in semicolonial China. He quotes at length from his diaries, and to avoid repetition, the lecture has not been included among the documents at the end of this book.

In this lecture he deftly anticipates certain possible objections and refutes or tries to refute them. For example: It was not his intention to en-

gage in anti-Japanese propaganda in Germany or to give public lectures to arouse pro-Chinese sentiments. Though very sympathetic to China's suffering, he was first and foremost pro-German and not only did he believe in the correctness of "the central thrust of our policy," but as an officer of the party he also stood "one hundred percent behind it."

The Japanese, moreover, had in fact every reason to be grateful to him, because he had attempted to "blunt the arrow" of the many protests lodged against the Japanese in Nanking, "precisely because I was a German and as such both had to and wanted to maintain the friendly relationship between our embassy and that of our ally Japan." Before sending off their complaints to the Japanese, his American friends had often asked him to mix a little honey into the text.

He asks and immediately answers the question of why he remained behind in Nanking, although his company had said he was free to leave the city with other Germans and officials of the Chinese government. He had remained behind out of gratitude to China, which had always treated him well—even during the world war—and in order to protect his Chinese coworkers and their large extended families. Of course he also wanted to represent the interests of Siemens China Co.; but he passes over that very quickly, since with the retreat of the government and the occupation of Nanking by the Japanese, not a single order had come Siemens's way. How very much he misjudged the realities of National Socialism can be seen from his attempt to present his humanitarian efforts in Nanking as simply those of a National Socialist party member doing his duty.

The conclusion of the lecture is John Rabe all over. He takes up the cause of Legation Secretary Rosen, who had so energetically represented German interests against the Japanese. Rabe of course knew just how precarious Rosen's situation was and what difficulties had arisen for him from Hitler's race laws. Rabe pleads for both Rosen and his sense of right and wrong, even though he himself had had his reservations about Rosen's gruff and at times not exactly diplomatic way of dealing with the Japanese. At the end of his lecture he writes:

I recall a conversation that he had with a Japanese general. In the course of it, Dr. Rosen used the phrase, "Since your troops got out of control . . .," whereupon the Japanese general flew into a rage: "How dare you say so! We have the best disciplined troops in the world." To which Dr. Rosen replied, "Oh, do you mean to say they did that on orders?"

Neither in Rabe's diaries nor in the documents appended here is there any mention of how many Chinese fell victim to the Japanese massacre in Nanking. Indeed, at the time there was no one who compiled statistics or counted how many civilians, prisoners of war, men, women, and children had been murdered. Today people speak of 200,000 to 300,000 victims. In his lecture, John Rabe says:

We Europeans put the number at about 50,000 to 60,000. According to the Red Swastika Society, which had taken on the task of burying the bodies, but could not bury more than 200 a day, there were about 30,000 bodies still lying unburied in the suburb of Hsiakwan on 22 February 1938, the date I left Nanking.

It is likely that Rabe's estimate is too low, since he could not have had an overview of the entire municipal area during the period of the worst atrocities. Moreover, many troops of captured Chinese soldiers were led out of the city and down to the Yangtze, where they were summarily executed. But, as noted, no one actually counted the dead.

Rabe's most urgent wish was to report personally to his Führer Adolf Hitler about the occupation of Nanking and the suffering of its people. When it became clear that he would not be granted such an audience, he enclosed the lecture he had given to his coworkers at Siemens in a registered letter.

Why did John Rabe want to speak to his Führer? Why did he send him his lecture? In his letter, he answers these questions himself:

My Führer,

The majority of my friends in China are of the opinion that you have not been provided a detailed report about the actual events in Nanking. In sending you the enclosed copy of a lecture I have given, which however is not intended for the broader public, I am fulfilling a promise made to my friends in China that I would inform you about the sufferings of the Chinese populace. My mission will have been fulfilled if you would be kind enough to let me know that the enclosed copy of my lecture was presented to you.

I have since been notified that I am to abstain from delivering other lectures of this sort or to show any pictures dealing with the subject. I shall obey this order, since it is not my intention to work against German policy and German government offices.

Let me assure you of my allegiance and honest devotion.

JOHN RABE

JOHN H. D. RABE
NANKING

1.21. Ueberseeheim, Dählmannstr. 20.
Siemensstadt, den 8. Juni 1938.

Mein Führer !

Die Mehrzahl meiner Freunde in China ist der Meinung, dass Ihnen über die tatsächlichen Ereignisse in Nanking kein ausführlicher Bericht erstattet wurde.

Durch die Uebersendung der hier beiliegenden Niederschrift eines von mir gehaltenen Vortrages, der nicht für die breite Öffentlichkeit bestimmt ist, erfülle ich ein meinen Freunden in China gegebenes Versprechen, Ihnen von den Leiden der chinesischen Bevölkerung in Nanking Kunde zu geben.

Meine Mission ist erfüllt, wenn Sie die Güte haben wollen sich wissen zu lassen, dass die anliegende Niederschrift Ihnen vorgelegt wurde.

Ich bin inzwischen verständig worden, weitere Vorträge dieser Art zu unterlassen, sowie die dazugehörigen Aufnahmen nicht zu zeigen. Ich werde mich dieser Anordnung fügen, da ich nicht die Absicht habe der deutschen Politik und den deutschen Behörden entgegenzuarbeiten.

Ich versichere Sie meiner treuen Gefolgschaft und meiner aufrichtigen Ergebenheit

John H. D. Rabe

An
den Führer und Reichskanzler
Herrn Adolf Hitler,
Berlin.

