
Debs in Prison: The Story of Convict no. 2253, Eugene Victor Debs.

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Kidnapped!

Moundsville, WV, April 14, 1919.

“Kidnapped!” is the ugly word that might fittingly be used in describing the manner in which Eugene Victor Debs, four times presidential candidate of the Socialist Party, was hustled off to prison Sunday and thrown into a cell in the West Virginia State Penitentiary here last night.

It recalls the kidnapping of Moyer, Pettibone, and Haywood from Colorado to Idaho during the great frame-up of the western mine barons against the Western Federation of Miners.

This spiriting away of prominent prisoners was a favorite practice with the old Russian secret police under the Tsars, fearful of an aroused working class protest.

So it was in Cleveland Sunday. The Socialists had planned a tremendous protest. Handbills printed in red ink had been distributed over the city during Saturday night; immediately it was now that Debs had been ordered Saturday morning to come to the city of his indictment, trial, conviction, and sentence to deliver himself up to his jailers. A mass protest meeting was planned for Sunday afternoon. But in the gray dawn Debs was spirited away

across the state of Ohio by a devious and circuitous route, covered mostly in trolley cars. The Cleveland Socialists held their demonstration, but the comrades down through the state and over in West Virginia didn't know where or when he was coming or going, so they couldn't greet him as he came through.

The sudden and mysterious manner in which Debs was spirited off to prison, when it was thought that he would be at liberty at least until International May Day, May 1, took the entire nation by surprise.

While Kate Richards O'Hare was given one month to prepare for her five years' incarceration in the state penitentiary at Jefferson City, Mo., Debs was given only a few hours to bid his great and teeming world “Farewell!” until he had fed ten years of his life to the suddenly acquired appetite of America's Bastille for



“Our Gene” at the start of his journey to Prison, from Cleveland, Ohio, Sunday morning, April 13, 1919.

political and industrial class war prisoners.

Saturday morning, April 12, someone purporting to be Federal District Attorney E.S. Wertz, who

prosecuted Debs, called up the Debs' home at Terre Haute, Ind., and ordered Debs to come to Cleveland. Efforts to learn whether Wertz was really the person at the Cleveland end of the wire were met with evasive replies, according to Debs. Someone also called up the Debs home from Cleveland claiming to be Mrs. Marguerite Prevey, one of Debs' bondsmen. Mrs. Prevey denies she called Debs' home on the phone.

Nevertheless, in good faith, and taking for granted that all arrangements were satisfactory, Debs took a Saturday night train for Cleveland, accompanied by his brother-in-law and [David] Karsner. News of what was taking place reached the Socialist Party National Office in Chicago late in the afternoon and [Alfred] Wagenknecht and [Louis] Engdahl hurried to Cleveland on a Saturday night train. Debs arrived in Cleveland Sunday morning at 7 o'clock, had his breakfast and was writing a few letters in his room at the Gilsey House when he was taken into custody. The Marshal's office seemed ignorant of Debs' whereabouts because it was not until Deputies Walsh and William F. Gauchat followed Mrs. Prevey with her sister, Mrs. May Diebel, Wagenknecht, and Engdahl, that they found Debs in his room. We were all greeting Debs' "Good Morning" when Mrs. Prevey noticed the two strangers in the room and asked them what they wanted.

"We have come to get Mr. Debs and take him to the Marshal's office," said Deputy Gauchat.

Mrs. Prevey stood on her rights as a bondsman, claiming she had not been notified, neither had Muscowitz, nor Debs' lawyers; she charged that the entire proceeding was irregular and insisted that the deputies should await the arrival of Attorney Wolf, one of Debs' counsels, who lives in Cleveland. Deputy Walsh called up Marshal Lapp from the hotel office, after which he returned to Debs' room, declaring, "I am ordered to take you to the Federal Building, Mr. Debs. I have a United States Supreme Court Mandate."

"All right, I am ready," replied Debs, and accompanied the deputy marshals down to their automobile and was taken to the marshal's office in the Federal Building.

In spite of the early hour, a goodly number of Socialists had gathered at the hotel, and they cheered Debs as he appeared and then followed the automo-

bile carrying him to the Federal Building. One reason for the anxiety displayed by the federal officials and the speed with which they were hurrying Debs off to prison, it was admitted by a reporter for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, was to be found in the fact that Cleveland Socialists had quickly planned a Debs Protest Meeting for Sunday afternoon, at which Debs and others were announced to speak.

