



Photo Credit: Rocco Rorandelli

December 1937, Nanjing

I ducked. With a thunderous rumble, more masonry fell into the open space backing the great city wall and Zhongshan Gate. Another Japanese shelling. White dust billowed sideways on the road where the lumps of concrete and bricks had landed. Even with a scrap of damp cloth held to my stinging nostrils I was still breathing in the choking stuff. It brought the familiar reek of cordite but also the thousands of dead bodies already inside and outside the city of Nanjing. The stink permeated avenue and alley of this fallen city. I could not delay long here.

It was now pretty clear to us Westerners that the Japanese soon would insist we all get out of East China. Though I had been searching most of the night, I still had to find my wife Shuqin and take her away with me. Hopefully to a safe country. I had no intention of going back to England. Perhaps both

of us could join up with thousands heading south to Hong Kong. Surely the British could defend that island? Or, even more certainly, Singapore. But the Japanese 66th Battalion field guns now had been pounding areas such as Han Si-men and the South Gate, almost continuously since the Nationalist army had refused to negotiate a surrender. It was definitely time for us to leave. But first I must locate Shuquin. Had she safely fled to relatives in the night? That was the most hopeful thought. More noises of guns and exploding shells battered my eardrums.

Again I flinched, for now in the street, a smaller fragment of debris crashed down in front of me. It came from the parapet of a ruined Chinese department store. Bombs, shelling and machine gun fire had shattered my nerves after the days of siege. Of course, I was still out on the streets only for that most urgent reason—I still had not given up hope of rejoining my wife (and her family). And for another, recently I had taken on the unofficial role of an assistant reporter helping the few western journalists who had not immediately fled the capital. I must help document the enormity of this city massacre.

But just at this moment I could not hang about reviewing in my mind the Japanese invasion's recent history. Through a blue drift of smoke I headed towards, our familiar street, Hunan Lu, where Shuquin and I had lived for three or more years. We'd been out trying to buy food the previous night when, during a bombing raid, we'd become separated. It was a highly dangerous thing to do. Many enemy soldiers were roaming in undisciplined bands through the city. Yet there remained a chance that with the prospect of facing Japanese marauding troops, Shuquin had reached out house and friends or relatives might have rushed her to a safer place. Hopefully our house might still be standing. But first I myself had to survive this part of the warzone.

There was so much rubble and so many uncollected dead bodies in the streets that I had to walk carefully. And I still faced the danger of more cascading masonry. It was falling from the buildings weakened by the random shelling and the frequent Japanese bombing raids. I could hear roaring of the army tanks and trucks of the enemy some streets away and now and then the screaming engine of one of the enemy dive-bombers. Where I was, the road was almost completely blocked by rubble and burned-out cars. My wife's patient face came into my mind. But I refused to let her be one of the corpses in the streets or the fallen rubble of buildings.

Fortunately, the morning bombardment now began to subside a little. Maybe the many fires sweeping

the city might not have reached the area of our house? But hope was a tiny flickering light in my mind. Haunted now with deepening dread, I crept from street to street, the acrid smoke and scent of death always in my nostrils.

Then I heard running feet and rough voices behind me. Out of the dust and smoke dashed a schoolgirl or college girl, judging by remnants of her uniform, now almost been torn off her bare shoulders. She was bleeding from many cuts and screaming for her life. Seeing me to be a westerner, she called out in English, 'Save me from these Japanese devils, sir. Be my saviour! Please, please!'

Right behind her I saw the first of three enemy soldiers. Coming a little after that one were the other two, all brandishing bayonets. Now I saw that first one more clearly, despite dust and smoke. His tunic was half unbuttoned and, stumbling with puttees unravelling, he was shouting: '*Pikankan! Pikankan!*'. Seeing me clearly to be a westerner, the whole group checked for a moment. In panic, I dragged the lass into an open doorway of a ruined grocery shop. She had a multitude of what seemed small stab wounds oozing blood down her back.

Somehow stupidly brave in that moment, I turned to confront the soldiers in the street. All I could do was scream orders in English at them. I said I would report them to their commanders. They checked, puzzled perhaps at my unintelligible words but attempts at authority. But just then there came a rifle's sharp crack from somewhere above. It was from the roof of another damaged department store on the opposite side. The leading Japanese looked astonished even as he fell with blood gouting from a bullet hole in his right temple. The other two checked in beginning their run at me. Bending over their motionless comrade, they awkwardly tried to carry him off. The sniper must have been one of the few Nationalist Chinese soldiers still in the city. A precious brave few had stayed on to fight.

I plunged back into the musty shop. The doorway was half-blocked with ransacked goods, now discarded. Hoping for refuge I made my way further into the interior's darkness. The Chinese college girl was cowering behind the smashed serving counter.

