

Prison Labor and Prison Script: Saint-Lazare

By

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During almost its entire history as a women's prison Saint-Lazare, like all other French prisons, was privatized under a system called "*l'entreprise générale*."¹ The state paid prison entrepreneurs a set fee per prisoner, and established minimum standards for the administration of the facility, and the care, feeding, and supervision of the prisoners. As early as the 1830s, prison reformers were criticizing this system as an abdication of state responsibility that led inevitably to the exploitation of prisoners and the perversion of the prison system.² However, successive French governments lacked both the political will and the economic resources to change the system.

The profit centers for prison entrepreneurs was the cheap labor of prisoners in prison industries, and from prison stores where inmates could use their meager wages to purchase a wide range of essential items which made life more bearable. Everyone agreed that having prisoners work had a rehabilitative value, and also helped maintain discipline. Prison industries developed along gender lines. For example, the women prisoners at Saint-Lazare undertook sewing and embroidery work, while male prisoners at other prisons usually worked in a heavier level of manufacturing. Women's prisons were less expensive to run since female inmates generally needed much less supervision than male inmates.³ In addition, the use of Roman

¹ M. Seyler, "De La Prison Semi-Privée À La Prison Vraiment Publique: La fin du système de l'entreprise générale sous la IIIe République," *Déviance et Société*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1989).

² *Ibid.*, 126.

³ *Ibid.*, 128.

Catholic nuns (in the case of Saint-Lazare, the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph) proved to be much cheaper and more effective than hiring lay workers.⁴

In a memoir, describing her year's incarceration at Saint-Lazare from November 1907 to November 1908, Marguerite Steinheil described the work she undertook as a prisoner:

We made sheets, towels, pillowcases, napkins.... I helped Firmin (her cellmate) with the sewing, and by sewing all day and a great part of the night, managed to earn seven or eight francs *a month*. The work was paid for at the rate of one halfpenny per towel, napkin, or slip, two pence per tablecloth and three pence for large sheet, but you had to pay for your cotton and needles, and when the work was not 'perfect,' it was refused, or no more work was given you!... The Sisters were so pleased with my work that they gave me the more difficult sewing to do — piles of fine napkins and tablecloths for the Spring sale at the *Printemps* and the *Bon Marché*... No wonder those vast stores can sell beautiful table-linen at low prices which make purchasers exclaim, as I had so often done myself: 'How can they do it?'⁵

Steinheil noted that "after a few months, my fingers became sore, and bled constantly."⁶ The sisters then provided her with paints and brushes and she "painted flowers and landscapes on scores of handkerchief-cases, cushions, glove-cases, and lamp-shades."⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Marguerite Steinheil, *My Memoirs* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1912), 333, 337.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 385.

The prisoners were paid with institutionally based prison-script that could only be used in the prison canteen. The *Vincentiana* material culture collection of the Archives and Special Collections department of DePaul University has these examples of prison-script from Saint-Lazare. (Insert script scans).