

DR. AND MRS. EN SEONG HO: A REMINISCENCE

by  
Irma Tam Soong

I first met Dr. and Mrs. En Seong Ho when I married Norman Soong in October of 1936 and lived in Nanking for a short eight months before I left Nanking to meet my parents, two sisters and a brother, who had arrived in Hong Kong in July. Dr. Ho was my mother-in-law Ella Ho Soong's oldest brother. So Dr. Ho was Norman's maternal uncle.

The apartment Norman and I rented was in a new compound called Pan Ch'iao Hsin Ts'un 板橋新村. It was separated from the large Ho compound by a small lane. Norman and I could go to the Hos' through their vegetable garden which spread out behind their spacious mansion.

Dr. Ho's office was in the front where his patients waited. He was the only western dentist of repute in Nanking, having had the best training possible under a western dentist in Hawaii. He was so popular and necessary to the dental well-being of the upper-class residents that even Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek had to use his services. A story that we all delighted in was his refusing to take the Gissimo on demand but made him wait like everybody else for his turn in the true American ideal of fairness and equality which was the doctor's creed. And, to our amusement and surprise, the head of the Republic of China had to put up with Dr. Ho's principled stand.

Dr. Ho was a short, stocky man of few words. But he knew exactly what he stood for, what he wanted, and all about him obeyed him without demurring. He was not given to social amenities, but one day he asked me what I needed for our home. We had just the bare necessities because we had to make do on Norman's meager salary from the China Press of Shanghai. I said I could use a desk. Not too many days later, a small, well-built desk arrived and stood in our parlor, a solitary symbol of hope for more prosperous days ahead.

I saw more of Mrs. Ho than her husband. She was a sister of Dr. K. F. Li, a close friend of my father's in the Bo Wong Tong and Mun Lun School of Honolulu. She told me that when she first went to Honolulu to marry Dr. Ho, she had a terrible time. My mother-in-law was asked to help her with the manual chores and other adjustments to an immigrant existence. Ella was not very patient (she became a very strict and successful public school teacher, one of the pioneer Christian Hakka girls who shocked the Chinese community by getting an American education and earning a good living!), Mrs. Ho told me with a rueful smile. She, like many well-to-do Chinese, had been spoiled by cheap servant labor in her home country. It is no wonder that she worked hard to convince Dr. Ho to go to Nanking and open a practice there.

The decision was a wise one. The life in Nanking was one of prosperity, opportunity, prestige, and luxury that few Chinese in Hawaii enjoyed. And she had at her behest all the servants she needed.

During the years before the Japanese invasion in December of 1937, the city of Nanking was humming with the energy of a youthful nation, eager

to grasp every new western influence to ensure a place among the powers of the modern world. Widened roads were open to traffic, and imposing buildings rose to fill the demands of budding branches of the government as well as embassies of foreign nations. The city was alive with government officials, diplomats, <sup>and</sup> returned students with their European and American wives. The two Ginling colleges, one for men and the other for women, were symbols of Christian higher education that flourished in other big cities. The Ho children were students and graduates of these two prestigious educational institutions.

A scheduling of important social events added a veneer of glamor and status to the burgeoning construction throughout the city.

I recall four events to which Norman and I were invited. The first was a dance hosted by the new Russian ambassador, who represented the rise of the peasant class to high positions in the Communist Party. He asked me for a dance. I felt honored, but Norman surmised that he chose me to emphasize the new respect due the former underdogs of the Czarist emperors. He wore an unshapely dark suit--or was he unshapely?--was a little bent over with a smile like a gnome. We shuffled around without stepping on each other's toes. I have never been asked to dance by an ambassador since!

The second was a pre-Christmas eggnog party at the American Embassy. To have eggnog topped with vanilla ice cream in China was a great treat for me.

The third was an evening in the Hall of Performing Arts situated not far from our home. The Yenching University's annual Christmas rendition of the "Messiah" under Prof. Bliss Wiant's baton had been scheduled for performance one December evening. As a Yenching alumna, I loyally attended the rehearsal in the afternoon. To my dismay the chorus practiced so hard that I worried whether they would have any voice left to sing in the evening. My fears were realized. Not only did they sing poorly but they disappointed themselves and bored their small audience, which probably did not appreciate the significance and beauty of Handel's great oratorio in the first place. One by one they slipped out. The hall was almost empty by the time the last note of the "Hallelujah Chorus" sounded the finale.

Fourth was an evening featuring Michel Elman, a world-renowned violinist who was visiting China and was booked by the China Press for a performance in Nanking. The publicity was so inefficiently handled and the ticket prices so high that I knew few would be present. I do not think Michel Elman ever forgot that evening, probably the only such in his notable career.

These few events are memorable as evidence of the rapidity which characterized the city's phenomenal growth. Its failures were quickly forgotten in the rush of more gulping and swallowing of new opportunities and ideas without prior efforts at mastication.

