

IN PRISON —YET FREE

EVA HERMANN



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By Eva Hermann

It may seem paradoxical for me to say that I would not have missed the experiences of these two years of my life in a Nazi prison for anything. But it is so.

When one's existence which has seemed quite secure suddenly melts away, when one is cut off externally at least from the circle of one's family and friends, and must rely entirely on one's self in an indifferent, hostile world; when the ground is taken from under one's feet and the air one breathes is taken away, when every security fails and every support gives way—then one stands face to face with the Eternal, and confronts Him without protection and with fearful directness. Then I understood what Cromwell meant when he said that it was a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Then I understood that it was not man but God who was sitting in judgment. With one stroke everything is transformed: good intentions no longer have any value; the omissions and the things I had left undone in my life in the world can no longer be made up; failure to love or errors can no longer be set right. What remained for me was an annihilating register of debts. I now saw that what the fancy of the medieval artists represented as taking place on the Day of Judgment was happening here and now in this earthly life. The level of my human existence was not only brought into question but was shattered and stripped from me by the Eternal.

I longed at that time to have a visit with a trusted friend, Rudolph Schlosser, who knew more than the rest of us about God's judgment and grace. But it is probably more than an accident that I was denied this and compelled to come to the first-

hand source of experience itself. In most cases however it would be well if some real guidance of the soul could be added to this experience. In prison there is a fertile field and well plowed land for those who are qualified to work it. The Gestapo knew well what it was doing when it forbade divine service and care of the soul to its prisoners. I believe that the churches are hardly aware of the possibilities among prisoners that are open to them if guides can be found to give bread and not stones.

When the church fails or is hindered in her work, prisoners, such as I was, learn something about the priesthood of all believers. I can never be thankful enough for the opportunity that I had to meet with people of other faiths . . . The Catholic prizes form especially. And there are times when one needs form more often than at other times. When voices are crying confusedly within, it is almost too difficult to find the way of silence. One may be incapable of hearing God's word in the stillness. Then it is that the form, that the spoken word, reaches us.

The young girl from a Catholic orphanage, who shared my cell in the first few weeks, one day happened to recite the prayer of St. Teresa:

*"Let naught trouble thee;
Let naught frighten thee;
All things pass.
God alone changeth not.
Patience can do all things.
Whoever has God, has everything.
God alone sufficeth."*

When she saw how much this helped me she repeated it at the end of every day that we spent together. Catholics, consciously or unconsciously, know something of what Otto Buchinger called

"the magic of prayer". We should not imagine that a litany is thoughtless mumbling: real strength can come from it. "The words were like a stream which carried his soul along with it," says Sigrid Undset somewhere of a person praying. During many a walk in the courtyard I have permitted myself to be carried along by such a stream, by repeating again and again the words of a Psalm: for example, Psalm No. 90, "O God, Thou art our refuge and our strength"; Psalms 42 and 43, "As the hart panteth for the fountains of water . . . all thy waves and streams pass over me"; and 62, "My soul is quiet in God"; 126, "When the Lord shall redeem the prisoners of Zion, we shall be as dreamers . . .".

"There is a great power in the practice of prayer," said a clergyman to me once. But he gave me no suggestions for practicing it. It would be well if we would make our own the words of the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray." "I am really praying all the time," said my cellmate in Mannheim, and real power emanated from her. Real power emanated from the little Italian girl, who sat straight as a stick and quiet in her bed and prayed St. Francis' prayer every night. "Lord Jesus Christ, make me an instrument of Thy grace. Where there is hate, let me bring love; where there is doubt, let me bring faith; where there is error, let me bring truth; where there is sorrow, let me bring joy; where there is injury, let me bring forgiveness; where there is despair, let me bring hope; where there is darkness, let me bring light. Grant that I seek not to be consoled, but to console; not to be understood, but to understand; not to be loved, but to love. Teach me to understand that one receives in giving; finds one's own in forgetting one's self; receives forgiveness in forgiving; and in dying rises again to Life Eternal." She lived this prayer, and one could see that in the midst of all her work, at-

tentively and carefully done, she was living upon a different level, as Thomas Kelly describes it in his *Testament of Devotion*: "In the innermost sanctuary of the soul."

We Were Calm

In Mannheim the investigation prison was in the castle, which was hit during almost every heavy attack. When I expressed my surprise to the head guard that we had gotten off with no casualties whatever, she said calmly, and as a matter of course: "Much praying takes place in this house." Indeed, behind prison walls people pray much more than I had ever suspected. It is only since then that I have understood why Elizabeth Fry and Mathilde Wrede found such receptive hearts in their work of bringing the message of religion. And prisoners do not pray only for deliverance and for protection from punishment. "Invoke me in thy need; then shall I hear thee and save thee, and thou shalt praise Me . . ." Many a person behind the walls learns that this means not a deliverance from need but a deliverance in need. One does not say in prison: "Think of me!" but one asks: "Pray for me!" and the person addressed takes the request seriously.

