

SPIRITUAL POWER IN INTERNMENT

By Walter Zander

The most interesting point in the internment problem is not how much the interned have had to suffer-for suffering is general all over the world at present-but how far they have been able to stand up, spiritually, to their trial, and to transform their adversities into productive experience. To judge these efforts fairly one must consider the special circumstances; for the inconveniences and deprivations which were their lot did not fall upon citizens who could hope one day to return to their homes, but upon people without a country and without protection, people who found themselves placed between two fighting worlds and in part even identified with those who had vowed their destruction. It was against this dark background that the spiritual battle had to be fought.

The first sign I noticed of the opening of the "spiritual defence" was on the morning after our internment. Hundreds of men, hungry and tired, roamed restlessly through the camp; but one, armed with a small Hebrew Bible and a gigantic dictionary, could be observed sitting quietly in the open air, getting to work without delay. He was a publisher from Hamburg who had made up his mind not to give in under any circumstances but to use this opportunity to read the Bible for the first time in his life in the original Hebrew. I asked his permission to join him, and very soon a small group rallied round him everyday.

Although for the first days hunger, confusion and despair prevailed, gradually the scenery beyond the barbed wire entered our consciousness: a fresh green meadow in which two young horses were frisking and, farther off, the sea. There was amongst us a Greek scholar who, reminded by the scenery of the immortal world of Homer, started one, sunny afternoon in the midst of all the tumult and anxiety to read aloud in a melodious voice from his pocket copy the song of Odysseus and Nausicaa. This man very soon became one of those personalities who quietly carried and supported the structural strain of the whole camp community.

The composition of the camp was extremely varied. There were Jews and Christians, Germans and Austrians, Aryans and Non-Aryans, boys of sixteen and old men of nearly 70. There were farm-workers and scholars, business men and artists, Rabbis and Priests and people of nearly every social, political and spiritual persuasion. Innumerable little groups constantly got together with a strange variety of discussions, that one rarely finds under normal conditions. Besides the questions whose general interest was obvious, like internment, war and politics, the frequency and intensity of religious discussions, heard everywhere, were striking.

One day, sitting on the hill-side, I heard a voice inside

one of the little huts,, saying most emphatically "And if the Jews had really kept the Sabbath the whole world would have been changed." I crept nearer to hear more and found to my surprise that the speaker was a fair-haired young Christian, brought up in Holland, a Seventh Day Adventist. He was a remarkable young man. On the Sabbath he attended the Jewish Service; on Sunday he played the clarinet at the Protestant Service; and he was the most single-hearted, man I have ever met. Out of religious convictions he applied from the beginning for one of the heaviest jobs, acting for nearly three months as stoker, getting up at dawn, to start the numerous open-air kitchen stoves.

The camp was terribly overcrowded and lack of privacy made concentration very difficult. Nevertheless it was possible to open a kind of University, which offered about 40 different lectures a week on the most varied; subjects, ranging from theoretical physics to Greek philosophy and Russian for beginners, not to mention theological problems in Judaism; and Christianity. On the Isle of Man a Technical School came into being which attempted to train a large number of internees in the elements of Engineering.

To create an atmosphere of concentration in the overcrowded and noisy tents,, where some eight or ten men had to live in very cramped conditions,, some men introduced hours of complete silence, visitors being kept away by more or less polite posters fixed at the entrance of the camp.

There were many remarkable examples of how spiritual power can conquer material difficulties. I remember particularly the following : In our tent at Prees Heath was a musician from Vienna, a young man in poor health who suffered acutely under the conditions of internment. One day, while we were still cut off from the outside world - without letters, newspapers, or any means of communication - and were sitting together, looking at the barbed wire, full of sad and longing thoughts, one of us produced from his suitcase the pocket score of a Brahms sextet for stringed instruments. No instruments were available, but as some in the group happened to be musical folk, we started singing the different instrumental parts as best we could. This became the beginning of an amusing musical development. Our Viennese conductor, who had a most remarkable memory, wrote down in a child's exercise-book the scores of some well-known opera ensembles from *Fidelio*, *The Magic Flute* and *Ballo di Masquera*, and these we sang and hummed, together nearly every evening to our great enjoyment. For the conductor himself this was the turning point. He had been very near to a complete breakdown but now he recovered visibly and even started again to compose. When, some

weeks later, an open-air performance of "Midsummer Night's Dream" was staged in the camp, he composed part of the music for it. A few days ago I met him by chance in Piccadilly Circus and he told me that, since his release, the music for "Midsummer Night's Dream" had grown into a work for full orchestra.

