

On Pilgrimage - December 1975

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The Catholic Worker, December 1975, 1, 2, 8.

Summary: Recalls her own prison experiences while visiting Alderson Federal Prison in West Virginia. Mentions books on prison life. Also visits friends and family living nearby in the hills. (DDLW #565).

Reflections of a Guilty Bystander, by Thomas Merton, is the title which comes to mind as I start this column. I have lived in slums a good part of my life, but always I have had a family, a brother and sister, who claimed my visits so that I knew quiet and comfort with them. I have seen the inside of many prisons, the first time in Washington during the suffrage demonstrations, where I saw my cell mate, one of the leaders, strung up to the bars of the cell door, chained there by her wrists for three hours. Our sleepless night on a single cot with no blanket in that Occaquan punishment cell was lightened by a long conversation with Lucy Burns, a school teacher in Brooklyn. We talked not about suffrage or prisons, but about the novels of Joseph Conrad.

I have been in houses of detention, in city jails, two in Chicago during the Palmer red raids, and four separate city jails, in both Bronx and Manhattan where we awaited trial. We received short sentences, thirty days, fifteen days, three days, in the House of Detention for Women, when it was on Sixth Avenue. There, one could look out of the window (barred of course) and call down to the people on the street.

I have visited a prisoner in the Tombs where one stood in what looked like a telephone booth and talked by phone to Raymond Larsen, the poet, who was jailed for smoking in the subway and resisting an officer. I have visited convicted murderers, one in Philadelphia, who was brought out with many others who were there for minor offenses. Wives, mothers and children and I sat at what looked like a counter with a heavy screen between us and the row of men on the other side. Ammon Hennacy, visiting that same prisoner later, was locked in a room with him. (The man had murdered a drinking companion, stuffed his body in a trunk and left it at a railroad station. He had written to the *Catholic Worker*, asking us to visit him.) In California, at San Quentin, I too had been locked in a room for a visit with a convicted murderer who later spent years on Death Row. A lawyer friend of ours had asked me to go see this man who apparently had neither family nor friends.

A PRISON EXPERIENCE

Of course during the air raid drills of the Fifties we were held briefly in many city jails: in Elizabeth Street station where they knew us, and for a few hours in a midtown west side station, and for a longer time in cells way uptown. In all these places we had nothing to eat or drink from early morning until late at night. It was Judith Malina's hunger which landed her in the psychiatric ward. (She was our companion on our first arrest.) We were being arraigned in the Night Court and when the clerks miscalled some of the defendants' names, she laughed. When the judge ordered her to stand before him, she pleaded as an excuse for her slightly hysterical laugh, that we were hungry.

"Were you ever in a mental institution?" he asked her, and when she became pert and answered, No, were you?" he banged with his gavel on the desk before him and ordered the police to take her to the prison psychiatric ward at Bellevue. This precipitated disturbance in the courtroom which was filled with sympathizers. The papers made much of it the next day.

Her experience in this psychiatric ward was a horrible one. There was no attendant on hand with the prisoners. A "correction officer," delivering a reassuring telegram from Judith's husband, arrived on the ward as Judith was being threatened with assault for resisting sexual advances. It is hard to express these things delicately. Why not say outright that it is a common thing for young students arrested on demonstrations to be raped by other prisoners?)

The story of prisons has been written many times. Dostoevski's **House of the Dead** began my own education. Kropotkin has written much on the subject. Eugene V. Debs spoke those unforgettable words "While there are men in prison, I am not free."

Radicals, war resisters, young and old, have seen the inside of prisons. I grew up on the writings of Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and certainly Dostoevski's **Crime and Punishment** and **The House of the Dead** had a profound effect on my thinking. I began to know compassion, "the suffering with" others, very early.

At Alderson Federal Prison

This is a long preamble to my adventure of this last month. Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, who works with a coalition of Protestant, Jewish and Catholic Women's Organizations in the United States, came to see me a few months ago at Tivoli. She came to ask me to accompany a group of women, sisters from different parts of the country, and two women lawyers, one from Washington and the other from Chicago, on a visit to the Alderson Federal prison in West Virginia.

The political prisoners, Jane Kennedy and Lolita Le Brun, were there. Jane, for fouling up a computer (I don't know how to explain it) and also for destroying

draft files in Indianapolis, was sentenced to three years on each count, the sentences to be served concurrently. Lolita is the Puerto Rican Nationalist who has been, for the last twenty years, serving a term for violence in the House of Representatives, a shooting which occurred from the visitors' gallery, which resulted in one wounding but no deaths, thank God. Some years ago I had visited Lolita. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote about her in her story of Alderson. Lolita is a beautiful woman who spends her time in prayer for her country and countrymen and is an ardent nationalist. I had not met Jane before, and was much impressed by her. A loving, sensitive person, she has suffered much.

We were all there for four days visiting the various buildings. The impression was, of course, that the food was good and plentiful, the place well cared for, occupation provided. The usual impression to be carried away was of a college campus-like place—no hint of anything like **Gulag Archipelago**, which I have been reading this last week or two. Perhaps one of the things prisoners suffer from most is that appearances are so deceptive. **A prison is a prison.** Men and women are not meant to be caged. A few furloughs a year (and who can afford them?), a few visits from relatives, to a place so remote that it is almost impossible to reach, except at great expense, and no housing for relatives when they arrive. I am sure it was impossible for anyone of the sisters who were there, on what was certainly a work of mercy, to get any clear idea of conditions, or what they could do about them.

