

FEATURE

Remember Iris

Historian Iris Chang won many battles/The war she lost raged within (Part 2)

--- A tribute written by U. S. Rep. Michael Honda was recited, which he had read into the Congressional Record earlier that week. - *"Her fierce pride of her Chinese American heritage empowered others with the certainty that they were truly Americans... Our community has lost a role model and close friend; the world has lost one of its finest and most passionate advocates of social and historical justice."*

By Heidi Benson

Renaissance Weekend - the meeting-of-the-minds seminar held each New Year's weekend in South Carolina. "Iris was much in demand and gave many talks," Brett recalled, adding with a laugh, "she was schmoozing the whole time." There, Iris had lengthy conversations with then-President Bill Clinton and gave him a signed copy of "The Rape of Nanking."

But when Brett and Iris were invited back the next year, the young couple took a different tack. They attended lectures but Iris gave fewer talks; she was still recovering from the book tour. Meanwhile, they decided they had put their plans for a family on hold long enough. "When we first got married, we said we were going to start trying to have a child after four years," Brett said. "And then we stretched it to six, and then 'The Rape of Nanking' hit the best-seller list and she was out promoting it for almost two years. By the time that was done, it was already eight years. So we finally started trying, and then we had our son in 2002."

Christopher was born Aug. 31 that year. He was a happy baby, with his mother's jet-black hair. "We wondered what we did with all of our time before we had a son," Brett said, "because of the amount of time that a little one involves. What

made it much easier is that we did have a wonderful nanny to help." They had moved from a small apartment in Sunnyvale to the San Jose townhome. "We bought this house when we knew he was on the way. There are so many kids his age here."

Iris' parents retired in early 2001, and after Christopher was born, they moved from Illinois and into a home in the same complex. Her mother hoped Iris would take on a lighter topic for her next book, especially with a baby in the house. The Nanking book had "made Iris sad." Iris took her advice, though the book she began was enormously ambitious. "The Chinese in America: A Narrative History" was published by Viking in 2003. Iris told her mother that working on it was a vacation after "Rape of Nanking." But soon she found herself drawn to a subject just as dark.

Iris Chang rang the doorbell on Ed Martel's front porch in Kenosha, Wis., on Dec. 4, 2003. It's a date he won't forget.

"She sat down and cross-examined me like a district attorney for five solid hours," said Martel, 86, one of the last remaining survivors of the Bataan Death March of World War II. His daughter, Maddy, remembered the day well, too.

"We set out a very big lunch — meat trays and sandwiches and desserts," she said. "My dad was so excited that she was doing this, and so honored."

Months earlier, Iris had seized on a letter in her "book ideas" file about a Midwestern pocket of Bataan survivors, all members of two tank battalions. "They drop so fast," the letter had read. The correspondent was Sgt. Anthony Meldahl, a supply sergeant with the Ohio National Guard who had admired Iris' work. Meldahl was now urging Iris to join his oral-history project. She did, and, starting in November 2003, would make four trips to meet with Bataan vets — in Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky. Each time, Iris swept into town and conducted four or five intensive interviews in as many days. "She was like a battalion commander," Meldahl said.

"It's amazing when you watch Ms do research," Brett said. "She would go into a town — and with Tony Meldahl's help, it was even better. She would have a team of three vets and their children and their wives. Iris would be interviewing them, somebody else would be filming them, somebody else would be photocopying records, and somebody would be sending documents down to UPS. And Iris would buy lunch and dinner for everybody, and they all thought it was great. "These people wanted their story told for a long, long time, and they knew that because Iris had success as an author, she'd be able to do a very good job," Brett said.

Ed Martel's story began on Dec. 7, 1941. Pearl Harbor was still smoldering when Japanese planes bombed the Philippines' Bataan Peninsula, where Martel was stationed with a National Guard tank battalion. With few rations, little ammunition and no reinforcements, 70,000 American and Filipino troops held off the Japanese for months. When the American general surrendered on April 9, the Japanese forced the troops to walk 65 miles through sweltering jungle. Some 8,000 died on the notorious "death march." Those who survived spent the rest of the

war in a bleak prison camp; some were shipped to Japan as slave laborers. Once the Allies won the war, the story was forgotten. It had been the largest U.S. Army surrender in history.

