

Paul
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The Prisons: "A Heck of a Thing"

A humane man who happens to be a judge in the state of New York did a wise and exceptional thing the other day, but in so doing, he unintentionally hurled a piercing shaft of light through one of our nation's greatest ills—its prison system. The judge, David O. Boehm of Rochester, was faced with the task of sentencing a man convicted of first degree assault to some form of payment for his crime. In this case, the traditional payment would have come in the form of spending a portion of his life in the State Correctional Facility at Attica. And, in this case, the convicted felon was a homosexual.

Judge Boehm took the unusual step of asking prison officials what the potential dangers were for a homosexual in Attica and he got an earful. "There have been stabbings and fights over this situation," the judge said. "It would be cruel and unusual punishment. He'd become an object of barter there, completely dehumanized, if he wasn't

killed." So, the judge put the prisoner on probation with a stern admonition to stay out of trouble if he wanted permanent escape from a most unhappy fate.

Thus ends one story, but what about the rest? What about young men who are neither hardened criminals nor homosexuals who are sent to such places surely to learn all the tricks of both trades? Or the correctional officers who leave their families each morning to join—as surely as the prisoners themselves—the prison culture, never knowing whether they will return home again that night? Until we develop humane alternatives to our present prison system, we will continue to consign men—both those we punish and those we pay to guard them—to hell.

Judge Boehm said it all after he left his courtroom. "I resent the fact that we have no alternatives . . . This is a heck of a thing, and the public ought to know about it."