



LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE

Living in
Prison Today

Victor Hassine
Inmate AM4737

Edited by
Thomas J. Bernard
Richard McCleary

Foreword by
John Irwin

Afterword by
Richard A. Wright

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Pennsylvania Department of Corrections

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and

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LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE: LIVING IN PRISON TODAY

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This book is dedicated to the fond memory of Lenny and Ester Silverman and Sandra Wolfe Karlin, three people whose selfless acts of loving kindness have shown me the way.

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I owe a lifetime of gratitude to a great many people who supported me, cared about me, believed in me, and encouraged me during these difficult prison years. You can't do time in prison alone and still expect to come out of it sane. I needed a lot of help from people on the outside to constantly remind me that I was still a worthwhile part of the American quilt.

I would like to start by thanking my father, mother, and brother who in many ways did this time with me so I would never have to feel completely alone. I hope the publication of this book will give them that sense of pride which I have not been able to offer since my incarceration. But for them I would have long ago lost this struggle to retain my dignity.

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Many thanks to former Pennsylvania Commissioner of Corrections David Owens who tried diligently to change the Pennsylvania prison system for the better; former Commissioner of Corrections Joseph D. Lehman who gave not only his permission but his support for the writing of this book; the Pennsylvania Prison Society for having the courage and perseverance to demand a human face on the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections; the Fortune Society of New York for promoting the annual PEN American Prison Writing Competition, which was directly responsible for my decision to express myself through the written word.

Finally, a special thanks to the Superintendent of the State Correctional Institution at Rockview, Dr. Joseph F. Mazurkiewicz, for working so hard and unyieldingly to keep his prison safe and clean for its inmates. If I had been sent to Dr. Mazurkiewicz' prison fifteen years ago to serve my time, I probably would not have had very much to write about. And a very special thanks to Dr. Thomas J. Bernard and Dr. Richard McCleary for their patience and dedication to making all this possible and recognizing the need for this candid look into the heart of the criminal justice system. Lastly, my deepest gratitude to Sherry Truesdell of Truesdell Word Processing Services for her professionalism, honesty, and dependability; and to Roxbury publisher Claude Teweles and editor Anton Diether for their invaluable efforts in making this book a reality.

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sity), Paul Cromwell (*University of Miami*), John Irwin (*San Francisco State University*), Lucien X. Lombardo (*Old Dominion University*), Linda G. Smith (*Georgia State University*), Jon Sorenson (*University of Texas, Pan American*), and Richard A. Wright (*University of Scranton*).

Preface

The Story Behind This Book

Thomas J. Bernard

Pennsylvania State University

In December 1992, I received a call from the local representative of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, a private, voluntary agency that works with prisoners. She wanted to know if I would address the Lifers Group at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview about future possibilities for the release of life-sentenced inmates. Rockview is located near Pennsylvania State University, where I teach criminal justice courses.

“Lifers” are inmates who have been sentenced to life without parole. What these lifers wanted to know was whether there was any hope that they might eventually get out of prison. For them, the only way out (other than death or escape) is to receive a commutation from the governor. Up until about 1980, commutations in Pennsylvania were treated somewhat like parole. There were hearings on the issue, so that those who applied for commutation had at least some but not very much hope that it might be granted.

Since the recent shift to a “get-tough” approach to crime, however, this is no longer the case. In the first half of the 1970s, Pennsylvania averaged over 30 commutations per year. By the second half of the 1980s, that figure had dropped to just over one per year. At the same time, about 100 life-sentenced inmates were coming into Pennsylvania’s system every year. So as a practical matter, life-sentenced inmates today can expect their requests for commutation to be denied, regardless of the circumstances of their crime, the length of time they have served, or their record and accom-

plishments since they have been in prison. This is not likely to change any time soon.

So my answer to the lifers' question was no. But I tried to couple that bleak message with a tiny glimmer of hope. Inmate population pressures in the Pennsylvania system, in my view, made it inevitable that a genuine consideration of commutation applications would eventually have to be resumed. There were simply too many life-sentenced inmates coming into the system, and the present commutation policy was too impractical to last forever.

