



Jeff Deskovic

Remembering Prison Guards

Yes, I was a teenager. But these weren't counselors; they were guards. And, I wasn't away at summer camp. I was away for Life!

In recent weeks, I have written about various aspects of my 16-year prison experience. I wrote about mental games that I played to maintain my sanity, as well as violence that I witnessed and was aware of. At this point I wish to discuss correction officers, prison guards, hopefully revealing some bright spots that I experienced in an otherwise dismal environment.

Many prison guards seemed to live to make prison a worse experience for inmates than it needed to be. In my mind, as well as that of many other prisoners who I spoke with, there was a tendency to group the guards into different categories according to how far they would take things. Some of them simply liked to engage in different forms of harassment; while others were so dangerous that when they were on duty my goal for the day was to somehow escape their notice. Still others were professionals and did their jobs. Then there were those who were actually friendly, occasionally exhibiting kindness and offering glimpses of humanity in an overall environment that was anything but humane.

Guards Who Engaged in Harassment

There were those who made the prison experience worse because of their attitude. They would often bring their problems from home and "from the street" into the prison, taking it out on the prisoners. Sometimes they would have such a nasty attitude that inmates would refrain from asking them for anything, even things that, according to the rules, we were allowed to have. At times they were verbally abusive, which other guards, all too often, found funny.

There were a variety of harassment tactics at their disposal, and they would frequently engage in; for example, rushing prisoners out of the messhall when a half-way decent meal had been served,

or making prisoners remain seated in the messhall for up to 45 minutes when the meal was lousy.

In order to fully understand what it meant to be in the messhall that long, one needs to keep in mind that the ventilation was poor and there was little fresh air. It could get very hot, either from the sun or from the heaters, compounded by the body heat of too many prisoners sitting too close to each other.

Some of the package room officers would typically take enjoyment from using the slightest excuse to refuse to allow items to be received by prisoners and, once in a blue moon an item would be stolen.

Sometimes in response to a prisoner who was loud, a guard would remove the fuse to a particular cell, leaving the prisoner with no lights or electricity. There was a code amongst the guards with respect to the fuses: If a fuse was removed or had been blown by a power overload, many of them would refuse to put in a new one.

Others enjoyed shortening the time that prisoners had in the library, by making sure that we took too long to get there, or by showing up to escort us out of there to soon, so that we had very little time. Recreation time could also be shortened in the same manner.

Guards Who Were Dangerous

Then there were other guards who even their peers disliked, because they were on a much higher level in terms of their dangerousness. Sometimes they would set prisoners up by writing a false misbehavior report which could send a prisoner to the Special Housing Unit, otherwise known as "the hole." At other times they would stir up violence amongst the prisoners for their entertainment. As I have mentioned in a previous column, they might accomplish this by spreading a false or even a

true story about a prisoner, or by paying a prisoner off with cigarettes.

Acts Of Kindness, Glimpses of Humanity

Yet not all of the guards were that way. Many were professional and did their jobs, no more and no less. Then there were those who I would say were decent people, and who I liked. There are a couple of points that I want to make, in order to help readers maintain a correct frame of reference by way of understanding things.

Firstly, a small act of kindness which in the outside world would seem like something barely worth mentioning, is a big deal in prison, a world in which both violence amongst the prisoners and varying levels of abuse by the guards is common, while decent treatment and respect cannot be taken for granted. Thus a small act of respect or kindness was regarded as a big thing.

Secondly, although I recognize that each person should be judged by their own actions and character rather than as a whole, it must be kept in mind that they did look the other way while the other guards were engaging in the above-mentioned tactics and many other things which, for the sake of space, I will not get into, as opposed to stepping in or reporting. This non-intervention led to a climate in which all of the guards knew that if they wanted to abuse the prisoners, they could do so and get away with it.

In order to occasionally be able to cook a decent meal, I purchased an illegal metal hot pot on the black market. The pot cost me approximately twenty dollars, which is a lot of money in an economy where many were making twenty-five or thirty-two cents an hour. There were various times when my cell was searched, and the guards did not confiscate the pot.

There was a guard who had a similar taste in books as mine, and we would

talk about books that we had both read and exchange perspectives in a way that I can't synthesize. It was somehow different talking to someone who was free as opposed to talking to another inmate.

I appreciated greatly his taking of ten to twenty minutes to talk to me, especially in view of the fact that there was a general unofficial prison code amongst both the guards and the prisoners that frowned upon such conversation. There were a few times when that same guard allowed me borrow books from him, and even an occasion when he borrowed a book from an outside library and let me read it.

Considering that I had been in prison for a long time and had read much of what the prison library had on the subjects that I was interested in, and that there were many titles and authors that they did not have, this was no small kindness. Had he not done so, I would simply have gone without being able to read those books.

Amongst the prisoners that had developed a cautious, yet definite, rapport with each other, there was borrowing that went on, sometimes involving books, newspapers, which were hard to come by in there, or canned food items. In order to be able to get an item, I would have to ask permission from a guard to let me run down to that prisoner's cell. Only certain guards would allow me to do so.

On one occasion, a prisoner that I knew from another facility arrived at the prison where I was. He was being housed at a different part of the facility than I. I asked a guard if he could arrange to have him transferred to the unit where I was at, so we could see each other, and that guard agreed to do so. A couple of weeks later he was transferred near me. Years later, when I had been sent to an area of the prison that was very loud and dirty, I asked the



same guard if he could have me sent to a quieter unit, and he did so.

