

Sing Sing Prisoners in a Baseball Game.

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Why We Still Need New Methods in Our Prisons

Adolph Lewisohn Says Reforms Have Not Gone Far Enough and Points Out Need of Improvements in Different Institutions

By Adolph Lewisohn

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THERE has been considerable discussion during the past year or two of the subject of prison reform, particularly regarding the conditions which formerly existed at Sing Sing and Auburn prisons and the improvement which has taken place under the Osborne system of self-government.

Many people think that we have already had too much, or at least enough prison reform, and that we ought now to leave matters alone. I am not of that opinion. I think we have only just started improvements in this direction, and that even in Auburn and Sing Sing prisons there is still a great deal to be done to make conditions right, in order that the prisoner, when released, will be in such condition, both mentally and physically, that he will be able to take care of himself and his family, if he has any, and that there will be a good chance of his becoming a decent member of society. In other words, the prisoner should be treated more or less as a patient in a hospital, and an effort made to cure him of his faulty condition, and to improve him in every respect, particularly also in character, so that in future he will be likely to avoid the wrong path which he formerly followed.

The only way this can be brought about is to give him such instruction and treatment during his stay in prison that he will be able to find the right kind of occupation afterward and to educate public sentiment so that the people will look at the matter in the right light and be willing to give the prisoner another chance when he comes out. We must get away from the idea of mere punishment, and rather strive for improvement and cure.

In recent years attempts have been made from time to time to improve the conditions in the prisons and to introduce the parole and honor systems, but the great benefit of the Osborne system is that it has a good influence on the character of the prisoners and under his treatment most of them go straight after their release, not because they fear further punishment, but because there is created in them the desire to do the right thing and become good members of society. Many of the ex-convicts from Sing Sing and Auburn who are now on the right path have told me that they want to do the right thing on account of either their mothers or other near relatives. I do not think such a thought formerly entered the minds of ex-convicts or, if at all, only in rare cases. The change has been brought about principally because there has now been created in the prisoner a hope for the future, in-

stead of the former feeling, which was almost justified, that there was no use for an ex-convict to try to go straight, as there was very little chance of his being able to make a living for himself and family. Having lost all hope for the future, prisoners formerly used to plan further crimes and wrongdoings with only the one idea of trying to avoid being caught again. There was also then that spirit in the prisoner of trying to get revenge upon the public generally. This is now commencing to vanish, inasmuch as he recognizes that there are a good many people on the outside who want to help him while he is in prison and afterward.

Judge Wadhams of the Court of General Sessions says that he has watched the matter carefully since the Osborne system has been introduced in Sing Sing and Auburn, and that while formerly a large number of prisoners would come before his court for second, third, and even fourth offenses, none from Sing Sing or Auburn prisons have come back since the Osborne system has been inaugurated, even for the second time. This speaks for itself.

There is also a report from one of the large industrial concerns employing a considerable number of former prisoners from Sing Sing and Auburn, which shows that for one year fully 75 per cent. have gone straight and have made good records, some of them being among the best workmen in the plant.

Of course, Sing Sing and Auburn prisons and the improvements inaugurated and existing there are but a small

part of the whole problem; their most important value is in the model they form for others to copy.

Great improvement is needed also in the conduct of the jails and institutions for juvenile delinquents, none of which can be covered by the system of self-government, and yet the methods in these institutions should be radically changed.

The institutions for the young people are often the starting point of the criminal life which follows. Statistics show that many of the prisoners have originally been in reformatories, and that their criminal careers started when they came to these institutions as little children. We must see what can be done in regard to these delinquent children, and look after them when they come out of the reformatories. The Osborne system cannot be applied to delinquents except in a moderate way, as young children are not fit for self-government. I hope that gradually the number of children placed in institutions, particularly in correctional institutions, will decrease to a minimum and that those who must be placed in institutions shall be so treated that they will be able to take care of themselves or be properly taken care of upon their discharge.

The number of persons placed in jails before they are found guilty should also be reduced to a minimum, and those who have to be detained should be carefully segregated and not mixed up with habitual criminals, which often may have a bad influence upon them, especially upon young people. No prison taint

should be placed upon persons detained for examination until they are really found guilty. The summons should be substituted for imprisonment in jails wherever possible.

The following is an excerpt from an address I made at a meeting at Carnegie Hall last January:

