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We call prison "school"

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Simon S. has spent approximately 2 Jahre in Austrian prisons. Simo K. was alltogether nearly 6 years imprisoned. Their prison experience is mostly due to their precarious residence and horrendous sentences because of minor offences.

Est-ce que tu peux me raconter tes expériences en prison et qu'est-ce que t'a amené en prison ? Est-ce que ces expériences ont changé quelque chose dans ta vie ?

Actually, if we start with the why: I came here to Austria and sort of was looking for a way to make ends meet. And with all the discouraging encounters I had with all the offices that I had been to, I didn't find it possible to succeed in making the right move for the plans that I had for myself, I eventually had to think of the easiest way to make life meaningful, which is built on the same goal that everybody had that I had met, which is to make money and leave, go back to Africa. So I had to find a way to be the same guy that everybody else is, make money for yourself and make decisions for yourself. So this was the reason why I got involved in the particular crime that took me into prison.

Est-ce que tu penses que tous les étrangers, que tout le monde, et je parle maintenant surtout de la mentalité Africaine, parce que nous sommes des Africains, qu'ils ont vécu la même chose que toi ou qu'il y a ceux qui sont venus et qui ont vit fait trouvé leur future, leur chance ?

I think we African migrants don't have all the same mentality, because our aspirations in life are different. Some actually knew they were coming here to do some kind of deal that will end in a lot of money and some came just to take their chances in life and see how they can progress. And some don't even know what they want. Some came here as a result of their involvement with some cultural activity, involvement with some diplomatic activity, and some come here as a reason of sports involvement and others stranded here for either prostitution or for reasons of drug dealing that mostly men are involved in. When you arrive here, what you become in Europe actually depends on the first few people that you talk to.

None of these actually apply to me, because I came to Europe and things were not working out. For some reasons I had to travel from Switzerland to this place, then reaching here I found out that what I was looking for wasn't possible for me here and under those circumstances it was really not possible to get along with this clean life like doing nothing criminal and surviving on "Grundversorgung", that was 39 Euro at that time. So a few friends of mine actually introduced me to this street life.

I also had other options, which is either to go in the U-Bahn and sell *Augustin* or simply just find some women who have enough money and be there toy-boy. In this sense you would be calculating how you can get your visa, how to buy your visa in whichever way it is obtainable. So what I thought was: "The only way I can be a man of my own and make decisions for myself is to earn my own

money." Actually the other options stated above are very good, because at least you earn something for the day and you don't pay tax for it, but the reason why everybody goes into street business is to make fast money. As it is, they say if you can do the crime you can also do the time. So everybody who does street business knows one day there is going to be darkness. That is actually what got me into prison.

Prison actually affected me negatively in a lot of ways. I lost a lot of things : I lost property, I lost money and it restructured my future in a way that up till now I am still in struggle with myself to right the wrong that I did then or to restore everything prison took away from me.

We call prison the "white house" or "school" because people go there to learn how to be strong for themselves for a new direction they want to push their life to or how to be strong in the crime they already know, so when they come out, they will do it better and safer. Prison is called « white house », because you have no rights to demand anything. It is a house full of powerful people to whom you can't even look up, you can't look eye-to-eye, you just have to obey what they say.

Mais il y a surtout le problème de perte, tu perds le temps et tu restes, et ça pour toujours, marqué par la prison, et ces cicatrices ils restent …

Yeah for sure, these wounds don't heal easily, like you said, and they haunt you for as long as you live. Somehow you will always be in prison once you've been there. From what we see today, it is also a structure that is built to fight the mind of anybody, who has done anything to deserve a prison term. Prison is something that keeps pulling you back. The police will always use it to position your kind of person, like "Hey, this guy is not to be trusted, he's

been in prison before. Hey, this guy must have committed that crime, because he has been in prison before." You know, the judge also uses the same kind of assumption to convict people, because if you've been in prison before, they think there is the possibility, the tendency that you can do anything. They feel that it is not because you made a mistake that you've been in prison the first time, they feel like you couldn't get out of it, it is your lifestyle. Prison is a prison of its own, working to make sure you are there. Not just the building, the "Beamten", the police outside, the judges, the "Staatsanwalt" or whatever, the prosecutor. Yeah, they are all in one body making sure, you come back there.