It was in this setting that the Hos and their family thrived.

Visitors from America or Peking, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, many of them friends and relatives, came during the summer to tour the "peaceful" China, to stop over to see the Hos, and to enjoy Mrs. Ho's gracious hospitality. Their eldest daughter, Lily Ho Quon of Los Angeles, and their granddaughter Alberta Quon were there that summer of 1937. As usual Lily had brought with her more flower and vegetable seeds for Auntie's gardens besides gadgets and ingredients for ~~the~~ many delicious desserts that Auntie loved to make for her many guests.

Her garden in the front yard was always gay with zinnias, marigolds, hollyhocks, snapdragons, cosmos, and other colorful blossoms of California. Her back lot was green with waving corn and rows of tomatoes, lettuce, and other fresh produce.

I recall one afternoon When Mrs. Yee Yap of Honolulu came to call on the Hos. Mrs. Yap's daughter was married to William K. Luke, treasurer of the city government of Nanking. He was greatly respected for being the only truly honest government official in a city that was rife with the corrupt practices of the last decades of the Ching dynasty and the subsequent shaky regimes after the Revolution of 1911. The Luke lived in a home hemmed in a row of wall-to-wall houses.

In the shade of overhanging branches of sturdy old trees, Mrs. Ho served Chinese tea, cookies, and most delightful of all, real ice cream churned in an ice cream freezer packed with cracked ice and salt. The ice cream, she said, was made of Carnation milk, sugar, and vanilla extract. Mrs. Yee Yap was a smooth conversationalist. She had much to say. I wish I could remember what she was talking about!

I never returned to my home in Nanking after that summer. For on July 7, 1937 the Japanese attacked Lukouch'iao and challenged the Gissimo to confrontation which he had promised the young General Chang Hsueh-liang and the Communists the Christmas before at Sian. Norman and I were in Hong Kong with my parents then. When they left China in November of 1937, I joined Norman in Shanghai where he had found a job as photographer for the New York Times. After covering the Japanese bombing all around the rim of Shanghai, he was sent to Nanking to cover the advance of the Japanese forces southward and was placed on the U.S.S. Panay with other Americans presumably out of range of what the world would decry as the "rape of Nanking." The Panay was bombed on December 12, 1937, and Norman became famous overnight for his story and photos of the bombing of the ship for the New York Times. Whether he had a chance to visit the Hos or our home was never mentioned. When he returned to Shanghai, we had hardly recovered from our ordeal before his boss, Hallett Abend, sent him on an assignment to T'aiierchuang in midwestern China. I returned to Hawaii, not know what each day's news would bring of his whereabouts or his safety.

It was not until January 3 of 1972 that I saw the Hos again. I was on a very short side-visit to Hong Kong from Clark Air Force Base where my son Colin was serving his three years of military service during the Vietnam War. My 1972 diary (which I fortunately had not discarded) mentions only Auntie Ho, her daughter Ivy and a few others. Had Dr. Ho passed away by then? Yet in my mind his presence was there. If he was, he would be his same quiet self, saying little, and accepting the turn of events with a rocklike fortitude.

Auntie Ho was her usual gracious self. She too had accepted the realities of war and the downturns of life. Her sweet smile radiated a serenity that lighted up the room. Gratefully I was privileged to share in the secret of her inner peace. She showed me her hymn book and told me she sang these hymns every day.

I left, walking away with a picture of her in my mind, smiling, the hymn book in her hands. As I look back, I realize I have been sustained by the quiet, strong faith in Christ Jesus that some consecrated missionaries were called to share with China's people and through them and others like them, down to me.

Honolulu  
Nov. 28, 1977

To: Elsie and Guy  
From: Irma Tam Soong

RE: ITEM ON DR. HO EN-SEONG

In looking over a copy of THE WORLD'S CHINESE STUDENTS' JOURNAL, Bi-monthly Illustrated, Vol. II, March-April 1909, No. 5, 3rd month First Year, H.I.M. Hsuan Tung, Published by the World's Chinese Students' Federation, E. 562, Burkill Road, Shanghai, China, I found on page 285 a mention of your father in an article by T. Z. Tyau, 1908, on pages 281-287, entitled "The Southern Captial (sic)" as follows:

The First Day in Nanking (June 29)

Towards the afternoon the weather changed and the sun came out as if to greet us on our arrival in this enchanted city. After a rest, accompanied by our host and hostess, we went to "do" the city. We first paid a call on a famous dentist, Mr. Ho En-seong, one of my fellow provincials, and then we visited the Government Hospital (中西醫院), a very respectable-looking institution.

The same issue had a report by my father, President Tom Ayoy, "Annual Report of the Chinese Students' Alliance of Hawaii (Branch W.C.S.F.) for the year 1908-1909."

*Irma*