

City Block: On West 85th St., Verdicts On the Deaths in Attica Are Already In

NYTimes

SEP 17 1971

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This is another in a series of reports, appearing from time to time, on New York City as seen through the variety of life on one block — West 85th Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue.

By JOHN CORRY

The people on West 85th Street did not know until Tuesday night or Wednesday morning that the guards at the Attica Correctional Facility had died by gunfire, and by then it did not seem to matter much to them. Nearly everyone had made up his mind about Attica at least a day before.

The people who had approved the decision to send the state troopers, sheriffs' deputies and guards into the prison still approved — or at least accepted it.

Governor Rockefeller did the right thing they said, and the question of who killed the hostages was of no consequence. Few of them, in fact, even raised the question.

The people who had expressed horror at the first news of the deaths and had said Governor Rockefeller was wrong, still expressed horror, and if there was a change of attitude at all on West 85th Street it was expressed by them.

Now, some of them said, they were full of anger; but it was apparent that many of them, particularly the young, also felt they had been proved right.

"I know it's wrong to feel this way," Peter Rogers, an economist said, "but I'm glad the prisoners didn't kill the guards. Now the blame is on society."

Don't Mention Troopers

Mr. Rogers, who is white, did not mention the sheriffs' deputies or state troopers, and not many other people did, either. Nearly everyone, it seemed, found a euphemism.

A young black man, a former convict, said that no one in particular had done the killing in Attica. "It's a tough world," he said, "and you die in places like that."

L. Edwin Moya, a Puerto Rican handyman, who said his brother had told him that Attica and Sing Sing were the worst prisons in the state, said that convicts always had a bad time.

"Five years ago my brother saw a Puerto Rican man beaten to death in the Tombs," he said, "and no one would do anything about it. At Attica, it is the same thing."

West 85th Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue is a street of uncommon diversity. It is full of brownstone and limestone buildings, with a few apartment houses, and although the residents say it is "a good street," most also have a deep awareness of crime and violence.

These residents said the state had acted properly. Few mentioned that most of the prisoners were black, and nearly everyone who said it was right to send the troopers and deputies into the prison added that the convicts were desperate men, capable of nearly anything, and that the law had to be upheld.

Describes Criminals

"I remember what happened around here a few years ago," said George Bassat, who has lived in the neighborhood since 1940. "These guys got a drug money. He wouldn't tell dealer and wanted his money. He wouldn't tell them where it was. So they burned him with cigarettes all over his body. Then they killed him. That's what a criminal is. That's the kind of man you had at Attica."

"I'm sorry if the prisoners Mr. Bassat said. They're men, too, but they must be dealt with firmly. There is no other way."

Mr. Bassat did not speculate about what might have happened on the morning the guards and prisoners died. Indeed, it seemed that no one wanted even to think about it.

Larry Hall, a black musician, did not know how the guards had died until his wife told him.

"Well that's better," he said. "It's more humane than having their throats slashed."

Mr. Hall was told that the prisoners had no firearms.

"No," he told his wife, "they must have stolen some from the guards."

Mrs. Hall said she, too, had heard that the guards had no firearms. "Zip guns," Mr. Hall said, "the prisoners might have had zip guns."

'I Respect the Law'

Everyone, it seemed, shared Mr. Hall's reluctance to visualize what might have happened at Attica. On Tuesday, a landlord, who once was interned by the Nazis at Auschwitz, said:

"I'm a European, and I respect the law. This is something terrible, slitting the throats of those men. William Kunstler, the radical lawyer who was up there, I hate him.

"He's a Jew, and I'm a Jew, and I would kill him. If I didn't have a wife and kids I would kill him. I know what it is like to live without law. He does not, but he talks all the time like he does. I would kill him."

On Wednesday, when the landlord heard that the guards had been shot, he said that he didn't want to think about it. "Killing," he said, "what does it matter how?"

'Can't Tell Anymore'

Henry Stolzman, an architect, said: "When I first heard about it, I felt an incredibly strong emotion. Horrible, I thought, why wasn't this prevented? I had been reading 'The Magus,' and there was the part about World War II atrocities. It can't happen here, I thought, but then it had.

"I'm not sure what my feelings are anymore. I can't tell about anything anymore."

So there was this feeling, too, on West 85th Street: of shock, and a degree of hopelessness. Mr. Stolzman, a white professional, felt it, and so did a janitor from Jamaica.

"First I read one thing about what happened," he said, "and now I hear another. I do not know what to believe. Everyone will back away from what they first say and no one will be able to tell anymore about anything."

Few people on West 85th Street wanted to say that perhaps the authorities had made the worst kind of mistake. They seemed to feel that talking about it somehow made it worse, or, perhaps more important, that talking about it might make them change their own positions.

A man who said, "They should get the ringleaders at the prison and send them all to the gas chamber the way they do in South Africa," also said that it didn't matter how anyone had died.

A radical young woman, who said, "I'm glad the prisoners revolted and I'm glad the guards are dead," also said that she had no idea how many prisoners died, and that if she had it would make no difference.

Dr. William Dubin, an analyst, who practices at 1 West 85th Street, said, "It's very frightening to everyone to think that the leadership, the people who control things, might over-react. When I first heard of the guards' deaths, I was disturbed; when I heard they had been shot, I was furious."