
A VISIT TO A RUSSIAN PRISON AUGUST 1992

I recently led a six week expedition to Arctic Russia, part of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The purpose of this expedition was to allow British young people, average age 17-18 from schools all over the UK, to experience six weeks of living together in the outdoors under canvas. Activities included kayaking, trekking, diving and a comprehensive programme of scientific research.

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Tempting as it is to tell you of the adventures of the expedition, this account is of my visit to a prison in the vicinity of our expedition area, the north-west corner of the White Sea known as Kandalaksha Bay, part of the Murmansk Region.

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The expedition was over and we had virtually finished a briefing for the local press 'And what do you do for a living?' they wanted to know. I told them I was a civil servant but they weren't satisfied. 'I am a manager'. 'What do you manage?'. So I told them. 'I'm a manager in the English Prison Service'. Well, this seemed to grab their attention and I went on to tell them a little about the sort of work I did. How much of this ever got published I'll never know as the reports appeared in the papers after we had left.

One of the reporters seemed to be quite influential and, on the grounds 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', I asked about a visit to a local prison. I fully expected to be ignored, at best given a polite refusal. After all, we were in the heartland of Gulag country. The Solivetsky Island in the White Sea, a little south of us, was used as a Penal Island until only recently. Earlier I had visited the Monastery on this Island and saw at first hand the results of Stalin's mania. Thousands from this prison alone

had died of overwork and starvation whilst building the Belomorsk Canal linking the White Sea with the Baltic. Until very recently the whole area north of St Petersburg was difficult to access and Kandalaksha was a restricted area in terms of egress as well as access.

A few hours after our press briefing I received a note. Be at the Town Hall the next day at 2 o'clock, it said.

I tried to tidy myself up a bit. Dug down to the bottom of my rucksack and found a clean shirt, borrowed a tie and spat on my shoes and turned up promptly. I was met by an 'official' interpreter (for reasons which escape me I was not invited to bring my own) and the driver of a big black Lada, fairly new at that, in total contrast to the relics that cling to life as they are driven at breakneck speeds over roads riddled with potholes.

We sped out of town, at great speed, they seem to 'aim and fire' rather than drive. Policemen at a control point leapt to attention as our official car passed. An hour later and we drove through a small village before reaching the prison. We entered through an arch which opened onto a courtyard. In front was the entrance to the prison itself, to the left some low rather decrepit-looking buildings. We pulled up outside this building and were met by some rather stern-looking soldiers who were clearly expecting us. We were ushered into the Commandant's office. He was also in military uniform. We sat down after the handshakes. By now I wasn't sure whether this visit was such a good idea anyway. I was somewhat nervous.

But I needn't have worried. The Commandant turned out to be as friendly and reassuring as one's favourite uncle. It

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so happened that he was being visited by his ‘Area Manager’ from Murmansk and he sat, looking very stern, by the Commandant’s side. Later I found him to be equally friendly.

Tea was brought and I was invited to ask questions. I didn’t take notes at the time, they may have become suspicious; but I did write up my visit in some detail later the same day.

Soon it became clear why I had been given the OK to make this visit; they had absolutely nothing to hide. There was no evidence (apart from which there hadn’t been time) that any special arrangements had been made. I believe I saw everything at ‘face value’. I visited the prison, there I saw the living accommodation, a workshop, exercise facilities and the hospital. I was allowed to chat with prisoners. They were

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well-fed, polite and communicative. Yes, the staff treated them well. Well, of course they would say that, but I spoke to a couple out of the presence of all but the interpreter and I believed them. Confirmation came when the Commandant was seen to be clearly approachable by the inmates. Staff too were confident in his presence. I later learnt he had previously been in charge of a children’s home in Estonia.

I asked about security. There had only been one escape in the last two years. Previous to this, the prison had been closed for two years. I think that originally the prison had been a ‘political prison’ but I did not press enquiries about this. There is a degree of sensitivity about the past. Incidentally, our escaped prisoner had soon been recaptured.

Security was very much in line with

a closed low category prison. There was electronic locking at the gate complex. I understood that prisoners were ‘shipped out’ for bad behaviour including escape attempts and that alternatives to this particular prison were not good!

