

Looking back at history for a new shot of hope

March 15, 2015 by Daniel J. Bauer

I once got involved in a “friendly argument” with a friend of my father about the role of history in our lives. The issue was whether younger people (I was a college student at the time) should have to keep listening to old stories about World War II. I was most reluctant to admit to the value of what had occurred yesterday. My eyes were so full of hope for today and tomorrow that I was blinded to the good that others had brought to the past.

My father’s stories were very tame, actually. He was in the Navy in the war and never got to sea, a source of deep disappointment to him. Dad could joke about almost everything, even, yes, his disappointments. So, now and again he regaled us with exaggerated yarns from his “war career” behind a typewriter in a Navy recruiting office in, of all places, Cleveland, Ohio. We thought his recollections were kind of humorous. Dad’s personal story of the war, however, did not touch me deeply.

President Ma Ying-jeou recently announced in a speech for the Department of Defense that the heroism of a number of foreigners in the Sino-Japanese War will soon be honored anew in Taipei. In the summer ahead, the grandson of a German businessman who is credited with the saving of lives during the infamous Nanjing Massacre of 1937 will fly to Taipei for a very special reason. Thomas Rabe will participate in a series of events to honor his grandfather, John Rabe, who aggressively and repeatedly interceded with Japanese military authorities to “buy time,” as we say in American English, during which he was able to organize the protection and mass escape of what historians say were as many 250,000 Chinese civilians from Japanese aggression. Many of those saved Chinese lives were of girls and women, children of all ages, and other innocents who were in grave danger of becoming cold statistics in the unspeakable atrocities that occurred at Nanjing.

I only learned about John Rabe this past week in publicity related to the commemorative ceremonies ahead. If you are like me, you too may benefit from a few quick history lessons on this man and the story of Nanjing, available via search engines on the Internet.

The president’s words singled out the role of foreigners in that war. Surely there is a time to celebrate our own ethnicity, our own nationality. Surely there are also occasions to honor the contributions of “others” very different than we are.

Rabe’s grandson will not be the only foreigner visiting Taipei as part of the remembrances. Thanks to a wealth of colorful historical documentary over the years (and other reasons as well), the name “Flying Tigers” is far more a household name than “John Rabe.” The granddaughter of Lieutenant General Claire Chennault, organizer of the volunteer air attack unit of the US Air Force so helpful in the efforts of the Republic of China in the Sino-Japanese War, will be here. Soldiers who fought on behalf of the ROC from the former Soviet Union will also be on hand.

As a college freshman “arguing” with a war veteran about the importance of history, I didn’t know what I was talking about. Looking back to that day over fifty years ago, I blush.

People who are older than we are (and now I am old myself) often carry experiences and memories, wounds and wisdom, courage and greatness that we who are younger need, but do not know we need. We are ignorant of the past because, all too often, we’re too busy with our today to look back and see how we got here. We got here largely on the backs of others who sacrificed for us. Some of us may belong to the generations that brought the advances and proliferation of high technology, the creation of miracle drugs and all sorts of marvelous feats in medical science. But others who long ago came before us gave their lives to make our world kinder and more peaceful than theirs was.

We need exhibits, educational opportunities and commemorative programs like those coming to Taipei from July to October 25 to force breathe a badly needed blast of optimism back into our spirits. With violence, racism, and nearly unprecedented intolerance taking the headlines seemingly everywhere these days, we need all the reminders of greatness that we can get. John Rabe lived a life not only of fragile, even broken virtue (he was, after all, an influential Nazi). He was also, in certain moments, a man with a moral conscience. More than being only a representative of an evil government, he was also an individual, principled, humane, and beyond stereotyping.

So, Taipei will honor Mr. Rabe in the summer of 2015, and Chennault and others, fine and good. But who among our mothers and fathers, our grandparents and ancestors also deserve their due? Whether they are “foreign” or “our own,” who are we forgetting in our societies, our institutions, our families? (*Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.*)

Talking points

- 1) This column begins with an anecdote about an "argument" about the importance of the past with that of the present. Does "the past" in your life feel as important to you as your "today," your "present"? Why or why not?
- 2) The author focuses on the help that foreigners gave to the government of the Republic of China in the Japanese-Chinese war of the 1930s and 40s. Where do we see the influence of "foreigners" in Taiwan? Do Taiwan youth look "too positively" at FOREIGN THINGS or FOREIGNERS nowadays?
- 3) Have you heard stories from your grandparents about World War II, or stories from your parents about life in Taiwan when they were young? Can you learn anything from these stories?

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