

## The drama of Zhending, 9 October 1937.

### The Chinese –Japanese war.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1937, the bishop wrote to his relatives: “As always, somewhere there is some fighting in China, but this country is so large...here all is quiet, though a few hundred km more to the North, and also to the Southwest, the soldiers, robbers, communist etc. are again merrily shooting around. In the mean time, we carry on with our mission work as if the whole of China lived in peace. If we ever will become Japanese subjects, I don't know; we do not deal with politics. Our Dear Lord cares for us, so we have nothing to fear...Most important is that we are ready when God calls us”.

In June 1937 he went to Yungping to celebrate the golden priest jubilee of his cousin Msgr. Geurts. “We had a real Dutch family party together. Hardly a few days at home, I had to go to a bishops meeting in Peking. I left on Monday the 5<sup>th</sup> of July, and expected to be at home again on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, but it became the 13<sup>th</sup>. There was a train stop on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July; a quarrel was broken out between the Japanese and Chinese soldiers. We did hope that it soon would be over. On Monday 12 July it still had not stopped. We then decided to hire a car, which brought us 20 km outside Peking. After that, with little Chinese carts to the South-East, also some 20 km. We then reached a station at the south of Peking, where we finally could take a train and reached home at 23.00 o'clock. Whether the quarrel, I told above, will become a real war, future will tell us; for the time being, every thing in our place is quiet”.(letter 27 July 1937)



*At the photograph: Msgr. Frans Schraven and his cousin Msgr. Geurts, in Yupingfu 1937, to celebrate the golden priest jubilee of Msgr. Geurts.*

It was evident that the quiet was just appearance, alas: 23 July, Peking was occupied by the Japanese army and war was a fact. During the past years, the Japanese had already taken in Mantsjoerije. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January, they attacked Shanhaiguan in the vicariate of Msgr. Geurts, and slowly they ruled the whole vicariate of Yungpingfu. They did behave kindly to the missions. The missionaries felt safe and no longer threatened by robbers and communists who had penetrated everywhere.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, seven European brothers Marist and their rector Pierre Willems (\* Meijel, +1947 China) were captured by robbers or fleeing soldiers, at Heishanhu, 20 km at the North-West of Beijing. A ransom was required. All eight of them refused to take any action to get money from somewhere. After 18 days, the priest was set free, the brothers at the end of October. During the following weeks, this incident gave hope to everybody who followed with tension all the happenings in Zhending.

At that time, the Japanese advanced along the railway to the South. On 4 September, the bishop wrote about the war situation, the continuous rain, that caused to spoil the harvest and “that we should trust all our difficulties to Our Dear Lord. We poor people can do nothing if Our Lord does not help us. And so, if we want Him to help us, we should ask for His help, with a humble and continuous prayer. So be it !”

And 17 September: “The communication with Beijing and Tianjin has been broken, but the post still arrives, I don’t know how. Though it does come with much delay. Shijiazhuang, a railways intersection, some 20 km at the South of Zhending, has been heavily bombarded. Zhending itself is not important from the military viewpoint. But trenches are led out here everywhere, although the fighting takes place 150 km Northerly. May God protect us, especially from the soldiers that are on the run, because they are used to plunder. The harvest looked well, but lately we had heavy rains, and with all those trenches, the ravage is still worse. Here in China, the poor farmers are always the ones who have to pay for it”.

In Zhending, the yearly retreat took place from 19 to 27 September. 60 Priests from the whole vicariate were present. After the retreat, most of the priests returned to their own mission post. 40 Chinese and European priests remained in Zhending.

The abbot of the Trappists of Baifang ordered his monks to go to Zhending. The bishop let them know that they are welcome, but that the town might be as dangerous as their monastery. On 29 September, the old father Albéric Maupeu arrived with father Emmanuel Robial and a Chinese brother; the two last ones to prepare for the coming monks. 7 October, the messenger of the monastery came to tell the abbot that the town gates were blocked. Therefore the other monks, among them also three Europeans, had to wait in the monastery for whatever would happen.

The same day, the Japanese troops reached Zhending, a town that is walled in by some 10 meters high walls. Firings followed. On the terrain of the Catholic Mission there were, apart from the 1000 inhabitants that lived there, still about 2000 refugees, mostly women and children. So also on the terrain of the Buddha Temple and the Swedish Protestant Mission. In the Catholic Mission, three persons were killed. The buildings got much damage from the grenades. In the morning of 9 October, the Japanese occupied the town and the storm troops went further. The Trappist Monastery was occupied on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. Nothing special happened in the monastery. The Japanese troops were very polite and paid for everything they used. On Wednesday 13 October, the monastery’s messenger went to Zhending and returned late in the evening with the terrible news: Msgr. Schraven and eight other foreign missionaries had been taken away. Nobody knew to what place.



