

Rescued From Dead Storage

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Asked to visit a woman committed to the psychopathic ward of Bellevue Hospital for an anti-Semitic remark, she recalls harrowing experiences with the mentally disturbed and tales of unjust incarcerations in psychiatric hospitals. These memories, plus an unpleasant encounter with one of Bellevue's doctors, prompts her interest in studying Belgium's decentralized methods for dealing with the mentally ill. (DDLW #410).

During the month a lawyer whom I had met only once before came to me at Mott Street and told me of a woman confined to the psychopathic ward at Bellevue for observation, who had been picked up in a restaurant for speaking abusively of the Jews. He wanted to know if I would go to see her, as her relatives were hundreds of miles away, and had not as yet gotten into contact with her. As we are spiritually Semites, and all of us children of Abraham, going to visit this poor woman was in the nature of going to visit an enemy in trouble. Having known of some unhappy experiences with the same psychopathic ward of Bellevue hospital, I readily agreed.

The sad experiences were these: On one occasion our friend Tim O'Brien, now overseas, well known to our readers as writer of many of the Ben Joe Labray articles, and other things for this paper and the Commonweal, collapsed from the heat in a sub-basement of Child's. When he came to, he found himself in the psychopathic ward and it took him several days to get out.

On another occasion, it took me some time to rescue a Mrs. Deane who had stayed in our House of Hospitality, who was attacked on her way home one night and who on her making a complaint to the police, was kept for weeks at Bellevue in this same ward, and only because we went to court for her, escaped being confined.

Another experience is that of our friend John Ferguson, who died last month, and who had been with the Catholic Worker for some years. He had worked as night watchman and occasionally he "celebrated," as the saying is. On one occasion

he rolled off the dock where he was watchman, and was rescued and brought to the hospital, and from there sent to one of the mental hospitals out on Long Island. He worked there for three years, without pay, virtually a prisoner, and it was only after he had been able to get some clothes which did not distinguish him from visitors that he was able to walk out one Sunday afternoon and found his way to us here on Mott Street. He told us his history afterward when he was trying to get his old age pension. Not being able to account for those three years of his life, he knew he was going to have a hard time getting his pension. He was with us for years and we never saw any indication of mental or nervous trouble.

The last experience we had was strangest of all. There was a shell-shocked veteran of the last war living with us and helping us in the kitchen. He usually washed dishes, and hung around the kitchen, and on two occasions when an argument came up as to the war, he became violent, throwing one man down stairs and another almost through the window. Not long after, he threatened Arthur Sheehan, the meekest and gentlest of men, and that Summer noon suddenly tore the crucifix from the wall of the kitchen, threw it in front of Arthur and seized a knife. A tragedy was narrowly averted and we called the police, explaining the circumstances to them. They took him away, only to have him return to us the next morning! I went again to the police station, complained, and demanded that he be given needed hospital care. After many protests, the police called an ambulance again and had Harry taken away. Within thirty days he was out again, although I wrote to the doctors in charge of the psychiatric division of Bellevue Hospital and explained the whole situation to them. They ignored my letter and released him; this man who had made an attempt on the life of another.

These experiences will explain my complete lack of confidence in this division of Bellevue Hospital and my readiness to visit the woman whom we will call Miss Jones.

When I went to see her it was in the capacity of a social worker, and since she had never heard of the Catholic Worker, I explained our work as social work. (Social workers are privileged in being allowed to visit prisons and hospitals without observing the regular visiting hours.)

While I was visiting the patient and talking to her of her situation, and trying to find out whether her sister would be able to reach her and rescue her before she was sent out on the island, a doctor came in whom I later found to be Dr. Frank J. Curran, senior psychiatrist and assistant professor of the New York University School of Medicine. His manner was so brusque, so rude, that it did not seem possible to me that he was a doctor. He threw a paper on the table before us, and said: "Your case will come up for trial tomorrow morning and it is my intention to recommend that you be committed to a mental hospital." There

was an edge in his voice and a harshness in his tone which I thought ill fitted a doctor supposedly treating mental patients. If it was true that the woman was mental there was no sense in getting angry at her. She should be treated with sympathy and consideration. Granted that she was irritating, had prejudice and an ugly manner of talking, that she disagreed with the administration of government and thought the Jews were running everything, still I could not see, from my talk with her, that this point of view should be punished by her being sent away to a mental hospital

(I remembered our friend John Griffin, who had been transferred from the tubercular hospital on Welfare Island to the psychopathic ward because he had quarreled with the help and complained about the food. Our old friend Hergenham, who wrote a few articles for us about conditions in the Municipal Lodging House, had also been threatened with the psychopathic ward for criticizing conditions.)

I am not so much criticizing our hospitals themselves (though we may do that in future articles) as the attitude of mind of such doctors as Dr. Curran, and whoever else were in charge at the time these incidents that I am talking about occurred.

The reason I consider the situation dangerous is because after the war there are going to be many more cases, hundreds of thousands of cases, of young men who are apt to be sent away into a confinement worse than death. They are going into those gigantic warehouses for dead storage, as one of our friends calls them, and there be neglected and forgotten unless their relatives are warned beforehand. If they fall into melancholy and despair at the situation in which they find themselves, it will be all the harder to get them out, no matter how close the relative.

Anyone who has ridden on the Long Island railroad out as far as Lake Ronkonkoma has seen these huge ghastly warehouses, reaching up to the sky out of the desolate wastes of pine lands, where men and women are confined to sit in rows along the wall, with nothing to do, to brood their lives away (or else, if they are energetic, made to work for years without pay in the kitchens or wards, doing hard work that attendants are paid to do).

We are happy to say that the unfortunate woman who had been suffering from the revenge of the anti-anti-Semite, who is just as virulent and venomous as the anti-Semite, and who by hatred increases that hatred, was rescued by her sister and released not only from the prison ward of the Bellevue psychiatric division but from Jefferson Market court, where the case against her was dropped.

Today, as I write this, I received a letter from Ossie Bondy, former head of the Windsor, Ontario, House of Hospitality, who is now in Belgium. He has been overseas since the war started, in the medical corps, and he promises to send us an article on the Gheel system of boarding out mental cases to private families. Having heard of this wonderful "decentralized" system of taking care of mental and nervous cases, we are most anxious to get an article on the subject, knowing

well that if we publicize these ideas enough, many a life will be made happier thereby.