Behind this anxiety, however, was a greater fear that Debs would be cheered on his way to prison by huge demonstrations in all the cities through which he passed. This is the only explanation that can be offered for the attempt on the part of the federal officials to elude all Socialists. After the necessary formalities had been gone through with at the Federal Building, Debs was rushed into an automobile which started off in a direction opposite to that of the Cleveland Union Station. We had a high-powered automobile of our own, however, and trailed the US Marshal's car which, by the way, was the property of the *Plain Dealer*, Cleveland's biggest capitalist daily, up and down through Cleveland's main thoroughfares and down its side streets. There was a merry race along Euclid Avenue, Cleveland's fashionable boulevard, where John D. Rockefeller has a palatial palace.

When the government officials saw they couldn't drop the Socialists' car, they suddenly halted their machine near the home of the late Mayor Tom Johnson, foe of special privilege, and exhibited this showplace to their prisoner. Then the race began again. It ended in a draw at the Broadway station of the Erie railroad in the outskirts of Cleveland. Marshal Lapp was good natured as Wagenknecht, Karsner, Engdahl, [Arthur] Bauer, Mrs. Diebel, and the driver, Morris Fried, piled out of the Socialist car, and he offered no objections when the first four joined him in buying railroad tickets for Youngstown. This was to be the start of an all day runabout trip to dodge any possible Socialist ovations that might have been planned for Debs on his way to prison.

Debs engaged in an animated conversation with his comrades and custodians on the train from Cleveland to Youngstown, Ohio's great steel city. He told again of the Great American Railway Union strike and of the six months he spent at Woodstock jail near Chicago, a quarter of a century ago. He was in the best of spirits all during the trip and kept the entire

party in good humor.

In spite of the fact that we arrived at Youngstown unannounced, the young son of Frank Midney, a prominent Ohio Socialist, spied Debs as he stepped from the train. He rushed up to Gene, threw his arms around the beloved Socialist spokesman's neck and kissed him. Marshal Lapp hurried Debs across the business section of the city to an interurban station, where tickets were secured for Leetonia on the trolley. It was noon but there was no time for Sunday dinner. The Great Government of the United States was so afraid of the terrible followers of this twentieth century agitator and martyr that it couldn't stop for breath, let alone dinner, in its frantic rush to get him into prison. It was a replica of the fear and terror voiced by Attorney General Palmer in his statement refusing to recommend clemency in Debs' case.

"That report was based upon a mass of garbled and lying newspaper stories," said Debs, as the trolley sped southward along the Ohio River, huge steel mills blackening and desecrating the surrounding countryside everywhere.

"They said I was planning to call a general strike," continued Debs. "Why, I have no power to call a general strike. Only the workers themselves can call a strike. That falsehood was published in some corrupt newspaper and the Department of Justice in all seriousness makes it the basis for a report to the President."

At Leetonia we met a Socialist agitator on his way to Niles to make a speech. Debs had but a moment to talk to him.

"I have a date at Moundsville, West Virginia," joked Debs, as the agitator, H.A.L. Holman of Texas, boasted of the big crowds he was addressing throughout Ohio.

Then Debs was rushed off on another trolley, this time for East Liverpool, Ohio's famous pottery manufacturing center. Arriving there, another hurried transfer was made, this time for Steubenville, and still traveling on the trolley, where we were scheduled to arrive at 6 o'clock. The sun came out from behind the clouds for a short time. As we traveled southward and approached the hills and mountains of West Virginia, it became very apparent that budding spring was trying to assert itself everywhere. Peach orchards were everywhere in full blossom, foliage was sprouting on trees and bushes. Thus we left Steubenville on our way

to Wellsburg, crossing the line that separates the state that will go into history for having sent Debs to prison from the state in which he is now confined as a prisoner. At Wellsburg we changed cars again, this time for Wheeling, where we arrived at 7:30 o'clock. It was here that Debs was permitted, for the first time since early morning, to get something to eat. Perhaps it was a well planned insult, perhaps not, but the US Marshal took Debs to a dairy lunch to get his last meal on the "outside" before entering prison to serve his ten year sentence. The marshal and his deputy sat at the lunch counter while the rest of us sat around a table. Debs was famished and ate heartily. Then we boarded a car for the seventh time that day on the last lap of our journey, with Moundsville and prison as our destination.

