Guard Duty Over Nazi War-Lords In Berlin Prison

(Courier-Journal staff writer Paul Contestable describes duty at Spandau Prison in this third in a series of articles on his five month stay in Berlin in 1953.)

By PAUL CONTESTABLE

Rudolf Hess, Admiral Doenitz, Albert Speer — familiar names to all of us during World War II became more than names to me after a few weeks in Berlin.

I was assigned to temporary duty in charge of Spandau Prison shortly after my arrival. Here I found what is perhaps the most unusual prison in the world.

Only seven prisoners were held in the massive prison back in 1953; now there are only three. They were the top seven Nazi overlords of World War II. Besides the three already mentioned were Walther Funk, Erich Raeder, Konstantine von Neurath and Baldur von Schirach.

RUDOLF HESS

With only these few prisoners, more than 200 guards and other personnel staff the prison at all times.

CONTROL OF the prison located at 23 Wilhelmstrasse in the west-central part of Berlin, in the British sector, is alternated each month among the Russians, Americans, British and French. The Russians had just completed their month and now it was our turn at guard.

Condition of the guards' quarters left by the Russians was almost sickening. Litter and filth were everywhere. A major clean-up project was necessary to make the quarters liveable.

Cooking facilities used by the Russians were found to be entirely unfit for our use and it was necessary to have hot meals brought in from our battalion headquarters.

Guard at Spandau Prison, I soon learned was not primarily to keep the seven prisoners from escaping, but rather, to prevent mobs from trying to enter the prison.

Around the massive stone walls had been erected an eight foot high electrically charged fence surrounded by row after row of barbed wire. British troops were forced to erect the barrier due to several attempts by mobs to enter the prison while they had the guard.

The only access to the prison was through a pair of massive, weather blackened steel doors.

The prisoners occupy odd-numbered cells in one of the four T-shaped cell blocks. Alternate cells are kept empty to avoid contact between the prisoners.

All things political, even daily newspapers, are outlawed in Spandau. Only for two hours a day, provided the weather is favorable, are the prisoners let out of their cells and into the courtyard.

As one Western official said: "Sometimes it's better to think of them as dead."

When I first viewed the seven prisoners in the courtyard I was rather surprised to see one still sitting alone under a tree, completely ignoring the other six who walked and talked in pairs.

THE MAN who sat alone was Rudolf Hess. Hess, famous for his 1941 flight to Britain with peace terms likes to act eccentric. He served as Hitler's deputy and shadow.

He was convicted at Nuremberg of "plotting against peace" and "crimes against humanity." His sentence was for life. To us Hess lives in a morose dream world apart from his fellow prisoners. He is subject to fits of insanity.

Walther Funk, another life prisoner, proved to be the noisiest complainer of the group. The Nazi economic minister's banks stored the gold teeth and fillings taken from Jews gassed in concentration camps. He played the organ at the weekly Protestant services at the prison.

The most alert of the prisoners was Albert Speer. Now 52, the ex-architect and wartime industrial chief sustained Hitler's munitions output under heavy Allied bombing. He is eagerly awaiting his release in 1966 by doing research in town and city planning.

Karl Doenitz, the Grand Admiral and submariner who was picked as Hitler's successor was released two years ago at the age of 65.

ONCE HITLER'S Youth Leader, von Schirach seemed prematurely aged at 45. He is subject to moods of extreme depression, particularly since his wife's divorce. He is due for release in 1966.

ADMIRAL DOENITZ

Baron von Neurath, former foreign minister and "protector" of occupied Czechoslovakia, suffered from heart attacks, and was nearly blind when I first saw him in 1953. Persistent Allied efforts finally sought his release in November 1954 for medical reasons. He died in August 1956.

Erich Raeder had survived a hernia operation while in prison. But his health was growing continually worse in 1953. In his late 70's, Raeder was the man, that built up Hitler's navy.

The poor state of health and age of the prisoners continually prompted Allied bargaining with the Russians for an ease of strict rules rule to little avail. Soviet prison officials accuse the West of backing off on the four power rules laid down in 1946.

As one Western official pointed out, "We don't pity these Nazis who helped slaughter millions. We just want to be a little more humane to keep up with the times."

Conditions at the prison change each month just as the control does. As Admiral Doenitz pointed out one day,

ERICH RAEDER

"Last month with the Russians here I lost 20 pounds, now with the Americans in charge I have gained 25."

Contact with the outside world and knowledge of world events is almost nil.

The prisoners live and eat in their single cells. The original prohibition on all non essential conversation has been relaxed in practice if not officially.

Now one 15 minute visit is permitted each month, twice their former ration. The inmates may also send one four page letter a week instead of one each month.

But every other attempt to modify the harsh treatment at Spandau has met with silence from the Russians.

The expense of maintaining the prison has also drawn concern from the West. Four military wardens are required, one from each nation, and a permanent interior guard of 20, five from each nation.

In addition there is the rotating guard of 110 to 150 military personnel from each nation every four months. Another 30 German, Belgian, Dutch and stateless persons do clerical, menial and kitchen work.

THIS ACCOUNTED for a ratio of 30 persons to each prisoner (now 65 to 1) while the average German prison has one person to every 4 prisoners. And to make room for the seven warlords, 600 prisoners had to be removed from the prison and housed elsewhere.

Total cost of maintaining the prison is over $100,000 a year with West Berlin putting up about three-fourths of the cost. This would care for 700 average German prisoners.

Just one mile from Spandau there is another smaller prison which could easily contain these celebrities at a greatly reduced expense. Informal questioning of the Russians on the idea of moving the prisoners has been so unsuccessful that no formal request has ever been made.