A good gauge of any prison service is the level of medical services it offers. I was not disappointed. A clean and functional hospital that was well staffed. Apparently staffing is not yet a problem, apart from which, when I asked about ‘local trades union agreements’ they did not understand the question! The dentist’s drill reminded me of 30 years ago when we also used cord-driven drills. With a gross shortage of drugs, analgesics are rare and the patient in the chair was not comfortable!

I was told that the provision of medical care exceeds that in the community. Local hospitals are used for the occasional prisoner in-patient, including Murmansk Hospital for serious cases which is over 600 miles away.

What about the regime? Prisoners could work day shifts or night shifts. The day started at 0900 and ended at 1600 hours while the night shift started at 1600 hours and ended at 0100 hours. They do not change shifts. In return for work the prisoners received a salary. Some of their earnings went to family, some they could spend on a few basics and the rest was returned to the prison authorities for their upkeep. The bulk of the work was building; the whole prison had been rebuilt over the past two years by prisoners. The construction work did not bear close scrutiny, but then neither did any other building erected over the past 70 years whether it was in or out of prison.

No work, no salary. This is not because prisoners decline to work. They don’t get the choice. If no work is available they simply do not get any pay, and consequently neither do their relatives. As

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there is no state allowance when the 'breadwinner' is in prison, this can be tough.

Exercise and association is on offer. The prisoners are currently building their gymnasium. Religious Services? - well, again they didn't understand the question! Things are changing, though. On the day of my visit a group of Hymn singers from Finland arrived to entertain.

The Russians allow conjugal visits. I had read that this was the case. Three-day visits. Apparently there were few if any criteria to be satisfied before these visits were allowed. Other visits were allowed but

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only up to six per year. These visiting arrangements seemed to be designed to cause the greatest amount of frustration but my Russian friends did not agree.

The prison houses 500 prisoners and serves the whole north-west of Russia. The prisoners are all male and are aged 18 and upwards. They were all clothed well - grey trousers and thick blue anorak-style jackets. I saw the four pm labour parade. It was not terribly military at all - very relaxed,

"After the visit we returned to the outside compound and to the mess where I was entertained to a fish soup - a local delicacy."

in fact. Though, like all buildings in Russia, there was a run-down, neglected appearance, there appeared to be order and basically the interiors were clean and reasonable well maintained.

I asked about staff. Are they all military? Yes, but are permanently assigned to the prison service where most will make their career. It is not well paid work and it is difficult to find sufficient recruits. I asked about staff reliability, staff morale and staff training. I was re-assured by positive responses.

In short, I was very impressed. Of course they have problems and in true Russian fashion, they weren't going to share these with me. On the face of it, I could have been in any western European low category prison.

The Commandant and his visiting boss were keen to learn about the British Prison Service. I told them all I could. 'We share many problems, that is why we both have grey hair' laughed the Commandant. His boss did not share the joke ■

O B I T U A R Y

WILLIAM DOUGLAS-HOME **(1912-1992).**

Author of 'Now Barabbas'.

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William Douglas Home, the playwright, who died on 28 September 1992, attracted long and fulsome obituaries in a number of national newspapers. Although the consensus seemed to be that 'The Chiltern Hundreds' and 'The Reluctant Debutante' were his best known plays, all the major obituaries acknowledged the quality of his first, 'Now Barabbas', which was set over an eight day period in a British prison,

on the eve of an execution. *The Independent* (30 September 1992) said 'probably it was his best play. It was certainly his most serious', while *The Daily Telegraph* (30 September 1992) described it as 'the play he thought his best'. Although clearly against capital punishment, it was not a particularly polemical play, and sought merely to acquaint theatre-going audiences with something of the reality of prison life.

The raw material for the play was gathered from personal experience. As a captain in the Army in 1944, Douglas-Home refused orders to bomb Le Havre before civilians were evacuated from it. He was court-martialled and sentenced to a year in prison, of which he served ten months before the war ended, first in Wormwood Scrubs, then in Wakefield. Like a number of other first-time prisoners (later turned writers) he

described how his expectations of what imprisonment would be like had been conditioned by American prison movies (Douglas-Home 1954: 191). He wrote the play for want of something to do while recovering from the experience at his parents' home (Douglas-Home 1979: 63-4).

