

Prison and Gary Gilmore

Marcus Graham

1977

During the last score of years there have been numerous prison outbreaks and attempted prison escapes throughout the United States. The media has invariably labeled these as “riots” and acts of “dangerous criminals.” What the media deliberately fails to reveal are the conditions within prisons that lead prisoners to risk their lives in attempting to escape or daring even to protest (as took place at Attica when more than forty prisoners and guards were massacred).

In the case of Gary Gilmore the world witnessed an unusual demand by a prisoner: the request to be immediately executed! He had been sentenced to death for killing two men he’d never met before, and the media promptly labeled him “a brutal killer”. Many editorial writers urged that Gilmore’s request be granted. The Courts finally did this, and on January 17, 1977, Gary Gilmore was executed.

The reaction by ordinary people towards Gilmore’s request was just the very opposite of those of the media and the court: no less than forty thousand people had the courage to pen letters of sympathy to Gilmore! On January 13th, Gilmore, through his attorney Ronald Stanger, requested that the last letter he had prepared be printed in full. The media ignored his request, and the Associated Press issued only these few excerpts from it:

“I simply can’t answer all the letters personally... I appreciate the care, consideration, concern, and love reflected in these letters...There are some pretty nice people in the world.”

What the imprisonment of human beings results in—leading some of the courageous victims to rebel or attempt to escape—can be more fully understood when one reads the unusual interview that appeared in *Playboy* magazine, April 1977. Two writers, Lawrence Schiller and Barry Farrel talked with Gary Gilmore during the very last days before his execution. The interview is more than worth pondering over by everyone who is interested to learn what the government’s prisons do to thousands who have the misfortune of being imprisoned, as the following salient excerpts show:

Playboy: What got you started thinking as a criminal?

Gilmore: Probably going to reform school... I always knew the law was silly. A kid comes out of reform school and he’s learned a few things he would otherwise have missed...And he identifies with the people who share the same esoteric knowledge, the criminal element, or whatever one wants to call it...being deprived of your freedom when you’re ten or fourteen...A kid resents losing part of his life...getting released...you had to fool them...Well, yeah, I had talents. I’ve always been good at drawing... My man used to tell me about my great-grandfather who was a pretty well-known painter about a hundred years ago...I’d been locked up for 12 years straight...Nicole and I have known and loved each other for thousands of years...We parted. Through my stupidity, I hurt her and caused her to leave me...I couldn’t hardly walk...eat...a heavy hurt and loss... Jensen did not resist. Neither did Bushnell (The two men he killed.)... It wasn’t anything I’d planned and schemed to do. Murder vents rage, and rage was what I was feeling.

Playboy: Over Nicole?

Gilmore: I told you that I didn’t want to I killed Jensen because I didn’t want to kill Nicole.

Playboy:...losing Nicole, explains killing Bushnell and Jensen. In all your statements and remarks... no hint of remorse that you took two men's lives?

Gilmore: I am not saying I don't feel bad about it...but I ain't going to tell you how bad I feel about it...ain't gonna ask the priest either...It's something I am willing to give my life for...Man, I know what I did was wrong and unreasonable and senseless. I couldn't snitch on anybody. I couldn't rat on anybody...I think to make somebody go on living in a lessened state of existence, I think that could be more than killing...

Playboy: Did you have to take much Prolixin? (Note: The Physician's Desk Reference defines Prolixin as a "highly potent behaviour modifier with markedly extended duration of effect" which operates "at all levels of the nervous system.")

Gilmore: About three months...they damn near killed me with that shit. I got it forcibly. I was handcuffed to a bed and they shot me with the stuff...I was chained down four or five separate times...The longest was for two weeks. I wasn't in chains. It was handcuffs, one on each hand, and leg cuffs, one on each ankle...and you're there, spread-eagled...the last couple of times I got chained down I made them beat me up first. So I just started swinging at them. I lost the fights, but I felt a little better...they'd come and knock me out with the needle again. Finally the fucking doctor comes in...and I asked him, how 'bout let me up, doc?...I was not myself. And he says if you were not yourself, who were you?

Playboy: You've had shock. You've had prolixin. You've spent four years in the hole. Guards and cops have kicked out all but two of your teeth...

Gilmore: Fuck it, man, they got so many rules in these goddamn places...I just can't abide by all... after you get known as a troublemaker, ah, it's so easy to keep getting in trouble, cause all them guards man, like, they put your picture on the hot list up in the fucking guards' lounge and it's "watch the guy" and "suspected doing this and that," all the time, man, they antagonise you in little ways that'll make you blow up...you get frustrated because you're in a situation where you're always in the wrong...never right. And they got the hammer,

Playboy: But there were situations on the outside in which you could have controlled yourself.

