

# NEW ZEALAND'S PRISONERS —

THIS description of prison life, and of the objectives of the prison system, has been prepared in two parts. The second will appear in our next issue

EVERY year many hundreds of New Zealanders are sent to prison. They are imprisoned as a punishment for committing crimes and to protect the community from further crimes. They are imprisoned to deter other people from committing crimes. They are imprisoned so that they will become better men and women, physically and morally.

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis in New Zealand prisons on this third aim. More than ever before an attempt is being made to deal with the prisoner as a whole man, not just as an offender against society. Current policy argues that he must not only be detained but trained, so that on his release he should be fit to take his place in the community.

Recently *The Listener* set out to get a picture of our prisons today. It paid long visits to two prisons—Mt. Eden, Auckland, and Wi Tako, near Wellington—and had discussions with senior officers of the Department of Justice.

New Zealand prisons are of four main types: borstal institutions for young adult offenders; maximum security prisons (such as Mt. Eden); medium security prisons (Waikeria and Paparua); and minimum security prisons (the prison camps). They are all made up mainly of single cells in which prisoners are locked for the night, but they differ in the extent to which they are shut off physically from the outside world—from stone buildings with a high surrounding wall at Mt. Eden to wooden hutments with no surrounding barrier at prison camps. All these institutions have become more "open" in a psychological sense in recent years, though they have been changed little structurally.

NO development gives a better idea of the principle underlying present policy than recent changes in the system of classifying prisoners. The aim of classification is to know the prisoner as an individual and to decide how he should be treated so that he comes out of prison better fitted to take his place as a citizen. Until fairly recently prisoners were classified according to age, offence, criminal experience and custodial risk. Though these factors are still taken into account, more attention is now being paid to attitude and responsibility. "As you know more about a prisoner," a senior officer of the Justice Department told *The Listener*, "the process becomes increasingly refined."

The first Classification Board was set up at Mt. Eden at the end of 1951, and at the beginning of last year the system was extended to Wellington and Paparua, the other two main reception prisons. The boards attempt to deal mainly with those sent to prison for 12 months or more, and who because of age or lack of criminal experience, or for any other reason, appear particularly worth attention.

Prisoners are classified about a month after they enter prison. Each prisoner is seen separately and reported on by the Prison Superintendent, who looks at him

as a prisoner; a Probation Officer, who looks at him as a citizen; a Vocational Guidance Officer, who is concerned with his aptitude; a psychologist, who is concerned with his attitude; and the Prison Welfare Officer, who considers what might be done for him in the way of further education and finds out what his interests are in such fields as recreation, culture and hobbies. These members of the Classification Board then meet, pool their reports and make recommendations to the prison administration. They are concerned with such questions as: What prison should the prisoner be sent to? How should he be employed so that he pays his way as far as possible and at the same time receives training for his release? Has he any mental or emotional disturbances which need treatment or which suggest any particular type of handling? Are there factors affecting his conditions of release or his handling on release?

The Classification Board has no executive authority, but as far as possible its recommendations are carried out; and they are "followed up" by the Prison Welfare Officer in the prison to which the man or woman is eventually sent. It is hoped in time to extend this classification system to all prisoners serving sentences long enough to allow for training.

INSIDE the prisons there have been many changes, and for those who think of prison mainly in terms of bars and locks none is more important than the increased "hours of unlock." Under the old system a prisoner was unlocked for breakfast at 7.30 a.m., given his breakfast in his cell, and locked in again till he was paraded for work at 8 a.m. He was also locked in from 11.45 to 12.45 for lunch and at 4.45 for dinner—after which he remained locked in till next morning. In most institutions the main body is now unlocked at 6.45 a.m. and the men are not again locked in till 7.45 p.m.—or later on special occasions. Prisoners who start work early may in some institutions be unlocked as early as 4.30 a.m.

With hours of unlock that take in meal times, communal meals have been introduced wherever room is available. At Mt. Eden prisoners are still locked in their cells for meals because there

is no mess room, but at Wi Tako the atmosphere is much like that of a works camp or army mess. And though Wi Tako is a "good" prison the aim everywhere is to have meal arrangements like those *The Listener* saw there. Communal meals were introduced at Wi Tako more than three years ago—it was the first institution to do so.

The Assistant Secretary for Justice (Prisons), Commander H. R. Sleeman O.B.E., former Deputy Naval Secretary has had the food problems of the New Zealand Navy to worry about, and he confessed that food in prisons was a "hobby-horse." It should, he said, be "good, hot, plentiful and varied." Food was specially important where men were confined and had no chance to get alternatives. They thought a great deal about

food, and where it was good and varied they were much more contented. Dissatisfaction with food had caused many prison troubles overseas.

Mr. Sleeman said the old ration scale was "liberal but very limited." There was little or no variety and too much bread, meat and potatoes. A greater variety of vegetables in a much more varied menu now gave a standard as good as any Service mess or average home, and an equally high standard of table behaviour was aimed at. All this had been done without increased cost. Nearly all prison food was the product of prison farms and gardens. Even the honey was produced in the prison apiary, and the jams were made in prisons from fruit grown in prison orchards. Where possible good cooks were selected as



Amalgamated Studios photograph

MAXIMUM SECURITY: One of the cell wings at Mt. Eden prison