'You can speak English?'

'Please, yes sir.'

She couldn't seem get up now. I saw there were more cuts on her arms and legs, all obviously from bayonets. And I cursed that only one of that Japanese three-some had died.

'Help me please, sir! Help me back to the Ginling Girls College. In the Safety Zone.'

'Yes, I know it. We must both go there now. You need Doctor Fischer or Doctor Wilson there and I know of your Principal, Miss Vautrin. She has nursing sisters in the hospital. They can help save your life.' At my words she nodded weakly. I knew there really wasn't much time left to save her. Too many wounds for me to try to bandage them up on the spot. And I only had the one piece of cloth I'd been holding over my mouth. I used it now to mop up the worst blood flows.

With help, she raised herself so I could support her by one arm. It was then I realised she had been partially resting on a long dead body. I pulled her quickly from the shop. Cautiously we picked our way out of the darkness into the street again. More shots sounded in the distance. Not far away a truck or tank roared its engine. But this street was too blocked for them to pass. From here it was going to be touch and go. But where else, what else? No way could I be sure what would happen next.

I knew the most direct route to the International Safety Zone was down the same street where my Shuqin and I had been living. Slowly the lass and I struggled our way from doorway to doorway down the still smoking street and on toward Hunan Lu where hopefully my house might still be standing.

'What's your name?' I asked suddenly. She was resting for a moment on a block of fallen stone. Suddenly I didn't want her remain any longer a nameless victim among the numberless thousands in that city.

'Will you tell me your name, dear? I'm Frederic, I used to work in a foreign bank here.'

'Minnie is my English name at college.'

'Don't try to say too much. You will need all your strength. Can you make it another quarter of a mile? Then we can enter the school compound.'

'I think so, sir. But I was fighting so hard. And they kept stabbing me to make me submit. Luckily they weren't trying to kill me. Well, not until raping me first.'

At that moment another shell landed nearby. We felt the hot gust of the explosion as smoke and dust enveloped us for a moment. 'Don't talk, Minnie. I think you need to rest some more yet.' Then for a few seconds she fell unconscious against me. I knew now she was close to total collapse and death. I drew her into another doorway. Maybe I could revive her? Luckily the bleeding was now mostly a trickle from many of the wounds. Looking around desperately for anyone or anything to help, I spotted the still slowly spinning wheel of an upturned handcart. It was partially buried under the recent rubble so I lowered Minnie's body to the ground. Then began tearing at the handcart to pull it free and turn it on to its wheels again. One was quite buckled but the cart was usable. The wooden floor was not splintered. Now Minnie was opening her eyes and moaning quietly.

'Minnie, we're going too slowly,' I whispered. 'You have to help me raise you into this cart. Then we can make better time to the College grounds. Minnie, if we keep stopping for you to rest it'll take too long,' She did manage to crawl into the back of the handcart when I held it tipped towards her. With my help she slowly stretched out on the wooden floor. Fresh blood began to stain the boards. Better to be on our way to the Safety Zone, before her blood loss became critical.

Now we turned down my old street Hunan Lu. I could see the remains of our house among other ruins. Some of the wreckage was still burning. I stopped as the shock gripped me. If my wife had come back earlier while I was searching for her near the [city] gate there was no hope she would have survived. I said nothing to Minnie, prone in the handcart. She had enough troubles and didn't need mine added to her suffering. Along with the smoke from the house ruins there was of course the sickening smell of death, which now hung all over Nanjing. The Japanese army left them where they were to further intimidate the remains of the populace. But here it seemed even stronger. All my instincts were telling me to start clawing at those burning timbers and brickwork. I looked at the girl lying there. At least she might still have a chance of salvation.

'Hang on there, Minnie. We're going to make it to the College. Afterwards I must go back to Hunan Lu. To look for my wife, Shuqin. Before things here get worse.'

'Your wife Chinese?' the girl whispered. It sounded like a statement rather than a question. Pushing

the cart, I could study her face somewhat. She had a broad forehead but her short-cut hair was in bloody disarray. She must have been seventeen or eighteen. Blood was running from her nose. Some teeth had been smashed, probably by the butt of a rifle. A young life violated before entering adulthood. The cart shook dreadfully over some patches of the road but I did my best to keep it steady. She groaned as quietly as she could. But it was too difficult the way I was pushing. I tried turning the cart around and pulled it like a workman. Better. At last the gates to the compound! Road paving here was in better shape. We entered as the civilian guards at the gate promptly stood aside.