Gilmore: I wasn't up to livin' in the fucking outside, man. You're locked up for 12 and a half years and ah... go out and ah... expect to immediately adjust to the shit.

Playboy: You told us the story of how Nicole pulled a gun on you the day before you killed Jensen. And you told how the loss of her resulted in a seething rage that you could release only through killing two strangers.

Gilmore: I told you that I didn't think the gun was loaded. As a matter of fact, man, I just stood there three or four minutes and told her to go ahead and shoot me if she wanted to...she finally put it in her purse, and I didn't go over and do anything to her, either.

Playboy: Well, if you could restrain yourself then, why take it out on two innocent...

Gilmore: I don't know, man. Just the habit of violence, maybe ...there is a term, institutionalized ... Means being so used to prison that no other way of life is possible anymore. It is a terrible thing to believe about yourself.

Playboy: Why not make things easier for your mother...fighting for your life?

Gilmore: Aww, man, join the writ club. You can appeal a thing like this for years, and you'll still go down in the end. Even if I got the goddamn case thrown out, they'd convict me on the other, and I'd be right back in the miserable son of a bitch again. Look man, I'm not dumb. I know I could have taken a stance of utter remorse, and started reading the Bible, and started preaching, and with the money I had there for a while, the publicity I was getting, I could have hired Clarence Darrow, if he were around (laughs) or Melvin Belli...but I'm just sick and tired...I just don't want to go through it again. I don't want to mess with the law anymore.

Playboy: You really wouldn't want to give life another try?

Gilmore: Oh, I'd love to. I wish they'd let me go out right now. I'd get a gun and get Nicole out of that hospital...the warden wouldn't let Nicole come to the execution, or else some goddamn psych doctor won't. And now they tell me I can't even record a cassette to send her. I ain't asking 'em for another goddamn thing. I just want to get it over... I don't want anything. I'd like to see Nicole. I'd like to stand. I don't want a goddamn hood. I just want a little quiet...I never wore a hood before. Why should I wear one now?...I just want to look them fuckers in the eye when they shoot me.

Playboy: Has the warden made up his mind about the hood?

Gilmore: I believe he's concerned that my standing and looking at the firing squad may unnerve them... He said he wouldn't put the hood on me until after I'm in the chair.

Playboy: You're pretty much alone in your wish to see it happen tomorrow morning...

Gilmore: Well just hang myself tonight if they stay it...

(Gilmore's last words before the end were: "Let's do it.")

Implications from Gilmore's Odyssey

The reasons why Gary Gilmore no longer wanted to undergo the inhuman mistreatment of prison life are self-evident from the interview.

The claim made by governments that prisons serve as rehabilitation places proves itself a blatant lie, as is so tragically illustrated by the secretive experiments that unscrupulous medical creatures (assisted by physical attacks from prison guards) inflict upon imprisoned victims like Gary Gilmore.

In reality prisons dehumanize the jailer by handing him clubs, handcuffs, bracelets and blackjacks—thereby turning him into a monster, devoid of any human understanding or feelings. The mistreatment by the jailers leads to dehumanization of the prisoners as well as it so tragically effected Gilmore to vent his rage when momentarily losing the love of Nicole, by killing two men he'd never even met before, an act he deeply regretted, and was therefore willing to pay for with his life.

The death of the two innocent men, the 19 years of ordeals that Gilmore was subjected to and the imprisonment of his sweetheart Nicole, must rightfully be placed at the very doorsteps of the government.

If Gary Gilmore had grown up in a truly civilized society, wherein dishonesty, greed, money and economic exploitation no longer prevailed, he would still be alive today, and so would Jensen and Bushnell.

The civil rights movement that called long overdue attention to the mistreatment of black people, the government's massacres or rebelling black people in Watts, Newark, and Detroit; the Indian seizures of lands that rightfully belong to them, the widespread rebellions in prisons, and the 40,000 letters of sympathy that Gary Gilmore received—all these events should arouse every sincere person to the need for abolishing the institution of government, and in its stead beginning to build a truly civilized society where every human being will have the natural right-and opportunity to grow up-in joy and contentment, as economic exploitation by the few at the expense of the many; and jails become relics of a shameful past.

fifth Estate

Marcus Graham
Prison and Gary Gilmore
1977

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/283-june-1977/prison-and-gary-gilmore>
Fifth Estate #283, June, 1977

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)