La prison, c'est un seul système, qui se trouve partout alors. J'ai une question un peu folle peut-être, parce que pour moi il y a deux prisons, il y a la petite et il y a la grande prison. Et ce que moi j'appelle la grande prison, c'est le civil. Dans la petite prison, on entre quand on fait des bêtises, on entre pour payer. Et la grande prison, c'est l'Europe pour les Sans Papiers, pour les harraga. Alors ma question : qu'est-ce que le plus difficile pour toi à vivre?

Hm, I think the big prison is more difficult to live in, because in the small prison you already know what the expectations are if you get caught in whatever you are doing wrong. But in the big prison it is not about doing anything wrong, it's about who you are, it's about migration, it's about quests for a better life. This is the situation in which we find ourselves right now. And everyone is desperate to get out of it, but getting out of it is not the biggest problem. The problem in this situation is that there is no time. You don't know when you are going to get out.

When you find yourself in the small prison, as you name it, you think "Oh, from this moment on I am dead". You lie down on your bed and look up on the ceiling and just think basically of

nothing, because nothing comes into your head, you are just still trying to figure out, if it is something you have done out of your own stupidity, out of ego, out of whatever. Then comes the moment when they use their big key to hit the door "Bang, bang, bang, bang ... Wake up, wake up, wake up ! It's lunch, it's breakfast, it's visiting time, your lawyer is here". It's so crazy you don't do nothing, you just wish the whole world could end right now, because right there you don't see nothing else, but you dying, dying to get out in the outside world.

When you finally get your sentence, either you focus on how to work inside the prison, so you can get a little bit of money to survive in there, or you think which trusted friend or family member you could write a letter to send you a bit of money so you can buy cigarettes or buy Cola or whatever in the prison. Then you cross that stage again, because there are so many other things happening in there that keep you hoping to reach the end of your sentence. But that doesn't stop the fact that every midday, once "Ausgang" is finished, you are locked, back into your cell. If you are lucky, you are locked in with people that you can communicate with, people you can play cards with, people that understand your language. If you are really fucked up, then they put you together with some guy from Ukraine, who doesn't speak German, who doesn't speak English, doesn't speak French, no language that you understand.

On communique alors avec les gestes, et des phrases simples "Coffee ? Coffee ? Coffee ? Oui ? Viens toi ici, moi je te fais le café." C'est comme ça qu'on communique en prison!

So the hope that you are going to be free one day, gives you some sense of joy. You start to make plans what you are going to do when you get out. If you've been a bad boy, you want to be a good

boy, and if you've wronged so many people, you would want to apologize or just keep your record clean this time and don't listen to what people say, just live your life and try to be happy. There is nobody, who wants to stay or keep living in the prison. In fact there are actually a few people, they get out, do something wrong again, and say "Take me back!". But this is not what we want to be part of, because we want to enhance our life, this is why we left Africa to come here. We didn't want to do bad things, when we came to Europe, but the system is too strong to survive in, this is why we start doing what we do to get our own share of the society by force.

There are a lot of similarities with the big prison outside and the small prison. Being an asylum seeker, I have been in refugee camps before. There is no big difference between a refugee camp and the prison itself. The point of entry, the "Erstaufnahmezentrum" is a total prison. Only there is more time, to play around. So there is usually time of breakfast, usually time for lunch, and time for dinner. But if you miss it that means you have missed it for the whole day. Just at it is in the prison. The only thing that makes it a bit different is that in the prison you must be in your room, they make sure you are in your room, whereas in the asylum centre, you could be somewhere playing basketball in the yard or just enjoying the fresh air. So at the end these two spaces are a lot more similar than we think, they just made it a bit lighter: we as refugees are not locked in and handcuffed when we need to see the doctor or when we need to see the lawyer. That is the only difference.

Attends, j'ai une autre question: Comment tu as fait pour pas t'abandonner à la prison ? Comment tu fais pour assurer qu'en prison, avec les gens là-dedans, les cellules, les sections, les escaliers, la petite place cadrée, ça ne te détruit pas ? Comment tu peux garder ta

personnalité, ton corps, comment tu as fait pour que la prison ne te fasse pas du mal ?

