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DR. ROBERT WILSON

Letters from Nanking, 1937–1938

In 1946 the American-led International Military Tribunal for the Far East brought charges against the defeated Iwane Matsui, former Commander of the Japanese Shanghai Expeditionary Forces, for what was already being called “the Rape of Nanking.” Matsui was charged with leading an army that systematically killed 200,000 defenseless Chinese civilians, committed 20,000 cases of rape, and stole or burned much of the property in the city.

Source: *Documents on the Rape of Nanking*, ed. Timothy Brook (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 210–11, 214–17, 250–54.

Dr. Robert Wilson was one of three American medical doctors, and the only surgeon, who remained at the University Hospital in Nanking when the Chinese defenders retreated and Japanese troops occupied the city in December, 1937. He wrote these letters to his family, even after he realized he wouldn't be able to mail them, as a kind of diary of events between December 1937 and March 1938.

What does Wilson's diary tell you about the Japanese occupation of Nanking? What does it tell you about Japanese forces? What are "war crimes" in the midst of war?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

It would be difficult to get into the shoes, much less the minds, of these Japanese troops from the viewpoint of a single American observer. Nevertheless, how might Robert Wilson account for their behavior? How do you make sense of it?

Tuesday, December 14

On Monday morning the 13th, exactly four months after the trouble started in Shanghai, the Japanese entered the city by several gates at once. Some came in Hoping Men [Gate] in the north and some in Hansi and Kwanghua Mens in the west and south-east respectively. By night they had complete control of the city and numerous Japanese flags flew from various places including their former embassy.

The entire remaining population of Nanking, some 150 or 200 thousand individuals, were crowded into the zone I have described earlier as the refugee zone. The International Committee¹ are doing a tremendous job with them and there is no doubt but that they have saved thousands of lives by their efforts. At the last moment thousands of Chinese soldiers threw away their uniforms and equipment and donned looted civilian clothes and crowded into the zone. Handling them is a grave problem in itself. Doubly grave has it become since the Japanese have not been kind and are rounding them up by the hundreds and shooting them, putting their bodies in the conveniently handy dugouts built for air-raid protection.

Any civilian who shows no signs of fear and goes quietly about his business in the daytime seems relatively safe. Nobody is safe at night. Last night Mr. Chi, architect for the university and left behind to look after the buildings as best he could, was only saved from shooting by the intervention of Charlie Riggs, who stoutly maintained that Chi was his

¹The European (including German) and North American governors of the International Red Cross (non-Asian). [Ed.]

coolie.² They then came over to our place with another Chinese University staff man, Mr. Ku, and all three stayed the night on some cots we set up in the living room. Steele of the *Chicago Daily News* also slept there and we totalled eleven people sleeping on the main floor and up stairs. I completely lost track of the innumerable Chinese that slept in the basement. The servants are rightly scared to death. To finish this paragraph more or less as it began, any civilian that shows signs of fear or tries to run away is promptly bayoneted. I sewed up one severed trachea this afternoon and we have had several dozen cases of bayonetting.

This morning we were treated to a thorough though unofficial inspection by thirty or so Japanese troops with fixed bayonets. They poked into everything. [Dr. James] McCallum, [Dr. C. S.] Trimmer and I showed them around and they would jabber away in Japanese while we would jabber away in both Chinese and English and neither had any idea what the other was saying. They lined up some of the nurses and took away their pens, flashlights and wrist watches. They did a pretty good job of looting the nurses' dormitory, taking all kinds of petty things. So far there has been no physical violence done to any of our staff.

Wednesday, December 15

... The slaughter of civilians is appalling. I could go on for pages telling of cases of rape and brutality almost beyond belief. Two bayoneted cases are the only survivors of seven street cleaners who were sitting at their headquarters when Japanese soldiers came in without warning or reason and killed five of their number and wounded the two that found their way to the hospital. I wonder when it will stop and we will be able to catch up with ourselves again.

Saturday, December 18

Today marks the sixth day of the modern Dante's Inferno, written in huge letters with blood and rape. Murder by the wholesale and rape by the thousands of cases. There seems to be no stop to the ferocity, lust and savagism of the brutes. At first I tried to be pleasant to them to avoid arousing their ire but the smile has gradually worn off and my stare is as fully as cool and fishy as theirs.

Tonight as I came back from supper to stay here for the night I found three soldiers had ransacked the place. Miss [Iva] Hynds had accompanied them to the back gate. Two of them arrived and the other had disappeared. He must be hiding somewhere around the place. I motioned

² Word used for usually Chinese workers. [Ed.]

the others outside stating in no uncertain terms that this was a Beikwan Byoyen [American hospital]. How do you like that? The two that were there allowed themselves to be led out. They had taken Miss Hynds' watch and several other watches and fountain pens as well.

