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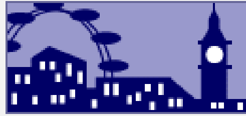
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Uncaptive Minds

By IAN BURUMA

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The main business of Napanoch, N. Y., is a maximum-security prison, Eastern New York Correctional Facility, also known as Happy Nap. The population of Eastern, 1,250 men, many from New York City, is about the same as that of Napanoch itself. Imposing in a hideous kind of way, the prison, built at the end of the 19th century, is modeled after a medieval fortress, with towers and turrets and a pyramid roof. The overall effect -- stony pomposity framed by lush green hills -- is rather Germanic.

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There is nothing particularly happy about Napanoch, situated on the raffish edges of the Catskills about 70 miles north of Manhattan; its better days as an affordable resort area for New York and New Jersey Jews have long gone. There are a few motels nearby with cracked signs that read Starlite and Eldorado; a diner; a Jewish cemetery; and a "colony farm," where the original inmates of Eastern, mentally impaired delinquents, were put to work in the early decades of the 20th century.

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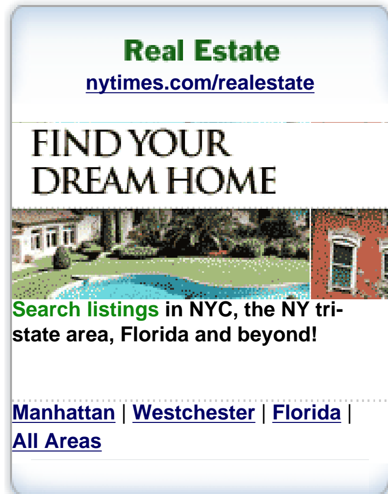

There is, however, a reason that inmates call the prison Happy Nap. Eastern is more relaxed than other maximum-security prisons, or "maxes," in upstate New York, with less hostility between staff and prisoners, and as a result fewer U.I.'s, or "unusual incidents" -- stabbings and the like. It is said that the farther upstate you go, the harsher the

prison conditions can be. Among New York's maxes, Eastern has one of the best reputations. It is one of only three maximum-security prisons in the state where you can still get an education -- not just in manual skills, but a proper college education with a degree at the end, thanks to privately financed initiatives.

One person to have benefited from such an education is Mika'il DeVeaux, a slim, 48-year-old black man who served 25 years for murder. DeVeaux studied theology at Sing Sing and got an M.A. in sociology. After he was released in October 2003, he founded an organization in New York with his wife called Citizens Against Recidivism. DeVeaux likes to point out how much prison education reduces the chances of ex-convicts falling back through the revolving door of crime and imprisonment. That's why, according to DeVeaux,

"Eastern is the place to be."

Education programs used to be widely available in prisons in the United States, especially after the notorious Attica rebellion in 1971, which left 43 dead. Among the demands of the inmates, who were pressing for improved prison conditions, was a better education program. This demand was met, not only at Attica but also in prisons around the country. Over the next decades, prison education flourished. Then, in 1994, Congress effectively abolished all federally financed college education for prison inmates when it voted to eliminate Pell Grants for federal and state prisons, despite strong resistance from the Department of Education. Critics pointed out that education greatly reduces recidivism; only one-tenth of 1 percent of the Pell Grant budget went to the education of prisoners

anyway. But Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, a Republican of Texas, argued that it was unfair for felons to benefit from Pell Grants when as many as 100,000 low-income students were denied them each year. Why should prisoners be educated for nothing when so many honest folks failed to get a break? And besides, she said, the federal government already spent upward of $100 million on prison education and training programs. Today, what federal money is spent on prisoner education goes largely toward vocational training.

Hutchison's arguments arose from a more generalized desire -- not just among Republicans -- to get tough on crime, or more precisely on criminals. Even though crime rates were actually dropping in the 90's, many argued that judges were letting felons off too lightly and that the "rights" of victims

needed to be taken into account. Thus, beginning in the early 90's, prison regimes were tightened, even as mandatory minimum sentences and three-strikes laws meant more and more people came into the system and stayed. In this climate few politicians were ready to stand up for higher-education programs for prisoners. Before 1995 there were some 350 college-degree programs for prisoners in the United States. Today there are about a dozen, four of them in New York State.

The Bard prison initiative was set up by Max Kenner, who graduated from Bard College in 2001. After Kenner finished school, he spent the summer driving around from prison to prison, meeting with staff members and inmates to find out what kind of education program was most needed. He found many administrators receptive to the idea of a higher-education

program; there was overwhelming enthusiasm among the inmates. And Eastern, thanks to its relatively liberal regime under its superintendent, David Miller, was the most hospitable, and agreed to be host of the pilot program.

The Bard Prison Initiative now runs an associate degree program at Eastern. There are plans to introduce a bachelor's program soon. Inmates have to go through an application process like any prospective college student: an essay, test scores, transcripts (G.E.D.'s for those who didn't finish high school) and an interview by Kenner and his colleague Daniel Karpowitz. "The admission process," Kenner said recently, "is emotionally the hardest part of our work. Up to 200 apply for 15 spots." Only 50 students, out of a prison population of more than 1,200, are now enrolled.

