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IMPRISONMENT OF THE MIND

The Effects of Indoctrination in Jail upon Two Young Americans
Who Have Just Been Released by the Chinese Communists

A Report from A. Doak Barnett

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Hong Kong rests on the edge of two worlds, But sometimes you forget it, because the place is so calm, beautiful, and "normal." Then, unexpectedly, something happens which shakes you emotionally and intellectually, making you realize that the frail wire fence separating Hong Kong from Communist China symbolizes a chasm which is frighteningly wide and deep in many respects.

On February 28, a friend of mine told me that I looked pale. I have no doubt that I did. During the previous twenty-four hours I underwent an experience which was genuinely unnerving. I saw and talked with two young Americans who had just emerged from Communist China after serving three-and-a-half-year "sentences" for "espionage." Both were completely indoctrinated in the ideology and world outlook of their communist jailers.

When Mrs. Adele Rickett and Malcolm Bersohn arrived in Hong Kong on February 27, instead of being jubilant about their release or resentful against the Peking regime under which they were imprisoned, they immediately made it clear to the world that they had become dedicated supporters and enthusiastic missionaries for the communist cause. Both of them flabbergasted friends and reporters who met their train by openly confessing complete guilt as "spies," expressing deep "shame and remorse" for all of their past "crimes against the Chinese people," praising communism and the Peking regime extravagantly, and announcing that in the future they planned to "work for the people."

Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn seemed to be under some sort of spell even after crossing the border. As they talked to reporters, the words came flowing out in the clichés and vocabulary of Radio Peking; it was as if they were repeating a communist catechism rather than describing personal experiences. The whole performance seemed unreal, even though both Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn spoke with obvious conviction. As I listened to them, the dominant thought which kept running through my head was that

their bodies had been freed from jail but that their minds were still imprisoned by the narrow dogmas to which, amazingly, they had been converted while behind bars. They were still living in a world created in their minds by years of indoctrination and psychological pressures in prison.

Both Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn came out of China hypnotized by the communists' "truths," which they learned not by personal observation or reasoning but by instruction in jail. In conversations they spoke constantly of the "truth." What a short and simple word! Webster says that *it* means "conformity to fact and reality." Simple enough, in theory. But Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn seem to have lost or abandoned their own capacity to make independent judgments on "facts" and "realities" and to have accepted completely the "truths" propagated within prison walls in Peking.

These two young Americans are the most striking examples to date of foreigners successfully indoctrinated within Communist China's jails. They are disturbing testimony of the vulnerability of the human mind to psychological pressures, and striking proof of the effectiveness of Chinese Communist indoctrination methods.

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Malcolm Bersohn, age twenty-nine, comes from New York City, where his father, a lawyer, lives on Park Avenue. He is a tall, lanky person who looks younger than his years.

Bersohn received his university education at Harvard, where he studied biology. After being graduated in 1944 he joined the army, and in the following year he was sent to China. For the next year or so, he says, he worked for the office of Strategic Services, one of the leading wartime U.S. intelligence agencies, before being demobilized and sent home in 1946.

More study in the U.S. followed, but apparently the lure of the Orient infected Bersohn as it did many of his fellow GI's during the war. By 1948 he was back in China, this time studying to be a doctor at Peking Union Medical College, the Rockefeller-endowed institution which used to give the finest medical training in China.

In early 1949 the communists entered Peking. At first Bersohn, like most other foreigners who had not evacuated the city, continued his work undisturbed.

I was in Peking at the time, and although I did not know Bersohn personally, I heard others talk about him. He was one of the sort who "settle in" abroad, learn the language, live very much as local inhabitants do, and avoid involvement in the

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somewhat ingrown community life of their fellow countrymen's enclaves. He was immersed in Peking. A few of the Americans there who knew Bersohn regarded him as "emotionally immature," but people gave him credit for "really trying to learn about China."

Finally, in July of 1951, Eersohn was arrested, along with a number of other Americans, and disappeared into a Chinese Communist jail. From that time until last month little was heard of him. Peking made no public mention of his name, and no charges against him were aired.

A few reports about him did trickle out to Hone Kong, however, from fellow prisoners and other Americans released earlier. These reports indicated that he was a recalcitrant prisoner who for a long time stood up to his jailers and consequently received tough treatment from them. During the early period of his imprisonment he was seen in chains; later he was observed manacled with handcuffs.