‘Oh, my god, what have we here?’ It was one of the careworn volunteers at Ginling College. Minnie’s groaning body presented itself spread-eagled on the cart’s dirty floor. ‘Disinfectant and washbowls, quickly!’ she called to the student assistants. And then some saw it was their classmate. Others came running then, all in their white shirts and dark blue skirts, crying out her Chinese name: Yun Qiu, Yun Qiu!

The classroom had been converted to sort of medical station. It was hardly acceptable as such because part of the ceiling had collapsed. The result of bombing or shellfire. Although the room was clean enough there were desks pushed back on one side to make room for operating tables and beds. Incongruously there were still wall maps of the world hanging a little crookedly, together with somewhat faded photographs of the late President Sun Yat-sen and the US President Franklin D Roosevelt. For a moment I had to find a bench to rest on. My traumas of trying to survive in a war zone began to take hold. Head in hands I refocussed on my urgent search for family. What was to be my next move?

Here bandages, dressings and bottles of antiseptics and other medicines were on open shelves. Minnie was soon being washed and disinfected on one of the tables so her injuries could be better examined. Meanwhile several other students were quickly bringing a change of clothes for her. The violence of her rapine had caused her to soil herself, despite defending her honour. A temporary screen of blankets was drawn around the prone figure. Dr Fischer, the German doctor, whom I had met with other journalists, had established himself in charge of the College refuge, changed his soiled white coat for another and busily washed his hands and arms. His main nursing assistant, a stolid local woman, was quickly boiling his operating instruments over a charcoal brazier. It seemed that Minnie was safe for a time. I turned to one of the young male Chinese volunteer helpers, scarcely a lad, who had helped me bring the handcart inside the campus.

‘I urgently need help to locate my wife and her family. We were living in Hunan Lu.’ I spoke in a low

voice in view of the medical operations.

'I am sorry, sir, to hear that. But many families have been torn apart by the Japanese attacks on our city. I have lost contact with my elder brother, for example. Let me make some inquiries among my friends. What is her name and where were you last living?'

'Her family name is Wu and given name Shuqin. Of course, as my wife she is also known as Mrs Foster. I am Frederic Foster, by the way.'

'Pleased to be of help, if I can, Mr Foster,' the youth responded. 'I am Han Zhulin.'

'It is all rather complicated, I'm afraid, Han. I was living here before the Japanese attack but our house in Lu has been totally destroyed. I was gathering information for an Australian journalist here in Nanjing last night at the Gate. The shelling or bombing raid last night must have been what did it.' I paused for breath, thinking of Shuying alone and waiting in the house. I knew we should have come here to the Safe Zone or left the city altogether. And now it's too late.' I couldn't suppress the emotions suppressed since my preoccupations with rescuing the girl Minnie from the Japanese. Now a few sobs forced themselves up in my throat.

'Take a rest, sir. Why don't you sit down?' I found Han was leading me to a bench by the wall under an aged willow tree.

'But, I must be sure. Perhaps my wife escaped to her mother's house? It's over near the Purple Mountain.'

'Maybe we can take you there in the morning?'

'If you could do that I'd be very grateful but now I need to sleep,' I told him.

'With my friends, I am sure we can get a rickshaw man to take you and we will come along also. But please, sir, come to our sleeping quarters and we will make up a bed for you.'

I only woke partially from my deep slumber sometime later in the evening when a student placed a bowl of noodles on the little table close to my shoulder. As soon as I had swallowed this welcome sustenance I fell back on to the bunk bed until sturdy hands shook me awake next morning. Although I did have a dream-like memory of noises, possibly loud voices, at some part of the night.

‘Sir, sir!’ Somebody was shaking me. ‘You must come with us immediately. Terrible things have been happening. Some quickly!’ I could see in the dim pre-dawn light that it was Han Zhulin once more with several others of the students. I quickly pulled on my shoes and grabbed my jacket off a chair.

Outside was a group of teachers and students and some male workers fronting the commanding figure of Jinling Principal, Miss Minnie Vautrin. I had met her previously on my journalistic visits to the Safe Zone. She was wringing her hands in despair and turning to Mr John Rabe, Head of the German Consulate and in charge of the whole Safety Zone, including Jinling College. As Principal of the College, she was very well known for her efforts to shield her girls from mass rapings by Japanese soldier. We all knew how bravely she had confronted not only the military hierarchy but the rampaging soldiers themselves. A thousand rapes a night in Nanjing was a figure journalists had been reliably informed.

My new friends urged me forward to the outer circle to listen.

‘These Nippon soldiers are utterly depraved!’

‘Indeed, indeed,’ John Rabe concurred in his heavily accented English.

‘God should have no mercy on them!’ Vautrin uttered hoarsely. But their officers too are evil beasts. Why don’t they control this terrible criminal behaviour? These are war crimes that must outrage the international community.’ Rabe could only nod in agreement.