It opened at the Bolton's Theatre, Kensington in February 1947, transferring to the Vaudeville in the West End in March. The half-dozen main prisoners in the play were composites of the characters Douglas-Home had known in Number Ten Mess at Wakefield, although there is no indication in any of Douglas-Home's biographies (1954; 1979) as to whom O'Brien, the IRA bomber, might have been based on. The Mess itself became the model for the theatrical set, and the by now retired governor of the prison, Mr W Smith, acted as

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technical adviser to the director. The plot, which concerned the possibility of a condemned murderer being reprieved, and the effect of his imminent execution on staff and prisoners alike, seems to have owed something to Douglas-Home's conversations with the Scrubs' Welsh chaplain, as executions did not take place in Wakefield at that time.

In the published version of the play, Prison Commissioner Alec Patterson, despite his own more favourable view of capital punishment, gave it a powerful endorsement:

Mr Home has performed a real public service by giving to a wide public his experience of prison life. He studied his fellow prisoners with close sympathy and understanding. The resultant sketches of their good points and weak ones are in consequence life-like and attractive. He will by this play, both on the stage and in book form, reach a far wider thinking public than can ever be affected by official reports, and he will without any sign of personal rancour or bitterness focus the attention of any upon the prison problem.

...The play will do good because it will enlist the sympathy and interest of a wide circle of intelligent people, and will make them think and ask questions; and above all it should make them more ready to help men who have passed

through this strange experience, and on emerging are a little dazzled by the first taste of freedom. (Introduction to Douglas-Home 1947; viii-ix).

Among the recent obituaries, only *The Times* (30 September 1992) mentioned that the play was turned, more or less faithfully, into a film two years later. The producer, Anatole De Grunwald, was noted for his readiness to tackle more mature and unpatronising themes than his more Hollywood-oriented contemporaries in the British film industry. He adjusted the screenplay himself, and seems to have left little discretion to his journeyman director, Gordon Parry. The film was shot in 28 days between January and February 1949, and released in May with an 'A' certificate. A retired principal prison officer, George Blake (sic) had acted as technical adviser. The main set itself - the wing of a typical Victorian prison, four tiers of landings, observation bridges and an immense skylight - constituted the first screen attempt at an accurate architectural portrayal of a British (as opposed to American) prison. It was designed in perspective, to look deeper than it actually was, and children dressed in prison officers' uniforms were used in long shots to give the impression of greater size. Low-angle camera work and low-key lighting combined to create an image of a vaulted, tomb-like environment which far surpassed the pictorial representations of prison interiors that had been available hitherto. Those involved in the design were given a tour of a large prison, (unnamed in the studio publicity, but presumably Wakefield) but were nonetheless forbidden to take photographs even of trivial items such as prison cutlery and prison breadloaves. (For a fuller account of the making of the film, see Nellis 1988).

The film was well received by the majority of contemporary critics. *The Sunday Pictorial* (5 June 1949) named it 'film of the month' against strong competition 'because it attempts to deal intelligently with a serious theme, and within the limits of censorship, it does face up to problems of social significance'. Jim Phelan (1949), who had spent 14 years in prison had experienced a last night in the condemned cell himself, compared 'Now Barabbas' favourably to all American prison movies, commending

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its attention to detail and acknowledging that it accurately captured the mentality of both officers and prisoners. Yet despite such praise, the film has been strangely neglected by British film historians (and never, to the best of my knowledge), shown on television, though a perfectly good print survives in the National Film Theatre archive). The only (brief) mention it has had in recent years has been in biographies of the then rising star Richard Burton, who played O'Brien.

It deserves a better memorial than this because it was the first authentic British prison film (previous ones having been comedies, melodramas or historical dramas), and because within the conventions of the time it made a far better attempt at conveying penal reality than many subsequent prison movies have done. As a play 'Now Barabbas' was respectfully, if predictably, compared to John Galsworthy's prison play 'Justice' (1910) which had some degree of influence on the then Home Secretary's decision to reduce the amount of time newly-convicted prisoners spent in solitary confinement (Dupre 1976; 1990). But, while it had no discernible influence on an official decision, 'Now Barabbas' was in fact a much better play (and better film) than 'Justice' and William Douglas-Home deserves at least as big a footnote in the history of penal reform as his more revered predecessor in the field of penal playwriting ■

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