

Freedom is a Strange Feeling

by Henri Alleg

(An Algerian hero, who escaped from a French jail after five years' imprisonment and torture and is now in Czechoslovakia, a free man).

NOW that I am free there is an odd feeling that I cannot shake off. It is the strangeness, after years in prison, of being able to walk freely in the streets, of being able to open a window and finding that no iron bars obstruct the view. Now my heart does not shrink every time I meet a policeman; now I can smile at him, knowing he is a friend.

I often think of the prison where I left so many friends. Particularly I do remember the hard times in the de Barberousse Prison in Algiers.

In a few days time it will be two years since we began a hunger-strike which was to have lasted 12 days.

My prison mates and I were just above the death cell in which there were 120-prisoners at that time.

We staged the hunger strike to obtain some improvement in the terrible conditions which prevailed in that and all other Algerian prisons.

The French colonialists refused to consider us as political prisoners. Our people were often treated worse than the common criminals who enjoyed advantages we were denied.

We didn't have beds, bed-clothes or tables. We ate from rusty pots on the floor.

The prison guards beat the prisoners with keys, fists and constantly insulted them. On the slightest pretext prisoners got two or three months solitary confinement.

Step Failed Them

Each morning death awaited two or three Algerian prisoners. At night we waited in vain to sleep. Sometimes sleep would not come, and when it did we hoped that we would not wake up in the morning to see another of our friends die.

Nor did those sentenced to death sleep. They remained awake so that they would not be surprised by the sudden arrival of the guards and the police who would drag them to the guillotine hardly awake.

They wanted to die fully awake and alert so that they could shout their confidence in the victory of their country. Or if others were to die we wanted to hearten them with our songs.

We lived under such conditions in 1957 and 1958. Thanks to the actions organised by the prisoners and our hunger strikers, thanks also to international solidarity and above all the struggle of the Algerian people, things changed.

There were some improvements, but no sooner were they won than the French administration put an end to them and our problems started all over again.

This is why hunger-strikes were held so often. A recent one lasted until the Algerian prisoners forced the French administration to concede to their demands and grant them the status of political prisoners.

This was a big victory for the prisoners who had been demanding this for years.

Patriots

Their determination and their heroism have won the admiration of the whole world. Yet it is still necessary to say that the conditions of the concentration camps in which patriots are held, are reminiscent of those of Nazi prisons.

The Algerian people as a whole have suffered terribly during the seven years of war. More than a million of their sons have been murdered by the French colonialists.

Thousands of Algerian men and women who have been driven out of their villages now live in camps.

Negotiate

In spite of this they continue their struggle under the leadership of their Government. But their hopes for peace are great.

Peace is possible if the French Government stops manoeuvring, if it stops talking about peace while continuing the war, if it ends its plans to divide Algeria, and if it sincerely wishes to negotiate with the provisional Government of the Algerian Republic.

This is what the French people themselves want.

No matter what happens Algeria will become independent sooner or later and the people of Algeria will take the road of social progress and real democracy.