



GIFT OF
THE AUTHOR

A COMMON CAUSE



By Julius Baer

*Being an address given on the occasion
of Passover, April 10th, 1933, before
the Jewish inmates and visitors at the
Michigan State Prison, Jackson, Mich.*

Compliments of

Julius B...

FOREWORD

I have been asked by numerous men of our group to speak on this occasion on the subject of how we, as prisoners, have been affected by the dreadful conditions that have been widespread in this and other countries during the past three years.

While I was glad to have the opportunity to contribute my share to the spirit of the occasion, I did not consider myself equal to the requirements of discussion on a subject so complex and many-sided. A problem that present-day sages have but partially succeeded in dealing with is more than I could hope to treat comprehensively or interestingly.

It was, therefore, with reluctance that I acceded to the request, and if my discourse fails to meet your expectations of enlightenment, it is not because the subject at hand is of little moment or my intentions unpurposeful.

A Common Cause

The season of Passover is a time that symbolizes freedom and the spirit of independence. It is a time for rejoicing and gladness. It is usually a time when we gather together to offer thanks for the bounties that have been provided for us by a kind Providence.

But to-day, with the pall of economic depression hanging high, with deprivation and hunger clawing at the hearts of the people, there is little indeed to be thankful for. In a land abounding with wealth and luxury, we have the specter of want and privation hovering over the heads of one-third of the people. We must admit, whether we like to or not, that there is something wrong with the make-up of our social scheme. The strong have overpowered the weak, acquiring everything for the few and leaving nothing to the many. This, my friends, is plain enough to be seen, as conditions of the past three years have taken it out of the pale of mystery.

Under a system of competition and rivalry, men have found their intercommunal relations with each other to be defective and devastating to the common good. Although brought into being under

one divine influence and spiritual endowment, men have lived in strife with one another and have been unmindful of each other's rights.

And so it has come to pass that the social structure which men have built is now crumbling for want of a true foundation. Their ideas of a way of life, after having been tried time after time throughout the history of mankind, each time proving to be faulty, have again been tested and again found to be unsound in basis and a peril to the ultimate good of the people. Discredited, as were the black arts of the witches of old, a new administration of government is now doing its best to carry us out of the wilderness, and while we are still under the pressing yoke of depression, the prophecies of the soothsayers are promising, and we have at least a future to look forward to with hope.

Still, you want to know how we as prisoners are affected by these conditions. At first view, it seems that we should have little to worry about. We have a bed to sleep in; our meals, such as they are, are provided; we have a variety of recreation and musical entertainment to divert our minds from the baser things of life, and, in the case of sickness, we are given medical treatment that is comparable with that which one may expect under the more normal conditions at large. An enlight-

ened conscience that was inspired by men like the immortal Thomas Mott Osborne, has departed from the brutalities of the dark ages, and has given to us the facilities for education and the training of industrial vocation. The plan of rehabilitation, whereby one may become better fitted to earn an honest and decent living when the time comes again for him to cast his lot in the stream of outside life, has been greatly humanized.

And here is where we come to the point of our question. This institution in which we as prisoners live, is only a small piece in the framework of the social structure. In the ambitious plans of men to turn us to an honorable way of life, a generous amount of attention has been given to rehabilitating us while serving our terms, but little interest has been shown in reclaiming us to the fold when the proper time comes. The proper time, my friends, is not necessarily after the letter of the law is followed and the spirit of the law is rejected. The laws of man, made by men themselves, have been so perplexing that even those who wrote them have in some instances agreed that there was sinister portent involved in them. And it happens to be that outside of a few cases where the pressure of influence was brought to bear, the course of procedure leaning toward the letter of the law has been adhered to,

while the spirit of the law has been ignored. This is the theory that was practiced in medieval times, and this, regrettably, is the theory that is practiced to-day.

For centuries past, men have been taught to hold hatred in their hearts for those who did not follow the accepted customs of life, and, with rare exceptions, to inflict the evils of vengeance upon them. So that now, as transgressors, and as a class of men who have been treated more or less with prejudice and contempt, it should not be difficult for us to read the handwriting on the wall to the effect that the suffering of the people at large, who have been taught to hate us, will be suggested into our oppressed life. And unless an enlightened administration of government puts in force its contemplated reduction of maintenance by an appreciable reduction in the number of our population, a measure which it advocated during its first weeks in office, the exposures from close shearing will be felt here. If we, as a group of men who are already weary from the travails of imprisonment, are not to be subjected to the greater distresses of restriction, a policy of administration more humanitarian in its intent to reclaim us will have to be adopted in the future.

The system that built castles in the air (which are now coming down to earth with a crash),

built also this large population and this great prison to house it. The wisdom of carrying the expense of supporting such a large prison population on the shoulders of an impoverished people, is now seriously questioned. We must face the facts, my friends, notwithstanding the foretellings of ambitious conjurers.