"It's baffling to me that the U.S. today has so little knowledge of the four months we held out," Martel told *The Chronicle* by telephone from his home in Wisconsin. "We marvel at how America turned their backs on us." Martel was slightly hard of hearing, but his memory was crisp. He recalled telling Iris about the worst of his Bataan experiences. "Iris asked me to tell about atrocities," he said. "Twice I broke down and had to leave the room." After he and his fellow soldiers had been starved and beaten for months, a Japanese guard knocked him to the ground, piercing his chest with his bayonet. Martel cried, "You son of a bitch! Just do it!" His daughter recalled that in telling Iris this story, he got terribly worked up. "Why did he have to toy with me like that?" he cried. It was as if he were back in Bataan. But just in time. Iris changed the subject, prompting him to tell a lighter story.

"Did you really look like Charlie Chaplin?" asked Iris, knowing Martel had been saved from near starvation by the bushy mustache he wore. The mustache reminded his Japanese captors of "The Little Tramp." So, in return for performing a short, Chaplinesque shuffle, he would be rewarded with a handful of scallions. "Iris was very loving," Martel's daughter said. "Talking to her, you felt like she was one of the family." After the interview, they kept up an active correspondence. Iris sent the Martels photographs from her trip, cards for Chinese New Year and updates on her Bataan project. One picture she sent showed Iris hugging Martel and his wife. He framed it and hung it on a wall in his home. Next to it, now, is a copy of Iris' obituary. When Martel read in a newspaper about her death, he asked his daughter, "Is that our Iris?"

Iris connected so well with these veterans because each of their stories mattered to her. She didn't just ask what had happened, she asked what

they had felt. Theirs was not just a story of war, but of boys becoming men, she said in a transcription of one of her many taped interviews. "It boggles the imagination, what you went through," she said. "You'll have to forgive me, but I find myself often deeply affected by these stories."

Between trips to the Midwest, Iris conducted yet another book tour. In early 2004, she traveled to promote the paperback version of "The Chinese in America." Brett said, "It was, I think, 21 cities in 28 days. And that really took its toll on her, too." Her last Bataan trip was scheduled for July 2004. She planned to visit Harrodsburg, Ky., where several survivors lived and where an old Bataan-era tank stood sentry in the town square. She hoped to gain access to a time capsule of audiotapes that was sealed within that tank after the war.

Getting ready for the trip. Iris went into overdrive. "In the past, when Iris was working on something, she might work for 48 hours straight and then she would crash for 20 hours, and then she'd be back up, working again," Brett said. "But this time, I had assumed she was sleeping all day after working all night. But it turned out she wasn't sleeping during the day either. She was trying to be a top-notch mother and she was also trying to prepare for her trip."

The nanny was the only person aware that Iris had been up for three days with no sleep. But the nanny spoke only Mandarin. Later, Brett learned that the nanny had urged Iris to cancel the trip. "Iris was really good at putting her best face forward, even when she was totally exhausted, so I didn't really perceive that there was a real problem," Brett said. "We had our lives so structured. Either she was watching Christopher or I was watching Christopher, or she was working or I was working. We didn't see each other as much as we did in the past." He added, sadly, "I think if we had, I would have noticed earlier that things were going wrong."

Normally, Iris never did interviews alone. She preferred to meet someone in each

town who could introduce her to the veterans and their families. For the Wisconsin trip, she had hooked up with people from the Bataan Commemorative Research Project, a historical archive and Web site created by faculty and students at Proviso East High School in Maywood, Ill. "World War II hit the town of Maywood really hard," said Ian Smith, chair of the school's history department. "This high school alone lost 200 students — 28 were with the Bataan company." Smith had been Iris' liaison in Wisconsin; another Proviso High teacher was to be her guide in Kentucky. But just before Iris left for Kentucky — the last week of July 2004 — a family emergency forced the teacher to cancel. Iris would be working solo. Her parents saw her off that morning. "She was very tired," her mother said. "She should not have gone."