If these inmates have nothing else in their lives, they have time. If they can do nothing else with their time, they can wait. The small shred of hope that I could give them was gratefully received. I was enthusiastically thanked for my presentation. Many smiling, desperately friendly faces were thrust into mine to tell me how much my talk meant to them.

One of those friendly faces belonged to Victor Hassine, although I did not remember meeting him at the time. Then in August 1993, an envelope arrived in the mail containing three of the interviews that are included in this book. A letter from Victor proposed that I share this material with my students since, "if they are to make a meaningful contribution to the administration of justice in Pennsylvania, they need to know the truth about its operation." I wrote him a brief note of thanks and then set the envelope aside.

Eventually, I got around to reading the material carefully. To my surprise, the interviews provided strikingly vivid descriptions of inmates and life in prison that were remarkably well-written and deeply insightful. I was intrigued. After considerable thought, I came to the conclusion that this material might form the basis for a book about prison life. I decided to look into it further.

First, I had to find out if the Department of Corrections would allow a book to be written by an inmate. It was a very long time before I received an answer: inmates could indeed write books as part of their freedom of speech. By the time I received their reply, Roxbury Publishing Company had agreed to publish the book.

On February 28, 1994, I wrote Victor a letter to inform him that I had been working on a proposal for him, that the Department of Corrections had agreed to the book, and that a publisher was

ready to offer him a contract if he still wanted to do it. It was the first time I had communicated with him since my note of thanks, because I did not want to offer any good news until all the pieces were in place, for fear of raising his hopes prematurely.

Victor's response was ecstatic. He readily agreed to all the arrangements, suggesting that his royalties go to a Philadelphia group called "Families of Murder Victims." This seemed to be a very appropriate group to receive the author's profits, particularly from a book by a man sentenced to life imprisonment for first-degree murder.

"Families of Murder Victims" is a private, nonprofit agency housed in, but not affiliated with, the Philadelphia District Attorney's office. Its purpose is to help families of homicide victims cope with their grief and to assist them as their cases work their way through the legal system. Funding for the agency comes from the Victims of Crime Act, the Philadelphia District Attorney's office, and the United Way, as well as from private donations. The contract with Roxbury Publishing specified that all of Victor's royalties would go directly to this group.

In my view, the result of this process is a book that provides a penetrating and insightful look at prison life in America today. Whether you are for or against prison reform, whether you support or oppose the get-tough policy on criminals, this book will give you a first-hand experience of what prisons are really like—a revealing look at prison life from the *inside*.

We, as citizens of a democratic society, should know what prisons are all about. Our society makes an enormous investment in prisons as part of social policy. As of this writing, the United States has about 1,100,000 people incarcerated in adult federal and state correctional institutions. Another half million people are in local jails, with an additional 100,000 in secure juvenile institutions. This totals over 1,700,000 individuals behind bars in this country.

This number is unmatched anywhere else in the modern industrialized world and shows an astonishing increase over this country's imprisonment rates in the past. Before 1970, our imprisonment rate was relatively stable at around 100 sentenced inmates for every 100,000 Americans. In that year, we had about 200,000 inmates in federal and state adult prisons. But around 1970, the

numbers began taking off. By the end of 1994, the total number of people in those prisons was just over 1,000,000 and the rate was about 400 sentenced inmates for every 100,000 Americans.¹

At the present time, the total number of inmates in the country is growing at a rate of about 90,000 per year. That means that by the end of every week, correctional administrators in this country have to find rooms and beds for 1,700 more inmates in their prisons than they had at the beginning of the same week. This task is almost impossible, and it has led to many of the problems described in this book.

As responsible citizens, we need to ask ourselves whether this enormous investment in prisons is a worthy social policy. I hope that Victor Hassine's book will help to stimulate debate over this very serious question.

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Prisoners in 1994." U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1995.

Foreword

John Irwin

San Francisco State University

Victor Hassine's *Life Without Parole* takes its place among a rather large array of descriptions of prison life written by prisoners. Some of these were written in the last century, but the majority of them came about in the last three decades, for the obvious reason that prisoners are becoming more and more literate. Some of the best of these are: *In the Belly of the Beast* by Jack Abbott; *A Sense of Freedom* by Jimmy Boyle (a British prisoner); *Tales from the Joint* by K. Hawkeye Gross; and *The Big Huey* by Greg Newbold (a New Zealand prisoner).