Surrendering to prison is something that never happens. You never surrender, because if you had the possibility, you would always want to break out. To keep your cool in the prison, it takes a lot just not to worry! It is a very difficult thing. From the very day I knew when I was to get out, I counted the days. Every single morning, I was removing one day. It was boring, to be indoor, just reading, writing and listening to music and thinking of when to buy a television set, or when to buy a music box, that belongs to you, with headphones, so that you will have your privacy in total. And you know, the needs of a human are always limitless. You have this today, you want to have that tomorrow. You are in constant conversation with your prison mates, if anybody has money and wants to provide something that you need in the room, like a boiler, if the prison cannot provide it, like a burner, if it is allowed in the prison, you know, there is always conversation about making sure that the room is suitable for living for everybody. So surrendering to prison, is something you always try to do, but nobody ever succeeds in doing that.

Oui, oui, je suis d'accord avec toi, ça se ne passe jamais. Donc, moi au début j'ai commencé tranquille, j'étais jeune encore, je suis venu à cette grande prison, l'Europe, et j'ai commencé à faire des bêtises. Et très vite je me suis trouvé dans la petite prison. Là j'ai commencé avec la tranquillité. Quand j'ai compris, que ce lit dans la cellule il est à moi, que je peux le prendre pendant tout le temps en prison, j'ai mis les photos, par exemple, et j'ai commencé à régler ce petit espace, pour me sentir au moins un peu « chez moi ». Mais qu'est-ce que tu fais après ? Le problème c'est qu'est-ce que tu fait après. Il y a beaucoup des temps à perdre, alors qu'est-ce que tu fais, si par exemple les racistes, les chiens,

les gardiens de prison vient pour t'emmerder, comment tu vas réagir ? Comment tu fais pour ne pas te perdre totalement dans cette expérience de la prison ? Parce que la prison elle est pleine de stress. Alors quelqu'un qui sort de la prison, il sort avec tout ça, avec tout le mal de la prison. Je me demande alors si c'est pas normal, qu'on sort de la prison un peu agressif ? Est-ce que c'est normal, c'est naturel ou non ?

There are so many things that are really annoying in a prison, the way the system is run, the regulations. One of them is at 7 a.m. in the morning, they expect everybody to sit down on the bed and really tidy up the bed. When the prison warder comes around and look, because some people take medication in the morning, so they must come around, they expect to see you sitting down, in some prisons, not in all of them. It didn't happen in all the prisons they took me through. But in the last one, at some point they said "Everybody must be seated!" At 7 a.m.!

Or when you want to have a nap in the afternoon, and they are taking other people from another floor to « Spazieren » and they talk like hell, and some come to your window to shout, calling at your room mate who is probably sleeping at this time and he has to go to the window and he starts shouting and talking to this person, you know, it's all very, very annoying. And you can't complain. If it were outside, you could say "Shut up!" or you could go down and say "Hey, could you please cool it" or you could call the police and you solve this problem. But right there, you lose all rights, basically.

But even the prison authorities know if they put people in the same cell who don't stand each other, there is going to be a problem, sooner or later. So they try as much as possible, they pick people from all the different cells, and try to put them together, on the ground that they understand that these people get along well.

Or, you could request to go to a particular room, where somebody lives you see as a friend. Or in some cases, there are big rooms, where six to eight, ten people can live together. So there is the possibility to play games, you can ask like four, five people "You want to play?", and if everybody wants to play, then you have a big table of fun. Or you could apply for a job as "Hausarbeiter", or apply for kitchen or apply for cleaning, and this helps you a lot. It helps against depression, and it helps to kill time, which means you will not need to be in your room for the whole day, you are at work maybe six hours every day, and you get extra time for "Spazieren", extra time for sport, extra time for a shower. Even on weekends you don't have to be in your room, because you have to work. On holidays the same. So once you are able to get yourself busy, engaged in so many things, it suppresses your pressure.