By the time her plane landed in Louisville, she was overwhelmed by exhaustion and anxiety. She got from the airport to the hotel, but that was all she could do. Iris collapsed in bed. Soon she managed to call her mother. "I knew Iris was not right," her mother said. "She couldn't eat or drink. She was very depressed." She asked if Iris had any friends there she could call for help. One of the veterans — a colonel she had planned to meet in Louisville — came to the hotel. Smith said the colonel spent only a short time with her. "She was afraid of him when he showed up," Smith said. "But he spoke to her mother on the phone and told Iris, 'Your mom is on the phone, so it's OK.'"

That afternoon, she checked herself in to Norton Psychiatric Hospital in Louisville, with help from the colonel. Through a third party, the colonel declined to be interviewed. "First they gave her an antipsychotic, to stabilize her," her mother said. "For three days they gave her medication, the first time in her life." (The family would not name specific drugs.) In three days, her parents came to take her home. Doctors at Norton Hospital had diagnosed "brief reactive psychosis," her father said. This could be a one-time event or it could signal the onset of bipolar disorder, the doctors told them.

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a mood disorder that affects one in every 70 people. The cycle of mood shifts that distinguish the disease — from manic highs to depressive lows — differs with every sufferer. Without treatment, the condition worsens over time. Though Iris had previously suffered what her parents called "down" periods after bouts of intense exertion, the lows were never as extreme as what befell her in Kentucky. "She had never seen anyone for depression or anything before," her mother said.

They brought her home, and at first Iris responded well to rest and treatment. "But gradually, she became very depressed," said her father, adding that her doctor in California prescribed an additional medication, an antidepressant. "But Iris herself did not believe she was sick." And she was determined not to be hospitalized again. "She didn't like the idea that she was taking medicine," her father said. "Iris was impatient. First she thought it would be a couple of weeks" before she improved, "but we tried to convince her that it would be several months, because that is what the doctors said." Her mother added, "She was in therapy all the time, but it didn't help, and she took the medicine on and off. The medicine made her feel sluggish. So she took a little bit and then she stopped — and it shouldn't be stopped like that." Iris had convinced her doctor to reduce her dosage. "She's very strong-willed," her mother said. "The doctors wanted her to continue in therapy, so sometimes they would go along with her."

Between August and November, Iris saw two different therapists before finding one who seemed a good fit. But, her father said, "In spite of many sessions. Iris did not tell the therapist her deepest thoughts. He was misled by Iris. He thought Iris was improving." Brett said Iris was anxious to get back to work. "She was so driven," Brett said, "she just wouldn't take time off." But that meant diving back into her Bataan Death March research.

Those close to Iris had always seen her ups and downs as part of the natural cycle of a brilliant person with intense drive, passionate commitment and a capacity for hard work. These were considered her finest traits. Now, the family rushed to learn everything they could about her illness. Brett devised a "20-Point Plan to Make Iris Well," listing such remedies as going to the beach; calling friends; eating well (on her desk, she kept a book titled "How Food Affects Your Mood" next to her Franklin Planner); and getting exercise. Brett set up a home gym in the basement and coached her through hourlong workouts with hand weights. Still, the depression failed to lift.

She was seeing a therapist two to three times a week, Brett said, but fought against having family members participate. "Iris was a very strong person, even when she was depressed," said Brett. "She didn't like other people taking control, so she resisted" his attending any of her therapy sessions. "There were up and down periods," he said. "There was a time earlier, in September, when we were worried, but she seemed to come out of that."

Their son, who had turned 2 years old in August, became aware of a change. "Christopher sensed that something was going wrong with Iris," Brett said. "He could tell that she was a lot different after she came back from Louisville. It was obvious she wasn't the same person that she was before," he said. "When Iris' condition got really bad, we sent him to stay with my parents in Illinois. We called him every day, sometimes two or three times a day."

Rabiner became worried, too. "Iris told me now was not the time to go on with the Bataan project. I told her, 'Take a break.' You're not on a moving train. You have a young kid. Let go. We all said, 'Take a break.'" One of Iris' best friends, Barbara Masin, came up from Santa Barbara for a long weekend visit. "I urged her to talk with someone — either Brett, or me, or someone. She finally agreed that she would talk to me. I was there for three days and we talked. For her, it was a relief," said Masin. "We went out and did really

long hikes, and it seemed to help. At the end of the three days, I was making silly little jokes and she was laughing. We arranged for her to come down and stay with me soon," she said. "But as I was leaving, she got apathetic again."

