In the face of evil, many people remain passive or shy away in fear of what consequences resistance will entail. There are, however, rare individuals who, rather than avert their eyes, actively fight against injustice at the risk of their own lives. They can judge, decide, and act according to their moral code and have inclusive perceptions that transcend race, religion, and ethnicity. Amidst the brutality of the Nanking Massacre during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Minnie Vautrin, also known as the American Goddess of Nanking, protected thousands of women from ruthless Japanese soldiers who threatened to rape or kill them. As one of two-dozen Westerners who remained in war-torn Nanking to form the International Committee for Nanking Safety Zone, Minnie conquered her fears and relied on her sense of duty to Chinese civilians who confronted the violent Japanese soldiers.

The Nanking Safety Zone was created in 1937 and sheltered hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians whose homes the invading Japanese had ravaged. These civilians were caught in the crossfire between Chinese and Japanese militaries. Most Westerners fled from Nanking in fear for their lives. The few who remained behind were urged by American embassy officials to aboard the USS Panay and move upriver, away from Nanking to safety. Minnie Vautrin refused to leave. She had been the dean of Ginling Women’s Arts and Science College, whose faculty all fled Nanking at the beginning of the massacre. She opened the gates of Ginling College, which was inside the Safety Zone, to women and children. Though she knew she would witness atrocities and brutality that would haunt her for the rest of her life and endure the constant fear of being raped or murdered, she also knew that as a foreigner, the Japanese soldiers would be less
willing to harm her, and thus she had the power to protect Chinese refugees in the Ginling College.

Genteel and scholarly, Minnie had no experience facing Japanese soldiers who threatened her with freshly bloodstained bayonets or slapped her across the face. She directly saved the lives of several male Ginling servants whom the Japanese mistook as Chinese soldiers and planned to execute. Only when Minnie asserted, “No [Chinese] soldiers—coolies!” (Chiang 132) were the servants freed. On New Year’s Day 1938, Minnie saved the life of a girl who was seized and dragged by a Japanese soldier into a bamboo grove. When Minnie tried to stop soldiers from looting, she found a gun aimed at her. Despite the physical perils and mental torture, Minnie remained steadfast in her mission to protect the refugees. She even found the strength to reassure others, promising, “China has not perished. China will never perish. And Japan will definitely fail in the end” (Hu 100).

As Minnie jeopardized her own safety to protect Chinese refugees in the East, rescuers in the West, like Miep Gies, Charles “Carl” Lutz, and John Weidner endured similar trials and faced difficult moral decisions to save the lives of the prosecuted Jews. Miep hid two Jewish families from the Nazis, risking her life to act in consonance with her conscience. Lutz, a Swiss vice-consul in Hungary in 1942, issued tens of thousands of protective letters that could cost his career, or worse, his life. John Weidner was tortured by the Nazis to reveal the identities of the Jews he led to safety from Holland, through France, to neutral Switzerland and Spain. All these rescuers and Minnie had several things in common: they took great risks for the safety of others and did not allow racial or religious differences deter them from doing so. They all could have chosen to be bystanders and escape physical and mental torture. Yet they were compelled to help others, feeling the way Weidner repeated over and over to interviewers: “I had no choice.”
(Weidner 1) To a Japanese sergeant who demanded her to leave the Nanking Safety Zone, Minnie defiantly said, “This is my home. I cannot leave here” (Hu 93). To these rescuers, moral courage was not heroic but rather ordinary and necessary.

As I researched Minnie Vautrin and her acts of courage, I wondered why she did not just say, “That’s not my problem,” and leave Nanking like rest of the foreigners. Why did she take such great risks? Wasn’t she afraid? What would I have done in her position? By sacrificing her own safety and enduring such a harrowing experience, Minnie saved thousands of lives. I may not live in war-torn China or Nazi-controlled Germany, but I have the capacity to make the effort and take the time to help those less fortunate. This past summer, I volunteered at Samaritan Homeless Interim Program with a sense of duty to people whose lives had no similarity to my own. There, desperation was inebriation by mouthwash, so I included no Listerine in care packages. Loneliness was what the retired history professor drowned in at home when was not there discussing Lincoln’s life with me. Love was celebrating with Garcia over landing a landscaping gig that will pay for his bus ride to see his granddaughter in Virginia Beach. Those at SHIP may have previously dwelled in the periphery of my world, like the victims of the Nanking Massacre were to Minnie before the war, but I have the power to alleviate their suffering and inspire others—as Minnie has—to do the same.
Works Cited