*At the photograph: The 10 meters high town wall of Chengtingfu as it is still there in 2009.*

### **What happened in “the cathedral” on that Saturday of the 9<sup>th</sup> October?**

In the early morning, Japanese officers came to greet the bishop, very politely. Soon after, soldiers, alone or in groups, climbed the walls or entered by a broken gateway, to steal. A Japanese officer had the gate be repaired, and put a warning note to it in the Japanese language. But the plunderers kept on coming, although officers did show themselves now and again. They penetrated the rooms of the priests and stole anything that looked costly. In the afternoon, ten soldiers came to investigate all the buildings of the St. Joseph sisters and they captured the Mission Superior ,Lucien Charney (\* 1882) and the economist Eugène Bertrand (\*1905)

Between 17.00 and 18.00 o'clock, two of them went to the bishop and demanded money. When the bishop answered that there was no money, they opened the drawers, took something and left again.

At 19.00 o'clock, the bishop and all the present priests came together in the dining room. Suddenly someone dashed in and told the bishop that the priests Charney and Bertrand had been captured near the house of the St. Joseph sisters, because they wanted to protect those sisters against the violence of the Japanese soldiers. He urged them to flee. The bishop answered that they would be free soon and that the Japanese are friends of the Europeans. There was no reason to fear.

That evening, about forty priests were in the dining room, when suddenly soldiers entered the room. One of them spoke Chinese, with the Jehol accent, an area at the north of Beijing. All had to stand up and were held within range.

The bishop asked what they wanted, but without answer, his eyes were blindfolded and his hands tied. Mr. Biscopitch, a Czech, who had come to Zhending for the reparation of the organ, and who had been unable to leave, due to the fights, being an old officer of the marines, wanted to help the bishop. He also was immediately taken and tied. Then followed the priests Thomas Ceska, (\*1872 in Kroatië); pastor in the village near the abbey; Emanuel Robial, trappist (\*1877 in France) Gerrit Wouters, (\*1909 in Breda) teacher at the minor seminary and organist in the cathedral church; and the brothers Antoon Geerts,(\* 1875 in Oudenbosch) and brother Vadislas Prinz (\* 1909 in Poland)

Joseph Chow Chih-yi stood between the Chinese priests. He did not shave for a few weeks, and in the dim light of the dining room, he was taken for a European by the soldiers. Lucky for him, the other Chinese priests could make clear that he was a real Chinese. The captives were led away. Another Chinese priest followed, but was threatened by the soldiers. He then went to the dormitory of the seminarians and told them what happened. Some soldiers asked for "the wives of the European missionaries". They were taken to the house of the Daughters of Love, where twelve sisters lived. The convent gate was closed. They called "Open the gate, or we will shoot!" When nothing happened, they just left, thinking that the sisters were asleep. But the sisters did hear the noise and they all went to the chapel, where they prayed, in great fear, till 23.00 o'clock, because they had been informed that some priests had been led away by armed soldiers.

The sick father Albéric (\* 1865) was spared all this, because he stayed in his room. At night time, a few soldiers returned, to plunder the room of the economist.

That evening, the clergymen Hill and Spira saw, from the protestant mission, an extraordinary great fire at the pagoda.

### **The first tidings that reached the external world.**

Sunday 17 October, Father Chanet in Dingzhou, received the tidings that bishop Schraven and eight others had been captured and been led away. Immediately he send a courier to Msgr. Montaigne and the French Embassy at Peking, who arrived only six days later, and passed on the tidings. The Dutch Ambassador, Baron G.W.de Vos van Steenwijk was also informed. The 24<sup>th</sup> of October, a Reuter tidings was spread over the whole world, and the General Superior at Paris received the names of the nine martyrs.

When father Chanet, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October arrived at Zhending, he found everyone in great bewilderment. The most contradictory statements were made. Slowly it became clear to him what had happened on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, and that the 10 men in Japanese uniforms certainly belonged to the Japanese army. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, he did send a report of his findings to Peking. 2 November, an investigation took place by the Japanese army. The conclusion of

that investigation was, that most probably, running away Chinese soldiers must be the offenders. The Japanese Embassy passed this on to the Dutch Ambassador and it was published in the Peking Chronicle of 30 November.



