

# I SAW JIMCROW IN PRISON

*The first Smith act victim released from jail tells of her experience with Negro women prisoners in federal jail who are kept segregated*

*By Regina Frankfeld*

**L**ET me tell you what I know from personal experience about Jimcrow in federal prisons. The Department of Justice has by a technicality contested the petition against prison Jimcrow submitted by Negro Smith act victim Ben Davis, who has spent several years in jail.

When Dorothy Rose Blumberg and I were taken out of the Baltimore City jail after our conviction under the Smith act and transferred to the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, another woman, a federal prisoner, went with us. She was a beautiful young Negro woman. The three of us were taken by station wagon under guard of two marshalls: a man and woman. This trip to Alderson was long and wearisome. It was the end of January and a bitter cold day. With the quick sympathy that is an instant bond between prisoners we helped each other on that long trip to prison. All three of us were emotionally and physically exhausted. We had said good-bye to our beloved friends and families only three days before this trip. We were on our way to prison for years.

On the way down we shared our cigarettes, sang songs, told stories about our children, played "20 questions." We found out that Ardelia had a baby, that her mother was taking care of the child, that she had always wanted an education but her family had been too poor and so she had had to leave school when she was 12 years old. We never found out what her "crime" was. That was somehow not important. For the hours we spent together we talked with the warmth and concern that on the "outside" one doesn't find until one has known one another for many years.

When we reached Alderson the doctors discovered that Ardelia was a very sick young woman. She was placed in the hospital and when she recovered, she disappeared into the Jimcrow set-up of Alderson. In spite of the bond forged during those weary first hours of prison life—the hours in the station wagon—in spite of my concern and many questions about her, I never talked to her again because of the Jimcrow barrier in the prison.

**FOR THE FIRST THREE WEEKS IN ALDERSON YOU LIVE IN THE "orientation" building. This is the period when you make the transition from the world "outside" to the world "inside." Here you learn how to be a prisoner. The first three days you spend locked in a room. That is your introduction to prison life—the locked door. During those three days the door was unlocked for brief moments and another**

inmate showed me how to make a bed with hospital corners, how to scrub the floor, how to wash the walls, how to clean that room so that when an officer went over the floor with a kleenex, she wouldn't find any dust on the floor or the furniture. And many were the warnings, "Be sure she doesn't find any dust or you will get a bad mark." It was a young Negro woman who taught me patiently over and over again how to make the bed, how to fold the prison clothes, how to clean.

When the first three days were finally over, I was released from isolation and joined the rest of the prisoners in the orientation building. I saw them all for the first time in the dining room. There were about 30 women taking that "course" in prison living. Young and old—Negro and white—from all over the United States, from the west coast, from the deep South, from New York—we all met in Alderson, the only women's federal penitentiary in the country. There were women there who were grandmothers and one child who had just passed her 16th birthday. Some women were in prison because they had sold narcotics, others because they had stolen cars and helped to transport them over state boundaries, still others for forgery, and there were the two Smith act prisoners, Dorothy and I.

We were welcomed and accepted into this strange community of women. For three weeks in the orientation building Negro and white women lived together. We ate together, worked together, went to the movies together, shared completely those first three difficult weeks. Each woman was assigned to a job. You worked eight hours a day and the remainder of the day you sewed labels into your prison clothes. In addition to her regular work assignment each woman had a "cottage" job. She had to help to keep the building in which she lived in spic and span order. My regular job was painting rooms and my "cottage" assignment was waxing the floor of the long upper hall. Then on the week-end the officers would throw in a couple of extra jobs like cleaning windows or waxing the dining room floor, etc., etc. On all these jobs I was helped by other inmates.

**OF ALL THE WOMEN WHO HELPED ME, I REMEMBER MARY best of all. She was only about five feet tall but full of humor and vitality. She was a slender, quick person with a beautiful warm brown skin and mischievous eyes. She worked in the kitchen on food service. While she was**

there, the food always looked good, it was served quickly and efficiently and she had that kitchen crew organized so that the work got done, as she would say, "one, two, three." She washed and starched and ironed those prison dresses so that they looked as though they didn't know how to wrinkle. Still she wasn't satisfied, so she decided to put pleats in the dresses. When the rest of us were ready to collapse and just had enough energy to sit and look at each other and breathe, Mary was standing over the ironing board putting pleats in her dress so that it "would look a little pretty."

We were very fond of each other. I was continually marveling at her terrific energy and she was forever teaching me the "facts of prison life." We both enjoyed Saturday mornings because then we had a common assignment. Mary washed the windows in the kitchen and I waxed the floor. We would sing together as we worked. Mary had come into the prison a week before I had so she was to leave the orientation buildings a week ahead of me.

BEFORE YOU "GRADUATE" FROM THE ORIENTATION COURSE INTO the regular life of Alderson, you come before the classification board and are assigned to your permanent job and living quarters. On Mary's last Saturday in that building we were working away together. Knowing that she would soon be gone, I expressed the hope that "we somehow land in the same cottage together." She was standing on top of the sink, washing the window, and turned and looked down at me. I was waxing the floor. "But Regina, that's impossible. As soon as you leave this building, that old devil Jimcrow takes over." That is how I learned about the Jimcrow in Alderson. In all the 20 months I spent in Alderson, I saw Mary only once again. I met her

by accident outside the door of the parole office while we were both waiting to be interviewed.

Mary knew the Jimcrow setup in Alderson. Once you are assigned to your permanent job and living quarters, you live in separate buildings, you eat in the same dining room but at separate tables, you go to the same movie but sit in separate sections. The worst job in Alderson is the piggery. Only Negro women are assigned to take care of the pigs. Very few Negro women are assigned to the office jobs.

Yet the Negro women as a group play an outstanding role in Alderson. The cultural event of the year, the event in which the women can exercise some creative ability, is the evening of the Spirituals. Once a year the Negro women sing Spirituals for the women of Alderson. People from all over the countryside come to hear the Spirituals. It is the one evening of the year when almost every woman comes to the auditorium. Negro and white women work together to make this an evening of dignity and beauty. A white woman painted a backdrop of a chariot in the sky as the background for the Negro women singers. I heard the Spirituals twice during the time I was in Alderson. It was a deeply moving experience. This evening was the gift of the Negro women to all the inmates of Alderson.

This is the Jimcrow setup in which Claudia Jones, a Negro Smith act victim, lives today in Alderson. It is against these practices which exist in every federal prison, that Ben Davis filed his historic petition against prison segregation. With the courage and militancy which is so much a part of his whole career, Ben Davis has challenged the government to clean its own house, to do away with Jimcrow in the federal prisons.



**THE LIGHT**

Courtesy of ACA Gallery  
Painting by Mervin Jules