

A Personal Victory Over Inhumanity

7 YEARS' SOLITARY. By Edith Bone. 256 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$4.50.

By HENRY L. ROBERTS

"FORTUNATELY for myself," Edith Bone remarks of her seven-year stay in solitary confinement in a Hungarian Communist prison, "I had read innumerable prison memoirs, from Silvio Pellico's book, "Le Mie Prigioni," to the post-revolutionary recollections of Vera Figner, Morozov and other Russians." Her book belongs to this literary tradition, a tradition which, unhappily, has had a marked revival in our age of totalitarian dictatorships. It is a strange tradition.

Each memoir is different, the narrators are of many nationalities and walks of life, the experiences are extremely personal. And yet all the memoirs are the same: the same flat, cold light fading at times to utter darkness; the jerky movements of the marionettes who are turnkeys, guards and inter-

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rogators; the gelid nakedness of spirit and body, which neither sleep nor prison blankets can cover; the "horror of treading in the stinking muck on the floor."

It is doubtful that Dr. Bone's book will prove to be a classic in the tradition. The story of her pre-prison years—her Hungarian childhood, her training and work as a doctor, her experiences in Russia in 1919, her years as a Communist courier and translator, her residence in England in the Nineteen Thirties and Nineteen Forties—is fragmentary and tantalizingly incomplete. At times she strikes a jarring pose. "How had I," she asks, "a British subject, who had served the Communist party for more than a quarter of a century—how had I come to be kidnapped in Communist Hungary by the country's own infamous secret police?" Somehow, one feels, a person of her background should not put the question quite that way. As for her prison experience itself, seven years from 1949 to 1956 as a "British agent," her account adds little to what we know of Communist jails or the Communist police system

and is not outstanding either for descriptive power or introspection.

Nevertheless, the essential thing comes through: the sense of the human being struggling, in this case triumphantly, to maintain dignity, integrity and above all, individuality against the inhumanity of the cell and the inquisitor. Dr. Bone was aided by a relatively sturdy constitution (she was 60 when she was arrested), but above all by a tough yet fertile mind. She refused to be coerced or cajoled into a spurious confession; she bickered endlessly with the guards, and sometimes went on hunger strikes until she was provided with a comb, or a blanket, or a book.

MOST interesting of all were the activities she devised to keep her mind from stagnating or going in trackless circles. At first, when she was confined in complete darkness, she recited poetry to herself, translating it from one language to the several others she commanded. Later, using prison black bread as a kind of plastic, she created

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Edith Bone.

Photograph by Stanley Rice.

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an abacus, statuettes and even alphabet blocks. With the aid of a nail she drilled a spy-hole through the door and disconcerted the guards by her knowledge of the prison routine.

When she was given pencils, some paper and books she worked on translations of Hungarian poetry, learned Greek, studied mathematics and eventually was asked to translate a Russian textbook. Having been so brutally liberated from her earlier visions of the Soviet paradise, she took particular interest in trying to penetrate the reality behind the surface of the printed page. She carefully calculated, for example, that the number of man-hours required to select seeds by hand would need many times the days reported in a socialist-realist novel about a Volga *kolkhoz*.

And so the years went by; she was moved from one floor to another, from one prison to another—but always in solitary confinement. Eventually the post-Stalin “thaw” penetrated even the chill of her cell, but it was not until the Hungarian revolution of October, 1956, that she was released. Fortunately, she was able to get to the British Legation and out of the country before the Russians moved in to “re-establish order” and to begin again the dismal cycle of arrest, accusation, interrogation and confinement.

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