*At the photograph: The pagoda of Chengtingfu.  
Down this pagoda, they were murdered.*

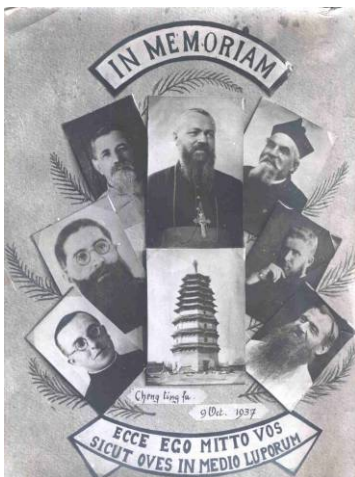
### **Finally certainty.**

It was on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, when near the pagoda, about 300 meters from the mission, rests were found which, without doubt, belonged to the nine abducted. All those rests were



collected by father Chanet and others, and taken to the mission. The Japanese commander was informed about those facts. The Trappists were informed on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November. Two days later the message reached Peking: “Most probably all burned. Chanet”. It was transmitted to The Netherlands. As some ten shells are found, it was supposed that all nine victims would have been killed by gunshots, and burned afterwards.

*At the photograph: The first from the left the French Célestin Jaladieu. The second from the left the Dutch Jan Ramakers superior of the minor seminary. The third the French Louis Chanet, who played an important part after the murder. Right the Dutch Leo Hoefnagels, who thought Frans Schraven the practice of the missionary life.*



### **The official investigation.**

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, Msgr. De Vienne, with the Japanese priest Taguchi and the Japanese Staff Major Yokoyama and a photographer, went to Zhending. Based on facts, Yokoyama was convinced that the Japanese army was involved in this case. On request of the commander Yokoyama, a solemn memorial service was held in the cathedral on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November at 10 o'clock in the morning. There, Ds. Spica heard one of the Japanese officers saying: “There are communistic elements in the Japanese army, that are probably responsible for this crime which is against all rules”.

## **Diplomatic consideration.**

From the French and the Dutch Embassies came strong protests against the statement that the Chinese were the ones who committed the crime, as was reported by the Japanese army on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November.

Now one was better informed by the investigation of bishop de Vienne and Staff Major Yokoyama. At Peking also, a memorial service was held in the Embassy church. The Japanese army would rise a monument, dedicated to the memory of the victims of 9 October 1937, with the text: “Animas suas posuerunt pro avibus suis”. ( They gave their life for their sheep.)

## **Why were Msgr. Schraven and Companions murdered?**

Many years, one was not sure about the motive for the murder. After all, the leading actors in this drama were all murdered and unable to tell about it. The last years, many puzzle pieces felt together and the motive became clear. The following was found:

### **The Japanese demand for girls and women.**

On 5 October, the missionary Ch Janet, in his township Tinchow ( 30 km from Zhending) lodged a complaint with the commander of the Japanese army. Because a group of 5 soldiers had come to a catechist, asked him 4 women , and threatened him with their guns if he did not grant their request.



Also the abbot of the Trappist monastery, near Zhending, wrote that the Japanese soldiers asked for money and women...In his report about the kidnapping of Msgr. Schraven and Companions, Ch Janet mentioned how the soldiers asked where they could find the wives of the Europeans. The missionary Aubé also did mention the motive “women” in his letter to Ch Janet of before 10 November, to demonstrate that the demand for women was characteristic for the Japanese behaviour. “That evening, they had demanded to go to the sisters, ‘their wives’ they said. Was it to plunder? Or to seek women? Probably both of it, they just behave like that”.

*At the photograph: Father Emmanuel Rabial,  
Trappist monk from France.*

### **The demand of women from Msgr. Schraven.**

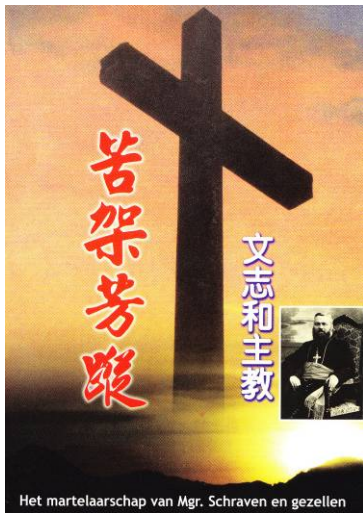
On 1 December 1937, Ds.R.E.Hill, of the Swedish mission in Zhending, declared on the Dutch Embassy at Peking that Li Chai, one of the acting managers of the Catholic mission, told him and Ds. Spira, short after 9 October, that Japanese soldiers on the mission asked for young women. One of the foreign missionaries had answered: “You can take what you like, but we will never extradite girls”. The soldiers left after that. This motive came back in the words of the Chinese interpreter, who was present that 9 October 1937 in Zhending with the Japanese troops. He told the Missionary Olivers: “ The Japanese commander, with a few soldiers, came to the residence to fetch girls and young women. They talked a long time with Msgr. Schraven , in order to get what they wanted. But the Bishop remained persistent in his

