

1930

Recollections of Carl Panzram

by Henry R. Pessers

This is an attempt to set down my recollections of Carl Panzram at the time he was a prisoner at the District Jail, Washington D.C. awaiting trial and until he entered the gates of the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas with a sentence of twenty five years on a charge of Housebreaking and Grand Larceny.

Panzram was at the jail a few weeks before I paid any particular attention to him. One day as I passed his cell I struck up a conversation with him. For some reason or other I thought that he was a habitual ^{and hardened} criminal so I asked him in the midst of the conversation as to ~~what~~ what was his racket. He said, "How do you know?" I answered him diplomatically by saying that I just had such an idea. When I inquired as to the charge placed against him he replied that he was being held for investigation. He answered me civilly thru out the brief conversation. I may have thought ^{that} he was an ^{and} hardened criminal because of his physiognomy which did not seem to indicate that he was as kind as the Bishop portrayed by Victor Hugo in Les Miserables.

After being at the jail about two months he was caught tampering with the bars of his cell window. He had succeeded in prying loose two of the bars. That very day or hour before this discovery all of the ~~officers~~ guards had been gathered together in the office of W. F. Peake, who was in charge of the institution, and warned to watch closely

Carl Panzram as there had been received reports from different prisons advising the Warden of the very dangerous ~~man~~ criminal in our midst. Panzram was put into a punishment cell immediately and a few hours afterwards about seven PM he was ~~to~~ escorted by four Jail Guards to the Basement of the institution. In the Basement are many posts which support iron beams that run directly underneath the ceiling. Each post is about eighteen inches in circumference and about nine feet in height. Panzram was placed ~~against~~ with his back against a post and his hands were handcuffed behind him. A rope was slung ~~thru~~ the cuffs and then ~~the~~ ^{it} ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~fastened~~ ^{fastened} around the post a few feet above his head so as to extend his arms upward. He was kept in this position for about twelve hours. Eyewitnesses ~~and prisoners locked in their cells~~ ^{and prisoners} narrated how all night long he shrieked, cursed and blasphemed. He cursed his mother for bringing him into the world and said that he wished to had a chance to tear her to pieces. He hurled the vilest epithets at the prison officials and any a few prisoners who happened to be present at the time. He expressed his desire in no uncertain terms to kill them. He wanted to tear their hearts out and throw them in their faces. The Jail physician, Dr. ^{Harris Bernstein} ~~W. W. H. H.~~ examined Panzram's heart to make sure that he would not die while at the Post because if that happened it might create a ~~scandal~~ ^{terrible scandal} and perhaps would result in the removal of the sanctimonious Warden if the truth came out.

While the examination ³ was going on Panzram taunted the Doctor with the charge that he was guilty of committing sodomy upon the body of his assistant, a prisoner. The Doctor of course resented this unfounded and ridiculous charge and voiced his extreme disapproval in words which only fanned the flames of intense hatred which Panzram held for him. The next morning the prisoner was taken back to the cell which happened to be one on the first tier of the South Wing. This cell was one of about six which were ^{only} used heretofore for men who were awaiting execution. He was placed in the very first cell that one came to after entering the wing so that he could be watched very carefully.

During the course of that day he called one of the officers who escorted him to the Post the night before a son of a bitch. This officer knowing him as I do must have been overjoyed at the opportunity which this offered to have further torture administered to Panzram at the Post. ~~The~~ ^{written} A report of insubordination was made out. The warden ordered the recalcitrant prisoner be placed at the Post again. Four burly guards anxious and waiting for an opportunity to use physical violence came into the cell to get Panzram. On the preceding night he offered no resistance, ^{menacing} forward of whom he was going. When the exactly what was contemplated. Offering resistance he was hit on the head with terrific force by an officer wielding a blackjack.

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Eyewitnesses, prisoners say that he was kicked and punched by the other quorks. A love tap with a blackjack is almost enough to make one dizzy so you can believe that the prisoner was knocked out completely. He was put to the Post again and stood there all night.

When I came to work the following morning Panzram was sprawled out on a mattress which had been placed on the cell floor.

