

Fall 1938

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### Recommended Citation

Clara Leiser, *Director of a Nazi Prison Speaks Out*, 29 *Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology* 345 (1938-1939)

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## A DIRECTOR OF A NAZI PRISON SPEAKS OUT

CLARA LEISER\*

This is an interview secured very recently with the director of a Nazi prison who is thoroughly familiar with penal institutions throughout Germany. In the main the world outside has thus far heard only of the frightfulness of concentration camps, and then only through escaped inmates. *Prison* conditions have been supposed to be less scandalous. I believe that this is the first document—I asked for, and received, written answers to written questions—issuing from an official now holding office in Germany in which that official denounces the Nazi regime. Obviously I cannot, without in turn becoming a murderer myself, divulge either the institution or the official concerned. The latter risked not only loss of position but life itself; that seemed less important than giving the world at once a true picture of inside conditions and proof that when Adolf Hitler claims a German people unified in support of his and his henchmen's dastardly methods, he wanders slightly away from accuracy.

I ought perhaps to add that this official does not resign his position or leave Germany because he feels that he can best fight the regime by keeping eyes and ears open as to who is in prison and why, so far as any one person can become so informed, and by treating the people in his charge with as much decency as he can "get away with."

The translation of the director's comments is virtually literal.

*The writer asked, first of all, whether there is any one set of rules and regulations prescribing the conduct of prisons and the treatment of inmates.*

No, there is not at present any one universally valid set of regulations. The sphere of Justice is already 'verreichlicht' (literally, be-reiched); that is, it is administered and handled centrally from Berlin. Practically all of the regulations that formerly obtained in individual states and dated from pre-Nazi times, have been invalidated and overhauled; for of course they originated in the humane theory of penology, which has been deserted altogether. Fundamental now is the thesis that punishment must be injurious,

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must serve as a means of frightening the prisoner. Treatment harmonizes with that proposition.

The militaristic note, without which of course nothing may any longer exist, plays the next important role, in women's prisons, too. Right now the National Ministry of Justice is preparing for publication a new 'Duvo' (Dienst-u. Vollzugsordnung)—regulations governing management and care of prisons and prisoners—which will then cover all prisons and every possible case. But do not think that this official 'Duvo,' which every functionary must learn exactly, will picture what actually happens. For the functionary will always have to 'interpret' the 'Duvo' according to the desired aims, for of course official regulations must be so drawn up that in case of emergency they could be made to stand up before a court of humanity. The 'interpretation' is, however, very often most brutal.

*How is the food situation?*

According to existing instructions, that can be quite decent; it depends on the interest, views, and purposes of the particular director. Naturally it must under no circumstances be better than that of the unemployed or the lowest paid workers outside. The average per capita cost for food per day is 42 pfennige (between 11 and 12 cents, at the old par value of the mark). In many short-term prisons the situation is somewhat worse, because the director, usually a very ordinary, uneducated functionary, has a 'monopoly' in the sense that he is allowed a certain amount per day which he may use as he will. Naturally he is interested in having something left over for himself, which is possible only at the expense of the inmates' sustenance. Ordinarily, each man gets about 1 $\frac{1}{4}$  ounces of black bread, women usually less. Malt coffee, and the noonday soup of barley, potatoes, cabbage and legumes, cooked with lard, are of course not very ecstatically eaten. In regular prisons, that is, those where long sentences are served; there is more system, and the situation is better. Each person gets about a litre of soup per day. Bread is usually dry; very seldom is there a little marmalade or margarine.

*Does the food differ for political and criminal inmates?*

No such distinction has come to my attention. Of course the director can always decide that Prisoner X shall have 'arrest' which means that he gets only bread and water, or that he shall be sent to the 'sick station' where he gets *only* thin soup, with nothing solid at all. Naturally there would be no official instructions con-

cerning this, and such measures are always covered by the institutional physician; are, indeed, 'prescribed' by him at the request of the director.

The same holds for work and free time. In any case, it must here be said that institutions lodging both criminal and political prisoners must isolate the latter, who work in their cells alone, eat alone, and sleep alone. Only the daily walk may be taken in company, but they must keep far apart, and are under the sharpest surveillance. Every attempt to communicate is severely punished. It is not always possible to enforce isolation because the prisons are so crowded. The criminals have an easier time of it, as they may do house-work, which is denied to political prisoners.

*I should be especially interested in learning something about the condition of the women.*

When they arrive they are, almost without exception, ailing, and dead-tired from the excitement of the 'discussions' during the period of investigation. Into the prisons come only those who have been convicted by trial; otherwise, as prisoners on remand, they sit in detention prisons, or, if they are not to *have* a trial, in a concentration camp. Concentration camps are under the jurisdiction of the Police. Prisons are controlled by the Department of Justice. Justice and Police are not always at one.

At first prisoners are left to themselves altogether for several days, in order that they may become quiet and get accustomed to their surroundings. When received they are naturally taken hold of in an extra stern way, to forestall any unnecessary or unavailing resistance to their sentence. In a few days work is assigned; from then on their lot depends for the most part on their behavior. Admittedly the prison personnel is rough, in the main, and dull and uneducated, but not, in general, wicked. In concentration camps it's different.