Three days before Iris' death, Brett dreamed up a special weekend. Just for her. On Saturday night they went to dinner at Fresh Choice and out to the movies. "We went to see 'Ray,' " Brett said. "I thought it would be inspirational. And she loved it. She hadn't ever heard much of Ray Charles' music before, and when we got home, she went upstairs and was browsing all kinds of information on Ray Charles on the Internet."

Sunday morning, they drove to Santa Cruz for lunch on the pier, then went to her favorite spa, Chaminade — a 300-acre mission-style resort, surrounded by redwoods and eucalyptus, in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Iris got a massage. "Then we came home, and that was our last weekend together," he said, fighting back tears.

After leaving Reed's Sport Shop at noon on Monday, Nov. 8, Iris tried to load the revolver she had just purchased. But the gun jammed. Such "black powder" firearms, popular with Civil War re-enactors, require skill to load and fire. The lead balls must be individually prepared, packed with gunpowder and topped with a percussive cap. According to the police report. Iris phoned a local gunsmith, an antique firearms specialist who did business from his home. She told him she had an old revolver that was unsafe to shoot. They made an appointment. At 12:40 p.m., she stopped for lunch at FujiSan Sushi in Milpitas Square. The manager knew her as a customer and an author — Iris and Brett ate there often. But this time, "she appeared unhappy," the manager told investigators. Iris ate quickly, asked for green tea to go and charged \$15.11 to her credit card.

Iris arrived at the gunsmith's at about 2 p.m., carrying a Reed's Sport Shop Bag. The gunsmith told police he had spotted a can of gunpowder in the bag. This kind of "black

powder" is unstable and unsafe indoors, so he insisted she first take the can outside. She told him she had not asked for instructions when she bought the gun. He showed her how to load the gun and tried to give her basic safety and handling instructions. Later, he would tell police that she "seemed distracted or aloof."

Hoping to practice shooting, she asked the gunsmith to go with her to a nearby indoor firing range. He explained that the gunpowder she had was unsafe to use indoors. She promised to buy less volatile powder. They made an appointment to meet Wednesday at the firing range. She paid the gunsmith \$10. They had spent one hour together.

After dinner Monday night. Iris returned a call to her agent. "We spoke for two hours, from 8:30 to 10:30 p.m.," Rabiner said. "I'd left a message — I actually had business to talk about. A book packager wanted to publish a children's version of 'The Chinese in America.' "Much of the conversation was upbeat. Other parts were not. She asked me if I was religious — I said I wasn't, not at all. In a funny kind of way, she was resolute, she was calm. She had been sad for several months, but she didn't seem in an acute phase. "

Rabiner invited Iris to spend a week or so at her home in Westchester County, N.Y. "I figured we'd take a week off and just relax, walk the woods up here. I thought it would break the spell, break the hold of these emotions. I told her that I wanted her to call me the next night and every night after that until she worked out the details. I got off the phone confused and concerned, but I was too unsophisticated about psychological problems to realize that she was saying goodbye to me."

That night. Iris and Brett followed their routine and went to sleep around midnight. "But I woke up at 2 a.m. and she was pacing the hallway," Brett said. "Iris wanted to talk, and I said, 'You should go to bed, it's 2 in the morning.' She went back to bed. Then she got back up again. I said, 'You need to go to bed.' So she went

back to bed and I watched her until she fell asleep."

Waking at 5 a.m., Brett saw Iris was gone. So was her car. He went to her desk in her upstairs office and found a note next to the computer. He immediately called the police. Ultimately, three notes were found, all dated Monday, Nov. 8, 2004. The first was short, titled "Statement of Iris Chang." It read: "I promise to get up and get out of the house every morning. I will stop by to visit my parents then go for a long walk. I will follow the doctor's orders for medications. I promise not to hurt myself. I promise not to visit Web sites that talk about suicide."

Then she wrote a suicide note — addressed to her parents, Brett and her brother — followed by a lengthy revision. The first draft said: "When you believe you have a future, you think in terms of generations and years. When you do not, you live not just by the day — but by the minute. It is far better that you remember me as I was — in my heyday as a best-selling author — than the wild-eyed wreck who returned from Louisville Each breath is becoming difficult for me to take — the anxiety can be compared to drowning in an open sea. I know that my actions will transfer some of this pain to others, indeed those who love me the most. Please forgive me. Forgive me because I cannot forgive myself."

