

THE HOFER'S CASE

Fort Leavenworth, December, 1918

"CRUCIFIXIONS" IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Cases of Jacob Wipf and the three Hofer Brothers

Religious Objectors to War

Two of whom died from the effects of

Military Atrocities in American Prisons

Told on the hospital cot by Jacob Wipf,
who prays with Christ: "Father, forgive
them, for they know not what they do."

Carried to the outside world by an Army Officer

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The fellow was telling his story. His eyes—plaintive eyes—spoke eloquently of intense suffering and were fitting comrades to the tale he voiced. The story, indeed, came as a stale breath from the Inquisition—a smudge of medievalism hanging on through the centuries to shadow its insidious deviltry upon our Twentieth Century—a hideous jest to taunt us moderns who boast of idealism and democracy.

As this bearded man with the beseeching eyes recounted his nearly unbelievable tale of religious persecution there seemed to spring from the trite words of his narrative a vitality of Will to Believe. I saw manifested there an indomitable spiritual courage to live to conviction and to permit no coercive interference with the still small voice of conscience. These were the virtues so evident in the man—qualities indeed which not only define the strength of any personal religion but which essentially characterize man's progress toward all spiritual freedom. Such were the virtues that authority's persecution had violated,—and, as my sympathy and admiration surged to the man, I suddenly felt twisted into some abhorrent nightmare of a past inquisition.

Unquestionably the story should be told—and retold; for, while it probably instances one of the worst of the present war's persecutions in America—it still typifies the spirit under which the war heretics had to suffer. Words, however, seem inadequate to tell the story as related to me by this C. O., for it is, in reality, written only in the indelible characters of his terrible sufferings and in the deaths of his comrades.

Jacob Wipf and the three Hofer brothers were members of the Hutterian sect. Staunch to their religious convictions, they protested against the forced use of their bodies in war. They were remanded by the authorities to the Alcatraz prison. This prison, built on a rock island of twelve acres, contains a typical Spanish dungeon or "Hole" as it is called in the vernacular of the prisoners. It is with this chamber of punishment that our story deals.

The usual rigors of confinement that military prisoners all endure—though evil enough in themselves—are nothing as compared with the tortures suffered by Wipf and his associates. They believed, with an intense conviction, that their duty to their God utterly precluded any submission to military command. Immediately, therefore, upon their entrance to the prison they refused to comply with any dictate of soldier authority. It must be remembered that this was no degenerate whim nor yet the stubbornness of criminals—it was the highest spiritual conviction of deeply religious men.

Upon refusing to work, they were sentenced to confinement in the "Hole," and they descended to this terror cell to suffer for five days under the most inconceivable conditions. The dungeon—a hideous reminder of past ignorance and cruelty—is located thirty feet below the base of the prison building and just at the level of the sea. The thick stone walls, standing through long years, have become saturated with moisture and water continually worked through the crumbling mortar joints and trickled on to the floor. The air of the place was heavy—and always damp and stale.

Into this "Hole" the Hutterian Brothers were thrown and, impotent before the uncompromising power of the officers, they could not reasonably anticipate help from any human agency. You cannot conceive the poignant isolation an individual feels behind the walls and restrictions of a military prison. A dull sodden impotence pervades one's mind and body—a deep seated horror of the bars, the guards and the oppressive rules (regulations). Realizing the injustice of his confinement and seeing his cherished American ideals of Freedom and of the right to Honest Opinion brutally ravished—there comes to the political prisoner a slow, throbbing spiritual pain. But add to this the terrors of a torture cell of the Alcatraz type and you know the acme of heinous persecution.

The four Hutterians were handcuffed by the wrists to an iron bar whose level barely allowed their feet to touch the floor. Guards stripped them of their Civilian clothing down to underwear. Blankets or covering of any kind were refused them and they lived in shivering fear of the cold and damp of the cell.

Beside them on the floor were laid soldier uniforms. The tenets of their church forbade the wearing of military garb. The sneering guards, miscalculating the determination of these prisoners, swore that soon they would be dressed up as "regular soldiers." Wipf's eyes shone triumphantly as he told me this incident.

"But," he said, "we had decided, To wear the uniform was not what God would have us do. It was a question of doing our religious duty, not one of living or dying"; then quietly: "and we never wore the uniform."