I learned from the Head tinsman, a prisoner who was in charge of celling men and other work of a routine nature a full account of the previous night's happening. It was verified by guards who had witnessed all the details. The narration of the brutalities visited upon this defenceless man kindled in me strong indignation and built up a feeling of sympathy for him. I found out that he did not possess any money. A man with money in jail is in a dire predicament. One without money is indeed unfortunate. I gave the Head tinsman ~~George~~ a dollar for Panzram. When Wilcox told Panzram that I send in a dollar he thought that a joke was being played upon him. "What! a guard sending me a dollar, don't try to kid me" When Wilcox reassured him that it was so tears came into Panzram's eyes. Here after being tortured and mistreated by everyone a guard takes a sympathetic interest in him. Later in the day when I passed his cell he stopped me and offered profuse thanks for my gift. I forgot to mention that ~~he took~~ when Wilcox said the dollar was from me Panzram inquired as to how long I had been an officer at the jail. When

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Wilcox replied that I had been there over a year
Panoram said that I would become as
cruel and obtuse as the others in time.

If I were not for the fact that I befriended
him at this particular time I don't think
that I would have been able to gain his
respect and ^{confidence} good will which led to his acceding
to my request that he write ~~my~~ ^{his} autobiography
for me. We became very friendly, a spirit
of entire cordiality prevailed between us.
~~It is perhaps interesting to point out that he~~
~~used to would not talk to the other officers~~
~~for any length of time.~~

We discussed the new ideas in Penology
advocated by such men as Sheldon Glueck,
Harry Elmer Barnes, Carl Lippman in this country,

Professor Lippman in Germany and others.
We discussed ^{Border, Religion and Life in general} I remember while I was guarding him
in the ball room when he was taking his
weekly shower he made the observation
that although he was guilty of inflicting
cruelty upon others ^{practically} all his life he resented
others treating him likewise and squawked
about such treatment continuously.

One day I entered his cell to make the
weekly inspection which included the testing of
the bars. A heavy piece of iron was used
to test ~~the~~ bars. When he saw me enter his
cell he immediately jumped up from the mattress
which was on the cell floor. Then he said,
"I guess you are alright, you won't harm me."
He resumed his former position.

On another occasion when I entered his cell to inspect the bars my back was turned to him while I was making the inspection. He could have jumped and relieved me, if he ~~would~~ ^{so desired} of my iron bar unit which he could have terminated my penological career. When I was ready to leave his ~~cell~~ all he said, "Gee! you've have to turn your back on me" I didn't ~~say~~ reply at the time but later I spoke to him. I said, "Carl, I did not turn my back to you because I was have." "I turned my back to you because I had confidence that you would not harm me." "We have been getting along so nicely together." He replied, "I don't want to harm you but I am so erratic but you better be careful because I am so erratic that I am liable to do anything."

He said at times that he was a disciple of Schopenhauer believing in the Philosophy of Pessimism. Carl was of the opinion that everyone was selfish and looking out for his own welfare. He believed that people who were good or kind or generous couldn't act otherwise if they wanted to.

It was Christmas Eve. a ~~chorus~~ choir in the Rotunda, ~~only~~ ^{with} singing hearing of Pangram has just completed singing carols. I passed his cell and looking in I noticed that Pangram was standing with the fly of his trousers unbuttoned, ~~but~~ his penitential was in plain sight of anyone who might look. It was told me many times by prisoners who were allowed out on the bustles and who were

able to pass Pargram's cell
that Pargram used to
having a few stray coins in his pocket ~~paying~~
~~the whole~~ repeatedly all the while I would
everything I had for a nice hole. He would
work his fingers to represent one whole making
this assertion.

Christmas cards were being distributed to the
offenders. Zubelewski, a prisoner, gave them out.
I wanted to have a little fun with Carl so
instead of telling him that the Episcopal City
Mission presented it he informed Carl that it
was a gift from the Warden. Excitedly, Carl
threw it out of his cell door. Carl was very
anxious to send a Christmas gift to the Warden.
Wt. Peake in the form of a pineapple. At
that time not knowing what Peake meant
by a pineapple I asked him to explain.
He looked at me with a haughty air. He
said that in the jargon of the criminals a
pineapple was a book.

