

Continues Her Work After Imprisonment By Communists

by Jack McDonough

SOUTH BERWICK — Abbie Sanderson is active and alert—not too unusual for a woman of 67.

But this South Berwick teacher was 21 months in solitary confinement, a prisoner of the Chinese communists.

Daughter of a Baptist minister, Miss Sanderson had gone to China at the age of 24. Following the influence of others she knew who had worked in China, she decided on this vocation while still a student at Colby college.

In 1918 the American Baptist Foreign Missionary society sent her to Swatow to teach the children of that city. Every five years she came home for a regular furlough.

In 1937 she extended the leave to be with her dying father. Then came World War II and she was unable to return until 1946.

Things were normal then. But in a few short years the hand of communism was felt. Gradually the hand closed. By 1950 it was a strangle hold.

For Miss Sanderson it meant fewer classes. The few became fewer. By 1951 there were none.

One pleasant April morning of that year there came a pounding on her door. Opening it she saw the uniform of the Chinese communist police. She would see little else for a long time.

The charge, they said, was spying for the American government.

An "accusation" meeting was held with Chinese communists from all the schools in Swatow in attendance. It was decided that Miss Sanderson was a bad influ-

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ABBIE SANDERSON, 67, who spent 21 months in solitary confinement at the hands of the Chinese communists, sits in her South Berwick home planning one of her many lecture tours.

Staff Photo by Lennon.

Imprisonment

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on the young people.

Police led her to one of the rooms in her own house and kept her there for four months. The only ones she saw in that time were her guards.

Then one day she and three fellow missionaries, two men and a woman, were taken across Sawtow bay to a building that once housed a Catholic mission. It was then that she learned her friends had also been imprisoned in her house, each in a separate room.

Time hung heavy for the next 17 months. She asked for and, surprisingly, received two Bibles. These, along with a devotional book and a French dictionary, were all she had to occupy her time.

For diversion she memorized passages of the Bible and improved her French vocabulary. She also relearned the method of finding square root by doing the process backward. Cube root proved too much of a challenge—she couldn't figure it out.

Once a day now she saw the other three missionaries. Peering through the small barred opening in her door she could see them being led past her cell to the single toilet facility to which they had access every evening.

The food was adequate and she suffered no physical harm.

"The hard part of it," she said, "was the mental pressure. The guards kept telling me of the harm that had come to other Chinese because of me."

"A good deal of the time I didn't think I would ever get out."

Suddenly on the last day of December 1952, the four were taken from their cells, whisked back across the bay, and told to pack their belongings.

Bringing them to the customs house, the police separated the other woman from the group at bayonet point, and put her on a boat for Hong Kong.

Miss Sanderson and the two men were returned to their cells across the bay.

"I thought that was the end for me," she said.

Five days later, however, they were returned to customs. They, too, were then placed on a boat for Hong Kong.

Within two months she was home in South Berwick. No reason was ever given for her release.

Shaken by the ordeal, Miss Sanderson was unable to talk to newsmen or discuss the 21 months of confinement with anyone for over a year.

But then, showing tremendous stamina and devotion to her work, she returned to the Far East in 1954 and taught in Sendai, Japan, for more than five years.

Today, after 42 years in the mission field, she is still difficult to pin down long enough for an interview. Lecturing from Maine to Massachusetts she maintains a schedule that would frighten a youngster of 50.