Mrs. Adele Rickett is thirty-five. Her family home in the U.S. is in Yonkers, N.Y.; but for a number of years both she and her husband have been studying China professionally. During the war her husband worked for the Office of Naval Intelligence, and after the war both of them did graduate work in Chinese studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She received an M.A. there in early 1948.

In late 1948, the Ricketts went to China. They received Fulbright scholarships to continue their study of China and chose Peking as a place to settle down. When the communists took over in 1949, "Del" was working toward a Ph.D. in Chinese literature and teaching English at Tsinghua University on a part-time basis.

As in the case of Bersohn, the strong arm of the Chinese Communist regime descended suddenly in July 1951. Mr. Rickett was arrested and sent to jail. Mrs. Rickett was placed under strict house arrest for over a year, and then she too was taken off to jail. There she was able to write notes to her husband, but she was never allowed to see him. No charges against either of them were publicly announced when they were arrested.

During 1949, in the period immediately after the communist entry into Peking, I saw something of the Ricketts and got to know them fairly well. "Del" impressed me as a highly intelligent, stable American girl whose interests seemed to be more cultural than political. Like most Americans with her kind of educational background, however, she did, of course, have political views. They impressed me as being mildly New Dealish and "liberal" but in no sense pro-Communist. She was, in short, neither radical nor ultraconservative but somewhere in the middle.

Mrs. Rickett was in a basic sense religious, I believe,

although she was not a proponent of dogma and did not parade her religious beliefs very much in public. Her personality was one exhibiting quiet self-confidence, friendliness, and warmth. She was the kind of girl one calls attractive even though she was not really pretty.

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There was no forewarning of the release of Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn, just as there had been none of their arrest. Suddenly, on Sunday, February 27, they presented themselves to the police at the Hong Kong border.

Hasty telephone calls from the American Consulate-General notified a handful of reporters and friends of their arrival and, by the time the afternoon train from the international border to Kowloon station had arrived, there were about a dozen people waiting for them at the station.

When the two of them stepped off the train, it was obvious that they were tired and tense, but neither looked in bad shape. From a sartorial point of view, they were hardly impressive; Bersohn was wearing faded blue jeans and an old gray shirt, while Mrs. Rickett had on black slacks and a checked jacket. But it was clear that physically they were all right, sound of limb and not emaciated. Their friends heaved a sigh of relief, and the reporters took note of their condition.

Fifteen minutes later, friends and reporters alike were exchanging questioning glances, shaking their heads in amazement and looking bewildered. We were assembled in a small station teashop interviewing the two of them, and what we heard was unbelievable.

The first question was directed at Bersohn. It was a general question which asked, in effect, "Well, what has happened to you during the last three and a half years?" Very simple, he said, "I was a spy." From then on his words tumbled over each other as he volubly described his guilt, his shame, the justification for his arrest, the good treatment he received in jail, his admiration for the communists, and his support of all the Peking regime's domestic and foreign policies. He spoke rapidly, somewhat nervously, and with considerable emotion. When questions from his listeners showed doubt or skepticism, he argued heatedly to convince the questioner. He sounded like a spokesman for the Chinese Communist regime rather than an American who had just been released from a Chinese Communist jail.

All of the reporters present scribbled furiously. This was turning out, unexpectedly, to be quite a story. No American expelled from China before had talked quite this way. Some had been strongly influenced by indoctrination in jail; many, for

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example, had believed propaganda such as the germ warfare charges, or were impressed in general by the strength and dynamism of the Chinese Communist' regime. But none had turned out to be 100-per-cent partisans and apologists for the communists.

Mrs. Rickett sat calmly on the side lines while Bersohn held the limelight, but finally the interview was switched to her. When she was asked, "And Mrs. Rickett, what comment would you like to make on the things Mr. Bersohn has told us?" I am sure that almost everyone present expected her to disagree with what had been said. Her first remark, therefore, was stunning. "I absolutely echo his statements," she said. Then she proceeded, in her own quiet way, to add a good deal more.

The interview broke up with everyone in a strange mood. Mrs. Rickett declined an invitation to stay with an American couple who had been close friends of hers in Peking; she chose instead to take a room in the YWCA. Bersohn went to the YMCA.

I decided that I must have an opportunity to talk with them again, this time alone, so the next morning I telephoned "Del" at the YWCA. She was friendly; "certainly, come on over." When I arrived, Bersohn had already joined her, so I sat down with the two of them in a sun-washed YWCA lounge. We talked for a couple of hours. Their answers to my questions were like a conversational fugue, the parts neat, regular and intertwining, the themes consistent and familiar. It was no act, however; I was absolutely convinced of their sincerity. By the time I left, I had the feeling that a vague chill had settled over the sunny YWCA lounge.

