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Rage Seethes in a French Prison Town

By JOHN L. HESS

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—Only the barking of dogs broke the silence of the wooded valley, tinted with the first gold of autumn. In the bar across the road from the prison, men moodily drank their beer or red wine, and glared suspiciously at a stranger. They spoke reluctantly, holding back their secrets, reflecting the hatred and fear that exploded in violence here last week.

Last Monday morning, two long-term convicts appeared in the infirmary of the Maison Centrale de Clairvaux and took the guard and nurse prisoner at knifepoint. By telephone they tried to trade the lives of their hostages for two getaway cars and guns. The weapons were refused. When the police smashed their way in Tuesday morning, the guard was dead and the nurse dying, their throats slashed.

This is virtually all of the story that happened here 100 miles east of Pons that the public has been told. On Friday, the nation's prison guards stopped work to protest the liberalization of penal conditions, some hooped at Government ministers' presence at the funerals of the victims, and President Pompidou criticized reforms and defended capital punishment.

His Wife Slated for Duty

But behind the gray walls of the medieval monastery of Clairvaux, transformed into a prison compound, and in the few score of houses outside, where the rest of the staff live, other facts that may

have a bearing on the tragedy have been kept bottled up.

In the bar, a husky, mustached young guard said his wife, a nurse, would have been on duty in the infirmary that morning had she not been on maternity leave.

"They're like wild animals," somebody said.

"No," he retorted, "They're worse. Animals don't kill their own kind. We should take 50 of them out into the court and sit them against the wall, and 50 guards, one to a prisoner, and — 'He brought a hand down in a definitive gesture'—make an example of them."

In a nearby community, another staff member admitted reluctantly and anonymously, that treatment in this spirit had been tried before at Clairvaux as an example. Until now, the affair had been kept secret.

'A Rest Home Now'

Last May, five prisoners were caught trying to escape through a sewer conduit. They were savagely beaten in the court, and in front of the other prisoners, to teach them a lesson.

The beating, a crime in itself, caused a dispute in the prison administration. It conceivably was an element in the subsequent liberalization of conditions.

"It's a rest home, now," a guard complained.

"It's a luxury hotel," said a young workman from a neighboring village. "Hot water, radio, television, newspapers."

The hot water was an exaggeration, but the other items were granted for the first time. Much progress has also been made in transfer-

ring prisoners from the "chicken cages" as more comfortable and private quarters were built.

The easing of conditions admittedly heightened the security problem, which was aggravated by the indiscriminate crowding of long-termers with other prisoners. The number of guards was not increased.

Guard Was 'Nice Guy'

When tragedy struck, fear and anger were directed at the liberalization. Since the jailbreak attempt, the 500 remaining prisoners have been kept locked up, denied work, visitors, newspapers, radio or television. While gendarmes have taken over security details, the guards are reporting to work only for minimum maintenance.

"We'll strike until they get all five," a guard said, referring to the total of five convicts now awaiting trial for murdering prison guards in France.

A staff member who described himself as a reformer and normally an opponent of capital punishment said that in some of those cases he

could find extenuating circumstances, such as the "provocation" of certain sadistic guards.

"But this guard was known as a nice guy," he said. "And the nurse. They were killed in cold blood. I'm afraid that those two heads must fall."

It was suggested that the two prisoners might have been influenced by the public beatings administered to the prisoners who tried to escape last May, and that in any case it was tragic that men with records of savage violence had been able to make their way—in a manner not yet made public—to the infirmary unguarded.

"Just because there was a failure in security didn't give them the right to kill," the staff member replied.

"We'll strike," said the man in the bar, "until the public realizes what kind of beasts we're dealing with."

When the visitor objected that there wasn't much sympathy around the country for the convicts, the man retorted angrily: "Oh, yes. There was a woman came by yesterday, and do you know what she called them? 'Poor wretches!'"