Let me recount some instances occurring in the last two days. Last night the house of one of the Chinese staff members of the university was broken into and two of the women, his relatives, were raped. Two girls about 16 were raped to death in one of the refugee camps. In the University Middle School where there are 8,000 people the Japs came in ten times last night, over the wall, stole food, clothing, and raped until they were satisfied. They bayoneted one little boy, killing him, and I spent an hour and a half this morning patching up another little boy of eight who had five bayonet wounds including one that penetrated his stomach, a portion of omentum was outside the abdomen. I think he will live.

I just took time out because the third soldier had been found. He was on the fourth floor of the nurses' dormitory where there were fifteen nurses. They were scared within an inch of their lives. I don't know how much he had done before I arrived but he didn't do anything afterwards. He had a watch or two and was starting off with one of the girls' cameras. I motioned for him to give it back to her and to my surprise he obeyed. I then accompanied him to the front door and bade him a fond farewell. Unfortunately he didn't get the swift kick that I mentally aimed at him. One of the earlier ones was toying around with a rather formidable looking pistol which I'm thankful he didn't use.

One man I treated today had three bullet holes. He is the sole survivor of a group of eighty, including an eleven year old boy, who were led out of two buildings within the so-called safety zone and taken into the hills west of Tibet Road and there slaughtered. He came to after they had left and found the other seventy-nine dead about him. His three bullet wounds are not serious. To do the Japanese justice there were in the night a few ex-soldiers.

One girl I have is a half-wit with some sort of birth injury, I believe. She didn't have any more sense than to claw at a Japanese soldier who was taking away her only bedding. Her reward was a bayonet thrust that cut half the muscles of one side of her neck.

Another girl of seventeen has a terrific gash in her neck and is the only survivor of her family, the rest of them were finished off. She was employed by the International Export Company.

As I left the hospital for supper after finishing my rounds on the 150 cases now under my care, the full moon was rising over Purple Mountain and was indescribably beautiful, and yet it looked down on a Nanking that was more desolate than it has been since the Taiping Rebellion [1853-64]. Nine-tenths of the city are totally deserted by Chinese and contain only roving bands of plundering Japanese. The remaining tenth contains almost two hundred thousand terrified citizens.

Last night [Plumer] Mills, [Lewis] Smythe and [George] Fitch were over in Fitch's car to escort Mills to Ginling [College]. Minnie [Vautrin] holds the fort there with several thousand women. When they got to the front gate they were held up by a patrol of Japanese soldiers under the command of a pugnacious, impudent lieutenant. He lined the men on one side and Miss Vautrin, Mrs. Chen [Shui-fang] and Mrs. [deWart] on the other side. He snatched the hats off the men and ordered everyone off the place including the women. Fitch told him he didn't have a place for them to stay but he insisted. They just got into the car when he ordered them back again and again harangued them for some minutes, finally sending the men back where they came from. Later we learned that while this was going on some Japanese soldiers had climbed over the wall and helped themselves to sixteen women.

The population faces famine in the near future and there is no provision for winter's fuel. It is not a pleasant winter that we look forward to. It is too bad that the newspaper reporters left on the day they did instead of two days or so later when they could have been more detailed in their reports of the Reign of Terror.

Another interruption to usher two Japanese soldiers off the premises.

As I probably won't get much sleep tonight I had better turn out dressed to get what I can.

Thursday, February 10

[...] The proportion of medical [to] surgical cases at the hospital is steadily increasing so that now Trim has about 50 patients to my 100. Today for the first time I went to our regular surgical clinic at 2 p.m., starting my operative schedule at 3:30. I shall try to continue that as the clinic certainly needs a guiding hand and there have been a lot of complaints about the way people are being treated there. This afternoon a woman came in with her face badly burned. She had returned to her home, on the order of the Japanese, four days ago. Several Japanese soldiers promptly visited the house and demanded girls. She had only one 11 year old and one 12 year old and as these did not satisfy the soldiers they set fire to her house burning up the 11 year old girl in the building.

We are getting a large number of women from 16 to 30, most of them nice looking girls who are ridden with venereal disease from frequent raping. All of them have gonorrhoea, most have syphilis and a large proportion have chancroid as well. That aspect of the clinic is certainly a heartbreaking one. It doesn't take long for any remote respect for the Japanese soldiers to evaporate permanently.

When our two cases of beri-beri showed up the other day we got immediate action and a boat is starting from Shanghai tomorrow with 100 tons of green beans. We hope to cut down any further incidence.

yesterday I tried my first heterogeneous skin graft using pinch grafts from a father to his daughter. The graft looked fine today but it is much too early to tell. This afternoon I admitted a horribly burned little girl who had all the skin off her lower abdomen and anterior thighs. It happened six days ago and the mother had put on a concoction of mice boiled in oil and burned up. I had to give the child a general anaesthesia to clean it up. Her mother had been shot offhand by the Japs about a month ago and the mother had not been able to give the child the attention she wanted to.

