

Redelstein, Elisabeth (1891–1986)

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Ruth Crocombe lives in Brisbane, Australia. Her research examines the connections between Seventh-day Adventist missionaries and the political and financial elite during the Chinese Republican Period.

Elisabeth Redelstein was a German Adventist medical missionary to China.

Early Life and Medical Training

Elisabeth Redelstein (also spelled Elizabeth) was born in Germany to a devout Catholic family on December 8, 1891. Following the conversion of her mother to Seventh-day Adventism, Redelstein was baptized in 1909. Her father refused to pay for her to attend teacher training at Friedensau, and so Redelstein trained as a teacher at the Froebel Training School in Berlin, and then she worked as a governess for an American family living in Germany. In 1911 she accompanied this family to the United States.¹ In 1918, Redelstein began training as a nurse at the Washington Sanitarium. Dr. Harry Willis Miller, a missionary to China, had returned to the United States and was one of her instructors.

Missionary Work in China

Redelstein was a highly skilled nurse. As a new graduate she was appointed head nurse in the Washington Sanitarium, in charge of the ear, nose, and throat department.² In June 1927, as a result of Miller's direct request for her, Redelstein arrived in Shanghai, China, to work at the Shanghai Sanitarium. There was no General Conference budget to send her to China at that time, so a private donor provided money for her transportation and her salary for the first year.³ It is important to note that she was not a self-supporting missionary. Redelstein was sent to China under appointment of the General Conference and remained under that appointment for the duration of her time in China.

After a period of Chinese language study, Redelstein began working as the director of the training school at the Shanghai Sanitarium and Hospital and remained in China for ten years. During that time she became intimately acquainted with two of Nationalist China's most prominent families: Chiang Kai-shek, the President of China, and his wife, Soong Meiling (宋美龄) (known in the west as Madame Chiang Kai-shek), and the household of Yu Fengzi, the principal wife of Zhang Xueliang (known to the west as The Young Marshal). The Shanghai Sanitarium and Hospital was the vehicle through which these connections were formed.

Soong Meiling's first contact with the Shanghai Sanitarium came in 1928 when her mother, Ni Guizhen () was a patient there.⁴ According to Redelstein's biography, it was through this contact that "a real friendship developed between the wife of the Generalissimo of China and Elisabeth...[and] more than once Elisabeth enjoyed being a guest for tea in the Madame's beautiful house..."⁵ This friendship would lead to Redelstein entering Soong Meiling's employment in 1935. It appears that Redelstein was not the first Adventist missionary to work for Soong Meiling. In 1933 the Shanghai Sanitarium and Hospital Financial Statements noted:

"Madam Chiang Kai Shek is also among our most grateful patients, having had an operation at the sanitarium. A recent letter from Mrs. Anderson reports that Madam Chiang has enjoyed continuous excellent health."⁶

An article by Elisabeth Redelstein, written in 1943, expands on this contact between Seventh-day Adventist nurses and Soong Meiling. She notes that:

"In 1933 Madame herself came to the Sanitarium for an operation. As a special favour to her, we allowed the Malayan nurse who had been on duty with her to spend several weeks caring for her at her Shanghai home after she left the Sanitarium."⁷

Redelstein goes on to state that a Seventh-day Adventist missionary nurse, the "wife of one of our missionaries," accompanied the Chiangs on the first part of their tour through China in 1935. However, the family returned to the USA, leaving Soong Meiling without a nurse.⁸ This missionary wife was Mrs. Satterlee.⁹ According to Redelstein, conditions on the tour "were very primitive and unhealthful" and, because of her experience with the Shanghai Sanitarium, Madame Chiang Kai-shek "was convinced that a Seventh-day Adventist nurse would fill her need better than anyone else she could find."¹⁰ Redelstein notes that Soong Meiling then requested that Redelstein spend her vacation with them as a nurse. She stated, "Madame knew that my vacation was due, because I had been invited to visit her sister."¹¹ The invitation to spend a vacation with a member of the Soong family indicates a close relationship between Redelstein and the family which goes beyond the casual professional context.

Redelstein was released from her position as superintendent of nurses at the Shanghai Sanitarium and worked for the Chiangs for a period of several months.¹² Her duties included managing the day-to-day running of the household, such as making sure the kitchen and kitchen practices were sanitary, planning meals, and taking care of anyone who was ill.¹³

Shortly after Redelstein's return to the Shanghai Sanitarium in April 1936, she was asked to accompany Yu Fengzi, the principal wife of Zhang Xueliang, the Young Marshal, to Europe. Redelstein stayed with the family in Europe for several months. Their return to China was initially delayed by the illness of the son, Raymond Zhang. The kidnapping of Chiang Kai-shek in Xian by the Young Marshal then caused further delays to the family's plans to return home in China. In January 1937, Yu Fengzi returned to China without Redelstein, who stayed in Germany to sort out the affairs of her father's estate as he had died on January 5 of that year.

Redelstein remained in Germany until 1938 when, due to the political climate in Germany, and the need to renew her American passport, she returned to the United States of America. In mid-1938, while she was still in Germany, the China Division of Seventh-day Adventists placed a provisional call for her. However, her health had broken down and she was physically unable to take up her old position at that time.¹⁴

In 1945 Redelstein was again asked to return to China and she accepted the call on September 7, passing her medical clearance on October 18. However, between receiving the call to China and her medical clearance, the United States War Department requested that she serve in Germany as an interpreter.¹⁵ She worked in Germany as a translator from October 1945 until August 1950. She initially worked as an interpreter at the Nuremberg War Trials; however, she found this work too distressing and requested that she be reassigned. She then worked as a document translator. While she was in Germany, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists asked her to act unofficially as a liaison between them and the Seventh-day Adventist church leadership in Germany.¹⁶ Redelstein passed letters between the General Conference and the German Seventh-day Adventist leadership. She also had supplies such as clothing and literature shipped to her army address, which she distributed to church members.

