



Saturday, February 16th, 2008

<http://wweek.com/wwire/?p=10803>

## "It Did Not Leave My Ears": *Nanking* Reviewed

BY: [Aaron Mesh](#)



*The acclaimed documentary Nanking was not screened for Portland critics – an increasingly common and frankly disconcerting case of a studio simply dumping a good movie into our market without bothering to get the word out about its quality. We will not be deterred: N.P. Thompson caught a screening in Seattle, and he weighs in:*

### *Nanking*

Neither easy to watch nor to listen to, the documentary *Nanking* recounts in stomach-churning detail the violence perpetrated by Japanese military on unarmed Chinese civilians during the winter of 1937-38. Taking their cues from the late historian Iris Chang's groundbreaking book *The Rape of Nanking*,

co-directors Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman edit covertly shot home movies of the mutilation of innocents (taken by an American missionary) into staged readings from the diaries and letters of a handful of Westerners who stayed behind as the city fell to invaders, and who did their best to save as many lives as they could.

The Americans and Europeans stationed at Nanking established a two-square-mile “safety zone” that incorporated a hospital and a women’s college. Surgeon Bob Wilson (personified here by an understated Woody Harrelson) regarded their decision to help the Chinese as “service of the highest kind,” yet the outside world had no idea of the conditions they fought against. A war crimes tribunal reported 20,000 cases of rape in the first month of the occupation; Chinese women would try to disguise themselves as men, or old women, or don blackface to avoid being gang-raped by Japanese soldiers.

When missionary George Fitch smuggled footage of the atrocities to screen in the United States, “not to be anti-Japanese, but to show how horrible war is,” he met with no help whatsoever from the American government. The genocide would soon be overshadowed by the Holocaust, then ever after largely denied by Japan. (The issue remains such a hot topic that the film, despite being short-listed for an Oscar and garnering much acclaim, has neither received distribution in Japan nor admittance to any Japanese film festivals.)

*Nanking*’s most significant achievement lies in the first-hand recollections by a dozen or so survivors – women and men now in their eighties who were children during the Sino-Japanese War. Their remembrances are the soul of the movie. We hear one man, his voice breaking as he recalls how “the Japanese devils” tormented his mother, describe his mother’s determined struggle to breast-feed his infant brother while she was dying from a bayonet wound. Another interviewee pays tribute to the Westerners’ uncommonly heroic stance: “My mother told me as long as I can find the American lady,” a nod to Minnie Vautrin, the headmistress of Ginling College, “I would be safe.”

As Vautrin, Mariel Hemingway spends most of the picture seeming miscast as a prim Midwesterner, yet there’s a late revelation about Vautrin that in retrospect makes Hemingway’s odd quality of diffidence and determinism appear a stroke of genius.

Extraordinarily, one of the heroes to emerge from this story happened to be a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party. Businessman John Rabe (Jürgen Prochnow) used his swastika to repel Japanese soldiers who attempted to infiltrate the safety zone, and the man honestly had hope that Hitler would aid the Chinese. In February 1938, Rabe received an honorific letter from the families he saved, a document that proclaimed, “You are the Living Buddha for a thousand living people.” On his return to Germany, Rabe’s reward was to be savagely mistreated by the Gestapo – by the very forces he believed he had served.

Guttentag and Sturman also interview a few ex-military, and it’s frightening how dispassionately these ancient-looking men recall the slaughter from 70 years ago. One former soldier says of his victims, “I don’t think it took more than 30 minutes to dispose of thousands of them.” Another, dragging on a cigarette, confesses, “It did not leave my ears – the sound of their pitiful voices.” And that’s as close to an expression of remorse as we get. N.P. THOMPSON.

*Nanking is rated R. It opens today at Fox Tower.*