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# Sinn Fein Prisoner Tells a Remarkable Story of Debs in Jail:

**Thomas Walsh of Irish Republican Army, Jailed by Uncle Sam on Orders from London, Associated with Debs in Atlanta — He Says 'Gene Rules the Prison and Dominates All**

Published in *The New Age* [Buffalo, NY] vol. 10, whole no. 483 (Nov. 24, 1921), pg. 1.

*Thomas Walsh, a friend of the editor of *The New Age* [Patrick L. Quinlan], was released from the Federal prison, where he served the best part of two years for the crime of being a fighter for Irish freedom, democracy, and small nationalities. He gave the following story to a New York World man, Charles Sweeney, one time press agent for DeValera. Walsh's story is the best we have seen so far.*

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From one who has just emerged from the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta after serving a year *The World* today received a dramatic account of the prison life of Eugene V. Debs.

*The World's* informant is Thomas Walsh, a soldier in the Irish Republican Army, who was imprisoned for carrying a letter across the ocean in violation of the Trading With The Enemy Act.

Walsh is not a Socialist. He is a Catholic and an Irish patriot. Before entering Atlanta Debs was only a name to him. Today Walsh said to this correspondent:

**"Finest Man I Ever Met."**

"Mr. Debs is the finest man I ever met in my life. He has done more good in Atlanta than a hundred chaplains could do, and he is the finest Christian I know, even if he doesn't go to church."

Walsh's story completes the picture of Debs drawn by *The World* in an interview with the Socialist leader on October 3, 1920. That interview had to do with Debs the untamed revolutionist and candidate for the Presidency. What *The World* today learned from Walsh is

the first detailed picture of Debs the prisoner in his daily life among 2,300 fellow convicts.

This *World* reporter knows Walsh to be a reliable and level-headed person. The remarkable story Walsh told today proceeds, condensed:

Debs is the towering personality of Atlanta Prison. He is the only "Mister" among the 2,300 convicts. Anyone heard by other prisoners addressing him in any other fashion would suffer for it. Two moonshiners addressed Debs as "Gene" in the prison yard one day. Four other prisoners grabbed them, saying: "Who the hell do you think you are talking to? It's Mr. Debs in your mouth, see? — MISTER Debs!" And the moonshiners ever after employed that salutation.

Why this deference to Debs the Socialist? It is because he has refused every privilege offered to him that was denied to other prisoners; because he is the real spiritual counselor of the best and the worst of his prison-fellows; because he has had the courage to go to the front on questions involving all of his fellows, and because around him he has built in their minds a tradition of real manhood that has inspired the conversion of what were regarded as incorrigible "bad men" into model prisoners.

### **Didn't Go to the "Hole."**

A guard caught Debs one day speaking to another prisoner working in the yard — a violation of the rules. He reported Debs to the then-Deputy Warden, Gregory, who ordered Debs sent to the "hole," a solitary confinement cell. The report, "Debs has been sent to the hole," flew around the penitentiary. Zerbst, the then-Warden, heard it. He called Gregory to him and said, "Don't you know that if that man went to the hole these men would pull this prison down brick by brick? Hereafter all reports about Debs come to me. He is MY prisoner." Debs did not go to the hole.

When delicacies have come for Debs he has refused them because other prisoners could not receive similar kindnesses. But at Christmas time last year he received all that was sent to him because at that season all prisoners receive what is sent to them. Debs took everything and then distributed virtually all of his own gifts among those who received none. The rest he gave away in daily doles for two weeks to the patients in the prison hospital.

Despite all reports to the contrary, Debs is treated exactly as any other prisoner — gets the same food; obeys the same rules. He gets up at 6:15; eats a breakfast of cereal, dry bread, and black coffee; cleans up his room (the state of his health causes him to live in the hospital, where he has a room, with an iron bed, an iron table, and a chair), walks for an hour in a space 20 by 100 yards; undergoes inspection daily; eats a lunch of beans or stew and dry bread; walks for another hour; returns to his room; eats a supper of beans or bologna sausage or frankfurters and dry bread and black coffee, and returns to his room for the night. He has felt keenly the prison regulation that denies prisoners a bath except once a week, for he was accustomed to a daily bath.

He was 68 years old one week ago last Friday [Nov. 5, 1921].<sup>1</sup> For a week before and a week after that event an average of 150 letters and telegrams from all over the country arrived to wish him well.

### **Tamed Sam Orr.**

Zerbst, the Warden under President Wilson, thought very much of Debs. He believed him to be one of the best influences that ever entered into the prison life. This may be explained by stating the case of Sam Orr, 50 years old, giant black man, who has served 30 years of a life sentence expiating a murder. Sam Orr was the worst of the bad men in the prison. Most of his 30 years he has spent in the "hole." Men were afraid of him. Debs arrived, discussed with him the consequences of his attitude, made Sam his friend, and Sam is now his devout follower and an exemplary prisoner. He is just one of the hundreds who dog the footsteps of Debs and seek his advice for matters that disturb them. As for Orr, Debs told Walsh, "I would rather that man be given another chance in freedom than that I get out of this place myself." To that end, Debs made one request on his famous trip to Washington. He asked Attorney General [Harry M.] Daugherty to give Sam Orr one more look at life.

Debs is a sick man. But he refuses to be pardoned on the ground of illness. He says he will tear up a pardon of this kind. He asserts he has committed no crime and that no conditions, therefore, shall be imposed upon his release.

Debs, although the mail brings scores of radical papers and publications to him, receives none of them. *The Call*, *The Nation*, *The New*

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<sup>1</sup> Debs was born Nov. 5, 1855, so he actually would have just turned 66 in 1921.

*Republic*, all of these are torn up in the mail room by standing order of the Department of Justice.

### **Propaganda of Good Will.**

He has never once attempted any propaganda within the prison. It is doubtful if more than 10 percent of the prisoners really know what it is he was sent there for. They know he is a Socialist, but few know what Socialism is. Debs never talks politics. To quote Walsh directly:

“If he propagands at all, it is the propaganda of good will among men. He doesn’t go to church, and I don’t know if he believes in any church, and I don’t care, for he is the finest Christian I have met in or out of prison. His Christianity makes a lot of professional exhorting look like a mockery.

“When I asked him what message I could take out to the world for him, he simply said, ‘Tell my friends and well wishers I sent them my love, whenever you meet them.’ And yet it is this gentle and admirable spirit who, I have been told by older prisoners than myself, leaped out of line on one of his first days in the place and threatened to assault a guard who attempted unprovoked insolence to him. And I do not doubt it at all, for Eugene V. Debs is nothing if he is not a man.”