

Losing freedom, prisoners find religion

Story: SHIRLEE IDEN
Photo: JACK IDEN

Behind the iron doors of one of the world's largest walled prisons, 27 worshippers celebrate Rosh Hashanah. Prisoners, visitors and rabbi, they gathered to mark the advent of the New Year, 5740 in the Jewish calendar.

A small minority in a prison that holds some 5,000 persons, but it was enough. Ten men are needed to form a congregation in Judaism.

Getting into Jackson Prison isn't quite as difficult as getting out, but one doesn't walk in off the street. A visitor who will participate in Jewish services inside the walls must be recommended by Rabbi Irwin Tanenbaum and then be cleared by supplying birth date and social security number.

A long, low reddish brick building, the prison is surrounded by a higher than normal cyclone fence, which surrounds an extensive parking area.

At the gate a casually dressed guard checks automatically anyone wishing to enter.

The large reception room is shaped octagonally with benches, a counter and a balcony. As in waiting rooms in clinics or bus stations, people sit, eating snacks from vending machines, smoking, laughing, chatting.

SMALL CHILDREN chase one another in a game of hide-and-seek and the loudspeaker calls out names of those whose turn to visit has come.

Two sets of iron bars have to be unlocked before one is inside the walls. And just as in the airport, a metal detector tries to find out hidden secrets.

Each visitor has a yellowish liquid painted on the back of his right hand. Later a blue light will show the mark and only then will iron doors open for the visitors to leave.

Through a hallway and then out into the bright sunlight of the prison yard, the rabbi leads the group.

Prisoners in blue jeans, chinos and other civilian garb stand around outdoors. Some laud the group shouting: "Merry Christmas, I'm a Jew."

Then indoors again the interdenominational chapel is opened. But today, it is a Jewish chapel with the Star of David prominent and Jewish High Holy Day prayer books set out.

It is difficult to discern which of the men is a prisoner and which a visitor. Each puts on a skullcap and throws a white prayer shawl over his shoulders. There are three women.

Capacity in the small chapel is about 70. Wooden benches and an wooden altar don't warm up the plain room very much. An ark contains a single Torah which will be used in the service.

KATHY GORWITZ, who has come to the prison many times with her husband, Kurt, from Lansing, lights the candles and says the holiday blessing over them to open the service.

Rabbi Tanenbaum chooses as many of the prisoners as he can to recite preliminary prayers, open the ark, hold the Torah and take part in the ancient service for Rosh Hashanah.

An inmate, trained by a Hasidic Jew who studied weekly with the men, blows the Shofar in the ancient ritual of the ram's horn.

In a little more than an hour, the service is complete. The "congregants" file out, each wishing the others will be inscribed for a good and healthy year.

The visitation has been arranged to last until 4:30 that afternoon, so half the time is left to eat holiday cake, drink coffee and just visit.

Rabbi Tanenbaum meets in a small office with several of the men who want counseling. Others stand or sit around trying to maintain a holiday feeling.

The rabbi comes to the prison each Saturday morning to officiate at a Sab-

bath service. His temple in Jackson is Reform and the congregation holds Sabbath worship Friday night.

"They have been good about letting me come," he says. But his mission behind the prison walls is a personal one. The rabbi is not paid for his weekly ministrations.

DURING the service, he took the part of the cantor also, singing the liturgy in a sweet, confident voice.

Sitting in a tiny anteroom, each prisoner seems his story to tell.

Floyd Diamond, hair shaved almost to the scalp is 41, and has been in prison since he was 16 years of age.

"Made a mistake, a murder," he says. "But I'll probably be out year after next."

Bob Good has come all the way from the Upper Peninsula to be at the Jewish service.

"I came in a bus convoy but it was a hassle," he said. "Rabbi had to pull some strings." In prison five years, he will be released in two months.

Rick Ward is a young artist who has achieved some prominence despite his imprisonment. A somber painting in black and white signed by Ward hangs on the office wall.

A tall thin young man, says he's getting out in just days.

Ken Yoeman will be deported to Israel where he was born. In this country since he was 11, he says he was jailed for helping his sister escape from another prison.

"And then I've tried to escape from here too," he says, explaining why he has been there since 1970.

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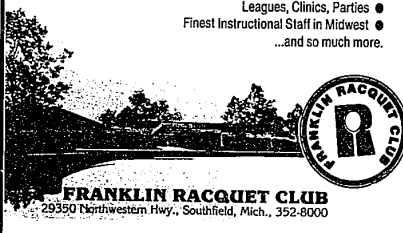
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