

An Island Prison

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OF COURSE, sun lights everything up. Seen on a sunny morning, Hahnöfersand leaves an impression of space, light, colour, fresh air and friendliness. From the moment my German friend and I were helped on to the little prison ship, *Christian Koch*, we were made to feel welcome. All the boys throughout and everywhere, greeted us spontaneously.

Hahnöfersand is an island in the Elbe, bought far sightedly from the city of Hamburg in 1905 to be used as a boys' prison. The boys are 17-23 years old, may stay there as long as four years but never less than six months. It is three kilometres long and about one kilometre wide. And there the boys can learn ten trades as well as gardening, farming, looking after cows, horses, sheep and pigs, sowing and harvesting wheat.

Starting in the governor's office, with a cigar for him and a rather strong Lux cigarette for me, we talked for an hour before setting off, via the vegetable garden and

greenhouses, to go round the four houses, each with a house father and one with a house mother. Large windows, different pastel shades of paint in all the rooms. House I has all single cells each with wash basin and toilet. In houses II, III and IV there may be three, four, or six in each cell and there the washing arrangement is in a corner like a little separate partition. Large airy recreation rooms, also used as classrooms and a library in each house.

To our joy, we went round the island in a two-horse cart, driven by one of the boys. Joy because horses are now so rare and also because there was plenty of walking, anyhow.

Each house carries higher privileges and more pay, ending with *das Dorf* at the farther end of the island almost a kind of open prison by itself, for 25 boys. Capacity for the whole island is 250 but that day there were less

than 200, 1965 being a less criminal year than most. We passed the Russian cemetery, well cared for. Why Russian? Because Russian prisoners had been kept there during the 1914 war. After that war, the island was again used as a boys' prison until the 1939 war when they were all evacuated.

As we drove back from *das Dorf* the boys were going back to their houses for dinner. The greeting now changed from *Guten Morgen* to *Mahlzeit*, as they raised their caps (they had caps to raise) to our equipage. No doubt the grape vine had informed them down to the last bean, what we ourselves didn't know, that we were to lunch with the governor. No doubt they knew exactly what we were going to eat. And thankful we were, as it was then midday and, in any case, we couldn't leave until the little boat was ready to take us.

"*Wollen sie die Hände waschen-oder irgendwas?*" asked the governor. *Irgendwas* turned out to be a separate door into the hospital block, whither we tramped, guarded by the secretary.

Then we sat down, before lunch, to a real prowl through the visitors' book with contributions in different scripts from all over the world: Japan, Indonesia, America, north and south. Not only scripts, little drawings too.

I asked about church services, visits from parents, roll-ups,

letters, books, classes, TV, warrants for hard-up parents. There is a resident pastor, visiting R.C. priest, doctors, dentists and instructors. Parents visit on Sunday afternoons for 40 minutes each and come mostly from Hamburg, though they may come from Schleswig-Holstein and if they need monetary help to visit, they get it. The boys have two books a week from the library, smoke Lux cigarettes, not roll-ups, do their own mending except for large jobs which are done in the tailoring, wireless and TV programmes are vetted, not indiscriminate. There are no individual newspapers, no chance of a Revolver Blatt, but cuttings are pasted up in each recreation room.

There is one very large sports-field and a separate, smaller one for *das Dorf*. I particularly liked the officer in charge of the garden—an important job, because vegetables are taken across for sale on the mainland. Also the officer in charge of one house because he was trying to interest the boys in individual gardens and was forming a choir.

The uniform is a light navy blue, trousers, jacket and forage cap, in which the boys look very nice.

The officers' uniform was rather like our naval petty officers. The officers told us they do a week's shift at a time—no doubt because of the difficulty of getting to and

from their homes. The governor, Herr Jensson, lives at Buxtehüde.

As the boys were all out at work, the front door of each house was open so that we walked straight in to meet the house father in the centre office of each.

Flowers everywhere: around the administration block, in the recreation rooms, in the boys' rooms and in front of each house. The houses were built, one by one, as and when the labour and funds were forthcoming. Except that the houses are not wooden huts, the whole place did rather remind me of New Hall Detention Centre.

As the distance from one side of the island to the mainland is only 80 metres, escapes are tried out especially in July and August. But the farmers on the mainland are aware of this and give no help even if the boy does swim so far.

I should have liked to be at a church service with those boys and to hear them sing, to have met the pastor, priest, the one housemother, doctors, dentists; to have gone over the hospital (further than the *irgendwas*) and the kitchens; to have met and talked to the boys in their recreation time. But we were immensely lucky to be there at all, as hordes of would-be visitors are on the waiting list. It was a concession that my German

friend was allowed to come with me and only then when it was verified that our friendship dated back 20 years.

I did feel that the aim *Now, therefore, ye are no more strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens* was high.

The governor was completely reassuring and most approachable. I liked the way he spoke to the boys using, of course, the intimate *du* and *dich*. As we went round the officers all greeted him in an entirely natural and friendly way. No one seemed officious or subservient. His instincts were sound. "That cake was made specially for you", he said at lunch, in the hearing of the man/boy who was waiting at the table. Thereby helping me to avoid a sin of omission, as I swiftly took a piece.

As we walked down to the jetty he said to me: "I didn't even read what you put in the visitors' book".

"Something frightful you may be sure", I said.

And away he went, laughing and waving, back up the steps to his office.

As the tide was low, we were put ashore at Schulaupier—famous for greeting all ships going up and down the Elbe, with their own national anthems—and not at the usual little harbour alongside.

And away went the crew, two boys and several officers, smiling and waving.