Legacy

In her 1943 *Review and Herald* articles about her time with the Chiang Kai-shek family Redelstein discussed the morning worships she used to have with Soong Meiling when she was working in the household. She stated that Soong Meiling was an active participant in these discussions and noted “whenever Madame came to a statement, which she thought would help the General [Chiang Kai-shek], she jotted it down to use for their morning devotions.”¹⁷ Redelstein also reported to the Seventh-day Adventist readers that the Chiangs had a private church service every Sunday and H. H. Kung, his wife, “and several other members of the family were usually present.”¹⁸ This statement is followed by a description of the service which, because Seventh-day Adventism emerged from the Methodist tradition, would have also been highly familiar to readers of the *Review*. Redelstein observed that the “Generalissimo loved the Christian hymns, and he enjoyed picking them out” and that the preaching was done either by a missionary or by H. H. Kung.¹⁹ Thomson notes that the Presbyterian missionary Frank Price was a frequent speaker at these gatherings.²⁰ At this time no records of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries being invited to preach at these church services have been located. This suggests that Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were valued more for their health and educational services than for their pastoral roles and theology, and Redelstein’s contribution to the spiritual life of the Chiangs was purely on a personal level.²¹

The contacts with the Chinese elite formed by Redelstein, and to a larger extent by H. W. Miller, “brought substantial monetary donations to the church, particularly in relation to the building of hospitals. However, these relationships were characterized by a naiveté which did not question the wisdom of aligning the

denomination so closely with a particular political regime.²² The close contact between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the wife of the president of China led to difficulties for the denomination following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.²³

Redelstein continued to work in nursing and nursing education well into her old age. In 1955, at the age of 64, she went to Taiwan to help H. W. Miller establish a Seventh-day Adventist hospital. While there she re-established her friendship with Soong Meiling. Redelstein was invited to join Soong and Soong's husband Chiang Kai-shek, now the President of Taiwan, at their summer residence for a vacation.²⁴ She remained in Taiwan for nearly five years, returning to the United States in 1959. She then worked for the Washington Adventist Hospital in the Maternity Ward for five years until her second retirement. In 1970 she was among ten nurses voted into The Association of Seventh-day Adventist Nurses' (ASDAN) hall of fame.²⁵

Elisabeth Redelstein died on June 20, 1986, in Loma Linda, California.²⁶ The brief obituary published in the *Adventist Review*, merely noting that she served in China for 10 years and for the American Army in Germany after World War II, may not have done full justice to an extraordinary life that she dedicated to Adventism in China and to her own country.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Mary S. Ogle, *China Nurse the Life Story of Elisabeth Redelstein* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1974), 31-32.
2. *Ibid.*, 41.
3. *Ibid.*, 47.
4. Elisabeth Redelstein, "My Year with China's First Lady Part 1," *ARH*, November 4, 1943, 12.
5. Ogle, 52.
6. Harry W. Miller, "Financial Statements of the Shanghai Sanitarium & Hospital and Shanghai Sanitarium Clinic Year Ending December 31, 1933," 4, Thiele Collection.
7. Redelstein, 13.
8. *Ibid.*, 14.
9. Collie. Craig. *The Reporter and the Warlords: An Australian at Large in China's Republican Revolution* (Sydney, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2013), 221. Collie notes the presence of Mrs. Satterlee in the household, but not her connection to the SDA Church. Through cross-referencing of SDA employment records this author has been able to determine the name of the SDA missionary wife in the employment of Chiang Kai-shek and Soong Meiling before Redelstein's secondment to their household.
10. Redelstein, 14.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Although there is no question regarding whether Redelstein worked for Madame Chiang Kai-shek in this capacity, there is a question regarding the date she began working in the household. The *ARH*'s 1943 articles give June 1936 as Redelstein's starting date. However, archival research has uncovered personal correspondence that contradicts this date and pushes the start date back to mid-1935. Ruth Crocombe in *The Missionaries and the Guomindang* demonstrates that the *ARH* articles, written nearly ten years after the event, have inadvertently provided the incorrect date.
13. Elisabeth Redelstein, "My Year with China's First Lady Part 2," *ARH*, November 11, 1943, 15.

14. A. W. Cormack, "Letter to Frederick Griggs Dated June 22, 1938," General Conference IDE files Record Group 21.
15. W. P. Bradley, "April 2 Letter to J. C. Kozel, 1964," General Conference IDE Files, Record group 21.
16. Ibid.
17. Redelstein, "My Year With China's First Lady Part 3," 13.
18. Elisabeth Redelstein, "My Year with China's First Lady, Part 4," *ARH*, November 25, 1943, 14.
19. Redelstein, "My Year with China's First Lady, Part 4," 14.
20. Thomson Jr, *While China Faced West*, 270.
21. The above paragraph is drawn from Ruth Crocombe's thesis. Crocombe, Ruth. *The Missionaries and the Guomindang: An Exploration of the Seventh-day Adventist Experience in Republican China*. Master's thesis, University of Queensland, 2015
22. Crocombe, 18
23. For further discussion of this point see Crocombe's thesis, *The Missionaries and the Guomindang*.
24. Ogle, 111.
25. A professional Adventist organization of registered and vocational nurses started in 1967 in the United States. Norma Eldridge, "ASDAN's Third Annual Meeting," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, June 8, 1970, 12.
26. "Redelstein, Elizabeth, M.," *ARH*, August 28, 1986, 30.

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