refusal. According to one of our brothers he said: “You can kill me if you want, but to give you what you ask for, never”. After that, the commander threatened, and left furiously”. The Dutch Franciscan fathers of Luan ( Shanxi), where Japanese soldiers also asked for girls to please them, were told: “Do not forget what happened on the Catholic mission in Zhending”.

Father Dennis van Leeuw, of the nearby Trappist monastery wrote: “The Japanese occupied the town. Their first action was, to make sure that no soldier of the enemy was left behind. They also looked for something else; they needed women”. In a letter to the Austrian brother Friederich, in December 1938, he told: “Last summer, Japanese soldiers, speaking Chinese well, asked, when they saw the pictures on the monument of the martyrs: Why did they burn them ? We know nothing. **When they had given us those wanted 200 girls for our pleasure, they would not have been burned**”. Again the number 200, and the affirmation of the motive.

### Recent testimonies.

Father Joseph Chow Chih-yi ‘eyewitness of the capture’ declared on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1997:



“Thousands of women were present at the mission in those days. Divine Providence saved them, because the Japanese were prevented to enter the terrains of the St. Joseph sisters and the Daughters of love, when they wanted. One can suppose that they were furious about that, and therefore captured and killed Msgr. Schraven and Companions. It is said, that in the town of Zhending, women were raped everywhere. Many were beastly murdered afterwards”.

The priest Joseph Wang, who as a fifteen years old boy had been present at the residence in 1937, wrote 23 September 1997, that not much is known about the motive. “It is said that the missionaries prevented the soldiers to go to the sisters, to trouble them”.

At the occasion of the 25 years jubilee of the Bishop Consecration of Msgr. Julius Jia, and the celebration of the 150 years existence of the diocese of Zhending, a brochure was published in 2005, with the title: “ The Martyrdom of Msgr. Schraven and Companions”. In it one can read that foreign missionaries prevented the intruders to commit atrocities in the churches. The Japanese soldiers were irritated by it. Further on in the booklet Mr. Ming-Sho-Chao ( 92 years old) tells how he, as a seminarian, the missionary Ramakers (Echt) accompanied to Chengtingfu on the third day after the abduction. “Earlier on that day, the intruders asked the bishop, to give them 200 young girls, for the satisfaction of the soldiers. The bishop refused categorically. Because of it, the Japanese army was irritated, and committed these terrible atrocities.”.

### Why their choice for such a standpoint?

When Japanese soldiers came to the missionary Chanet and asked him for girls, he motivated his standpoint as follows: “ You know, Mister Commander, that a real Christian will choose dead above such a violation, and none of my catechists, even if he would have to pay with dead, will ever agree with such disgrace”. Msgr. Schraven could have said the same to the Japanese commander, who asked him for girls.

## How were they killed?

Also about the way the murder took place, one is not sure. There were in fact some beggars around the place who have seen it. But whether it is true? The Trappist father Struyven wrote as an eyewitness report: "They were loaded on a lorry, and at a distance of 300 meters, they were killed with fist blows. The poor organ builder ( Biscopitch) was assisted by the pastor of the cathedral ( Ceska?) and a father Trappist ( Robial ?). They were burned together. At the stake, the head cap of the pastor was found back, full of blood. The rosary of father Robial and buttons of the trousers of the organ builder were also found on the stake.

"Monsignor lived longest. He was not yet dead when he was thrown on the stake. He groaned with a loud voice: "My God, my God "; the pagans who saw and heard it, understood: "Mong Tié", which means "great"?. Several times, they threw kerosene on him, but the fire did not catch easily. The bishop suffered much; finally, one threw petrol on the stake; a large flame shot upwards. Slowly, the groaning of pain fell silent... Only a piece of bone was left over from him. Further, his lorgnette was found back; the glass was melted, only the frame was over. (...) It is a consolation, that no female religious or refugee was raped...The events did have a great impact on the whole area. Even the Japanese commander said that they had died as martyrs of Christian love".