I'd been teaching at Bard

during the spring semester for several years, commuting from London, where I lived, so I knew about the program. When I signed up last year, Kenner told me the students would be interested in learning about East Asian culture. So, somewhat to my surprise, I found myself teaching a course in modern Japanese history. The idea of talking about samurai rebellions, Japanese imperialism and General MacArthur's occupation to men who were in for drug dealing, grand larceny and murder, was certainly intriguing but also somewhat daunting. How much did they know? How should I approach the material? Would they be at all receptive?

I entered Eastern on a cold day last February. Flurries of sleet made the fortresslike prison look even bleaker than usual. After being put through a metal detector and

frisked, I heard the iron gates close behind me with a thud. My "escort," in charge of education, was a friendly woman named Theresa with the jaunty air of a popular coach.

The first thing you notice inside is the spotlessness of the floors, which is no wonder, since there are always men around mopping and buffing. We walked through a narrow corridor with yellow lines on the floor. Inmates in olive green uniforms filing past us greeted Theresa with elaborate courtesy. Several blind men were being led around by fellow prisoners. Being physically impaired has its advantages; a bit more leniency is shown by the guards, which is why, Kenner told me, some prisoners pretend to be blind or deaf, a ruse that rarely works for long. One young white prisoner greeted me in German. I showed my surprise. "Ja," he said, "I'm the only one." Then I noticed a peculiar smell. Theresa must

have spotted my wrinkled nose. "Skunks," she explained. "There are skunks under the floors."

My first class was held in the vocational section, where inmates engage in metalwork and other manual tasks. Eastern is well known as a producer of dog tags and street signs. Since prison rules dictate that all men in "voc" wear work boots and pass through metal detectors, my students did not like coming here. It meant they had to take off their boots and belts and submit to a body search, always a humiliating business. My class of nine consisted of a Puerto Rican, who had been to the Bronx High School of Science, one of New York's prestigious magnet schools; two white military veterans; a Vietnamese-American; four black men, two of them Muslims; and one young white man who had been incarcerated since he was 16.

I had been assured by Kenner and Karpowitz that the students would be enthusiastic. This was an understatement. But as I learned in my first weeks of teaching, the main difference between these students and those on the Bard campus was their polite formality. I was invariably addressed as "professor," not so much for my sake, I sensed, as for their own self-respect. Somewhat patronizingly, I suppose, I had expected talk about sword-fight movies and Oriental wisdom. Instead, from the very start, questions of a far more sophisticated kind came quick and fast: about the economics of the Opium Wars in China, about the criminal activities of unemployed samurai, about the impact on Japanese cultural identity of Western ideas. One of the black Muslims, a tough New Yorker, mentioned Alexis de Tocqueville in

the context of the Meiji Restoration.

The students were smart, streetwise and funny, and I found it impossible not to be charmed by them. They were also clearly grateful to be in class, where they were treated as intelligent adults. It is easy to feel a little smug about dealing with these men, to feel a sentimental solidarity with them against the guards and the rest of their oppressive world. This soon leads to the kind of phoniness that any inmate can see through in an instant.

One form observed in prison is that you don't ask what someone is in for -- unless you're in for something, too. You may not get a straight answer anyway. Deputy Superintendent Sheryl Butler, a spirited woman in her 50's, told me that I didn't want to know the students' crimes. "Otherwise you can't deal with them objectively," she said. Kenner

told me the same thing. But I couldn't contain my curiosity and looked up their sentences on the department of corrections Web site. Of course, even what I could find out didn't tell me much: second-degree murder could be armed robbery, a gangland killing, the murder of a wife. But it helped me to keep some perspective whenever I was tempted to see the inmates purely as victims, suppressed by vicious guards.

I never witnessed any serious oppression, just the imposition of endless petty rules. The students remained remarkably calm, even when they were provoked. They knew they had no choice. It was hard enough getting into the education program. One false move could cost a student his place in the classroom, and in Happy Nap too.

It is a tricky situation.

Education widens the gap between students and corrections officers and can easily increase hostility. Many of the officers have not been to college themselves and probably don't expect their children to either. But higher-education programs should also make life easier for the C.O.'s, since the prisoners who benefit from them are more inclined to behave themselves. Indeed, a C.O. once told a colleague of mine that life at Eastern was a trifle dull. At the previous institution where he'd worked there were shakedowns, stabbings on the galleries, mayhem in the solitary-housing unit. At Eastern, a guard was liable to fall asleep.

My second class was on the failed samurai rebellion in the 1870's against the Westernized Meiji government, on which the movie "The Last Samurai" was very loosely based. I

mentioned a book, by Ivan Morris, titled "The Nobility of Failure," and explained the admiration in Japan for rebels who die for lost causes. We discussed how this ethos compared with the American celebration of success. Perhaps, I said a bit facetiously, there was no such thing as a noble failure in America. One Muslim among my students laughed and said, "This room's full of them."