During this last lap of our journey, Debs turned to us for a moment, with just the flicker of a tired feeling in his eyes. Yet he was smiling the old familiar Debs smile as he said:

"If I were to engage in satire I would say how strange it is that I have been organizing labor for half a century, and now I am being taken to prison by organized workers, most of them wearing the button of their craft in their hats." It was literally true. The conductors, the brakemen, the firemen, the engineers, the motormen, all union men, helped take Debs to prison.

As we ascended the incline that leads up to the sleepy hamlet of Moundsville, and to the state prison, Debs gave us his last words to his comrades everywhere. He said:

"As I am about to enter the prison doors I wish to send to the Socialists of America who have so loyally stood by me since my first arrest, this little message of love and cheer. These are pregnant days and promising ones. We are all on the threshold of tremendous changes. The workers of the world are awakening and bestirring themselves as never before. All the forces that are playing upon the modern world are making for the overthrow of despotism in all its forms and for the emancipation of the masses of mankind. I shall be in prison in the days to come, but my revolutionary spirit will be abroad and I shall not be inactive. Let us all in this supreme hour measure up to our full stature and work together for the great cause that means emancipation for us all. Love to my comrades and hail to the revolution."

As Debs' body was locked away in West Virginia's Bastille, his mind did not concern itself with the question of any presidential pardon that might come offering him release.

"Suppose," we had asked him, before he was separated from us, "suppose President Wilson should cable a pardon for you without any strings attached to it, an unconditional pardon, what would you do, what would be your attitude?"

Debs' answer came without a moment's hesitation.

"I shall refuse to accept it unless every man and woman in prison under the Espionage Law is extended the same pardon. They must let them out — IWWs and all — or I won't come out. I do not want any special dispensation of justice in my case. It is perfectly clear. I have always taken that position, and I cannot too strongly assert it now."

THE REPLY MUST COME FROM AMERICA'S TOILING MILLIONS. GET THEM ALL OUT THROUGH YOUR ORGANIZED POWER AND PROTEST.

PRISON!

Moundsville, WV, April 13, 1919

Gene Debs is in prison! He is caged in a steel cell, with a door of heavy metal bars. It is Cell No. 51, in the south wing of the West Virginia State Penitentiary here at Moundsville. He has been given "Number 2,253."

This thing happened tonight, at 10 o'clock, on the night of Palm Sunday, with Easter one week distant, and as an admirer of Debs said on his departure from Terre Haute, Indiana, his home on Saturday, "We are ready for another crucifixion."

"It will never happen. They will never do it. They won't put Debs in Prison."

This is what the millions over the land have said for these many months since his indictment, and even since his conviction and sentence. But we said "Good Night" to him through the bars that constitute the door of his dark hole in this human hive they call tiers of cells.

Debs tonight took his place — a convict —

among a thousand other convicts, criminals of all grades and shades and brands, and the words that he uttered in the court room at Cleveland, Ohio, during his trial came back to us, we who were with him. They were:

"As long as there is a criminal class, I am of it. As long as there is a lower class, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Only a few moments before, as they first took him away from us and conducted him through the turntable cage door, the latest prison ingenuity to bar the "inside" from the "outside," Arthur Bauer, Gene's brother-in-law, a brother of Mrs. Debs, who had come with Gene all the way from Terre Haute, uttered the anguish of an outraged working class when he exclaimed: "My God, how can they do it, why do they do it!"

Yet Debs' last message to the workers of the nation perhaps best answered why they did it. This message was:

"Tell my comrades that I entered the prison doors a flaming revolutionist, my head erect, my spirit untamed, and my soul unconquered."

It was on the trip here, at East Liverpool, Ohio, that Debs remarked that today was April 13, the anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, the beginning of the American Revolutionary War in 1776, that it is also the anniversary of the Ludlow massacre in 1913, during the great Colorado coal strike.

For a half century the world has known of Gene Debs of Terre Haute, Ind. Now, if this world would reach him through the mails, it must address him:

Gene Debs

818 Jefferson Ave.

Moundsville, W.Va.

which is the address of the penitentiary of this state.

Workers of many nations have already protested the conviction of this man, who was the center of the little group that arrived on this Palm Sunday night at this American Bastille promises to take a prominent place in American working class history. There were Debs, his brother-in-law, Arthur Bauer, Alfred Wagenknecht from the National Office of the Socialist Party, David Karsner of *The Call*, the New York Socialist daily, the writer, and of course United States Marshal Charles W. Lapp and US Deputy Marshal Thomas E. Welch of Cleveland, Ohio, in charge of

Debs.