I turned to Han. ‘What has happened?’

‘Sir, in the night two soldiers climbed the wall into the College and came into the sick room. They began dragging away two of the women caring for the poor student you rescued yesterday. She woke up and tried to stop the Japanese. So they bayoneted her to death and made off with the other

students.'

'Didn't anyone else try to stop them?'

'They were too quick for us. And by the time we came out they were through the gates where they had a car waiting.'

I bent double, cursing at this news. Then fell to my knees in the dust of the campus courtyard hammering with both fists on the ground. People came to try to give comfort and bring a chair to raise me up again. No words would come to my lips as the crowd gathered around.

'You were a brave man, Mr Foster, to rescue my student namesake, Minnie Ho. But it is typical of this dreadful war that every corner brings another tragedy. I truly hope that one day the people of Nanjing, and the wider world, will remember your unrewarded mission to rescue that poor girl.'

Synopsis of Afterwards

This is a story beginning in Shanghai in 1931/2 when the foreign concessions dominated the business of the city. Growing China-Japanese tensions would lead to the retributive shelling and bombing of the populous Chinese Chapei quarter by Japanese naval forces while Western interests stood by. But only a few years later the eventual Japanese invasion of China via Shanghai led swiftly to the infamous sacking and massacres in Nanjing in 1937. After that, the conquest of China would see the British and Europeans summarily bundled out of the country, labelled as the evil, rapacious colonialists.

Afterwards opens with a group of British revellers strolling home after a ball. They discover in the pre-dawn the dead body of a young woman in a boat beside the river. She has in fact been murdered, and one of the British couples becomes involved in helping the Chinese family of the victim to discover the killer or killers. Things take a dramatic turn when an American friend of the Englishman dies mysteriously in hospital after a car crash. It emerges that the Chinese underworld is involved. Another complication follows as the Englishman's fiancé, Alice Calvert, is unexpectedly taken home to England by her parents and the relationship begins to fall apart. This leaves Frederic Edgely, an employee of a

foreign bank in the Bund of Shanghai, vulnerable to a romance with the twin sister of the deceased Chinese woman.

Frederic's attachment to the twin sister, Wu Shu Qin, leaves him open to hostility to some powerful Chinese associates of her father. In the midst of this mystery, the actual Japanese naval gunship revenge attack on the Chinese quarter of Shanghai occurs. Frederic and Shu Qin become victims of the bombardment when she is seized and raped by Japanese marines who also almost kill Frederic—Shu Qin has to rescue Frederic by rowing him across the same tributary where her sister had been found murdered; and the true killer of her sister is also revealed at this time.

Frederic and Shu Qin then journey to the US to meet up with her student brother. They then go on to Britain to be wed in the company of Frederic's family. When they find Shu Qin is not really accepted by the family, they go back to China by way of fascist Italy. But by now the Japanese have invaded Shanghai and will eventually go on to the terrible events of Nanjing in 1937. Here Frederic and Shu Qin become separated outside of the international safe zone and Frederic has to assume that his wife has been a victim of the massacre. He makes his way back to Shanghai but leaves just before the great exodus of all foreigners demanded by Japan with the start of World War II. Rather than return to his own family in England, Frederic emigrates to Western Australia to take up a small farm in the wheatbelt as he is medically unfit to join up in the army. And he is assisted in his resettlement by the Australian doctor who first attended to him in hospital after his encounter with Japanese soldiers back in 1932. He does marry again but in the 1950s dies in WA of the injuries received, still not knowing what really happened to Wu Shu Qin.

In the final part of the story, set in present time, two young academics, descendants of Frederic, who have researched Frederic's history, visit the Shanghai World Expo, intending to travel later to the Nanjing Massacre museum. At the Expo they meet two academics from Nanjing who turn out to be descendants of Shu Qin. For she did not die in the Nanjing Massacre but survived injuries only later to be oppressed by the zealous Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. New friendships develop between the two sets of descendants involving an excursion to Nanjing and both unhappy and happy consequences. Alive but unbelievably ancient, the matriarchal Shu Qin is well over ninety years of age but capable of appreciating the news that her first husband, an Englishman, had also survived the Japanese and started another family in a foreign land.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Glen Phillips

Born in Southern Cross, Glen Phillips has taught English for many years at Edith Cowan University In Perth Western Australia, where he currently lives. He is the Founding Director of ECU's International Centre for Landscape and Language. His poetry is represented in 30 anthologies, and over 40 individual volumes. His poems have been awarded prestigious prizes, have been translated into several languages and are object of graduate studies. His more recent books include *Alpi e Prati: Poems of Italy* (2014), *Poems of the Wheatbelt* (2016) and *Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragons: Chinese Poems* (2016).