The two lawyers with us, Edith Barksdale Sloan from Washington, D.C., and Ralla Klepak from Chicago, probably did more for the prisoners than any of the rest of us. Sister Margaret Traxler, who conceived the idea of this visitation, is planning another in January, this time with more women lawyers. The talk Ralla Klepak gave was a clear and stirring exposition of what the women could do or not do in relation to their cases.

The two Sisters, Rose Ann and Sandra, at whose house we stayed at Hinton, West Virginia, are with the prisoners daily. Sister Sandra was there some years ago when I visited Lolita before. They, of course, do the most of all, voluntary prisoners as they are, dedicated to this life of service.

I am sorry to say that I kept very inadequate notes and this is but a fragmentary account. I can only conclude by saying that comparisons of our federal prisons to country clubs or college campuses are very wounding to those who have served terms in them. Prisons are prisons and people are branded by them in soul, if not in body.

I left Alderson and Hinton before the others because Fr. McDonough, Huntington, West Virginia, a town of some 80,000, came to call for me. I spent the night in his rectory, which has become something of a house of hospitality in that town in the center of the coal mining area. His brother, Fr. Joe from Cleveland, Ohio, was visiting also, and the little house was full. Another woman and I slept on the second floor, and the two priests and a Nigerian student slept on the first floor, together with a couple of young men curled up on arm chairs in the living

room.

It is a black parish and it was sad to hear that the Ku Klux Klan is getting active in the region. A young boy had been shot, and the usual propaganda about protecting white womanhood was being circulated on cards throughout the town. Returning later by plane to New York, I was horrified to read in the **N.Y. Times** a long feature story about the revival of the Klan and the “grey flannel” aspect of its new membership. (There was also a story of a prison riot on Riker’s Island with the news that some of the guards had been held as hostages. One of the grievances of the prisoners was that they were forced to communicate with their visitors, wives and children, through plate glass and by means of telephones. I was back in the world again and the world did not seem much better than the prison I had just been visiting). I felt much at home in this latest house of hospitality. I had known the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity for many years. In fact Sister Peter Claver, who gave me my first contribution the year Peter and I began the Catholic Worker, is a member of that same order which had begun work in the South many years ago amongst the poorest of the poor.

As the crow flies, the prison, the house of hospitality, and Chuck Smith’s Catholic Worker Farm and the surrounding homesteads are not too far apart. But the winding roads made a car a necessity. So, Paul Salstrom, who edits **The Green Revolution** and whose address is Box 8074, Huntington, Va. 25705, took charge of me after Father McDonough, who had transported me from Alderson and housed and fed me and in whose little church I had received from his hands, the bread of life that Sunday morning.

Paul and his beautiful young wife drove me along those winding roads past many a “holler” tucked in between those protecting hills. It was a cold and bracing Sunday afternoon with the smell of snow in the air. I was anxious to have a glimpse of my granddaughter and her baby, and Marge and Johnny Hughes, and Ellie and her new little one, and Mike Kreyche and little Jessica, and Chuck Smith and Sandy. And since I had brought along my famous chair which had traveled all over Europe with me and on the picket lines in California a few years ago, I had a very comfortable and happy visit on the road side. Oak, my great-grandson, played happily in the dirt and kept inching away towards a big puddle. Everyone looked healthy and ready for the winter, which, down there, begins to ease up in February.

Each family has adjoining acreage—a cluster of farms—but there was no possibility of my surveying them. They explained it would take half an hour to get from one to another, or twenty minutes or three quarters of an hour, according to the steepness of the path and my agility.

I willingly gave up the idea of crossing brooks on the swinging rope and very frail looking bridges, that looked as though they could precipitate one into a rocky stream bed below. Some days when the creeks are dry and it is summertime, one can risk driving across the creek to Chuck’s, the only place that can be reached

by car. The rest of the adjoining land can only be traversed by agile people, of whom I am not one. It was a good visit which satisfied my curiosity. I did not say, however, how much I preferred prairies and deserts and the sea, the sight of horizons and sunrises and sunsets. (I am even glad for our long straight highways.)

But I certainly admire these bold pioneers who have built their own cabins, made their furniture, raised their food. It is good that the very difficulties of their terrain make it impossible for them to be swamped with all the young wanderers, who are searching for another way of life, but at the same time are learning much by their wanderings.

Another Prison Idea

I keep remembering Peter Maurin's words, his exhortation, "We must try to make that kind of society where it is easier for men to be good." Thinking of this I was delighted to hear one of the women of our group at Alderson say that in Sweden there was an experiment with another kind of "rehabilitation." Instead of imprisoning, give each offender against society, and his family, ten acres of land and the tools to work it, what he needed, I suppose, to sustain life, and leave him or her free. I would be shamed to set forth such a seemingly preposterous idea before our readers were it not for the fact that someone else contributed the information that there had been a Ford Foundation study made of this experiment. I shall do my best to find the study, or account of the work done already in this direction, and write more about it.

Meanwhile those who are interested in the Problem of Prisons can send to the American Friends Service Committee for a pamphlet by that name printed in 1970, 10 N. 15th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19102.

(P.S. I must not forget to thank our many readers and friends for the beautiful birthday cards they sent me which I put in our favorite books which are always being loaned around, so that others can enjoy them too. I only wish I could answer all the letters and cards which come addressed to me. Be assured that I look at them over and over again with joy and thanksgiving for all our good friends and helpers. D.D)