We get up to the tune of Jap airplanes and hear them all day long. Every now and then we think some Chinese planes come to the outskirts but we have no direct confirmation except occasional radio reports from Hankow. [- . .]

Sunday, February 13

[. . .] Last night we finally had the members of the Japanese Embassy to dinner. Three of the four came, the fourth having celebrated the previous day too vigorously. The previous day was the Anniversary of the founding of the Empire. Messrs. Fukui, Fukuda and Kasuya were the guests. We put our excellent radio upstairs and played some classical records for them. We settled the problem of what to talk about by finding that two of them played bridge so that a bridge game was quickly organized. Fukuda and Fukui playing Riggs and Fukui. Unfortunately they stayed until ten-fifteen so that we didn't get any of the news broadcasts. Ordinarily we listen to Manila at 8:50, Hongkong at 9:30 and Shanghai at 10:10. Occasionally London at 6:00 and now and then Melbourne or some other place that happens to be giving the news.

Another cheerful tale came to my attention yesterday. Two weeks ago six Japanese soldiers entered the town of Liulangchiao some miles southwest of our town. They proceeded with their usual system of rape and looting. Some of the men in the town organized some resistance and killed three of the soldiers, the other three getting away. The three soon returned with several hundred who quickly threw a cordon around the town. A town of 500 inhabitants, it had only about 300 at the time. These 300 were all tied together in groups of six to eight and thrown in the icy river. They then leveled the town so that there wasn't a wall standing. The story was told me by a man who had gone from Nanking to Tanyangchen, a village just beyond Liulangchiao. He talked with the terrified inhabitants of the surrounding territory and saw the ruins. Coming back he passed two soldiers on sentry duty at Yuhwatai just outside of South Gate. He was with his wife and child. They had passed the sentries about fifty yards when one of them casually shot in their direction, the bullet going through his flank but fortunately not entering the peritoneum. He is anxious to get out and return to Tanyangchen.

Only tonight four Jap soldiers came in and robbed several people in the University Library at the point of pistols of several hundred dollars. I guess the millennium is not here yet.

March 7

[. . .] The fall of Nanking on December 13 was immeasurably hastened by the incompetence and defection of T'ang Sheng-chih who was supposed to coordinate the defence. I shall not go into details on that here but will some day when the opportunity affords. If anyone had mentioned to us on December 12 that the entry of the Japanese would be the signal for a reign of terror almost beyond description we would have laughed at their fears. We had urged our Chinese staff to stay in the firm belief that, once the much vaunted Japanese Imperial army had taken control, lives would be safe and, while there might be some interference in the conduction of affairs, it would be only petty annoyances and that we need not be overconcerned.

When the mass murder, rapine, looting and arson began shortly after the entry of the Japanese troops we at first could not believe our eyes but were effectively convinced in a very short time. We had experienced no trouble whatever at the hands of Chinese soldiers even during the night of December 12 when tens of thousands of them streamed northward through the city to their slaughter at Hsia Kwan. It is true that they had burned some of the buildings just outside of the city walls in preparation for a defence of the walls that was never made, but outside of that and the burning of the Ministry of Communications, which burned on December 12th and therefore was presumably burned by Chinese, no destruction was carried out.

The Red Swastika Society³ has for the last month been feverishly burying bodies from all parts of the city outside the zone and from the surrounding countryside. A conservative estimate of the number of people slaughtered in cold blood is somewhere about 100,000, including of course thousand of soldiers that had thrown down their arms. A few pitiful survivors of many of the mass murders managed to get to the hospital to tell their tale. I will record only one incident to illustrate.

At the University where the haphazard registration was going on of the twenty thousand people occupying the new library and compound and the main University buildings and compound, speeches were made urging all those that had been connected with the military to acknowledge it. They were promised that if they did so they would be made into labor gangs and their lives would be spared. If they did not acknowledge it and for any reason the Japanese suspected they had been connected

³ Nazi German imitation of Red Cross Society. [Ed.]

with the military they would be summarily shot. About two hundred came forward and gave themselves up. I treated several survivors of that group. They were separated into several gangs and joined with hundreds of others picked up elsewhere. One bunch was taken into the hills beyond Ginling College, a few machine guns sprayed on them, several gallons of gasoline doused over their heads and they were set afire. Two survivors later died in the hospital burned almost beyond recognition, one not even having been hit by the machine guns, and the other having his jaw torn open.

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Source: "Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima," Truman Library, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/viewpapers.php?pid=100>.