No high walls block the front view of this prison. They extend only around the prison yard in the rear. But guards sit in turrets at intervals on buildings and walls with loaded rifles in their hands ready to frustrate with deadly bullet any attempt on the part of an inmate to win the open. The grass grows fresh and green and free upon the wide lawn in front of the main building of the prison, but heavy gratings are upon every window, and keys, locks, bolts, and bars everywhere block the way that leads to freedom.

“Don’t think that I hold anything against you for your part in bringing me here,” Debs was explaining to the United States Marshal as we ascended the steps and entered this place to which the federal judge has sentenced “Our Gene” to spend the next ten years of his life because he made a speech at Canton, Ohio, in June 1918, and so Debs spent his last few moments on “the outside” forgiving everybody, “with malice toward none,” as Abraham Lincoln put it.

Warden Joseph Z. Terrell and the prison physician, Dr. O.P. Wilson, were waiting for us. In a mo-

ment we were all acquainted, and then—

“Mr. Debs, come with me,” said Warden Terrell, and in another moment the threshold that leads from liberty to the tomb of living men had been crossed.

“You’re quite a tall man, Mr. Debs,” said the warden as the automatic turntable cage door moved noiselessly, transferring its opening from the “outside world” to this “inside world.”

“Yes, six feet,” answered Debs, pleasantly, and that was all we heard as they passed on and out of our sight. We went back into the warden’s office and waited. Soon the warden returned and signed several papers that the already impatient marshal and his deputy presented to him. Then we began asking questions about Debs, and the treatment he would receive.

“He will be allowed to write all the letters he pleases,” said Warden Terrell, “subject of course to limitations and to the prison censorship. He may receive visitors twice a month, but the understanding seems to be that visitors coming from some distance would be allowed to see Debs at almost any time.”

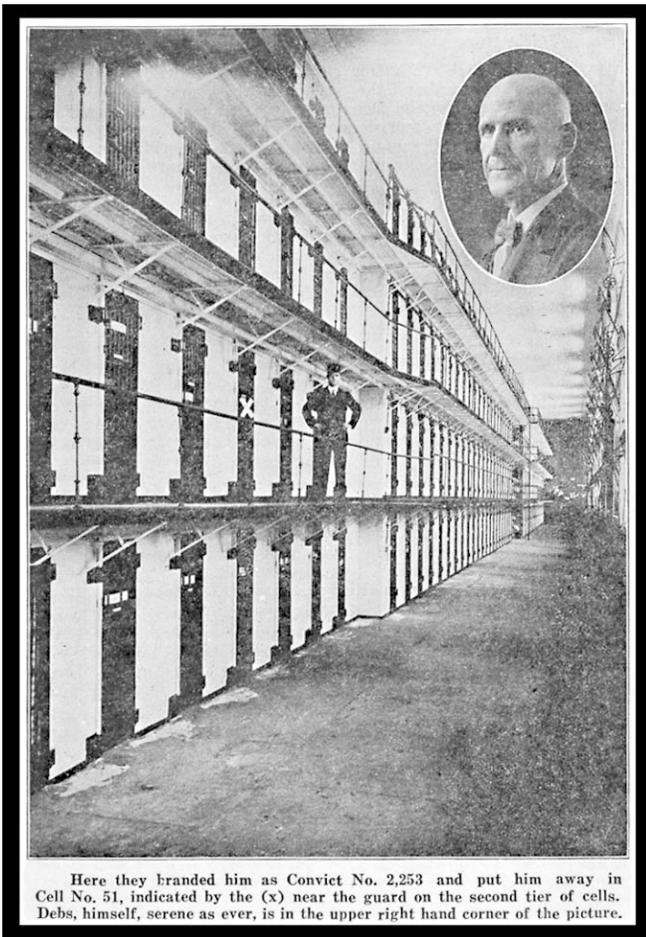
The warden wrinkled his brow just a little when it was asked if there would be any restrictions on papers, magazines, and books sent to Debs.

“No,” he said, “not if they are for Debs along. But he must not pass them out among other prisoners, some of whom are ignorant, you know, and it might have a bad effect on them.”

While Debs’ activities as a propagandist and agitator may thus be somewhat curtailed, the warden assured us that all letters and telegrams, no matter how great the number, would be turned over to Debs immediately upon their receipt.

