

Huey on the Eve of Freedom

Karen Wald

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SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. (The Daily World and LNS)—After the California Appellate Court had overturned the decision in the Huey Newton case, clearing the way for a new trial or freedom for the Black Panther Party Minister of Defense, all the press were clamoring for interviews.

Under this pressure, the authorities at California Men's Colony—East temporarily let down the wall they had built to isolate Huey and his ideas from the public, and a stream of reporters filed through the bright, sunny visitor's lounge on June 4.

CMC-East is surrounded by rugged mountains and rolling fields, with work-gangs of prisoners toiling under the blazing sun for 3 cents an hour. The facilities are cleaner and more modern than any other California prison. "But it's still a jail," Huey reminds you—just like the outside is a jail. "Getting out will simply be transferring from maximum security to minimum security."

Having passed through the variety of officials checking identification, prohibiting cameras and tape-recorders, two sliding gates, and an archway with a silent, invisible mechanism to check who-knows-what, we were now seated in a small interview room at the side of the lounge. Huey looked healthier, stronger and more relaxed than the last time we had seen him in the Alameda County and Vacaville Facilities. Isolated from the rest of the prisoners, he spends all but three hours of the day in his prison cell. When they let him out for meals, he says, "I gulp down the food in about 15 minutes, then spend the rest of the time exercising."

He is confident of gaining his freedom, probably in 60 days, although he realized he may then still have to spend another 60 days in a Richmond jail for an old misdemeanor. Is he happy with the decision? "I'm glad I'll be getting out. There's a lot of work to do. But we-know the judges are trying to convince people by this that the judicial system is fair, that it really works. And that's not true."

He pointed out that the Court had overturned the decision on the basis of several legal technicalities—primarily the refusal by Judge Friedman to instruct the jury concerning "unconsciousness as a total defense against homicide."

The judges also recognized as errors Friedman's failure to instruct the jury that the transcript of the key prosecution witness's testimony had been changed, after the jury went out to deliberate. The witness, Henry Grier, when asked if he's actually seen the assailant's—Huey's— face, had replied, "I didn't see his face." The original transcript had read: "I did see his face."

But the one issue that the judges studiously avoided ruling on was the main political focus of the trial—the challenge to the very structure of this judicial system, and especially the racist compositions of the juries.

Neither Huey nor his lawyers think it very likely that the State Supreme Court will decide to hear—let alone overrule—the Appellate Court decision—the one thing that could block Huey's freedom this summer. "The Appellate judges involved are very highly respected in legal circles, and it would be most unusual for the upper court to over-rule them in such a clear cut case," observed one person involved in the legal proceedings.

Where was Huey's head at after all these months in jail, visited only by immediate family, lawyers and black author Herman Blake?

Clearly he has been doing much thinking and reading. His lawyers provided written material, and the prison underground provides even more abundant and diversified reading matter. His reaction to events of recent weeks occupied most of his conversation with us.

"I'm really impressed with the moderate students, who have just begun to get active," he said. "They are now going through a lot of the same processes that today's radicals went through in 1964, in the civil rights movement. It's important that they go through this. That they try, and exhaust the peaceful methods of dissent. That's the only way they will know for themselves that there is no alternative to revolutionary change."

But he was worried about the responses of some black and white radicals. "If the radicals handle it poorly, they won't be the vanguard of the new movement that is developing. Others will rise from these new ranks to take their place. They'll have to. If the radicals don't encourage the moderates, but instead put them down, they will alienate them."

He also drew certain positive distinctions between today's students and those who took part in civil rights struggles. "In many ways they are more advanced than the students were in '64, because they know something about the earlier struggle. You can see it in their leaflets. They're saying 'We think peaceful means can work. We're going to try it. But if they don't work...' they're already thinking ahead."

Then, looking more serious, he observed: "If we can't radicalize people on a broad, popular level we're dead anyway."

"We must develop solidarity abroad, solidarity with all the struggling masses of people abroad.

"But we also have to develop that solidarity with people here if we possibly can.

"A civil war or a military coup perhaps can be won by a minority. But no Revolution can be carried out unless the populace is sympathetic."

It was suggested that with all the problems and divisions facing the movement, there was hope or expectation on the part of some people that Huey would come out and perform miracles.

"I can't do any," he smiled.

"But I do have a program of what to do when I get out.

"First, there's the matter of Bobby Seale and all the other Panthers in New Haven and New York, who we have to work on freeing, and Los Siete and all the others.

"Then there is—and this is a priority—the Soledad 3." He spoke at great length of the three black brothers facing mandatory death sentences because they are accused of killing a white prison guard, and especially of George Jackson, the most heavily political of the three, whose writings and letters indicate a political consciousness every bit as deep as Huey's own.

Jackson, convicted to "cop a plea" on a second degree burglary charge, was given a 1 year to life sentence and has been in ever since—ten years. "The prisons keep you in so long they make you political," observed Huey wryly. "They make you into a political prisoner—then they're afraid to let you go.

"George Jackson is a beautiful brother. We really need him."

He then went on to explain excitedly the third part of the program he will engage in when he gets out—the bussing of parents and families of prisoners.

"Most of the parents of guys in here are too poor to afford to come down here," he said, pointing at the mostly-empty visitors lounge. "When guys get abused by the prison guards, no one knows about it. We want to raise money for our own buses. Have chartered buses taking family and friends of prisoners to different prisons every week. Eventually we would do it throughout California—maybe all over the country.

"And while we were doing it, we would be organizing, radicalizing these families, at the same time their sons and brothers were being radicalized in the jails.

"It would be like a national Breakfast for Children Program."

The lights began flashing on and off, to indicate time was up. Huey stood up, looking tall, strong and very eager to begin the important work that waits for him outside.

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