In the final version, she added: "There are aspects of my experience in Louisville that I will never understand. Deep down I suspect that you may have more answers about this than I do. I can never shake my belief that I was being recruited, and later persecuted, by forces more powerful than I could have imagined. Whether it was the CIA or some other organization I will never know. As long as I am alive, these forces will never stop hounding me..." "Days before I left for Louisville I had a deep foreboding about my safety. I sensed suddenly threats to my own life: an eerie feeling that I was being followed in the streets, the white van parked outside my house, damaged mail arriving at my P.O. Box. I believe

my detention at Norton Hospital was the government's attempt to discredit me. "I had considered running away, but I will never be able to escape from myself and my thoughts. I am doing this because I am too weak to withstand the years of pain and agony ahead."

After Iris Chang's Oldsmobile was found off Highway 17 on Tuesday morning, Nov. 9, the California Highway Patrol was called to the scene. The Highway Patrol then called the Santa Clara Sheriff's homicide unit and detective Sgt. Dean Baker, a 33-year veteran, took over the investigation. "There is an aspect of paranoia in the majority of suicides," Baker said. "A lot of people — depending on how disturbed they are — feel that people are plotting against them." And often, he added, "people think they've wronged everybody and can't possibly do anything to make up for what they think they've done wrong. Generally, there's an apology."

After studying the final results of the Santa Clara County medical examiner's report. Baker closed his investigation March 1, 2005. The coroner's report, dated Dec. 23, 2004, stated: "Based on the medical investigator's report and the autopsy findings. Iris Chang, a 36-year-old Asian female, died from a self-inflicted intra-oral gunshot wound." Baker explained his conclusion: "There's no evidence that any kind of conspiracy caused her death. We've seen a lot of suicides. We've seen staged suicides and we've seen homicides. I have no evidence of foul play. Everything points to suicide."

The number of calls to Asian Community Mental Health Services spiked in the days after Iris Chang's death. Most of the calls were from women, said Betty Hong, executive director of the Oakland clinic. "Depression is a silent epidemic among Asian Americans because we tend not to seek help soon enough," Hong said. "It's a double-edged sword. There's a stigma within the culture about accessing care, because then people will think there is something wrong with you and your family. And then there's the issue of the model minority. Asians were the first

immigrant community that 'made it,' and we should all be doctors and lawyers." That is, successful and invulnerable.

Stress does not cause mental illness, but it can worsen the symptoms, doctors say. Iris pushed herself "to be the best possible mother and the best possible writer," Brett said. This put her under enormous stress. On top of that, she wasn't sleeping. "A lack of sleep is one of the hallmark symptoms of mania," Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, author of "Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide," told The Chronicle. "Typically, people start losing sleep, then stay up later and later each night. It has a terrible reverberating effect. The lack of sleep can exacerbate the illness and vice versa."

Rabiner believes that neither the subject matter of her work nor the intensity of her work habits precipitated Iris' manic-depressive symptoms. "Iris was suffering from clinical depression," she said, "and it deepened rapidly over a period of about three months. People tend to think that clinical depression is like a bad-hair day. It's a disease. If she had a brain tumor, people would better understand."

Along with fear for her safety, Iris' illness generated feelings of self-blame. In her goodbye note, Iris described her guilt about having allowed her son, Christopher, to be vaccinated before the age of 2. She feared these vaccinations may have caused him to become autistic. But today Christopher is healthy. Family members say he shows no signs of autism.

When Brett woke to find Iris gone early Monday morning, he called San Jose police, reporting that she was missing, on medication and a suicide risk. The Police Department drafted a missing person's report. The report stated that Iris had been taking two medications: the mood stabilizer Depakote, an anticonvulsant similar to lithium; and a smaller dosage of Risperdal, an antipsychotic drug commonly used to control mania, which is also thought to reduce suicide risk. Sluggishness is a common side effect of Depakote, because it subdues the manic phase of

bipolar disorder by depressing the central nervous system. Iris' reluctance to take medication may indicate the difficulty she had accepting her illness as an illness. "For anybody who experiences mental illness for the first time, it's very hard to accept that it is your biology that is making it happen. It's very hard to believe that there is something wrong with your mind," said Dr. David Lo, director of Santa Cruz Mental Health Services and former director of Chinatown Mental Health Center in San Francisco.

