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# The Political Prisoners at Dannemora: Report of Their Attorney.

by I.E. Ferguson

(Published unsigned in *The Communist* [UCP], v. 1, no. 6, [circa August 1920], pg. 8).

On Tuesday, July 27, [1920], I saw the four political prisoners at Dannemora — Gitlow, Alonen, Winitsky, and Larkin. I was treated with courtesy by the authorities. I had a long private interview with each of the men.

The prison is not so bad, in comparison with others, as I had been led to suppose. Ex-Senator James L. Long, Deputy Superintendent of Prisons, ran the prison for a month this spring in an interval between wardens and introduced various betterments which the new warden, Mr. Kaiser, has continued. It is still regarded as a punishment prison for old offenders and refractory convicts, but it is less different than formerly from Sing Sing and Auburn. The prisoners do not have so much time to themselves. Their visiting privileges are more restricted; their correspondence is more interfered with. In the prison staff there are still guards bred in the old school of man-breaking savagery.

The four political prisoners are not, however, undergoing specific torments. They are all “good prisoners.” But they do not have such favors and privileges as may be easily obtained by professional criminals of depravity and understanding. A pimp, thief, or gunman who is willing to make himself agreeable to the prison organization may count upon a desirable job in the prison and upon becoming, in the course of time, a trusty. If his wife or mother makes the long journey to Dannemora, he gets practically as a matter of course the privilege of sitting with her for long hours of private conversation in the office “outside the gate.” Nobody stands by to listen to what is said or to insist upon it being said in the English language if that is not their natural medium of communication. The political prisoner is led into a little grilled pen. The visitor is led into another grilled pen. The prisoner’s

grilled pen is separated from the visitor’s grilled pen by an aisle two or three feet wide. A “screw” (warden) stands in the aisle between the prisoner and guest. He censors the subject matter of the conversation and forbids the use of languages other than English. This has been the experience particularly of Alonen, whose family and friends speak only Finnish, and Winitsky, whose natural medium of communication with his parents is Yiddish. Most of Larkin’s visitors have not been allowed to see him even through the grill.

Reading matter sent to the political prisoners is apt to be kept from them — especially *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, which some of the other prisoners are allowed freely to receive.

Letters written by or to the political prisoners are frequently detained. This includes correspondence with their counsel. Important and confidential letters between Larkin and me, relating to the conduct of his case on appeal, were entirely suppressed.

I had a talk with Warden Kaiser, who disclaims strongly any intention of subjecting political prisoners to discrimination and who ordered the correspondence censor to release my letter to Larkin and Larkin’s to me. I also had a talk with Mr. Long, who happened to be visiting the prison that day, as to the general policy of transferring political prisoners to Dannemora. Mr. Long insisted strongly that there was no such policy — that the political prisoners are at Dannemora simply because it was necessary in adjusting the prison population that some prisoners be sent there. I have been told, however, that a draft of prisoners of the class usually thought of as belonging at Dannemora was transferred from that prison to Sing Sing at about the same time that the political prisoners were transferred from Sing Sing to Dannemora.

The physical condition of the men I saw, except Larkin, is about as good as is to be expected of men in jail. Winitsky is keenly distressed by the detention of correspondence between him and his mother, who is in poor health. When his father visited him last week the guard stationed between his cage and his father's ordered him not to talk about this or about other unsanitary prison conditions. Winitsky exclaimed that he would protest to his father, whatever the consequences, and the interview ended in a heated discussion with the Principal Keeper. Winitsky has not been punished, but he apprehends that he will be watched closely until caught in some trivial infraction of rules which can be made the basis for transferring him to the cotton shop, reputed the worst in the prison. Alonen and Gitlow are men of self-contained type who are able to a considerable extent to regard prison conditions with detachment and to live within themselves. They succeed in making a pretty good best of their bad situation.

Larkin, on the other hand, is a man of terrific vitality, who lives intensely, in prison or out. His cell is in the old insect-ridden "east hall." His job is in the cotton shop — the worst in the prison — winding cotton thread on spools or bobbins, breathing air full

of cotton fluff. Most of the men who work in that shop have been sent there as a punishment. Several seeming attempts have been made to induce him to lose control of his hot temper, and say or do something for which he could be disciplined. He has been told that unless he conducts himself to the satisfaction of certain officials, he will not leave the prison alive. Larkin replied with dignity that he was at Dannemora not to curry favor but to serve a certain term of imprisonment.

Larkin is dominated by a fierce sense of social justice. Those who knew him out of jail will remember how he kindled at wrong between man and man, however remote his personal concern. This quality of his causes him more suffering in prison than insults or bad physical conditions. He meets continually with things that burn him — mess tables decently painted on the side which confronts visitors in the mess hall, but stinking on the side at which the prisoners eat; the lesser harshness of prison towards depraved professional criminals than towards decent men who have made a slip; sodomists who pass along the cell block soliciting infamy; petty graft and pull and politics and cruelty. Larkin looks years older than when he went to prison.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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