One of the evils from which the public has been suffering is over-taxation. This has been measurably contributed to in recent years by the unprecedented growth of our state institutions. The fact is that the government has maintained greater establishments than the public purse was capable of supporting.

And why should it have been necessary to have such great institutions? Ours here is the largest, the most modern, and perhaps the best-looking of its kind in the world. Millions of dollars have been spent in building it. If it is to be kept full, and this is something which is seriously questioned, more millions will be needed to maintain it.

Only a few years ago, comparatively, this institution had a population of not more than a thousand inmates. Although our geographical location has not changed and our general population has not greatly increased since then, we have the astounding number of more than 5000 to-day.

This institution alone houses enough men as prisoners to exceed the prison population ratio of the entire country! Has it been necessary for this state, more than any other state, to maintain so big an institution? Have other states been less prosperous or more unhappy because they have not supported as large a prison population? This, friends, is only one of the many conditions that has redounded to the people's present state of abjection, but it is worthy of the most earnest attention that the state administration can give to it.

Now, about the more than 8000 men that are in our state's prisons. A lot of folks have been given the idea that we are all a bunch of vicious animals, with the proverbial horns sticking out of our heads.

We will admit that there are men amongst us who are depraved and wicked. We admit that there are men here who are untractable to the social amenities of life. But, after all, how should one expect them to have been when they were committed here. If they were good and kind men, it is reasonable to believe that they should not have been sent to this institution in the first place. However, good or bad, all of them are sooner or later responsive to the humanities of brotherliness; all of them can be moved to see the happier

and sunnier ways of life if you would but show them that sympathy and understanding, sincerity and good faith, are the elements of which mankind is made. But you must show them these by example, not by mere words.

Here, my friends, removed from the natural stream of life, are men who breathe and feel and see in identically the same manner as those who have found the paths of life easier to tread. If they are cut, they will bleed; if wounded at heart, they will suffer the pangs of heartache. Make no mistake about that, friends! There are men here who, though they made their mistakes, are Americans in spirit. There are men here who at all costs would uphold the right and condemn the wrong. There are, indeed, numerous men in this institution, as there are in the other institutions of this state, who have come to a realization of the difference between a right and a wrong way of life, men who have shown an unquestionable aptitude to live a life of usefulness and honor.

And what is the state's duty to these men, my friends? It has been said that in training them so they may be better fitted to take their places again in society, the state's intention in doing so is to *change only the spirit and not draw on the flesh*. Yes, it is by far a greater duty to keep the men who have come to the parting of the ways

out of prison than it is to keep them in prison! For who is man in his little mite that he should demand the utmost of pain and the greatest degree of anguish from his lesser brother? By what divine revelation is the idea of unremitting punishment or unrelenting hatred to be considered an encouragement to correct social intercourse or a gain to the great plan of life? The salutary influences of mankind emanate from forbearance and humanity; they do not come from irreconcilability.

Yet an archaic and obsolete criminal code holds them here, in many cases to age beyond their years of usefulness, and an administration of justice, with unlimited power vested in it, lacks the determination of purpose, although it has the intelligence, to return them to the common fold where they could contribute their share to the common good, and help in measure to bear the budgetary burdens of the state instead of living on them.

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Thus, while freedom and independence are the symbolization of the occasion of this gathering, our topic has been and we have dwelt at large on the effects the general conditions to-day should have on our welfare and on our prospects of freedom and independence.

In reviewing these facts, I have tried to present them as I have seen them, without color or enlargement. I have lived, worked and talked with a countless number of my fellow prisoners, and among them I have seen hundreds of men who were neither vicious nor had horns in their heads. There are men in the prisons of this state who are known to the prison officials as just plain human beings, men who have toiled honestly and diligently through many years of wearisome journey only to find that the road to come back was closed to them.

And the reason that the road to come back was closed, is because we have been living under an administration of justice that has been the offspring of a system of society in which competition and envy, ambition and jealousy, contention and animosity have been running parallel to each other. We have been living under a system that has collapsed from its own faultiness; a system that has carried the torchlight in one hand and a whip in the other; a system that has left hunger and heartache, misery and bewilderment along every step that it has taken through the generations of the past.

These are the cardinal truths, the glaring lessons from which we have to learn, my friends. There is light enough in them to see that through

the united effort for common betterment, a new brotherhood may be established among men.

Sometimes it takes a great calamity to open the eyes of men to the realities of life. The depression of the past three years, in all its terrible aspects, has been a world-wide calamity. Let us hope then that out of all this suffering and distress, our administrators of government will be able to see that all men are sufferers in common, that whether we are in prison or out, we were created and brought to earth by one Heavenly Father. And in the eager intent to rebuild a falling social structure, let there not be a deaf ear turned to the callings of these toilers from within, for here, friends, a pulsating humanity dwells; here also the moralities of faith and hope live or die according to the character of treatment that our brothers at large show them.