While I was working in the messhall, there was an officer who was excessively clean. He would make all of us mop the messhall floor with hot water, and then cold, changing buckets every two rows. But he would take care of his workers. That meant that when it was chicken day, he would secure us an extra piece of chicken.

There was another guard who, on a couple of occasions when the meal was nasty, stole a can of sauce and some pasta and allowed us to cook pasta and sauce. On another occasion, also involving the messhall, a guard who normally did not work in the area he was assigned to that day, allowed me to eat two cookies that his wife had baked at home.

There were other guards who would allow me to work in the messhall on my days off, as opposed to having to remain in my cell all day. Once, when I was working in the messhall and I felt sick, the guard I was working for would not call over to the medical unit so that I could be seen by a nurse. Instead, he insisted that I do my regular duties of sweeping and mopping. I asked a sergeant, who I knew from his days as a regular officer, to call over there for me. He did so, and not only secured me an appointment to immediately go over there, but also told the officer that I was going there, in defiance of what he knew the officer wanted.

Although that helped me with my immediate need, I would pay for that. After getting better a few days later, that same officer had an attitude with me, and purposely did not call me into work, which meant that I was stuck in my cell all day up until nighttime recreation. And on those days where there was no nighttime recreation, I would only be allowed to come out of my cell for an hour a day. In order to make up for that lost manpower, that guard attempted to have another worker as-

signed to him.

However, the guards who were responsible for assigning new workers knew what was happening, and refused to give him anybody new thereby forcing him to allow me to work once again. Within three or four days he caved in and called me back down to work. Had the guards assigned him another worker, it would never have happened.

When hamburgers or hot dogs were served, prisoners would occasionally look to smuggle some back to eat later or the next day. We would frequently look to see who was doing the pat frisks that we would be subjected to once we left, to assess the likelihood of our being able to avoid being caught. There were a couple of officers who would ask us, in a quiet and discrete manner, if we had anything on us. If we replied that we had some food items, they would perform a cursory pat frisk and would not confiscate the items.

The package room, which is the place where items that have been sent either from stores or from prisoners' families and friends, was known for sometimes taking a long time to call prisoners to come and get their goods. There were a few guards who knew the package room officers, and they would sometimes call up for me and ask them if they could send me to get my items. One time I had been sent a pair of sneakers which were a close call as to whether I would be allowed to have them because of a design that they had on them. The guard told me that in the future, I was to make sure that any sneakers I had sent to me were not of the same design, and that this time he would let me have them.

One time when I had been transferred from one prison to another one, a prisoner who was housed right next to me who had no electricity asked me if I would heat up some water for him so that he could make a cup of instant soup. When I told him that I had not as

yet received my property and thus had no hot pot, he told me that he would lend me his. He said that his pot had been altered and that was why his fuse had been blown and thus he had no power. He told me that my cell had been equipped by a prisoner who was an electrician to handle the extra voltage that the pot would draw.

Although I was skeptical, he assured me that was the case and offered me a soup to do it. Because I was hungry, I agreed. Within minutes of plugging in the pot, however, the fuse blew, leaving me without power. I stayed that way for three days until a guard was on duty that I knew. I asked him to replace the fuse so that I could have power. He gave me a fuse on condition that I not say anything to the other guards or prisoners, because he knew that the regular guards in the block were playing a sadistic game with the prisoners, pretending not to have replacement fuses when they did.

When I was in the county jail, one of the officers tried to prevent me from using the phone to call an attorney, which I was entitled to do. His partner interfered on my behalf and got into an argument with him, with the end result being that I was allowed to use the phone.

One time the prison was locked down so that all of the cells could be searched. The guards typically trashed prisoners' cells during such searches, which could involve anything from ripping up papers, to dumping clothes and pictures all over the floor to taking items on the slightest pretext to just generally leaving the cell in such a state of disarray that it would take four or five hours to put things back in order. I was fortunate on one of those occasions because one of the two officers that was in my cell searching instructed the other one to take it easy because he knew that I stayed out of trouble.

There was a point during my incar-

ceration that the idea of growing food appealed to me. One day I was talking about the idea to a guard, and learned that he was growing various vegetables on his property. He talked about his experiences of growing them, the costs involved, and a few tips. I was able to take my fantasy of growing food a little bit further by listening to him talk.

Of course, I was not personally involved in every incident of kindness of which I became aware. Some I merely heard about or witnessed. There were prisoners assigned to every floor of every cell block whose job it was to sweep, mop, throw out the trash, and distribute the trays of food during meal times to those who were confined to their cells. There were a few guards who would inflate the number of trays of food that they needed in order to have extra trays sent to the block, which they would give to different workers. On other occasions, the prisoners thus favored would ask the guards to call the hearing officer to ask for a break for a prisoner who had broken a rule.

One time a prisoner had his radio confiscated following a search of his cell. Another guard who he worked for got the radio back for him.

Another time when a prisoner was scheduled to go on a family reunion visit which involved being in a trailer on the prison grounds from Friday until Sunday morning, got permission from the gallery officer to ask the guard who worked in the barber shop if he could have an unscheduled hair cut in time for the visit. The guard allowed him to get the hair cut.

Probably the most extreme example that I had ever heard of was when a lieutenant confronted another one over the latter's harassment of a prisoner that had formerly worked for him for years and was a distant relative by marriage. He told him that he better leave him alone, otherwise it would be settled in the parking lot after work. ■

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