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It is difficult to describe impressions of people's minds, because such impressions are formed not only from what the people say but also on the basis of how they say it. However, I know of no better way of giving a thumbnail sketch of the present state of mind of Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn than simply to quote some of the things they said to me. I cannot attempt to reproduce full conversations, but even disjointed fragments may give a rough idea of their thinking.

All of the following quotes were taken down verbatim in their presence, and they were spoken with what appeared to me to be firm conviction.

GUILT AND SHAME

The question of espionage charges and guilt came up first. Both Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn were determined to prove their own guilt.

Bersohn: "When I was arrested I was absolutely guilty of the crime of espionage."

Rickett: "My situation was clearly espionage."

Bersohn: "I knew in the first place that I was guilty. In order to gain self-respect one has to confess."

Rickett: "Before I was arrested, in my heart I knew that I was guilty of being a spy, but I wouldn't have admitted it."

Bersohn: "We are grateful for such light sentences. One has to be penitent to be released."

What did their "espionage" consist of?

Bersohn said that as a member of the OSS during the war he "did intelligence and espionage against the Chinese revolution." Then, he said, when he was in Peking as a medical student during the period of the communist take-over, he "did another piece of espionage" when he "sneaked through" the "wave length of a spy radio" to an American university lecturer outside of Peking who, Bersohn says, was a "spy" and "not a friend of the Chinese people." In addition, he said that he delivered information on the "Chinese Volunteer Army" to an American girl in Peking; this girl, a student, was also a "spy," according to Bersohn. In short, he said, "I admit I spied for the U.S. Government, It is a fact. How can I deny a fact?" Bersohn then went on to say that previously he had had a "savage mentality" and "did not know" what he was doing. Later, he said, he had come to feel "full of shame and remorse."

Mrs. Rickett stated that her husband worked for the ONI, and that she "helped him in doing espionage work." This, she said, consisted of "military, cultural, and political intelligence work." She asserted that she and her husband each received \$2,300 from the U.S. Government in 1948, and that he received another \$3,000 in 1950. "In the beginning," she added, "I was terribly reactionary, refusing to see what the truth was."

On the surface, these confessions, from the "criminals" involved, may sound fairly convincing. Yet I know of no one who talked with Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn in Hong Kong who was convinced. The two of them found themselves in the anomalous position of confessing their guilt to people who did not believe them.

I personally am convinced that neither Mrs. Rickett nor Bersohn was guilty of "espionage" as the term is used in the West. I asked Bersohn if he had ever, in Peking, submitted regular reports to any agency of the U.S. Government or received any money for information. The question annoyed him, and his answer was evasive. "Espionage has nothing to do with money," he said. I probed Mrs. Rickett on the source of the money she said came from

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the U.S. Government, Reluctantly, she admitted that the \$2,300 she and her husband received in 1948 consisted of their Fulbright scholarship grants, and she avoided saying anything about the \$3,000 which her husband received in 1950 by stating, "That is his affair, and I cannot say anything about it."

But both Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn left China convinced that they were guilty of "espionage," as the term is used by the communists. In short, they apparently came to accept the Chinese Communists' definition of the word, which can be extended to cover acquisition of almost any knowledge about the regime, particularly by persons unsympathetic to the communists.

Some news reports from the U.S. following Mrs. Rickett's release implied that she might be trying to protect her husband, who is still in jail in Peking. But I am sure in my own mind that this was not the case. She appeared to be sincerely convinced of her own guilt and, like Bersohn, was "full of shame and remorse." She was able to say to me, without emotion, that she was not concerned about her husband, and that naturally he would have to be in jail longer than she was "because his crime was greater than mine."

INFALLIBLE LAW

From the day they were arrested until shortly before their release, neither Mrs. Rickett nor Bersohn was given a trial or convicted of any crime. Then, about two weeks before they left, they were both "tried," sentenced to three and one-half years' imprisonment and "deported" from China "because they had already served their terms." In view of these facts, their opinions on the present legal system in Communist China are startling, to say the least. Remember, also, that Bersohn is the son of a successful New York lawyer,

Rickett: "In China today a person who is not guilty of a crime could never be arrested or convicted."

Bersohn: "I was together with several hundred people at different times in jail. I never knew anyone who was not guilty of serious crimes. I never met one innocent person."

Rickett: "They don't arrest you until they have absolute proof that you are guilty."