All of this adds up to continued harsh treatment for the four remaining prisoners and for the continued maintenance of one of the most expensive and inefficient penal operations in modern history.

CONTACT WITH the Russians during my duty at Spandau was relatively limited. The wardens and officers from the four countries had their meals together in the wardens house.

Due to the language barrier between the four countries, a simple German greeting was all that was exchanged at mealtime. The British and French responded and the Russians usually countered with a sort of grunt.

While on duty I had to carry a pistol but always disarmed before sitting down to eat. The Russians, however, never removed their weapons on duty or off.

On one occasion a Russian officer who obviously was suffering from too much Vodka and myself had a minor disagreement outside the prison. I barely gave it a second thought until, meal time that day.

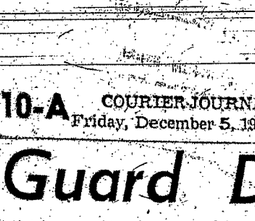
I walked into the dining room at the warden's house, removed my pistol, said "Guten tag" and sat down with my back to the Russian table. The usual grunt did not come.

Instead I heard the chairs moving, and the Russians made a silent, massed exit, before the meal was served.

Russian silence said what their words did not.

NEXT WEEK — A look at the German people.

Barometer for his desk



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AMONG WOMEN

Hard To Give Gifts To

By Mary Lennon Snyder

In discussing Christmas gifts last week, we considered the problem of giving to those who have everything. There is another classification of recipient who is "hard to give gifts to," as they accumulate so little of this world's goods.

Mrs. Snyder

I was interested to learn that in a suggested gift list compiled by one of our large secular magazines, there was a category of gifts listed for priests, sisters, and others in the religious life.

This list suggested membership in a Catholic Book Club. In some instances a gift to a convent might be more acceptable than individual gifts to the teaching sisters residing there.

Then, too, there are many lay people among our acquaintances who do not read Catholic literature because they have the wrong conception of what Catholic reading is. Because they once tried a pious hagiography long since outdated, they consider all Catholic writers outmoded.

NOT ONLY would a gift subscription to a Catholic Book Club be a worthwhile Christmas remembrance, it might also change the recipient's whole mind set toward Catholic writing.

Too many think that Catholic writing must be dull because of the previously mentioned chance acquaintance with some book written decades ago. Since a man lives by his craft, writers reflect the taste of their contemporary reading public.

In bygone days readers seemed to want their reading to point out a moral in clear type. To the conscience, tinged with puritanical or jansenist teaching, reading would be a waste of time unless it improved the mind. With this thought the writers tended to be didactic, pietistic and, by modern standards, boring.

Modern writers know that modern readers do not expect good writing to be dull or obviously didactic. Therefore the modern Catholic writer is not at all dull.

Modern Catholic reading geared to the tempos of our day can be a way to improve the mind, lighten the hours of tedium and help one in his quest of eternal happiness.

A gift subscription in a Catholic book club would guarantee the recipient good reading selected by an expert familiar with Catholic teaching and in standards of literary artistry.

THERE ARE several good Catholic book clubs. If I mention one, the public relations directors of all the others will send me hateful notes reminding me, regretfully, that I failed to mention their excellent service. If I mention none, some readers will surely write to ask me to suggest a good club.

Therefore, while acknowledging that there are several other excellent ones, I shall mention two: the Catholic Book Club, 70 East 77th Street, New York 17, and the Maryknoll Book Club of Maryknoll, New York.

Splash Parties

The CYO program director announced this week that there are openings during the Christmas holidays for splash parties, for sodalities, class parties, organization parties. Any groups interested in holding a splash party in the CYO pool are asked to contact Joseph Judge at BAker 5-7100 Ext. 10.

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Russ Nasell, Most Precious Blood, 625; Al Wiedmer, K. of C. No. 2, 636; G. Dalton, K. of C. No. 2, 612; John Anderson, St. Josaphat H.N., 631; Frank Kubarich, St. Josaphat H.N., 668; P. Morreale, Mt. Carmel, 622; A. Dini, Mt. Carmel, 618; M. Mauro, Mt. Carmel, 630; "Packy" McFarlin, Sacred Heart No. 2, 639; Joe Grock, Sacred Heart No. 2, 657.

Dick Kessler, H.R.A.A. No. 2, 615; Ed Kowalski, St. Francis Xavier, 665; George Finucan, Holy Cross No. 1, 654; P. Faker, Sacred Heart No. 1, 627; Joe Baierschmidt, St. Cecilia, 635; J. Walz, H.R.A.A. No. 1, 620; Tony DiGirolome, St. Lucy, 617; Clarence Fiege, Mother of Sorrows No. 1, 617; Joe Drechsler, Mother of Sorrows No. 1, 654; C. Papke, St. Margaret Mary, 620.

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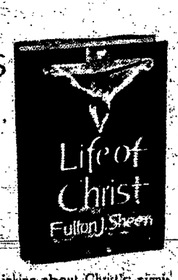

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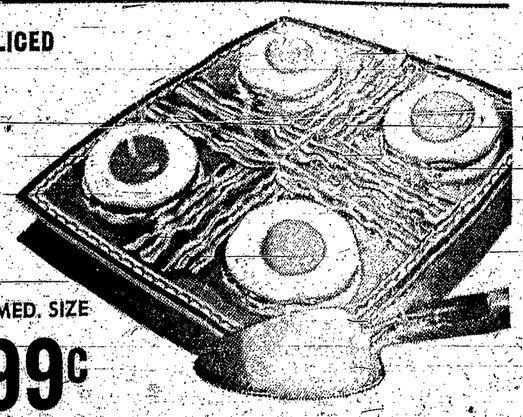

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