Families, too, have trouble coping. "There is no way that a family member could sort out all the details, let alone their own feelings, because they're connected to the person," Dr. Lo explained. "The onus is on us, as Western medical professionals, to be aware of cultural influences — and to be proactive in educating family members and the patient when there is a first encounter with mental illness," he said. "It is a scary, dangerous and terrifyingly confusing time."

As Iris' good friend Barbara Masin said, "Those who are close to her did everything that they possibly could have done. There is always free will. I believe that Iris was very strong-willed and whatever she wanted to do, she would do." Brett voiced a similar conclusion. "When somebody like Iris makes up their mind that they're going to commit suicide, they're going to do it. She was too strong-willed not to."

A poster-size photograph of Iris, lit by candlelight, stood vigil on the lawn of Spangler Mortuary in Los Altos in the early evening of Nov. 18. It was a Thursday, nine days after her death. In the picture, Iris was standing, her head bowed in prayer like a saint or an angel. In the month after her death, the image would be the central icon at each of three Bay Area memorials.

At the first memorial — that evening's "visitation" — friends signed the guest book and offered condolences to the family. They approached the open casket, where they stopped, gazed at her for a final time and bowed three

times, in Chinese custom. Beautiful as always, she was dressed in an indigo blue suit, identical in color and hue to the dress in the photograph.

The next morning, Friday, Nov. 19, dawned cold, clear and sunny. At the Gate of Heaven Catholic Cemetery in Los Altos Hills, the photograph stood on an easel before the chapel. Hundreds gathered for the memorial service and burial. After eloquent eulogies by family and friends, a tribute written by U. S. Rep. Michael Honda was recited, which he had read into the Congressional Record earlier that week: "Her fierce pride of her Chinese American heritage empowered others with the certainty that they were truly Americans ... Our community has lost a role model and close friend; **the world has lost one of its finest and most passionate advocates of social and historical justice.**"

The Gate of Heaven was well named. Open sky surrounds broad, rolling lawns at the crest of a hill. Iris Chang's grave faces west toward wooded hillsides painted with November's glorious reds and yellows, colors of consolation before winter's starkness. As the coffin was lowered into the ground, the black-clad tribe of mourners formed a line. One by one, each dropped a single purple iris or one red rose into the grave, saying, "**Goodbye, Iris.**"

One month later, on Saturday, Dec. 11, the same elegant photograph of Iris was displayed at a memorial honoring her on the 67th anniversary of the invasion of Nanking. As a duo played traditional Chinese music, a group of nearly 100 gathered at the Millbrae headquarters of the Chinese-language daily the World Journal. The event was organized by Global Alliance and the Rape of Nanking Redress Coalition. One speaker called Iris "a hero for those muffled by injustice." Another said: "Let us thank her parents. They are the ones who brought her up."

Between eulogies, a guitarist played "Let It Be." Then, a larger-than-life video image of Iris appeared on a wide-screen monitor: She was speaking as an expert witness in a mock grand jury trial of Emperor Hirohito, filmed at the 2003 Youth Conference at San Francisco City College, which the Nanking Redress Coalition sponsored. Finally, the group stood to sing a halting but heartfelt rendition of "Amazing Grace."

To soothe the pain of her loss, it would be tempting to seek a single, simple explanation for the suicide of Iris Chang. Though troubling to realize, those things that protect us most — faith, family, health, financial stability — are often powerless against mental illness. "People who are in great treatment, who have all the love and support in the world, can still commit suicide," Jamison, author of "Understanding Suicide," has said. "Sometimes, people can be both mentally ill and highly disciplined, highly structured, highly productive members of society, whether you're talking about science or business or the arts. It happens every day of the week, and people just don't know it because people don't talk about it."

Every suicide is the tragic terminus of a tangle of roads, a route unique as a thumbprint.

The fundamental question about suicide, as Howard I. Kushner wrote in "Self-Destruction in the Promised Land," is this: "Why, when faced with a similar set of circumstances — whether cultural, psychological or biological — does one person commit suicide while another does not?"

No one knows the answer.

"Goodbye, Iris."

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