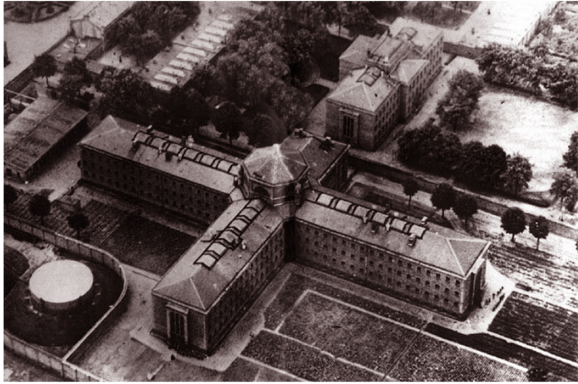


Hitler's slaughterhouse: the living hell of Plötzensee



Behind these grim walls the executioner's axe works overtime

“... the purpose of punishment is the infliction of suffering.” In the tiny, dark cells of this Nazi prison that is the Law. It breaks some men, but it tempers others to a harder steel as the underground fight against Hitler goes on.

• • • While serving a sentence for high treason in Germany I saw, in the course of years, the inside of almost a score of concentration camps, police jails and prisons. The last five months of my sentence I spent in the prison of Plötzensee, the scene of execution of all persons condemned to death by the “People’s Court” (*Volksgericht*).

I was transferred from a penitentiary in western Germany. Through the cunning operations of a Gestapo spy disguised as a prisoner, our secret organization for the political schooling of prisoners in that western prison had been smashed.

The prison train with its steel walls, its two-men cubbyholes and its small barred windows came to a halt at a station in the northern part of Berlin. One after one we descended from the train. Each two prisoners were handcuffed together. Then a chain was passed through the handcuffs the whole length of the column. So, each man became chained to 17 others. A dense formation of policemen surrounded our crew on all sides. A man complained: his handcuffs were too tight; his wrist was swelling.

“*Tut's weh?*” asked a policeman, “does it hurt?”

“*Ja!*”

“That’s what I want . . . *Abteilung, marsch!*”

Once outside of the station, we were herded into a grimy, windowless truck and driven to the Plötzensee prison.

Red brick buildings with hundreds of barred windows loomed all around. A brick wall 18 feet high closed the grounds against the outside world. Guards lined the walls at intervals of 50 yards. Each of them had an army carbine in his hands, a truncheon in a pocket fastened to his trouser leg, and bayonet and pistol in his belt. Low round machine-gun turrets topped the roof of each cell block.

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In a rambling basement hall we were stripped naked. Each man was told to raise his arms, spread out his legs, and to bend over. Guards inspected every inch of our bodies for hidden contraband. A young physician raced past us and pronounced us healthy. Then we were given a cold shower and prison clothes. After each prisoner had been shorn of his hair, and had written a short history of his life, he was escorted to his cell by a taciturn guard.

Solitary confinement predominates in Plötzensee. There are 1800 solitary cells in four large cell blocks. The cells range in four tiers. Newly-strung wire nets between the tiers discourage suicide by diving head first to the ground floor. Each cell has a small window high in the wall which faces the yard, a steel door with a spy hole, an open toilet stand, a collapsible iron bed, a work table, a wooden stool, and a rack for wash bowl, plate and spoon. Knives and forks and similar utensils are all taboo.

During his first week in Plötzensee the prisoner is left alone. He sees no one. He has no books to read and no work to do. He does not leave his cell for exercise. Between seven a.m. and seven p.m. he is not permitted to sit down. During the other 12 hours he is not permitted to budge from his bed. Those who violate this rule are handcuffed to the bed, hands and feet; the window of their cell is closed and the steam heat turned on to full force. In all the cells the radiators are installed beneath the beds. The latest handcuffs are of such construction that they tighten automatically with every accidental tug or jerk—and remain tightened. So the prisoner learns to be very quiet.

After this first week, the prisoner enters the routine life of Plötzensee. He is given work to do. All his work is done in the solitude of his cell. He may be given hunks of old rope to be plucked into oakum; he may be given worn-out army uniforms to be dissected for reutilization; or he may be given a store of paper and glue for the manufacture of paper bags. The making of paper bags is the best work available to the political convict in Plötzensee. But most of them make oakum or dissect old uniforms, toiling from morning until night in a stinking cloud of dust and dirt.

The accomplishment of a daily task is demanded. The average output of a fast worker working ten hours a day forms the standard demanded of all. Those who do not attain their daily task receive smaller food rations and are deprived of their "privileges," such as receiving or writing letters, bathing, exercise, reading books and receiving visitors. Most prisoners fall behind in their daily task. Many of them work secretly at night, or during Sundays. The wages

paid to them average two pfennigs a day. Half of this money is held back to be handed to the prisoner upon his discharge. The other half he may use to buy fruit, lard, sugar, etc., if he has been one year in Plötzensee.