At present most political prisoners are from the ranks of the *Bibelforscher* (literally, Bible Searchers). There are few communists, but very many plain citizens who could not embrace the new ideals and so became punishable. For the most part they were convicted of specious criminal offenses, with, however, a political background—perjury, offenses against the national economy, sins against rules for giving work, insults, etc. Geographically one cannot tabulate them; Justice and the Police have work to do in every part of the realm. In Prussia, Bavaria, and Thuringia, for

instance, prosecution is not so severe as in Saxony; in Saxony, on the other hand, there are a great many young prisoners.

Today, when organized illegal activity has practically vanished, the basis of political convictions is very frequently merely the reading or paying for forbidden literature, and as this offense is often committed without any understanding of its significance, many pretty harmless and foolish persons are caught. Many get two years because they contributed twenty pfennige (five cents!) simply out of good nature and scarcely realizing what they were doing. It is the same with aiding the relatives of political prisoners and harboring or protecting those being hunted by the law. *Nobody* may help the relatives of political prisoners (including the *Bibelforscher*) except the National Socialist Social Welfare Division; whoever does, subjects himself to punishment. The prison associations that existed up to now have had to curtail their activities. Harboring someone the police are looking for is preparation for high treason.

After release, any prisoner may, if the authorities so desire, be sent to a concentration camp for an indeterminate period of 'preventive custody.' *Every Bibelforscher MUST be so transferred*, women as well as men. *No Bibelforscher may ever attain freedom.* Communists, except party officials, may possibly be released after some years of proved 'conversion;' *Bibelforscher*, hardly. A great many people are put into concentration camps *before* their detention imprisonment, and then, after serving their regular sentences in prison, are sent back again. Every prisoner would rather serve a long term in prison than a short one in a concentration camp.

*What happens to prisoners who are or who become ill?*

Any prisoner may ask to see a physician, who then 'looks at him.' Naturally much depends on the individual doctor—though he too is responsible to the Department of Justice and is not free to prescribe as he will. Severe cases are sent to the hospital, where of course the employes carry out the rules on personal freedom and strict surveillance. Anyone who is ill in prison receives 'sick rations.' This does not mean a special diet; merely plain soup. *Nourishing food is given only when death threatens.* People who arrive with stomach and intestinal ailments strive to get better; healthy ones incarcerated for longer periods usually become weak, many get 'nervous stomachs'; many, a scurvy-like disease of the gums resulting from a one-sided diet lacking fruit and fresh vegetables.

The criminals include many with venereal diseases, especially among the youngsters. There are practically no measures to prevent infection. Sensible institutional physicians try to cure these people as best they can, but they are hampered by lack of medicines and proper food. Prisoners who are unquiet, or who rage, may find that the physician will prescribe a 'quieting cold shower,' a 'packing,' or a 'massage.'

Efforts are made to keep the prisons free of vermin; in the new ones successfully, but it is impossible to eradicate bedbugs from the older buildings.

*Are prisoners allowed to work?*

They are supposed to work and receive money therefor from the State. They all work gladly, for incarceration without work is much worse—is, indeed, a form of punishment. During their free time and on Sundays they may read a book from the prison library, which consists primarily of Nazi books. Here again, much depends on the individual director. Prisoners who behave may work for themselves a little on Sundays, if they can procure work-materials out of their earnings (from one to three cents a day), half of which they may dispose of as they choose. It is useless to *send* money, for they may not spend it.

Exercise in the open air for one hour daily is the express right of every prisoner; in detention prisons the time allowed is much shorter. Gymnastics are allowed, often even athletics.

*Have most of the political prisoners had a prior police record?*

In the beginning most of them did have, because their political convictions had already brought them into conflict with the law. The political 'offender' of today is usually an unpolitical person who could not conduct himself properly in the light of the to him monstrous decisions of the new regime, and who thus unwittingly made himself punishable. People who belonged to any of the former organizations for fostering humanitarian interests do not know that they thereby practiced 'Freemasonic activities,' they fail to jot such membership down on some questionnaire, and presto, they have made themselves punishable. Or some time a woman may, in the house of a friend, exchange criticisms of some new regulation governing the food supply or some new restriction concerning its use. Presently she quarrels with her friend, who notifies the police of the earlier remarks, without, however, saying that she did the same thing. The one who betrays is the more 'state-loyal,' and is therefore believed. The denunciation is immeasurable and bound-

less. It is simply a means of self-advancement, the symbol of the abandonment of individual character, and thus of absolute subordination, which alone is rewarded.

*Will you tell me, please, whether the communist political prisoners now are laborers or intellectuals?*

They come chiefly from the ranks of former organized labor, including the women who were active in industrial plants. But you will no longer find many in prisons. Most of them have allegedly or actually been freed, or they have emigrated, or else they sit, without hope, in concentration camps—probably in equal numbers.

