
Debs on Prisons and Prisoners

by David Karsner

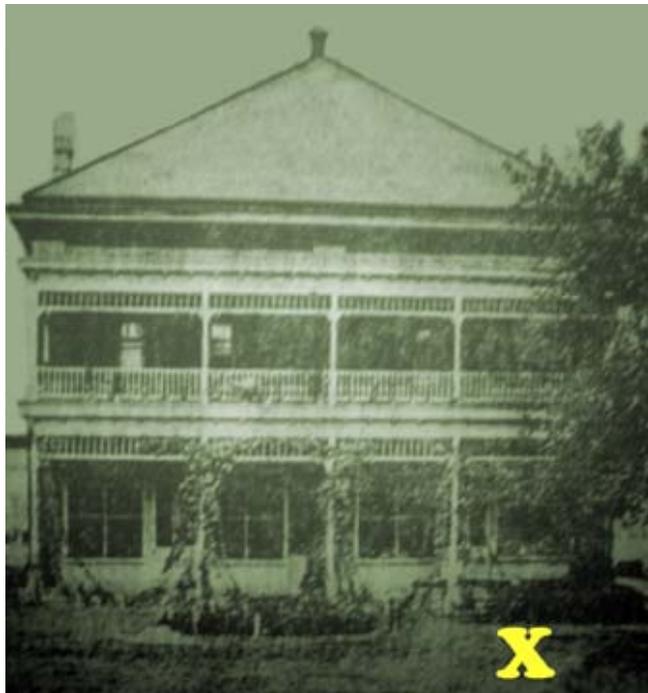
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For the fourth time since April 13 last when Eugene Victor Debs began serving his sentence of 10 years at the West Virginia State Prison at Moundsville, I was privileged to visit him. It was Saturday afternoon, June 7 [1919]. Warden Joseph Z. Terrell and myself had been discussing Debs and his case informally. Presently the warden pushed a button on his desk, summoning a guard who would escort me through the prison yard and to the hospital, where Debs has lived and has his being since April 14, the first day following his entrance to the prison as Federal Convict No. 2253. No guard came, so the warden himself escorted me to Debs' room on the ground floor of the hospital.

It was a bright, sunny summer's day, and some 800 prisoners were scattered about on the spacious lawn in the prison yard. Some were sitting alone. Others were in groups of twos, threes, fours, fives, and sixes. Many of them were smoking pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. But for the monotonous similarity of their clothing, and the gray wall that stretched 40 feet from the ground and enclosed them, one could not have thought of these men as prisoners, but as workmen enjoying a half holiday. The latter was correct. They were enjoying a half holiday, for Warden Terrell had ordered all work suspended at 12 o'clock that day. But the former was incorrect. The men were not workmen, though

they had once been such, and many of them would be again. Now they were convicts all. Bankers, tellers, burglars, slayers, counterfeiters, forgers — men imprisoned for every conceivable offense, and now all on the same dead level.

I especially noted at as Warden Terrell passed these different groups of me not one lowered his eyes. Many of them looked straight at their keeper, some



*Moundsville Prison Hospital, 1919.
Debs' room is marked with an X.*

with smiling eyes of friendly acknowledgment, some with blank expressions, some whose faces were alight with hope of future liberty, while others — the “lifers” — gazed straight ahead at the great gray wall as though that stone panel were the very end of life and its mysteries. But not a man cowered. Not one hung his head as the warden passed. A young fellow was sitting in a chair under a great tree. The stump of his left leg was thrown across the arm of his rocker. The amputation must have been a recent one.

“How are you feeling today?” asked the warden as he passed this man.

“Pretty good,” responded the prisoner airily.

“Well, take care of yourself; don't overdo it,” called back the warden over his shoulder as we proceeded to the hospital a few feet away. On the steps of

the hospital Old Bill, a Negro, was sweeping. A small butt of what had been a fat cigar was gripped between his teeth. He touched his hat as the warden appeared. Old Bill is assigned to hospital work. I suppose he is sort of a janitor. He is serving a life term for murder, having been twice saved from the gallows by two Governors of West Virginia. Old Bill is passionately fond of Debs. Both Gene and the warden told me that Old Bill has appointed himself as a sort of "valet" to Debs, and he performs multitudinous services for Debs in a manner suggestive of true camaraderie and adoration. I am told that Old Bill watches Debs like a faithful dog would watch his master, not from fear, but from love. Behind that wall Old Bill, the murderer, is every white the social equal of Eugene V. Debs, America's supreme libertarian, and one of the world's greatest humanists.