The French sister Poulieu, who had a lucky escape from the murder, wrote: At the foot of the pagoda... there they will have killed them, one after the other, either with a knife in the heart, with gunshots or in an other way. They will have dragged them along the ground on a tree stump, a few meters further ( the ground was found soaked with blood) and on this tree stump they will have made a fire, with the help of windows and doors that were taken away from houses around. Then they were covered with petrol and burned."

The Chinese interpreter told missionary Olivers: "They started to martyr the youngest. (Probably Bertrand; a pulled out, bloody piece of beard, was found of him. Other missionaries protested against it. Immediately, three of them were killed with gunshots. One does not know who those three were, for the Chinese did not know them".

Many questions remain open, like this one: How do we have to understand the fact, that by the kidnapping serviettes were used to tie their hands? On the stake, wire was found by which they had been tied. Could that mean that they were burned while they were still alive?



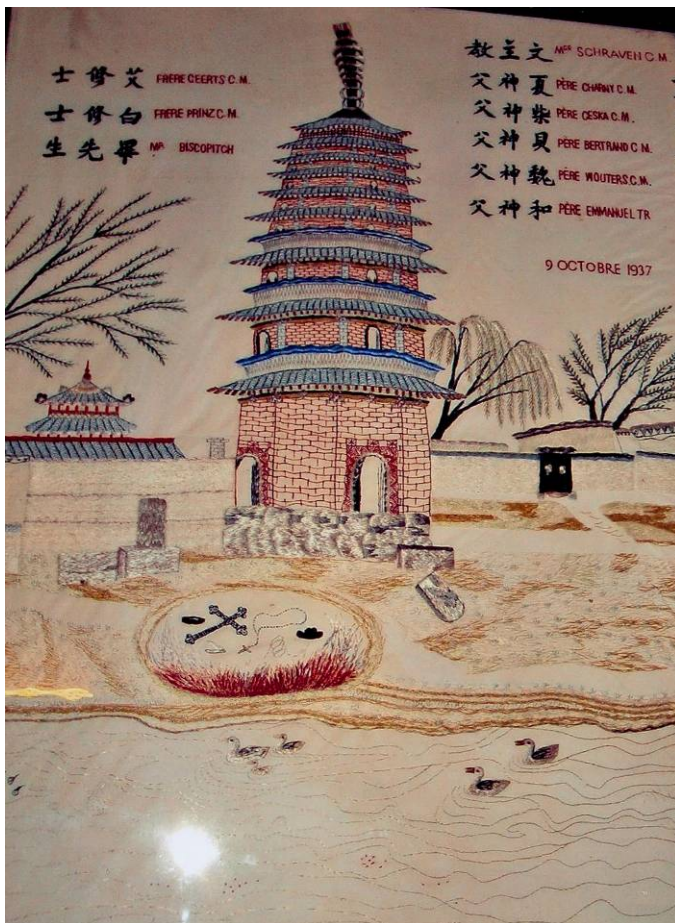
### Finally.

Msgr. Schraven and Companions died as missionaries who remained faithful at their post and defended women against sexual violation by the Japanese soldiers. And they fought for the rights of thousands of refugees.

In 1938, at the expense of the Japanese army, the promised monument was erected in white and black marble. A monument that is still there. It has a height of two meters. In the white marble memorial tablet is engraved: In Memoriam Victimarum Diei 9 Octobris 1937. Whereupon the names of the nine victims follow.



( Since a few years, it is again located before the former cathedral in Zhending. Since the fifties, the whole former mission terrain became a military terrain.)



*The mortal remains of the victims were interred on the graveyard of Paitang; the monument that had been erected there, has disappeared.*

*This picture shows an embroidery, made by the orphanage children of Chengtingfu, after the murder, and is located in the museum of the Lazarists at Paris.*

At the right are the names:

Msgr. Schraven. Lazarist from Lottum 64 years.  
 Lucien Charny. Lazarist from Melun ( France) 54 years.  
 Thomas Ceska, Lazarist. Brodovak (Kroatië) grew up in Austria. 65 years.  
 Eugène Bertrand Lazarist from Aurillac ( France) 32 years  
 Gerrit Wouters. Lazarist. from Breda. 28 years.  
 Emmanuel Robial. Trappist from Mont-aux-Malades near Rouen. 52 years.

At the left the names:

Brother Antoon Geerts. Lazarist from Oudenbosch. 62 years.  
 Brother Wladislaw Prinz. Lazarist from Szlachetne Lipinki, Poland. 28 years.  
 Mr. Anton Biskupitz, organ builder from Pressburg, the present Bratislava (Slovakia) 51 years old.

Wiel Bellemakers c.m.  
 Vincent Hermans.