I think Hassine's book is most like Gross' *Tales from the Joint*, because both books were written by people who had little experience with the social worlds, mostly lower class, that supply prisons their inmates. *Life Without Parole*'s particular strength is that it is about large, contemporary prisons. Until reading this book, I hadn't seen any good prisoner descriptions about prisons today, after the extreme overcrowding and the violence between prisoners that have changed conditions so significantly. Hassine has a sharp eye for contemporary prison violence because he came to prison as an outsider, unfamiliar with the patterns and values of the thieves, hustlers, drug addicts, state-raised convicts, and gang bangers who populate the prison. At times, perhaps, Hassine accepts too readily other prisoners' fairly standard explanations for the way things are, but he is intelligent and frequently sees things clearly from his very different perspective (he is a law-school graduate).

All in all, *Life Without Parole* is a very valuable work on the contemporary prison, produced by an intelligent individual who has experienced prison first-hand for an extended period.

About the Author

Born: June 20, 1955.

1956: Family exiled from Egypt for religious reasons.

1961: Family immigrated to Trenton, New Jersey.

1966: Became an American citizen.

1977: Graduated from Dickenson College, majoring in Political Science and History.

1980: June, graduated from New York Law School. November, arrested on an open charge of homicide.

1981: Convicted of first-degree murder and sent to SCI-Graterford.

1985: Helped to found the first prison synagogue.

1986: Helped to found the first Jewish Post-Release House. Filed conditions of confinement suit in Federal Court against SCI-Graterford to abolish double-celling. September, assaulted by an inmate and transferred to SCI-Pittsburgh.

1987: Filed conditions of confinement suit in Federal Court against SCI-Pittsburgh and Department of Corrections.

1989: January, assaulted by an inmate and recovered in outside hospital. April, transferred from Pittsburgh hospital to SCI-Camp Hill. August, transferred to SCI-Rockview.

1990: Received Pennsylvania Prison Society's Inmate of the Year Award.

Editor's Note

The names of many of the inmates and prison employees described in this book have been changed to protect their identity.

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Preface: The Story Behind This Book</i> by Thomas J. Bernard	x
<i>Foreword</i> by John Irwin	xiv
<i>About the Author</i>	xv

PART I: PRISON LIFE

Introduction	3
Chapter 1: How I Became a Convict	5
Chapter 2: Things Missed	17
Chapter 3: Prison Violence	27
Chapter 4: The Underground Economy	35
Chapter 5: Prison Politics	47
Chapter 6: Race Relations in Prison	59
Chapter 7: Saying Goodbye	67

PART II: INTERVIEWS

Chapter 8: David: A Sexual Victim	71
Chapter 9: Chaser: A Medication Addict	77
Chapter 10: Toney: An AIDS Tragedy	85
Chapter 11: Albert Brown: A Permanent Resident	91
Chapter 12: Jacko: Surviving the Hole	99

PART III: OP ED

Chapter 13: Prison Overcrowding	107
Chapter 14: Homosexuality: The Pink Cells	111
Chapter 15: Relationships Between Inmates and Guards	117
Chapter 16: A Theory of Prison Evolution	121
Chapter 17: Conclusion: The Runaway Train	125
<i>Afterword</i>	129
by Richard A. Wright	

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Mr. Smith Goes to Harrisburg	143
Appendix B: 'A State Tries to Rein in a Prison Awash in Drugs'	155
Reprinted from <i>The New York Times</i>	

PART I

Prison Life

Editor's Note

In this first section, the author introduces himself and describes the beginning of his life as a convict in prison. His first life, which is briefly summarized above in "About the Author," ended in 1981 at the gates of the State Correctional Institution at Graterford. His second life, which began in June of that year, is the focus of the next several chapters.

The following material will give the reader a keen insight into the nature of imprisonment from a personal perspective. This, of course, cannot explain every detail of the phenomenon. Consider the old parable of the two blind men who encountered an elephant. Grabbing its leg, one exclaimed, "An elephant is like a tree!" Grabbing its tail, the other said, "No, an elephant is like a snake!" In this same sense, different readers will form different impressions of prison life after reading this narrative. All these impressions, however, will tap the same vein and, it is hoped, help them to better understand the experience of incarceration.