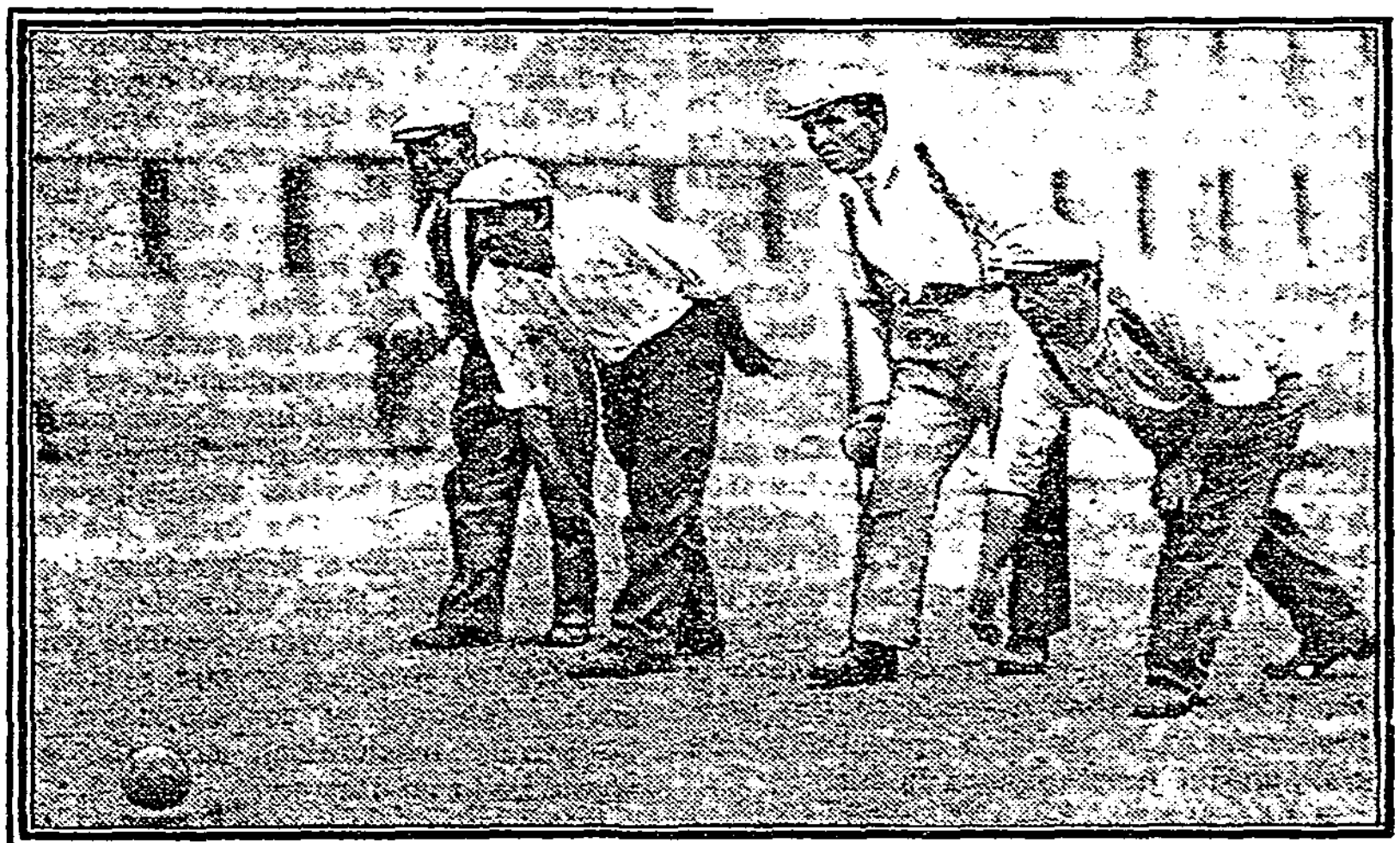
We all greatly deplore the terrible war now raging in Europe and the great suffering and loss of life occasioned thereby, and it grieves us deeply that we are powerless to end it. But right here in our midst tragedies are constantly occurring which, if not equal in number, are causing mental and physical suffering as great, if not greater, than those in Europe, and the most pathetic part of it is that much of this suffering could and should be avoided. Is it not a pity that in committing the prisoner we punish his innocent family or dependents, not only by the loss of support but by the stigma which is indirectly put upon them?

During the last twenty-five or fifty years great improvements have been made in many directions. Through the advance in medicine and surgery, diseases are now cured which formerly were incurable. Great has been the advance in the arts and sciences and in the management of industry, but no corresponding advance has yet been made in the treatment of prisoners or in prison management. We employ a tremendous amount of machinery—courts, judges, district attorneys, wardens, keepers, and the like—and what do we accomplish? We do not attack crime at its root nor try to prevent it. We watch and wait until a crime has been committed, and after the harm is done we make arrests. The innocent and the guilty are thrown indiscriminately together and deprived of their liberty until their guilt or innocence is established. We do not prevent the commission of crimes, nor do we consider the causes that led to the crime in shaping the punishment and fixing the time of imprisonment.

We are practically working under the system established hundreds of years ago, which makes it impossible to consider the causes of crime. The prisoner is cast into prison for a period of time, and except in cases of life imprisonment and capital punishment, which must be comparatively rare instances, he ultimately must go back to the general community. It is certainly of the utmost importance, and we owe it as a duty to society, to see that the prisoner is so treated while in prison that when he comes out he will be a better person, cured, or at least partly cured, and able to support himself and his family.

It is of the utmost importance that his health should be safeguarded while in prison, if for no other reason than that when he comes out he should not spread disease and be a menace to the community, as is now often the case. In other words, the system of temporarily separating wrongdoers from the rest of the people is useless and harmful, unless you restore them to society reformed and purified.

The National Committee on Prisons, of which I am President, has a very large amount of work before it. It cannot be expected to accomplish everything at once, but it is doing all it possibly can to bring about improvement, and it will be successful if it receives the co-operation of a large number of our good citizens, and our fellow-men generally.



(Photo American Press Association.)
Prisoners at Play Under the New Prison Conditions.

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