Oui, tu as beaucoup des possibilités … Pour moi, le travail en prison, on ne le fait pas pour l'argent, parce que de toute façon c'est pas bien payant, ou mieux pas payant du tout, alors on le fait seulement parce que la porte de la cellule va être ouverte toute la journée. Comme ça, tu peux sortir, parler avec les amis, et si le gardien il parle avec toi tu peux lui répondre « One moment … Je dois terminer d'autre chose avant ». Ça veut dire que ta position change, tu peux bouger un peu librement en prison, et si tu as par exemple besoin de quelque chose, tu peux aller direct pour le prendre, pendant que les autres, ils doivent demander quelqu'un qui travaille pour leurs amener tous ce qu'eux ils veulent.

Mais pour moi, cette question d'agression, notamment quand tu sors de la prison, pas quand tu es là-dedans, reste vraiment un grand problème. Moi, je suis sorti vraiment agressif. Cette agressivité ce n'est pas nous qui le créons, c'est cette merde, ce système en général. Tout le monde il veut vivre bien, ok ? Alors, je crois que, pour me débarrasser avec cette agressivité, je dois avoir tous ce que moi je veux et ce que j'ai voulu avoir

avant que je sois tombé en panne dans la grande prison. Je dois avoir tout ce que moi j'ai voulu de cette Europe, tout ce que je n'ai pas trouvé jusqu'à alors.

Quand je suis venu en Europe, quand j'ai pris le risque de mort pour y venir, je me suis trouvé d'abord au Sud ! Et là-bas les gens ils cherchent du travail, par exemple, pour 35 Euro ou 25 Euro. Je me suis dit, que ça va, il va m'aider, je peux vivre avec ces 35 Euro, vraiment je peux me construire, je sais pas quoi … Mais puis j'ai rencontré des gens – je suis d'accord avec ce que tu as dit, que tout dépend des personnes que tu rencontres quand tu arrives en Europe – et eux ils m'ont parlé de Bologna, alors du Nord. Ils m'ont raconté des trucs, et alors moi je me suis mis sur ce chemin avec eux, j'ai pris la même route qu'eux. Alors mon voyage, il a commencé avec cette décision. J'ai commencé mon voyage comme ça et puis je me suis trouvé en prison, enfermé. Et le mal il a commencé. Alors pour me débarrasser de l'agressivité, de la pression je dois avoir ce qu'il me manque en ce moment, ou ce qu'il m'avait manqué.

Si on parle de l'agressivité ou de la pression, qu'est-ce que ça veut dire? On parle des cicatrices et avec ces cicatrices il y a des souvenirs. Les cicatrices sur mon bras ils restent! Même les tatous, ils restent ! Les blessures elles restent. Et avec tout ça aussi les souvenirs ! Tu ne peux pas t'en débarrasser totalement, parce que ce que tu as vécu, il va rester comme un souvenir, mal ou bien, c'est un souvenir. Il va rester pour toujours.

Je dois alors me changer, moi-même je dois me changer, je dois chercher des choses, qui me font du bien. Eux, la loi, l'état, ils nous enferment, ils nous font vivre comme des prisonniers ou des ex-prisonniers, ils disent que nous sommes pas bien, et que nous n'avons pas le bienvenu dans ce pays. Donc, pour combattre cet image je dois chercher me faire du bien, pour me changer. Mais crois moi, le mal que tu étais enfermé, ce que tu

as vécu, par exemple, la prison, ça va t'accompagner pour toujours. Tu vas rester un peu enfermé avec les souvenirs maux.

Mais comment est-ce qu'on arrive à se changer ? Tu dois changer toi-même, simplement, tu dois travailler toujours pour te changer, c'est un travail à toi de le faire, parce que l'état, il fait rien pour toi. Quand l'état il construit une ville, il le construit bien, mais il construit cet espace seulement pour les gens qui sont des autrichiens, pour le peuple, mais pour nous, les sans papiers ou harraga, l'état il donne rien à nous, vraiment il nous donne rien du tout. Pour nous il y a seulement la prison, petite ou grande. Et une fois que tu es entré dans la petite prison, que tu fait des bêtises, tu n'as pas le droit d'avoir autre chose. Tu vas toujours rester prisonnier ou ex-prisonnier. Et si tu veux changer ça, c'est à toi de te changer.