“I am just going to use common sense in my treatment of Debs,” said the warden. Bauer then left with the marshal and his deputy for the return trip home. Wagenknecht, Karsner, and I lingered, although midnight was approaching. We readily accepted the warden’s invitation to visit Debs and bid the spokesman of American Socialism “Good Night” in his prison cell. One of the jailers led us up an iron staircase and along the corridor of a second tier of lairs for humans. Through the bars of his cage door we asked him again if there was anything we could do for him.

“No, nothing more,” Debs replied. “I am going to have a good night’s rest. My only hope is that everyone tonight could have as good a couch as mine. Don’t



Here they branded him as Convict No. 2,253 and put him away in Cell No. 51, indicated by the (x) near the guard on the second tier of cells. Debs, himself, serene as ever, is in the upper right hand corner of the picture.

worry about me, comrades, I am all right. Everything is fine,” and with that he stretched out both his hands to each of us in turn, said “Well, good night” again, and we promised to be back on the morrow if the warden would let us in. Then we returned to the warden’s office where we sat down and asked more questions. Both the warden and the prison physician insisted that the “Flu” epidemic that has been raging in the prison, resulting in several deaths, is now a thing of the past. They stated that the wing in which Debs’ cell is located has been thoroughly fumigated, and that they had the “Flu bug whipped out.”

Debs is bald-headed, just like the warden, so he will not have his hair cut. Upon entering the prison, Debs was not subjected to the usual shower and the usual change of clothing because the warden said he felt that Debs didn’t need it. Although the warden praised the prison fare in high terms, he said his new prisoner might send out for any delicacies he wanted, or that they might be sent to him. He said prisoners spend about \$1,000 monthly in such purchases, saying they were free to buy anything they wanted.

He said Debs would not be asked to do any prison labor because of his advanced age. Debs is 64 years old. The color of the prison uniform has been a cadet gray. Striped suits are not used except for escaped prisoners, who have been caught and brought back. We were shown the “solitary” cells, but it was claimed these were not used except in rare instances, while the “shackles” were brought into use in only very extreme cases, it was claimed.

While we were talking a reporter from one of the Wheeling papers came in and Karsner gave him Debs’ statement about his entering prison as a flaming revolutionist. The warden pricked up his ears and insisted that Debs must not start a revolution in his prison among his “boys.”

“Debs must not organize any soviet in here,” he insisted rather strenuously.

Still on Deck.

Chicago, Ill., May 1, 1919

“All, or nearly all, of the enemies I’ve had during my lifetime have met with misfortune and trag-

edy. Clouds have settled over their careers. I’m still on deck. And I’m going to emerge from this new experience in my life in triumph, too.”

This is one of the conclusions that Eugene V. Debs reached as we discussed the big incidents of his busy life, while making that memorable journey to prison from Cleveland, Ohio, to Moundsville, West Va., on Palm Sunday, April 14. He did not gloat over his fallen foes, who have sought to hold back the hands of progress on the face of time, but rather exulted in the fact that the world was moving ahead in spite of all obstacles.

It all comes back to me now, stronger than ever, as word comes from Debs’ prison down in West Virginia that so many visitors want to see and visit with Gene that the Prison Warden has been compelled to turn them away, and there are so many letters coming to Gene in the mail from all parts of the world that the Prison Warden is planning to change his ruling made on the night of our arrival that Gene would receive all letters sent to him.

The prison officials, if not the Democratic officialdom at Washington, are no doubt discovering that Debs has more friends than ever.

One of Debs’ most bitter opponents during the Pullman strike was John R. Walsh, the Chicago banker and newspaper proprietor. Walsh was himself sent to prison as a bank wrecker. His friends secured his release just in time to permit him to die on “the outside.”

George Pullman and Eugene V. Debs clashed in the great Pullman railroad strike. Pullman is said to have gone to an early grave because of the wild life led by his two sons, both of whom died degenerates at an early age, also clouding the life of the wife and mother.

Judge Westenhaver, at Cleveland, who sentenced Debs to his present 10 years’ imprisonment, isn’t the first interpreter of law that has faced the Socialist spokesman. One of these was Judge Peter S. Grosscup, of the federal district court in Chicago, who some years ago was driven from the bench in disgrace and who now lives somewhere, as Debs remarks, “an unburied corpse.”