Bersohn: "The legal system in the People's Democracies is the most infallible system on earth. Why? It is democracy. Anyone who thinks that anybody else has made a mistake or is capable of making a mistake can express himself on it. That is the essence of democracy."

I asked them if they did not think it strange that their "trials" came at the end rather than at the beginning of their

imprisonment. Of course not, they replied. They were guilty from the start, The authorities make no mistakes, The system is infallible,

JAIL: "WONDERFUL"

Bersohn spent a total of three and one-half years in jail in Peking, and, as stated earlier, he was reliably reported to have been in chains or handcuffs during at least the earlier part of that period, Mrs. Rickett spent two and one-half years of her "sentence" in jail.

There have been many reports on conditions within Peking jails, including theirs, made by persons who have come out of China during recent years. These reports indicate that treatment of different individuals varies considerably, In some cases, the authorities are fairly lenient in a physical sense, and the emphasis is on indoctrination, In others, however, the jailers are very rough, and sometimes prisoners undergo prolonged periods of physical maltreatment, Most foreign inmates seem to get enough food to survive without difficulty, but the diet is meager, The cells are usually overcrowded, and prison life is extremely austere. Many prisoners are made to work. All prisoners live in an atmosphere of psychological harassment, pressure, and fear while they undergo intensive indoctrination and demands for confessions,

What did Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn have to say about their treatment in jail?

Bersohn: "I was always treated kindly while in jail, Everyone was--not only Americans but also Chinese, I had pneumonia once and almost died, The doctors treated me day and night,"

Rickett: "The food was good."

Bersohn: "The Chinese Government gave me two lives. I should have been shot for espionage and wasn't. I might have died of pneumonia in prison and didn't. I am certainly grateful to the Chinese people."

Rickett: "Our conditions were so good! The People's Government took care of us so well!"

There was no irony in these statements, They were made with genuine emotion.

One of the most significant things about their discussion of jail life was the fact that they refused to talk at all about their indoctrination. They refused, in fact, to recognize that the "study" and "discussion" groups in which they participated were instruments of indoctrination, The whole

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process, they asserted, was a voluntary one in which they gradually came to see the errors of their past and accepted "truth."

Rickett: "In jail I sometimes studied and sometimes worked, at sewing and such. The study was often in groups, sometimes individual. But don't think it was forced. Usually, the demand for study came from me. It was not placed on me by the government."

Bersohn: "We could discuss anything we wanted in jail. It was free discussion."

Rickett: "We had no pressure put on us."

As I listened to them make claims such as these, I thought of all the people who previously had described to me the severe psychological pressures of prison indoctrination which they had experienced. I wondered how and when Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn had been "broken." But it did not surprise me that they could not admit, even to themselves, that their ideological conversion had been under duress.

When Bersohn was asked about reports that he had been kept in chains, he became agitated and said he would not answer such questions.

"THE TRUTH"

Everything which Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn said provided evidence that in their Peking jail they had undergone a basic emotional and intellectual conversion, and that they left China believing with religious fervor in communist "truth."

Rickett: "In a People's Democracy, after you express your opinion, through the course of discussion you arrive at the truth. There is only one truth. There is only one standard for judgment: what is good for the most people."

Bersohn: "Everything we read in the newspapers told the truth. The newspapers in China cannot tell a lie. No, we did not see any papers but the Peking People's Daily, but it tells the truth. It is not distorted like American papers."

Rickett: "When I first went into jail, I argued for American democracy. We had many happy discussions. But gradually I realized that I was looking at things from the wrong viewpoint, through the wrong glasses. Gradually, one comes to realize the truth."

Bersohn summed it up neatly when he said: "A cigarette is a cigarette, a piano is a piano, and truth is truth." How can one question it? There it is--simple, clear, undebatable.

What had happened to the innate skepticism, the insistence on personal opinions and individual judgments, the belief in independent thinking which these two graduates of leading American universities must once have held? Wholehearted belief in "the one truth" has superseded all.

"NEW DEMOCRACY"

After hearing Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn speak the way they did of the "truth," there were no surprises when I heard them express their political views.

Rickett: "In the New Democracy today the government is of the people. It comes from the people,"

Bersohn: "If Lincoln were alive today he would be a communist."

Rickett: "The Communist Party is an organization of the people. Anyone who wants to work for the people can join the Party. The people and the Communist Party are one."

Bersohn: "It would be perfectly impossible to have democracy without the leadership of the Communist Party."

Rickett: "There is absolutely nothing you can say to express the new spirit you see in China. Many of the principles of morality in Christianity are absolutely akin to the principles practiced in People's China."

