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# Debs Can't Write to Prisoners: D of J Rules Him Out — Interesting Correspondence by Otto Branstetter

Published in *The New Age* [Buffalo, NY], vol. 10, whole no. 505 (April 27, 1922), pg. 3.

The average prison has for its predominating purpose the brutalizing and degradation instead of the reclamation and correction of its inmates. The rules which govern convicts are flint-hearted in their rigorous and repressive purposes as are the more or less distant politicians and grafting official hirelings who frame them.

An instance in kind will appear in the following correspondence. Eugene V. Debs addressed the following brief message of devotion and sympathy to his fellow political prisoner, J.O. Bental, at Leavenworth:

Terre Haute, Ind., April 3, 1922.

My dear Comrade Bental:

You have not heard from me by letter but I am sure you know that my daily message has been going to you and you have not for a moment been forgotten. You have borne yourself with loftiest courage and fortitude through all your trial and the deprivation it entailed, reflecting the highest credit upon yourself and the cause. You have carried your cross with your head erect and your spirit undaunted and by your splendid self-sacrifice you have exalted yourself and set an inspiring example to your comrades everywhere.

I am not writing to you at length for I know it is not necessary. For obvious reasons I refrain from saying in this letter what there is in my heart in regard to your case. Of one thing you may always rest assured and that is that you have not sacrificed your freedom in vain.

My wife and brother join me in affectionate greetings and best wishes to you and all your dear ones. Please remember us also in comradely greetings to all the prisoners there who are paying the penalty of their loyalty to the cause. We shall not rest while one of them remains in prison.

Yours fraternally,

**Eugene V. Debs.**

This message instead of being delivered to the prisoner, Bentall, was returned to Debs with the following note:

United States Penitentiary,  
Leavenworth, Kansas,  
Main Office,  
April 5, 1922.

Mr. Eugene V. Debs,  
Terre Haute, Indiana.

Sir:

Inmates of this institution are not permitted to correspond with inmates, or former inmates, of this or any other penal institution, except by special permission from the warden.

Your letter, addressed to J.O. Bentall, returned herewith.

Respectfully,

**James Driscoll,**  
*Mail Clerk.*

The following brief and pointed rejoinder from Debs ended the correspondence:

Terre Haute, Ind., April 7, 1922.

Mr. James Driscoll,  
Mail Clerk, U.S. Penitentiary,  
Leavenworth, Kans.

Dear Sir:

Your note of the 5th inst., furnishes additional proof that the brutal and idiotic rules that govern the average prison stamp the officials who control these institutions as being intellectually and morally the inferiors of the hapless human beings in their custody. Of course, i do not blame you in the least for you are simply executing, as you are paid to do, the stupid and heartless orders of your "superiors."

Quite respectfully,

**Eugene V. Debs.**

It will be noted that these stupid and inhuman rules which speak sufficiently for themselves are established and maintained by the Department of "Justice." There is no admixture of sanity or mercy or even common humanity in this department so far as these qualities are reflected in the prison rules. The cruel and farcical aspects of such "Justice" strain the limits of irony and sarcasm.

***O. Branstetter.***

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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