It was Judge W.W. Woods that was called upon to sit in the great “conspiracy trial” growing out of the Pullman strike, as a result of which it was hoped to send Debs to prison for life. Woods died unlamented.

It was E. St. John, chairman of the railroad managers' association, one of the most powerful and most successful of all the railroad managers this country has ever had, that claimed Debs and his American Railway Union wouldn't disturb the operation of the big Rock Island Railroad. When the strike came and this railroad was tied up tight from one end to the other, St. John was dismissed in disgrace, and the last heard from him was to the effect that he had some petty job on some obscure railroad down in South Carolina. These are only a few of the wrecks resulting from the efforts of the few to stop the growing power of labor from asserting itself. Perhaps in prison, Debs may find time to write the full story.

As we toured by short stage across the states of Ohio and West Virginia, Palm Sunday, April 13, dodging Socialist demonstrations wherever the United States Marshal had a suspicion any might develop, we speculated as to what sort of prison Debs was about to enter.

Debs recalled that his first experience with jails and prisons came during the "ARU" strike when he was thrown into the Cook County jail in Chicago.

"My chief companions in the Cook County jail," he said, "were huge, famished sewer rats that tormented me by day and kept me awake at night. One night as I dozed away they ate up my shoes and then came crawling and sniffing over me."

Debs then told how a rat terrier, the property of one of the jailers, came to his cell and he pleaded with the owner to permit the dog to remain with him, knowing that that would keep the rats away. The jailer consented, but no sooner had the cell door closed upon Debs and the rat terrier than the dog set up an unceasing howl that did not end until he was released. Even the dog refused to remain in the cell in which Debs was caged by the plutocracy of a quarter century ago.

"When i was in the Cook County jail it contained 350 human beings, 300 men and 50 women," narrated Debs. "Six unfortunates were crowded in each cell, with the result that the place became stifling hot from body warmth. The presence of swarms of lice added to the tortures suffered by these 350 prisoners who, in their struggle against the heat and vermin, undressed until most of them were stark naked. They were often bloody from head to foot through constant scratching."

In those early days of the American Railway Union, when the workers on the railroads were seeking to build a powerful organization to combat the railroad barons, the newspapers directed a steady stream of vilification and abuse at Eugene V. Debs.

"I received from 30 to 40 letters every day as a result, in which the writers threatened to assassinate me," said Debs. "While I was in jail on one occasion, I received a letter from a boy 18 years of age, in which he stated that he had just bought a gun and that he was coming to Chicago to 'get my blood by Saturday night.'"

Throwing Debs and the other officials of the "ARU" in jail was one of the methods resorted to by those in power to break up the strike. The offices of the union would be raided, all the records carted away, and the officials arrested. Then the kept press all over the nation would publish a report to the effect that the strike had been broken. The local officials of the "ARU," reading the local reports, would wire to Chicago for information. This would not be forthcoming because the officials were in jail and the records were in the custody of servile government officials. Demoralization in the ranks of the strikers would thereupon set it.

It is interesting to note that Debs was sent to Woodstock jail for six months, whereas his fellow officials were only put in jail one month, because, as the court stated, Debs was intelligent enough to know better than to commit the crime he was charged with, the violation of a court injunction.

When Debs was taken to Woodstock jail, the prominent citizens of the Chicago suburb seriously considered lynching the terrible agitator who had been brought amongst them. On repeated occasions they protested to George Eckert, sheriff of McHenry County, who had Debs in charge, that he was treating this sower of discontent "too white."

"You attend to your own business and I'll take care of mine," was the sheriff's reply to the prominent citizens.

In Woodstock jail as everywhere else everyone with whom Debs came in personal contact immediately became his friend. When Debs left Woodstock jail he was presented with a set of resolutions, tear stained, expressing the well wishes of his fellow prisoners, while the wife of the sheriff at each succeeding

Christmas always sent Debs some remembrance, and after her death he daughter has continued to send Debs a Christmas card each year.

With these reminiscences from Debs, we who were with him on his journey to prison this year, 1919, concluded that somehow he would get along at the West Virginia state penitentiary at Moundsville, West Va.

But these same reflections threw into the lime-light more than anything else the gross stupidity and utter ignorance of a reigning social order seeking to maintain itself in power by imprisoning one of its most prominent opponents.

Debs' very presence in prison breeds the discontent and protest whose growing power and volume will force the ruling class to liberate him immediately the volume of that protest becomes threatening enough.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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