Communists are not treated differently unless they are hostile. In any case, it is rigidly forbidden to discuss politics with them. They are supposed to take advantage of the National socialistic lectures which the director must give whenever opportunity offers, but without contradicting or asking questions. And they must of course be more closely watched, their letters more minutely censored, their books more carefully chosen.

But currently by far the greater proportion of political prisoners are *Bibelforscher*—altogether simple folk, agricultural workers and ordinary mechanics; next come the intellectuals, of uncorruptible character, who at first tried to come to terms with the new ideology but finally could stand it no longer and on some chance occasion when their nerves failed them, did or said something punishable. Teachers who could not approve the new educational theories, clergymen whose consciences compelled them to deny the authority of the totalitarian state, human beings who could not conceal their belief that war is evil, or just plain people who tried to assuage the miseries of their unfortunate fellowmen, without the express permission of the State—these constitute the larger part of today's political prisoners. And the inmates of concentration camps, too. Under certain circumstances the altogether simple, the intellectually alert, and the most distinguished people are equally unendurable to the State.

*Are there many Jews?*

Practically none, and certainly not for political misdeeds, but for allegedly criminal offenses: 'Race defilement,' usury, insults, etc. And practically no young Jewish women convicts at all. That is not, however, the case in the concentration camps, where no trial need precede incarceration. Jews as Jews are of course treated differently from Aryans, since a contemptuous attitude towards them is not only a right but a duty. In spite of that, however, one

does not mistreat or let them starve unless that can be concealed. For officially Jews are the *guests* of our country!

*What about youthful prisoners?*

The regulations concerning them are much more humane; for it is sought in every conceivable way to win them over to the State, especially the political prisoners. But criminal ones too are given great leeway. An appalling number of girls between 15 and 17 years of age already have illegitimate children, are venerally diseased, and have long since undergone every imaginable kind of demoralization. Incest is also increasingly common. Lectures on morals are completely useless, for every one of these girls entrenches herself behind the meritoriousness of Motherhood. And whoever says anything against that is a traitor!

*Are husbands and wives ever imprisoned together?*

So far as political prisoners are concerned, in an extraordinary number of cases husbands and wives are incarcerated in corresponding institutions. If they have children who are minors, these are usually turned over to Nazi families. *Bibelforscher* are deprived of parental rights by law! The mothers among them are martyrs to their convictions in the most gruesome meaning of the term. They are invariably good mothers and have brought their children up religiously, and the thought that they are being corrupted has made many a mother ill.

We have many young women prisoners whose fiancés are in penal institutions for men; both are serving long sentences. Outwardly they are very composed.

*Have you any idea how many families have been unhappily affected by the imprisonment of their members since the Nazi regime began?*

How many human lives have been blighted through such conflicts it is impossible to say. *But there can scarcely be a single family in whose wider circle there is not at least one case of political disaster.* Very often there are several cases in one family. Not so much is known about them, because people keep still about it.

*There has been a good deal of protest on the score of women being held as hostages by the Nazis. What can you say about that?*

There is no acknowledged holding of hostages. Nobody can be held in a prison on such grounds—but in concentration camps, yes. But who is really informed about the concentration camps in general? Who knows who is still alive in them and who is no longer among the living? Besides—what does 'hostage' mean? Who-

ever doesn't want to betray husband or brother, even though the State demands it, defies the State and thus becomes a traitor himself. Any woman who helps her husband simply out of love—and many have done it only so—receives equal punishment with him. When a husband flees the country, neither wife nor children may leave—is that 'holding them as hostages?' Then indeed are there many hostages in Germany! When a man is deprived of his citizenship, his wife and children lose all right to inheritance and to sojourn in Germany—doesn't that amount to the same thing also? On his own behalf a human being will risk much; but the fate of the children is bound up with his own—and that is often insuperable.

*Does it ever happen that political prisoners revolt?*

Occasionally, of course, but not the important ones. Besides, it is in every respect the most foolish thing a prisoner can do, pardonable only on the score of overstrained nerves. The best of the political prisoners are quiet as walls, and as impenetrable. They save their energies for future needs.

In addition to all this, I would like to say that thus far every prisoner has been entitled to religious comfort, according to his faith. The ministers themselves see to it that this subject is not altogether forgotten, though it cannot always be accomplished without difficulties. Communists usually profess no religion, but very many of today's political prisoners are confessed Christians.

Then there is the matter of sterilization. This is very frequently resorted to, among women as well as men. One can, if he wants to, readily enough declare a human being who refuses to change his 'wrong' opinion, to be morbidly feeble-minded—the most frequent ground for sterilization. This is especially often resorted to in the case of the *Bibelforscher*. A sterilized person may marry only another sterilized person. And women very often take to the primrose path very soon after having been sterilized.

Finally, concentration camps and prisons are conducted according to the most militaristic principles, officials and inmates alike standing at attention, reporting to their superiors in military fashion, and marching in the same manner.

The care of released prisoners may be undertaken *only* by Party organizations (the National Socialist Social Welfare Division)—not by any private individual or association whatever.