During 30 minutes each day we were taken out into the yard for exercise. We were formed into columns of 30 men and went through those 30 minutes at an exhausting pace: running in circles, jumping on one foot, leaping like frogs with hands clasped on the back of our necks, galloping through the dust on hands and knees, diving into garbage pits, running backwards with heads stuck between our thighs, goose-stepping with pants lowered beneath the hips. There were many other variations. Each detail was commanded by the guard on duty, and each guard had his own set of ideas about exercise suitable for foes of the Nazi regime. There were, of course, decent men among the guards, mainly soldiers who had served their time in the army, but even they adhered to the man-breaking program in order not to forfeit their chances for promotion. The strongest among us forgot the degradation of this daily *Freistunde* ("free hour"), and even began to like this deadening prance, but for most it was an ordeal unmitigated by thousandfold repetition. Those who rebelled were thrown into the dungeon, a basement hole of complete blackness, bread and water and nightly beatings.

During the "free hour" speaking among prisoners was, as at any other time, severely punished. Nevertheless, each of those hours became a social event. The eternal militants among the inmates of Plötzensee were experts of furtive contact and conspirative organization. Unnoticed by the guards, they slipped to the fore and the rear of the marching formations, collected information, exchanged the latest news, broadcast warnings about suspected traitors and spies, gave whispered instructions as to which book to read and which anti-Nazi address to report to upon release. Their hawk-eyes watched the long rows of cell windows for familiar faces, flashed signals, smiles, and words and gestures of loyalty and encouragement.

The prison church was also a place for consultation, reports and instruction in our ceaseless war against Hitler's machine and against all it stands for; this war which, I firmly believe, kept most of us alive until today. Sunday church attendance was compulsory. Three hundred at a time we sat in narrow booths which ranged from the floor near the pulpit almost to the ceiling of the rear wall. While the clergyman expounded a potpourri of Bible and *Mein Kampf*, messages crept to and fro and up and down the mass of convicts. And

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when hymns were sung, one portion of the prisoners roared stolidly to the sounds of the organ, while the others sang into each other's ears, less loud, but to a tune of their own.

There were other means of communication. We stole pencils from the doctor's or dentist's office and passed written notes at the end of broom-sticks from window to window in the dead of night. We made use of the system of air-shafts which permitted verbal contact from tier to tier in a vertical direction. Messages to the kitchen were pasted to the bottom of dirty dishes, and messages from the kitchen hidden in a chunk of bread or a pail full of cabbage soup. All this was extremely dangerous. Every newcomer was considered as a provocateur or an informer of the Gestapo until he had been identified by someone who knew his past or the circumstances of his arrest and conviction, and had been signaled by the political leader of his tier as safe.

Once a week each prisoner receives a book from the prison library. All illustrations bearing anything which resembles a woman are removed before the respective books are given into circulation.

The prisoner who has served his sentence is usually not released; he is surrendered to the Gestapo for an indefinite term in one of the concentration camps—preferably Sachsenhausen or Buchenwalde. Incurable hard-cases are sent to Dachau; a place from which few return who could still be called men. It is this prospect of ultimate and final incarceration, coupled with the almost certain conviction that a revolt in the

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My cell was situated on the ground floor of Cell Block A. Another wing of this ground floor harbored death row. The cells of death row were never empty.

We passed them daily when going to and returning from the yard. The doors of the death cells bore signs: *Nachtlicht! Sachen herausnehmen!* All night the electric bulbs burned in those cells, and the condemned men—men convicted of high treason in different parts of the country and carried to Plötzensee to die under the axe—lay naked on their cots, deprived of their clothes to prevent suicide by hanging.

There were 17 such cells, each of which, after the execution of its occupant, is promptly supplied with another candidate for death.

Those among us who awoke early in the mornings and lay on their cots waiting for the morning bell to command them to rise, soon learned to recognize the sounds of execution: The clatter of feet in death row at six in the morning, the creaking doors of the shed at the other end of the cobbled square which faced death row—the shed where the quicksilver-filled axe hung behind a canvas curtain, where, in a corner, stood the light green scaffold to which the condemned man was strapped face up to face the clouds, the swastika flag and descending death; the sudden rattling of keys in iron doors, sometimes the sound of a futile scuffle, roars and screams of despair and rage, or a booming voice singing the *Internationale* and ending with a hoarse shout of farewell to the hundreds who lay listening in their cells, still alive. But most of them went quietly, without imprecation or audible complaint, and only the occasional cries of solidarity, of hate and indignation from distant cell windows remind the marcher that he does not die in vain. ●

—Jan Valtin

KEM

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... THE REICH

Graft was legalized in Germany when the Reich Ministry of Finance issued instructions according to which "bribes and graft" are deductible as overhead expenses when making income tax returns.

● A woman was recently sentenced to 14 days in jail in the Saar region because she was overheard to have made the following remark while marketing: "It's getting worse. You can barely get anything to eat for a whole mark. And the men folks are constantly earning less and less." The woman's sentence was ordered published in the local papers as a warning to others who might think of expressing themselves.

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