AFTERWORD

John Rabe's Last Years

He had kept a diary for decades. It was his passion. He took pleasure in recording what he had experienced and observed so that he could understand it better. He could, as is surely obvious by now, write clearly and tell a story well. But after the Gestapo confiscated his Nanking diaries, the pleasure he once took in writing was apparently lost. Or perhaps he also thought it was too risky to put to paper what he was now thinking.

Since throughout the war, the only task assigned to him by his company was the job of looking after Siemens employees in foreign internment camps, he had plenty of leisure time to make a clean copy of what he had written in Nanking: seven not especially large volumes, covering the period from September 1937 to April 1938, intended as reading for his wife—and thus full of many remarks about the family and household problems—and interspersed with newspaper clips, letters, invitations, and documents that he had pasted into it. He gave these volumes the title: *Enemy Pilots over Nanking.*

And then he condensed it all into two volumes, a total of 800 pages titled *Bombs over Nanking—From the Diary of a Living Buddha.* The text is much the same as that found in the seven family diaries written for his wife. *Bombs over Nanking* also contains newspaper clips, letters, telegrams, minutes of Safety Zone Committee meetings, and a list of more than 400 cases of atrocities by the Japanese military. These two diaries contain an uninterrupted documentation of the bombardment of Nanking, the founding and work of the Safety Zone Committee, and those war crimes of which the committee was aware. This book is a selection of all the important entries in this work by John Rabe.

He did not begin his last diary until 24 April 1945. It is written in his fine hand and begins as if it were a direct continuation of *Bombs over Nanking*: descriptions of looting, rapes, arrests, people driven from their homes, executions. Not as bad as in China, but bad enough.

While on a visit to the Siemens Works he was arrested by the Soviets and kept locked up in a nearby house with other detainees. He was not subjected to a third-degree interrogation. The food and treatment were good, as he himself notes, but of course he did not like being under arrest. He was interrogated by a major whom he calls "Föderoff." There are claims that he was also received by Marshal Zhukov, but they are incorrect.

The Soviets asked him about his life in considerable detail, and he had to sign his statement as taken down by the Russians and give his word of honor to help the Soviets "restore order in Berlin."

He was then released, but they also ordered him to provide them with the names of all Siemens employees who had ever worked in the Soviet Union. "A difficult task," John Rabe writes. "I don't know how I'm going to carry it out." A colleague took over the job for him.

In Rabe's last diary, Hitler and the other leading National Socialists are mentioned only occasionally. He had come to his conclusions about them. He had written them off, they no longer interested him.

The Russians were followed by the British, who took over the sector in the northwest of Berlin. The military government hired John Rabe as its chief translator, but in August 1945, after only a few weeks, they tossed him out again because former party members were not allowed to work for them. He was now earning nothing and was burdened by the worry that as a former party member he would not be hired by Siemens, either.

He was often ill—heart problems, high blood pressure, and his old diabetes. The doctors blamed the eruption of a skin condition on a deficient

diet. And yet he often had to work helping dismantle the heavy machinery at the Siemens Works.

The German Denazification Panel would not denazify him. As an intelligent man, he (1) should not have joined the party and (2) upon returning home in 1938, should have seen National Socialism for what is was and resigned at once.

He was finally denazified, however, on appeal, and his firm rehired him, but once again did not give him a position or real responsibility.

In 1934, he had written a lovely book, a bound manuscript of 215 pages titled *A Quarter Century with Siemens Company in China,* which contained old photographs of Peking and was dedicated to Carl-Friedrich von Siemens. It can still be found in the Siemens Archive. Rabe never wrote a single angry or critical word about his firm; but it is difficult to understand why they treated him as they did.

Upon his return to Berlin—after years of successfully managing one of the most important branches of Siemens China Company in Nanking; after serving as the mayor of Nanking who, in the unanimous opinion of both Germans and other nationals, saved its 250,000 inhabitants in a catastrophic situation, acting as manager, diplomat, negotiator, and chairman of the International Safety Zone Committee and, last but not least, providing splendid proof of his courage in many dangerous situations—he was given only a subordinate position in the personnel department.

He was never assigned tasks commensurate with his abilities. Why not? We can only guess. Because his education had stopped with the equivalent of a high-school diploma, because he was not an academic? Because he had not been part of the home team in the Berlin central office? Because people never forgot that he had stayed behind in Nanking, instead of representing the interests of Siemens China Company in Hankow? Surely the firm could have given him an appropriate position in China or Hong Kong after he was called back from Nanking. At one point there were hints from the Shanghai office that pointed in that direction, but then nothing more was heard of it. Why?

The Siemens Archive provides ample information about the excellent reviews given Rabe's work from 1911 to 1913. But it is silent about this question. After his diaries became public knowledge, the firm commissioned a Chinese artist to create a bronze bust of John Rabe, which was placed outside its new branch in Nanking in October 1997.

When they were bombed out of their apartment in Berlin-Wilmersdorf

in 1943, John Rabe and his wife moved into one room of their son-in-law's apartment in Siemensstadt. John Rabe lived in this room until his death. They went hungry, and were perhaps not as clever as others who knew how to make better use of the black market for their needs.

When potatoes fell from a Soviet truck one day and John Rabe managed to pick two of them up off the street, it was an event that he considered worth recording in his diary. They made soup out of ground acorns his wife had gathered in the fall, and when the acorns ran out, they ate nettles, which according to Rabe tasted as good as other salad greens.

He did not complain, but remembered that others had things as bad or perhaps even worse. After beginning his diary with such élan, he then had to explain why later on he did not touch it for weeks, even months. "We have suffered hunger and more hunger," he wrote in the spring of 1946. "I didn't have much of anything else to report, which is why I stopped making diary entries."

He traded a Chinese carpet and his antique Chinese wooden figurines, including a Kuanyin, the goddess of mercy, for some potatoes. The cellar in his bombed-out building in Wilmersdorf was broken into and everything of value stolen—by his fellow Germans.

Early in 1947, he was pensioned off at age 65, but to augment his small pension he continued to work part-time for Siemens.

In Nanking he had once noted in a moment of depression: "Here I went and did the right thing, and now the company doesn't like it. What a mess! I truly am a 'Lame Jack'!"—or, as he might also have put it, a raven [German: *Rabe*] of bad luck.

"I am so tired," he writes in 1947. And again: "The 'living Buddha for hundreds of thousands' in Nanking, and a pariah, an outcast here! That would soon cure you of any homesickness."

He had resigned himself to his fate.

And then the Chinese military mission in Berlin found his address and saw to it that he got some extra food. Madame Chiang Kai-shek had her secretary inform him that she would be happy to help him out because of the great things he had done in Nanking. The Chinese offered him an apartment and a pension if he were willing to resettle in China. All he had to do was to be a witness for the prosecution at the Tokyo war crimes tribunal. John Rabe declined. In a message he left for his grandchildren, he explained: "I didn't want to see any Japanese hang, although they deserved it. . . . There must be some atonement, some just punishment; but in my view the judgment should be spoken only by their own nation."[1]

The wife of the American missionary W. P. Mills, who was still in Nanking, learned of Rabe's address as well. She sent him CARE packages. John Rabe went on working part-time for Siemens, he lived in poverty, but he no longer had to go hungry.

On 5 January 1949, John Rabe suffered a stroke while working at Siemens. He died that same evening. In attendance at his grave were his wife, his children, and a few friends.