

A LETTER FROM EXILE

Claudia Jones Tells Dreary Round of Life in Prison

By CLAUDIA JONES

LONDON.

I write from a London flat one month after my forcible ejection by political deportation from the United States. On the radio in the room in which I write, a story is being narrated about Lincoln and the historic power of the Presidency to grant amnesty to the nation's political prisoners.

Uppermost in my mind and thoughts are my imprisoned comrades of the Second Smith Act trial who serve their sentences years in American prisons for the crime of holding independent political ideas.

It was exactly a year ago, on January 20th, that I traveled



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under guard all night from Grand Central station with two outstanding women Communist leaders — Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Betty Gannett. We were on our way to continue our unjust sentences under the Smith Act, two weeks of which was already served at the Women's House of Detention in New York.

We travelled on the New York Central, sleeping in double decker Pullman beds. A pajama-clad male marshal slept adjacent to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn on the lower level while Betty Gannett and I huddled in one bed on the upper compartment adjacent to which lay a woman marshal. But this was only an index of the indignities to which one is subjected to in prison life.

Those indignities are not alone direct and overt; they are subtle and indirect. They range from the loss of one's surname for a number, the familiarity with which prison officers call you by your first name your subjection to tasks which are minute, infinitesimal, and, in many

cases unnecessary.

I cannot speak for Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Betty Gannett. But I can tell Daily Worker readers that there wasn't a prisoner in Alderson who understood why we should be jailed for our ideas.

I don't know intimately what the prison conditions of the men are like, but having been in a woman's prison, I can tell you what conditions are like for Elizabeth Gurley Flynn with whom I lived in the same prison cottage for four and a half months. Perhaps a description of these conditions can arouse anger and give added argument for a more urgent amnesty campaign for their immediate release.

Picture if you will a room about eight feet in length and three and one half feet in width. This is your home for the duration of your unjust sentence. This is an old "orientation" building. "Orientation" meaning where you spend the first three weeks on arriving in prison in which you are placed in quarantine, and when you experience your first prison indoctrination regulations. Here, isolated from other prisoners you have hourly round of assignments such as scrubbing, buffing and waxing already shining floors, putting nametags on your clothes, taking IQ tests and the like.

The cottage where I was housed with Gurley Flynn had steel-barred windows. This cottage, as against others which are unbarred and give the impression of a simulated freedom there were some advantages, namely that of having your own room a private commode, and washbasin a situation unlike other cottages one uses middle century pots when locked in for the night instead of the more modern hygienic methods of sanitation.

I learned about this and other differences in these conditions when I lived for the first three months in an all-Negro "jimmecrow" cottage. "White" Cottage and "Colored" cottages were the norm in Alderson, as in all prisons. Negro to omen prisoners got the worst jobs and were

excluded from some classifications at that, so that the indignity was double in the case of Negro Smith Act victims. It is significant however, undoubtedly as a result of struggle which forced the desegregation schools decision and the Justice Department's embarrassment caused by the filing of Ben Davis' anti-jimmecrow suit that at Alderson (this practice was being dropped).

As I write, I picture in my mind's eye the workroom where Elizabeth Gurley Flynn works as a prison seamstress for the United Health Public Service prison run hospital.

Her schedule is as regular as dawn and as sure as nightfall. Up at 6 A.M. when a custodial officer opens your door; breakfast at 7 before and for a half hour after your room must be thoroughly cleaned, your bed made to permit you to be at work at eight.

It is a disciplinary offense which means your statutory days may be taken from you—dread of all inmates—if these things are not done within that schedule of about three-quarters of



BETTY GANNETT

an hour. Her workroom is in the basement of this building.

Clean enough (she keeps it so), the windows are also barred and there sits this outstanding daughter of the American working class who, at 65 years of age has so much more to contribute to the nation's progress. She sits mending pillow cases, sheets, baby navel bandages (yet, in this age) and other garments for the prison hospital. She works alone here. Two 15 minute breaks at 10 o'clock the morning and at 3 p.m. allow all inmates to use this half hour as they please for a rest period or to smoke.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's schedule is like that of all the women prisoners here who work at varied industries in the prison set up with approximately 40 minutes for lunch until 5 p.m. quitting time. Others work in canning, weaving, garment, laundry, painting, garden group, or the piggery, dairy, the farm or as maintenance workers. The favorite workroom is the room called D & A—where the women's going home garments are made by the inmates.

Let this first year's anniversary of the jailing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the comrades help to instill the anger that Americans are capable of — an anger which will wrest full constitutional and individual liberties from the claws of the Justice Department, the McCarthyites and the Wall Street prosecutors of ideal

ion-TV Amusement for Children

"Junior Britannica Theatre" (Channel 4, Sunday 9-10 a.m.). Granted it is on the factual side, it nevertheless has many exciting features. What's more, after each film is a book for children concerning the topic, which can be found in the library.

Or go to the public library yourself, and seek the librarian's help in choosing a book for your youngster. Just remember, pick something that interests him, and which can be integrated into a healthy and sane concept of life, and which, if possible, leads into or follows a vein which can be continued to further your child's interest and excitement in the subject, in order to get the child to want to read more.

The YMHA and the Henry Street Settlement are both centers for this type of entertainment. The "Love for Three Oranges" (New York City Opera Co.) is a wonderful opera to take children to, and no doubt, there are many others (I admit my lack here) and the NYC Ballet's "Cakewalk" most children will enjoy. A movie on Russian folk dancing, now at the Olincoln is

terrific.

I am quite sure that if the many cultural attractions within the city were utilized, and the few correct TV programs tuned on, with the proper use of our libraries and museums, our children can grow up to be decent and sensitive human beings with a love for life."