I wanted to ad some concerning the topic of how to control aggression after prison. You know it is not good to generalize things, because when something happens, the reaction and the end effect is always different from person to person. I didn't quite experience this level of rebuilding your self-confidence, rebuilding your emotion, rebuilding your reaction to issues after prison, how you handle things. I didn't quite go through it, because when I got out of prison, I already had a family. So this was like a quick twist, that redirected my way of reflection, my way of approaching issues, because my child was already there, so I would say "If not that, because of my daughter, I would have fought this person now or I would have slapped this person now", you know. A lot of people go to prison out of taking law into their hands, thereby earning their free ticket to prison. I would love to have a discussion involving other people to talk about this transition of how to regain yourself, of how to recover from prison life to normal life after prison.

As regarding this transition from prison life to future life, I already said, I wouldn't want to say anything about that, because I don't have experience of it, personally, and for sure, if I get a chance to interact with people, maybe we can intertwine and make a good topic out of it, because it is really a life changing phase. This is when you decide "Hey, prison life is enough." Some people go to prison two, three times, before they say "No ! It's enough!". Some people go just once and say "Never again ! I don't wanna go back there !".

Ben, toujours la question elle reste, comment tu veux vivre cette autre vie ! Oui, comment ? Parce que très franchement, ok, on a entré en prison, on a resté en prison, on a vécu un certain temps là-bas, ok, avec les désirs, ok ? Et on reste à penser, on cherche seulement avec le stylo et la feuille un autre chemin. Parce que tu as tout le temps là-bas, tu as rien à faire sauf regarder la télévision etc. Mais quand tu sors, et tu es sans papiers, tu n'as pas une famille qui t'attends en déhors, tu te trouves dans la même condition qu'avant que tu es entré en prison : Tu n'as rien du tout ! Tu trouves les mêmes difficultés, et la loi pour se régulariser, il a changé entre-temps. C'est devenu encore plus difficile, d'obtenir un séjour légal, par exemple. Tu n'as pas connu la loi avant ton séjour en prison, et tu n'as aucune idée des nouveaux articles, tu comprends seulement que tout ça c'est fait contre nous ! Alors je te demande, qu'est-ce qu'il reste pour nous? On n'est pas accepté ! En prison tu es accepté, mais en dehors ? Tu cherches le travail, mais tu ne le trouves pas, même pas un travail irrégulier. Il y a seulement le business. Toujours le même disque. Alors comment vivre simple ? Si tu ne trouves pas de l'aide ? Comment tu vas affronter ça tout seul ? C'est beaucoup ! C'est trop !

Yes, when there is no hope ... When it's basically the same condition again, only that you are then an ex-convict, and a future convict if you continue ...

Ja, c'est ça ! Alors j'ai une autre question, comme on parle de business et tout. Alors, « C'est quoi, la rue pour toi ? »

The street is basically the only place that provides a job. But the jobs that you find in the streets, are already illegal in the face of the law. But the law is not making a provision for every single person to have the possibility of a job, of a clean job, of a registered job. So whereby some people are left out to partake in what the government has provided, the people who are in lack will still find a way for themselves. So this kind of trade, once again rolls between the hands of those who are in need. So they find a common place to meet, a common strategy of doing business. So, it's like when alcohol was banned, it had to flow into America through the underground and it really became an essential commodity. And everybody has to find a way to get hold on them. They found out, "Oh, hey alcohol is making a lot of people rich and the government is not getting anything." Then they legalized it, then killing the business. Then now it's Ganja or Cocaine or whatever, there is always something in the street you can get your hands on. It could be stolen goods, it could be smuggled goods, it could be whatever. Or your own personal goods, that you don't feel a need for anymore.

So street life ... I think it's a phrase that describes our struggle. It gives us hope, it provides the need, that even our parents cannot provide, the possibility that the government did not install. These facilities that make up street life are basically our own doing. We build them ourselves and we don't pay taxes for it. So that is what makes it really interesting: I negotiate with you, you feel good with

it, okay, business is done, you go your way, I go my way, no hustles. Then they find a reason to really tag us with a name : “criminals”, simply because we are living our lives, the way we see it in the street.