Bersohn: "In the whole world there is nobody so peaceful as the Chinese government and Chinese people."

Rickett: "The communists are always against aggressive war."

Bersohn: "The United States is filled with poverty at the present time and is on the road to war. Depression is inevitable in the U.S. It cannot be avoided. Periodic depression is part of the system."

Rickett: "Capitalism is inseparable from poverty and war."

Bersohn: "I am sure that the future standard of living of the Chinese people, after they have completed their socialist industrialization, will be much higher than the standard of living in any capitalist country."

Rickett: "In the future, America will be a socialist country. It is not a question of whether the U.S. 'should' copy the U.S.S.R. and People's China. It is a question of whether the U.S. 'will.' It absolutely will; that is the way the whole world

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is inevitably going."

Bersohn: "Taiwan [Formosa] belongs to the Chinese people and does not belong to the US. No evil force can stop them."

Rickett: "No force on earth can stop the Chinese people when they want to get what is rightfully theirs."

The whole schematized communist conception of the world, phrased in standard terminology, was repeated over and over. If there had not been such conviction in their manner of speaking, their contribution to the conversation would have sounded like the reading of a well-rehearsed, two-part script. One of the pair would make a statement; the other would affirm support for it and then, using the same terminology, add something in the way of elaboration. The first would then pick up a cue and continue. And so on. Their answers to questions were not short and simple. They had to answer every question with the complete version of the catechism; and even if interrupted they would insist on continuing to speak their piece,

One very revealing incident took place while we were talking in the lounge of the YWCA. An American woman who had joined our conversation noticed that Bersohn was not wearing socks and asked him why. He was flustered by the question and said, "I am sorry. Yes, I should be wearing socks, shouldn't I? I will get some." He was like a small boy reacting to a verbal spanking. I wondered how many, and how harsh, his verbal thrashings had been during the past three and a half years in jail, and whether he would ever be able to stand on his own feet again as an independent person, intellectually and emotionally.

"I AM NOT WORTHY"

The shock of listening to them expressing communist dogma would have been less if Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn had become members of the Communist Party. When a person joins the international apparatus of communist organization, a great many things follow from this fact. But this was not the case with them. Both stated that they had not become Party members--they seemed genuinely surprised when asked if they had--and in my opinion there is no reason to doubt their claims. They are ideological converts, not political recruits.

When Bersohn was asked if he had joined the Communist Party, he replied, "I have not that honor."

Mrs. Rickett answered the same question by saying, "How can we join the Communist Party? Only the best people can join the Communist Party. I am not worthy. I have committed crimes."

Both of them, however, feel in a vague, undefined way a tremendous obligation to work for the communist cause, for the new "truth" they have accepted.

Mrs. Rickett, when asked of her future plans, said, "I want to return to the U.S. to be an honest person, work for the people, and make up in some way for the harm I have done in the past."

Bersohn said, "I will try to be an honest and upright person, a person who does not harm the people. I will try to apply the morality the communists taught me--you must not harm the people."

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My principal emotions after talking with "Del" Rickett and Bersohn were pity and shock. I believe this was true also of most others who talked with them here in Hong Kong. There were very few angry reactions.

My pity was based upon realization of the terrible emotional stress they must have undergone during indoctrination in jail, and apprehension about the difficulty they will have in adjusting to a world in which the "facts," "realities," and "truths" they now accept will be in constant conflict not only with attitudes they will encounter but also with the things they themselves will observe and experience. They have traveled a hard road psychologically during the past three and a half years; another difficult road lies ahead.

My shock came from seeing what had been done under pressure to the mind of a person I knew. After talking with "Del" Rickett I had the sinking feeling that "if it could happen to her, it could happen to almost anyone I know." The Chinese Communists' methods of indoctrination are not basically esoteric or mysterious. Essentially the technique is to control all that a person sees and hears, as well as to focus on him the full force of authority and social pressure, and to use both persuasion and threat to make a person confess past guilt, renounce previous attitudes, and wholly accept a new faith. (See ADB-3-'54.)

Of course, my conversations with Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn took place only during the first days after they left Communist China, so it is difficult to judge to what extent they will be able slowly to come out of their present trance-like state of mind and adjust to a new environment during the months ahead. Their indoctrination may, or may not, wear off.

But certainly when I talked with them immediately after their release, both Mrs. Rickett and Bersohn were living in a world far different from the one I know on this side of the flimsy wire fence separating Hong Kong from Communist China.

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