Everyone had his own story, one that could quickly curdle into despair. One warm day in April, after two months of teaching, I attended an anniversary celebration of the Bard Prison Initiative at Eastern. A jazz band of inmates and volunteers was playing in the yard, while prisoners in white aprons served lemonade and chocolate cake. Speeches were made, by inmates and by Superintendent Miller, who has the avuncular manner of a rural bank manager. Words like "respect"

and "future" and "self-improvement" flew thick and fast. The sun was shining, but one of my students, catching my eye, whispered, "It's miserable."

Stories of failure and despair vary. You can never be sure how much is true. His came in a flood of words: regularly beaten by a drunken stepfather, kicked out of the house at 14, placed in a foster home, where he felt sheltered for the first time in his life until he discovered that the foster father was sexually abusing his charges. He was so incensed, he said, that he killed the man with a kitchen knife. He told me that he still becomes enraged at the thought of men abusing innocent women and children. Since he's been in jail, he has spent most of his time reading and writing. Books are his salvation, he said. He dreams of being a famous author. He has at least 12 1/2 more years of his sentence to go.

It was obvious to me, as a teacher, how precious education was to the students, not only because they could practically recite every sentence of the books and articles I gave them to read but also because of the way they behaved to one another. Prisons breed cynicism. Trust is frequently betrayed and friendships severed when a prisoner is transferred without warning to another facility. The classroom was an exception. We talked about Japanese history, but also about other things; one topic led to another. One day a guest lecturer spoke about pan-Asianism in the 1930's -- the Japanese aim to unite and dominate Asia by defeating the Western empires. My Vietnamese student remarked that he was a pan-Asianist with "a small a," but that really he was a "panhumanist," for "we are all one race, right?" One of the black students snorted in a good-

natured way. The Vietnamese smiled and said: "I know we have disagreements about that."

There cannot be many places -- in or outside prison -- where blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Muslims and Caucasians can discuss race and religion without showing hostility. A Muslim student, a big man from the Bronx, said he'd encountered little animosity to Muslims in prison. "Sure, that's because we know each other," another student said. I found this surprising, since prisons are not known for racial or religious tolerance. But perhaps they were referring not to the prison system in general, or even to the narrower confines of Eastern, but simply to the class. Then a black student, in for robbery, piped up: "If I hadn't been in prison, I'd never have met any Jewish guys. I had all the stereotypes in my head, you know, cheap and mean. But now I'm hanging with a Jewish guy the longest

time."

Eastern is different. But why? Why was Eastern more receptive to the Bard Prison Initiative than other prisons in the state? Why is Eastern "the place to be"? Several men pointed out that "the tone is set by the top." The superintendent and his deputy both started their careers as teachers.

Deputy Superintendent Butler likes to refer to Eastern as a "therapeutic community." She has spent decades of her life inside the prison. Her son works there now. Eastern is her community, too. Walking around the prison one day, she sounded almost wistful when she told me about the flowers she'd received from inmates when she was hospitalized for a serious illness. I asked her about the trouble that inmates had making friends, when they know they might be transferred at any time. She replied that inmates get "very attached to

staff, too, you know. They have tears when they leave. We bring them up, like our children."

This is not the kind of thing you'd expect to hear from corrections officers in most maximum-security facilities. There is no doubting Butler's benevolent intentions. Like her boss, Butler has been consistently supportive of education programs at Eastern. And the relative decency with which inmates are treated by the C. O.'s has much to do with the example set by Miller and Butler.

Something Butler said to me still sticks in my mind. She was speaking about the benefits of education for men who would never leave prison. "You know," she said, "if you have a body" -- that is, if you've been involved in a murder -- "you're in for life." She kept returning to this point, even though most men do eventually get

out. It was almost as if Butler did not really want her charges to leave.

I spoke about my impression to Mika'il DeVeaux, the ex-convict who started Citizens Against Recidivism. "Deputy Butler," he said, "wants to be the Eastern mother. She'll mother you, and if that's not what you want, she'll bully you." This can be disconcerting to some inmates. I heard one of them say that at least in more "old-fashioned" institutions, you knew where you stood; it was "us" against "them," and a prisoner would not even dream of talking to a C.O. And yet, as DeVeaux also pointed out, "it is a rare man who asks to be transferred out of Eastern."

Butler has known some prisoners for many years. I knew my students for only a few months. Yet I, too, found it hard to say goodbye. It is difficult to know what they really think of the teachers. We were not C.O.'s, to be sure, but still people on

the outside. I do know what they think of Max Kenner, who threw them a lifeline when the government refused them an education. He is a hero to men who had little confidence left in humanity, including their own. It isn't much -- a few dozen men out of a thousand who can study for a Bard College degree, but to those men it is everything. It costs the state about $32,000 a year to keep a person in jail. It costs the Bard Prison Initiative only $2,000 to provide a student with a year of college education.

On my last day at Eastern, I turned back toward the prison as I was leaving. There, high above me, I could just make out a face, pressed against the bars of a cell. It was my youngest student, the one who knifed his foster father. As I drove off, I glanced into my rearview mirror. All that moved in the mass of brick and steel bars behind me was a pale arm waving.

Ian Buruma, a

teacher at Bard, last wrote for the magazine about Iraq.

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