But neither the intellectual nor the artistic sphere were the most characteristic, but rather the fact that the best men threw themselves wholeheartedly into the life of the community. The so-called intellectual and spiritual personalities did not refrain from manual or disagreeable tasks. The cleaning of the very primitive lavatories for some 500 men was undertaken at Prees Heath first by a well-known Pacifist and Mathematician and later by our Greek scholar, together with a Psychologist from Birmingham. A Catholic Prelate, although ill and no longer young, volunteered to help in peeling potatoes and washing up dishes for the whole camp, a work which had to be done in the open air and in all weathers. This kind of example, modest though it was, had a great effect on the moral attitude of the community and helped to keep camp life on a high level. This and similar instances were mainly responsible for the fact that the tendency to employ the poorer internees to do the dirty work for payment—a custom which obtained here and there in other camps—did not gain ground in our camp.

It is beyond question, that at Prees Heath a comparatively small minority was strong enough to shape the character of the whole community, merely by taking part naturally in every branch of camp life and setting a moral example.

When we came to the Isle of Man, however, the same spirit did not prevail and I often wondered for what reasons. Perhaps because life in houses cannot be as communal as in tents; perhaps because the whole atmosphere was much nearer to ordinary conditions of civilisation; finally because at that time the releases came into operation and, most welcome as this was, it naturally created nervousness and restlessness for those left behind.

An experience we had soon after our arrival at the Isle of Man will serve to show how community life can be influenced. Four of us were billeted in a house where 35 men were already installed. It was known as the Youth-House. The majority of the inmates were farmworkers and the rudeness, noise and uncouthness can hardly be imagined. To receive a kick in your knee or a bucket of water from the second floor on your head was by no means uncommon. When we arrived late at night, we were greeted with a terrific noise. The cook, a man of enormous proportions, who in private life was a butcher, served a meal much as one would feed pigs. Next morning one of the four suggested that we should leave this house immediately. The other three, however, persuaded him to stay, because we did not want to give in, and we rather wanted to see how far our way of

living could prevail under these circumstances. The result was most satisfactory. After a short time the community was won over, the militant cook being one of the first. One of us was unanimously elected housefather and the house itself—to the great surprise of many in the camp—became a centre for religious, musical and artistic activities. When Christmas came—the festival last year coincided with the Jewish Chanukah—we had quite a celebration. The walls of our common room were covered with frescoes of singing children and angels, the work of a well-known artist, who was an inmate of the house; the tables were decorated with greenery; and the house-father spoke of the deeper meaning underlying both festivals—the triumph of light over darkness and the task of mankind to increase the peace of the world. This night left a deep impression on all.

The most valuable sphere was, in my opinion, the religious, and the relationship between all the different religious groups was excellent. It was by no means rare to see a Rabbi, a Catholic Priest and a Protestant Minister engaged in conversation together. At Prees Heath, where very little space was available, one small tent, called by us "The Tabernacle," had to be used by Orthodox Jews for their daily services as well as by Catholics for celebrating Mass and hearing Confessions. When a scheme was submitted as to how the time should be divided, both parties hesitated to accept it, fearing that the others would not get their proper share.

The religious services were of great help to many and gave them strength to endure their trial. Many who had already lived a religious life, concentrated on study and on the intensification of their devotion. On the other hand, some whose religious consciousness had been weak or overlaid by the materialism of our time, experienced there the power of religious reality. I saw elderly men returning to the creed of their youth and I met young lads who for the first time had penetrated through the political rubble to the spheres of religion. Among Orthodox Jews the religious life was particularly strong. The morning and evening services, the keeping of the Sabbath, and of all the great festivals and the daily learning of the Talmud and the Torah gave substance and meaning to their life. From a numerical point of view the religious groups were not in the majority but there is no doubt that they formed a most important centre of the community life.

I myself early saw that internment for me meant bidding a strange farewell to the world. Although it had been forced upon me, I felt that I must enter wholeheartedly into this spiritual detachment which might lead to the conquest of material superficiality. It was somewhat like the fairy-tale where a child falls into a deep well and finds at the bottom a wonderful green meadow. The old truth became abundantly clear to me that it depends largely upon ourselves whether or not we turn suffering into blessing.