For a full thirty-six hours, these quiet heroes remained "strung up" as it is called. Not a bite of food of any sort was furnished them and but one glass of water. They suffered—chilled to the bone, nearly naked, hungering and thirsting—and with pain and fatigue torturing their every nerve. To add to their torments, guards came to them during this 36 hour period and beat them brutally with clubs. Yet never once did they think of accepting the easy way out by succumbing to the military will.

Finally, the inhumanity—as well as the futility—of such treatment was apparent even to the authorities and they released the Huttrians who were, by this time, in wretched condition.

For the rest of the five day period, they were exempt from this "hanging up" but the other features of the punishment remained in force. They were without clothing. The cell was damp and musty. They were allowed but a single glass of water each 24 hours and not a morsel of food for the full five days. The dungeon contained no bed and their rest was taken on the water-soaked floor. Washing and toilet facilities were entirely lacking and thus they were forced to live there close to the filth of their own excrement. Frequently the sentries came in to manhandle their victims.

Full of the horror and pain of it all, these four protestants to war gradually became physically weaker and weaker. They felt the "death by inches" close upon them. Sanity remained to them only by the sturdiest effort of will.

At last the authorities, fearing the consequences of their action, released Wipf and the Hofers from this ordeal. They emerged from the dungeon, broken in health, and barely managing to walk. Upon reaching the light and fresh air of the upper prison, they were found to have contracted scurvy. Their skin was covered with unsightly eruptions. The effects of this disease were still evident in Wipf's face, as I talked with him.

This completes the story of the actual dungeon experience of the Huttrians and, though they were yet exposed to many petty persecutions in the California prison, their lot was softened considerably.

The immediate sequel, however, is as hideous as the actual story. Shortly after their ordeal in the underground cell, the Huttrians were transferred to another military prison where most of the C. O.s. are at present in confinement. The change was from a temperate climate to one more rigorous and this was accentuated because the season was that of early winter.

With their advent to the DISCIPLINE of this other prison, the Huttrians found similar difficulties awaiting them. They again refused to submit to military duties, and as in their former place of imprisonment, they were sentenced to confinement in "Solitary." Conditions here were infinitely more favorable in respect to sanitation and the like. Still they were placed on a bread and water diet for fourteen days; "strung up" to the bars of their cell; and forced to sleep on the floor.

The consequences of such "disciplinary" treatment following so closely upon their former ordeal and combined with the sudden change from warm to cold weather are easily pictured. Cold draughts that swept across them as they slept on the floor soon took fatal effect on their weakened lungs. Within ten days two of them—two of the brothers—lay dead in the hospital. The immediate cause—the surgeon's report stated—was pneumonia!

The third brother—already in a precarious, though not serious physical condition—was granted an immediate release, to arrange for the journey home of his dead brothers. Jacob Wipf—physically the strongest of the four—stayed staunchly in "solitary" fighting down his general weakness and diminishing vitality, with never a thought of playing the coward.

Finally Wipf's physical strength became exhausted—and, as I write his story, he now lies in the prison hospital suffering the effects of the dungeon torments. I recall him as he spoke with me, patient and quiet,—though staunch in an unassuming heroism, he held neither malice nor hate against his oppressors. There was a gentle forgiveness for them. All that remained of his concern about his persecutions was a wonderment that our present system could thrive and that the social conscience could remain callous to such coercive brutalities.

This is the spirit of the man, and the message of his story. It is sufficiently startling to quicken the conscience of every American to shame that he should be even a remote party to such oppression. And similar sufferings were meted out to all the objectors to war, though in many instances the coercion was not carried to such brutal extremes as in the case of the Huttrians. But all suffered much the same—Christian and Jew—Socialist and Moralist;—a thousand of them, and as clean cut and quietly brave group of Americans as I have ever seen teamed to a common cause.

You who are caught quietly in the comfort of your library arm chair or the calm of your own fire-sides! You worshipers who sit softly in church and call upon the name of the Father! You workers and men of trade who are free to go and come as you will and to relax in the joy of your families! To all of you—Americans!—comes the story of Jacob Wipf and the Hofers who would not let their conscience die.

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