Warden Terrell opened the door of Debs' room. Gene, as on the occasion of my other visits, was seated at his table in front of his two windows facing south on the yard. He had been writing. A pile of sealed letters were on his table. He laid aside his pen and came forward at once. He had been expecting me, for I had written him that I would come down. After we had embraced affectionately and were standing face to face for a moment, the warden broke the spell that held me enthralled by saying: "This is the long and the short of it."

"Sit right down, warden," pleaded Debs as he reached for a straight-back chair. He was as cordial to his keeper as thought the warden had been a royal guest, and yet they probably see each other at some time each day. Debs fetched a second chair for me and prepared to seat himself on the side of the bed. In another instant he was stooping over his amble leather suitcase which he had brought with him. He fished into it and brought forth a box of cigars. He dived his hand into the box, and with his usual generosity thrust a handful of smokes into the coat pocket of the warden, who tried in vain to resist the kindness of his prisoner.

"Debs," said the warden in a tone of mock seriousness, "I am almost beginning to wish I were a prisoner and to have so many people say such nice and kind things about me as they say about you. I never saw a man thought so much of by his friends before." Debs seemed to be highly embarrassed, but only for a moment.

"Well, warden, if you are ever a prisoner, I should like to be your warden, so I might have a chance to reciprocate for your many kindnesses to me." Warden Terrell brushed the matter away by denying he was treating Debs well, and cited the case of another prisoner about Debs' own age, who was also having some consideration shown him by reason of that fact.

Debs and I sat down. The seats of our chairs touched as we faced. Immediately he began to speak about Moundsville Prison and then prisons in general. In a few moments his words were gushing forth in a torrent of perfect eloquence. On the lawn, just a few feet from his window, the prison band was playing popular airs. Whenever they struck a high note Debs raised his voice so that he might not be drowned out of hearing.

The day was warm and sultry and the gathering clouds presaged a shower, which came later. Debs was wearing one of his own shirts, without a collar, and loose, yellow trousers of the cheap khaki variety. Pinned on the wall by the side of his bed was a magazine print of Christ. Some 15 or 20 books, nearly all of them dealing with social questions, were standing upright on a plain wooden shelf placed at the window by "Old Bill." A large bouquet of flowers which had recently come was on his writing table, which also held numerous magazines and papers. The two windows facing the lawn were closed, but a third window on the side was open. Pinned to the sash of one of the front windows was a Red Cross card, which I construed was merely indicating the hospital.

Debs again paid a sincere tribute to Warden Terrell as a man and to his administration of the prison. He declared again that he had observed nothing but kindness in the prison since his incarceration, and reiterated a former statement that "if there were as much human kindness and consideration on the outside as there is on the inside, all would be well with the world."

"I have been in many jails and prisons, and have seen numberless criminals, young and old, male and female, and of every hue and shade, and my heart is with them all. I cannot pity them without condemning myself. But I can love them, and I do. I love them for what they are, foul and repulsive as they may appear to those whose cry of 'unclean' but mocks the dead sense of their own guilt and shame."

"Many an innocent soul," he went on, raising

his hand with forefinger and thumb extended, a characteristic so familiar to the tens of thousands who have heard him speak in public; “many an innocent soul, branded with crime, is vainly beating its tired wings against the steel bars of a prison cage.

“But the guilty! Who shall dare to judge them? What sinless, spotless saint among us may pronounce them wicked and sentence them to hell? The very lowest and most degenerate of criminals is not one whit worse than I. The difference between us is against me, not him. All of my life I have been the favored one, the creature of fortune. We both did the best we could and the worst we knew how, and I am the beneficiary of society, of which he is the victim.” The last remark of Debs caused me to remind him that he was not at this moment the beneficiary of society, but rather its outraged and banished benefactor.

“Think of punishing the brother we have deformed for the crime he has suffered at our hands. Think of torturing his body and deforming his soul for having the awful misfortune to be the dehumanized victim of our own humanity. Is it any wonder that in such a perverted, wicked system, the basest passions are aroused, hate and lust fill the world, and fire and slaughter ravage the race?”

Debs looked squarely into my face, and his eyes never before shone with a clearer conviction than when he said to me: “I belong in this prison. I belong where men are made to suffer for the errors of society. I have talked about this thing and these social conditions all of my life, and now I am glad to have the opportunity to live out in practice the words I have spoken so many, many times. I belong to this stratum of society. The roots of the social system are here. They are nowhere else. These men — and I know many of them by their first names now — were workmen. For the most part they have been used and exploited. When they had nothing more to give, when they had given their all, when they strove to make the very best of a bad bargain and erred, society put them out of sight. They were no good any more. They could not be used any longer. They were ‘unclean.’ Put them away!