Intercession is something very serious and responsible. I have been aware again and again, often physically aware, that the prayers of my friends on the outside were helping me. It was like a wave of power which carried one further at the time when he was on the very brink of despair. On the day of our trial the prayers of our friends, present and absent, were around us like a wall or a barricade. Later one of the prison officials said to me, "Considering what was at stake, we were amazed at how calm you were." We were calm, but only through their help. I have never thanked them for this, nor will I try to do it now.

For whatever I should like to say or must say about this far exceeds the power of poor human words to express. But it can never be forgotten, and we shall ever remain in their debt.

When Carl Heath spoke to us at the German Yearly Meeting in 1939, he told us of a Greek physician with whom he had worked in the Balkans. The doctor had lost his home, his family, and his possessions, except for what he could carry in a little suitcase, like millions of others who in the meantime have suffered the same fate. When Carl Heath expressed to him his admiration for his splendid and unwearying work, he smiled quietly and only answered: "What is left but love and service?" In prison we were refused on principle both love and service. But this refusal could not be enforced. In the common rooms there were terribly moving examples of selfless service. There was Germaine, a Frenchwoman, who tried to liberate a prisoner of war and was betrayed by his clumsiness. It took seven months for the Gestapo to find out even her name. "My father, when the German troops marched into Alsace, lost everything. The little that he still has he should not risk to set me free. I don't want my parents to know where I am. You might call me Blanche Moritz. That isn't my name, but it is enough for the official record."

With inexhaustible devotion Germaine cared for a Russian woman who wavered for weeks between life and death after a stillbirth accompanied by acute sepsis, and defended her against all attacks of the Nazi woman in the group. "I certainly won't take care of you when you get sick," she said to the latter crossly after a battle of this kind. Three days later her opponent succumbed to a painful case of arthritis and for six months she cared for her with the same self-sacrificing devotion as she had for the Russian.

Love Found a Way

Every week prisoners were transported from other institutions, causing a shortage of blankets so that the transients would be very cold in the night. One could always be certain in these cases that the oldest and most helpless woman of all of them would find spread over her in the morning Germaine's lovely coat, which she had made for herself. Her cellmates venerated her as a saint. Then there was Lisa, an 18-year-old movie actress, who for espionage had been condemned to 13 months of strict solitary confinement and who was expecting the death penalty. She was watched carefully, and was allowed to approach no one. But when one of the women in the yard fainted, it was Lisa who caught her before she could hurt herself, and whoever was particularly depressed could be sure of an encouraging word from Lisa as she passed by, or, if that was not possible, at least she would receive a cheerful look. In Hagenau, during the winter, bitter cold suddenly set in. All of us were trembling with cold beneath our pair of much-too-thin blankets. Suddenly Zenta, a Tirolese, wife of a high officer in the SS and pioneer of Naziism in Austria, said that she was suffocated with heat and spread out her second blanket over me. It was incredible how ingenious these people were, despite their total lack of possessions, in devising ways to give pleasure to each other on birthdays and feast-days. To accomplish this they endured many hardships and defied all threats of punishment.

When imprisonment has lasted a certain time it ceases to be punishment. One has removed one's self from ordinary life and slowly begins to find a new standard. What seemed to be a colorless gray on a gray background, gradually assumes color again, although in weaker shades and hues. Some reach this point

quickly, others more slowly. It lasted over a year for me.

Not until then should the question of meaning be put, for not until then is one capable of hearing the answer. Nor is one able until then to get the inward profit which lies locked in such a time. When breadth of life is denied one, one naturally and necessarily puts forth roots into its depths. "Many of my former political prisoners are writing me today of their nostalgia for their quiet cells," said the chaplain of an investigation prison to me recently.

Among the long-term prisoners, murderesses who spend ten, fifteen, or twenty years in prison, can be found persons of astonishing inner equanimity. "A piercing pain, a killing sin, and to my dead heart run them in," says Stevenson. It is surely true that even the worst deed may become an instrument in the hands of God to awaken a person to the inner life.

There are words in the Bible and verses in the hymn-book of which I have always been afraid. "If they take body, property, honor, child and wife . . ." I have often been horrified when that was sung with such nonchalance and thoughtlessness. "If I have but Thee, then I can ask naught of heaven nor earth. Though my body and soul perish, yet art Thou, my God, my heartsease and my part forever." It was like a secret knowledge that I had to put this to the proof again, to see whether it is as valid for our time as it was thousands of years ago, and I feared that I would not be able to do so. "We know, that for those who love God, all things serve the best," but did I really love God? I think we are all a little inclined today to listen more to that part of Jesus' most impressive commandment which is really only an appendix and an addition: thy neighbor as thyself. But who of us can love God with our whole heart, our whole soul and our whole mind? And yet it has been my experience that love of one's

neighbor does not stand fast in the storms of life unless it is grounded in the love of God.