RECHENUNGSABTEILUNG
AN DER REICHSBANK FÜR DEUTSCHEN AUßEREN VERKEHR

Empfangsbescheinigung
Nr. 48

Von:	[Redacted]	
Nach:	[Redacted]	
Ort:	[Redacted]	
Zeit:	[Redacted]	
Umsatz:	[Redacted]	
Umsatz:	[Redacted]	
Umsatz:	[Redacted]	

Umsatzsumme
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1938 JUN 10 11:15 AM

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John Rabe's letter to Adolf Hitler

The majority of his friends in China, Rabe writes, believed that Hitler had not been provided a detailed report about the actual events in Nanking. Who were these friends? Adolf Hitler, to whom the letter is addressed, might have assumed Rabe meant Chinese friends, perhaps even the Americans on the Safety Zone Committee. He had promised them he would inform the Führer about the sufferings of the Chinese people.

Later, however, Rabe would indulge his fantasy a bit at one point and write that he had promised the "Chinese government" that he would tell Hitler what he had seen and experienced in Nanking. That, of course, is out of the question. After the siege of Nanking began, he had no opportunity to speak with representatives of the Chinese government.

Nor did he mean his Chinese or American friends. What he had in mind was the German embassy itself, because the embassy knew that what it said had not been going beyond the Foreign Ministry in Berlin to reach the man who made German policy. Rabe had read Rosen's reports. He sometimes even included them in his diary. He knew exactly what Trautmann's views were, knew of his desire to mediate between the Japanese and the Chinese and of his belief that military advisors should remain in China.

Perhaps John Rabe believed that Hitler would be deeply shocked when he read his report about Japanese war crimes in Nanking, and perhaps even that he would rethink his policies regarding China and Japan. John Rabe probably believed that Hitler, "a man, the same as you and I," would not leave the Chinese to their plight. He had written as much in his diary.

He did not suspect that Hitler didn't give a damn about such bagatelles as the death of hundreds of thousands of Chinese. Hitler thought in the grand categories of world history and was concerned with when and how to take Czechoslovakia in one lightning move.

John Rabe waited for Hitler to reply. In vain.

"Then came the surprise," he writes in a memorandum. "A few days later [after sending the letter to Hitler], I was arrested by the Gestapo, that is, two officials arrived in a car and drove me, along with the six volumes of my diary and the film, to [Prinz] Albrecht Strasse."

Once there, he was interrogated for several hours, but "honorably released," as he wrote. "From then on I could not give any lectures, publish any books, and above all not show the film that had been made by John Magee in Nanking and dealt with the atrocities of the Japanese soldiers. In October 1938, I was given my books back, whereas the police kept the film"—of which, as Rabe surely knew, there were now two copies in Berlin.

It had not been a third-degree interrogation. The Gestapo had seen that John Rabe "stood one hundred percent behind the central thrust of German policy," as he himself had always emphasized, and that he would not cause any trouble. "Right or wrong—my country" was, after all, his motto. John Rabe was glad to fall back on that truly dubious maxim. He followed the Gestapo's orders. He toed the line. He did not make much of a fuss about his brief arrest later, either, when after the war many people were happy to use some minor brush with the Gestapo to turn themselves into resistance fighters.

I first heard the news of Rabe's arrest via the grapevine of German China hands, though in rather dramatized form: Rabe had made a film of the atrocities in Nanking, or so it was said, and had shown it to a small cir-

cle of Siemens directors back in Germany. He was then denounced, arrested, and sent to a concentration camp.

In reality the Gestapo had interrogated him because of his letter to Hitler but then left him in peace. According to family tradition, it was Carl-Friedrich von Siemens who then had him sent on a mission to Afghanistan, where he was to look after some Siemens employees who had got into difficulty there.

Which was why I was unable to reach him by telephone at his office and so believed the reports about his being sent to a concentration camp. In reality he soon returned to Berlin. He worked at Siemens as a clerk until the end of the war.

During the war he was responsible for the foreign travel arrangements of Siemens employees. He was also responsible for company employees in Kabul and, later, for those held in detainment camps, especially in India. It was his job to keep connections open with the main office. His son Otto Rabe reports his amazement at how often his father would go to a bookstore and put together large packages of the most varied kinds of literature for the people interned in the camp at Dera Duhn, India.

Rabe kept no diaries after Nanking. He started his last one, his Berlin diary, as the Red Army marched into Siemensstadt on 24 April 1945.

In my autobiography *Mut und Übermut* (1991), I devoted a small chapter to John Rabe. His granddaughter Ursula in Berlin read it and got in contact with me. I learned from her that John Rabe's diaries had not vanished with the Gestapo but that in fact his son Otto Rabe had them stored in the attic of his Black Forest home. The family had never read them; indeed, they had often considered throwing them out or destroying them—after all the cruelties war had brought, they didn't want to read about still more cruelty.

At my request, however, his granddaughter had the diaries sent to her in Berlin, and she provided me with photocopies of all the volumes, about which I was then to write an article. I was so impressed by the diaries, however, that upon completing my article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, I decided to publish them as a book. From Rabe's son I also received the manuscript of the Berlin diary that forms the following chapter.

In December 1996, a facsimile set of the diaries was displayed in New York, where they caused quite a sensation. The family's original plan had been to present the diaries to the Chinese, but I persuaded them to give these volumes to the German Federal Archives in Berlin, where they are now to be found and are available to all for research.