One day as I was talking to Pargram
then the bars of the cell door I called his
attention to a beautiful sunset which could
be seen through his cell window. As I said
look over there Carl he jumped away from
where he was standing and appeared very
frightened and excited. When I asked
him the reason for this reaction he said
that he thought for the moment that I was
trying to divert his attention in a bid to assault
him with some object. He had been used to having
his attention diverted in the past for this reason.
Upon second thought I apologized to him for
saying pointing out the beautiful sunset because

He couldn't have been in a mood to appreciate
 Pamgram's brother who lives in the state of
 Washington hired a counsel for Carl. In a letter
 to Carl he said that newspapers at home were
 carrying accounts of his criminal activities. He
 employed Carl to trust in Jesus Christ and give
 up his criminal career. Carl reminded the
 brother of the time when the family gathered
 a sum of seventy five dollars with which Carl
 was to leave for South America and try to behave
 like a brother to whom Carl was writing. This reply ~~was~~
 kept the money instead of forwarding it as arranged.
 He reminded the brother of the brutal treatment
 manner in which he was treated by him after Carl
 when a boy of about twelve attempted to shoot
 a German Preacher who had punished the in revenge
 for whippings administered by him. He told his brother
 that he had killed twenty one human beings
 during his life and had ^{murdered} violated all the laws
 of Man and God. He complained in the letter
 that no one ever had pity on him. Carl
 suggested that the brother use the pilfered seventy
 five dollars with which to purchase a gun. He said,
 "as you are a nut on religion like our father
 just go out into the woods, read your fool Bible
 and then blow your brains out." He ended the
 letter by requesting the brother not to write any more.
 Pamgram wrote a letter ^{asking for his salary} to a man
 whom he worked as a farm hand for a while.
~~before~~ being arrested on the charge which led
 to his incarceration at the District Jail. According
 to Carl the man owed him about ten dollars.
 The farmer sent him ^{about} two dollars instead. Pamgram
 sent him returned the money order and suggested
 to the farmer that he buy some cyanide of potassium
 with the money, to ~~use~~ ^{swallow} one half of it himself
 and send the remainder of the portion to the writer

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I don't know how true it is but I was told that when Carl was in a cell with other prisoners, he administered to one of them, a sick man, with great tenderness.

I happened to be one of the officers named to accompany thirty two prisoners, among whom Pangram was included, to leave the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas. Pangram on the way out of the ~~instated~~ Jail passed ^{the warden's secretary} to the prisoner, who took down Carl's confession to the murder of three boys. Carl made this confession on the second night of his torture at the Post. Carl spat upon this prisoner. Pangram was heard to remark ^{to the prisoners} while on the way in a police van from the District Jail to Union Station, ^{to find the train} that he would try to cause a train wreck. Before we boarded the train ~~and~~ Warden W. L. Peak who ^{also made} ~~was in~~ charge of the trip advised the railroad authorities. The emergency cord which runs beneath the ceiling of the coach was disconnected. I understand that pulling the cord while the train was running fast would cause some cars to leave the track.

Pangram was shackled and handcuffed to a prisoner by the name of Standish who was ~~to~~ very disappointed in getting Carl as a partner. Standish you see was very much like the rest of us, only he liked ~~to~~ and did steal ~~the~~ ^{and} steal ~~the~~ ^{and} steal ~~the~~ ^{and} steal (suit cases). Like nearly all the prisoners on the train Carl spent his time playing cards for money. Whenever Warden Peak got in sight of Carl he made all kinds of disparaging remarks of a sexual nature ~~which~~ ^{was} in order to taunt the warden. He gazed intently at the warden with eyes burning with hatred, seething with a lust to kill him. He also reacted this way whenever he caught sight of Dr. Maurice Hysman, who by the way stood up

all night watching ¹⁰ Panzram closely, fearing to
go to bed less something dreadful should happen ^{to}
him at the hands of the prisoners. As Panzram ^{was}
securely shackled ^{and as the guards watched him every second} and his hands cuffed, there was
very little possibility of anything like this happening
~~being~~

I remember Carl thumping his nose at
boys while the train was at a standstill at one
of the stations en route.

He talked to me in a friendly manner
and smiled occasionally at me while on this journey.
When he left the train he gave me a warm hand
shake.