Now and again we meet a person in our lives in whom the love of God burns like a bright flame. Eight years ago, Thomas Kelly attended our Yearly Meeting. He was an American Friend of thorough scientific education, of admirable philosophical training, equally well versed in the thought of the East and the West. At that time he was a vexation and a stumbling block to me. We were literally drowning in the sea of sorrow and trouble which was engulfing our Jewish friends, without being able to help them. And Thomas Kelly spoke to us of joy. It seemed so cheap to come out of secure America and talk about joy. I rejected his message, and yet knew in my inmost heart that I was not being just to him: he knew suffering and trouble just as we did, perhaps even more deeply, and had penetrated through both to a level to which I could find no approach. Once I heard him say in conversation, with calmness and seriousness, "I don't think that anything in this life could happen to me which would rob me of peace and joy." That was a daring statement. But on his lips it had the ring of truth.

Thomas Kelly died soon after. I never had any personal contact with him. Yet, while I was in prison I felt his presence from one day to the next, stronger and stronger. I knew that these years would be futile for me if I were not successful in catching just a gleam of the light that made bright for him life and the world. And I let him take my hand and lead me.

Christmas

Then came Christmas of 1944. Visits and services of worship were forbidden; our writing periods were set at four months

instead of six weeks; and our few letters generally were lost as a result of some air raid. For months we had no word of our families. Most of them had been bombed out, many of us no longer owned even what we wore, for that belonged to the prison. Our surroundings had unspeakably deteriorated; vermin abounded, the stove smoked but did not heat, the beds were made with damp covers, everything pertaining to Christmas was lacking. And yet I wrote then, "Perhaps I have never experienced Advent so strongly as this year . . . I often lie awake at night, and that which keeps me from sleeping is—joy." "Behold, I have commanded thee to be of good heart and joyful." In Hagenau that had been a commandment impossible of fulfillment. And now it was becoming more a gift and grace. "When the power to laugh in peace and joy was taken from me, Thou didst come and make me glad." In my whole life I never had a happier Christmas. Free of all Christmas activity, it had become Christmas in the presence of God, and my heart sang: "My heart leapeth and cannot be sad."

The front came closer. We were in a little munitions factory that was built so flimsily it would fall at the first bomb like a house of cards, and the heavy machines were buried down in the air-raid shelter. The factory stood at the entrance to the town, just behind the fortification. We political prisoners did not suppose that we would be allowed to survive the end of the Third Empire; we believed that destruction was before us. And I dwelt in the very joy which I had failed to understand in Thomas Kelly. If there was still one wish left for me in this life, it was not to see my husband and children and parents again, for all human connections had been broken; I wished only to stand opposite a person once more with whom I was at one in that which is

eternal. From this wish grew my friendship with Lydia, the Italian, which brought us both indescribable help and happiness. "When we are swallowed up by the overwhelming oceans of the love of God, we arrive at a new and special relationship with some of our fellow human beings," says Thomas Kelly.

The rest were waiting feverishly from day to day for the final arrival of the Allied troops. I had stopped waiting. I was completely ready for anything that might come, for each new day and its burden. It was a life in the present, which is eternity, and I knew that no end of punishment, no pardon, no American could make me any more free than I was.

A Sea of Light

That does not mean that external freedom, when it finally came was a trivial thing. One's capacity for experience grows astonishingly in two years of "dearth of pure elements of earth". In Hagenau once a fellow-prisoner told me, reflectively: "A year ago the whole beauty of the Walsertal lay at my feet. But today I have much more joy in a single rose here in the courtyard than at that time in all the Alps together." What it meant to have mountains, fields, meadows, and forests instead of iron bars and walls; the fragrance of flowers instead of the odor of smoke and clothing; the song of nightingales instead of the whirr of machines all day and all night—these things too cannot be expressed in human speech.

The first greeting which I received from American Friends after the end of the war was Kelly's *Testament of Devotion*. In it is everything that I know from my own experience and much, much more, expressed more clearly and understandably and beautifully than I can ever say it. Since I received it, I have kept

it always by me. It is like a map which urges me on to ever new discoveries in a country into which I ventured under his leadership, and there took a few first hesitating steps. To penetrate it further, to come to feel at home there, seems to me to be the sole worthwhile fulfillment of life.

In the face of the hard reality of our existence today, in the face of all the ashen gray grief which crouches on every street and before which our arms sink down in helplessness, there is for me, again and again, only the one comfort: to know that the entrance is there to reality which is greater than all the misery; that the sea of darkness is flooded over by the much greater sea of Light. The leader of the Quaker unit in Goslar said once: "It has become the essence of my work to meet people everywhere who in every single situation of life have been triumphant and victorious over need and difficulty."

Each one of us knows of victory such as this. And we know too that it is not won by human power, but that it is a free gift of the grace of God.

In 1943 the author, a German Quaker, was convicted of the offense of befriending the Jews in her neighborhood and sentenced to prison in Mannheim, Germany. Her husband was also sent to prison in another place, and they were only released two years later when the American troops arrived. In this letter describing her prison years Eva Hermann writes in an unusually sensitive way of how prison was for her an agency of inward liberation.

The translation of this letter was made by Dr. Daniel Coogan of Haverford College, and it was published in the *Friends Intelligencer* and the *American Friend*.

Published by
The Tract Association of Friends
Philadelphia, PA
1947

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The Wider Quaker Fellowship
a program of the Friends World Committee,
Section of the Americas,
1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102