“I would not harm a hair in the head of any human being I know, but I would like to have all the plutocrats, their mistresses in satin and jewels, and those who believe this is a just system to sit in a great grandstand, and then parade before their seeing eyes

this pageantry of misery — the criminals, the sick, the halt and blind. I think that any man or woman who could witness such a spectacle without feeling his and her just share of social responsibility for it all has become as gross and as dehumanized as they make out these poor souls to be.” Debs’ eyes were moist as he spoke. Once he raised his voice and his hand in his old time manner, and as he did so I was thinking with what tumultuous cheering and heart throbbing his words would have been received in Madison Square Garden, for instance.

At this moment the prison band struck up “Maryland, My Maryland.” There was flare and fire in the swelling music, whose notes flew high over the prison wall just like the hopes of the men who dotted the green sward here and there within the enclosure.

“Of course it is fine and thrilling to be on the outside world mingling with noble spirits and kindly souls who illuminate the earth with the light of their generous love, but some must be in places like this, else how could we differentiate between light and darkness? And I am as pleased to be here as any.”

Debs again mentioned the peculiar social psychology that considers a prison as a place of social uncleanness. “Many of the poor souls who come here,” he said, “come without spirit or soul. Their lives were warped before they arrived. Society has taken the gold from their lives and consigns their dross to prison. Is it any wonder that in prison men’s basest passions are aroused, and that their twisted animalism finds expression in utterable perversions?”

“Yet, in spite of every opportunity for men to become less than human, I have seen evidences within these walls of gentleness such as only a mother is capable of, and I have seen manifestations of courtesy and kindness that would reduce the show of a ballroom or a banquet hall to insignificance by comparison.”

The eyes of Gene Debs were staring out of the white curtained window now. He was standing up, his tall, slender, classic figure in perfect outline against the white background. His face was kindly, yet grave. Doubtless he was running over in his mind the same thoughts to which he had just given utterance. For those thoughts and those words he had just spoken were Gene Debs. There is no other.

The day I was there with him the Wheeling

[WV] newspapers had printed a story that “Debs had been nominated for President,” and that the slogan of the socialists was to be “From Prison to the White House.” The prisoners get these papers and read them, and when they read that Gene Debs was nominated for President they were thrilled by the sheer knowledge of being able to brush elbows with a Presidential candidate. Some of the prisoners know Debs very well, for there are several West Virginia miners in the prison, and some have even voted for him for President of the United States on one or more occasions when he has been a candidate.

Although Debs is not permitted to speak or write anything in the prison remotely suggesting Socialism, a ruling to which he strictly and scrupulously adheres, I am told that within the prison some of the men have silently congratulated him. This felicitation has been transmitted to him by a clasp of the hand, or a long, smiling look into his face. Comes the day when these fellow prisoners of his may greet him as the Presidential candidate.

No less a person than the prison chaplain, Rev. Mr. Hess, last Sunday morning, after the religious services which Debs attended, told me that he had congratulated Debs on his nomination before the services began.

Mr. Hess did not hesitate to convey to me the impression that he held no sympathy, not the slightest, with the social ideas of Debs, but he thought him a “most kindly and considerate man, and a pity that he had to go outside the bounds of the law to merit pun-

ishment.”

Of course, all informed Socialists know that Debs has not been nominated for anything since his imprisonment. Following the lead of the *New York Call*, which, on April 19 [1919], printed an article by the writer suggesting Debs as the party’s candidate for the fifth time, many other Socialist and labor papers throughout the country have seized upon the idea, which has been transmitted to or copied by the opposition press, who have made it appear that Debs is now actually the Presidential nominee.

While we talked a prisoner rapped on his door calling him for supper. It was 4:30 o’clock. I got up to go. Debs remarked that his appetite is always good, and that 5 men convicted of murder are his companions at meal time.

As I left him standing halfway between his room and the hall, he blew a kiss with his hand, and said I should take it back to New York for his comrades.

“Tell them all,” he called to me, “that I am all right here. There is nothing here of me but my clay. I am not inactive, but busy every minute of the waking hours — busy rendering little services to these poor souls, writing their love letters for them, applying for pardons for them in their own names, waiting upon 3 consumptives in the tubercular ward, and thinking of my beloved comrades everywhere, and wishing that I deserved the smallest part of the boundless love and kindly though they are showering upon me out of their generous hearts and sympathetic souls.”

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