Saint-Lazare as a Women's Prison: 1794-1932

by

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"Pour une femme, il vaut mieux mourir que d'entrer à Saint-Lazare."[1]

Introduction

In Ancien Régime Paris the name "Saint-Lazare" would have immediately conjured up images of the venerable mother house of the Lazaristes located on the rue Saint-Denis just outside the city gates. This vast headquarters, of arguably the most influential religious community in France,[2] was also the site of the oft-visited pilgrimage shrine containing the remains of the quintessential French saint, Vincent de Paul.[3]

However, throughout the 19th and into the first third of the 20th century the name "Saint-Lazare" would have immediately conjured up very different images of a notorious prison housing prostitutes, delinquent girls, and other women prisoners and convicts. The name and the place in both cases are one and the same.

Founded in the twelfth century by Louis VII as a leprosarium far outside the gates of the medieval city, the priory of Saint-Lazare already had a long history when it unexpectedly fell into the hands of Vincent de Paul.[4] With no more lepers in residence, and only a handful of aging monks, the last prior Adrien LeBon was searching for a way

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[1] Adolphe Guillot, *Des Principes du nouveau Code d'Instruction Criminelle*, (Paris: L. Laros et Forcel, 1884), 187.

[2] From its approval by Louis XIII in 1627, the Congregation of the Mission was highly favored by succeeding Bourbon kings who considered it to be a reliable and loyal French Congregation. Louis XIV made the Lazarists the chaplains at Versailles and all the royal palaces and parishes. When the French Jesuits were suppressed by Louis XV their missions in China and elsewhere were turned over to the Lazarists.

[3] Vincent de Paul was beatified in 1729 and canonized in 1737.

[4] See for example, Eugène Pottet, *Histoire de Saint-Lazare (1122-1912)*, (Paris: Société Française, 1912).

to put the property to a new ecclesiastical use, and guarantee the retirement needs of his dwindling community. Vincent de Paul and the newly-founded, (1625) Congregation of the Mission were an answer to his prayers.[5]

Vincent's community already had a small headquarters in Paris at the College-des-Bons-Enfants located near St. Victor's gate.[6] Although he was initially reluctant to take on the responsibility of administering such a large enterprise as Saint-Lazare, Vincent de Paul was ultimately convinced to take the step. On January 12, 1632, the priory became the *maison-mère* of the Congregation of the Mission.[7] The rather ramshackle enclosed compound that Vincent knew was rebuilt, at great expense, at the end of the seventeenth century by his second successor as superior general of the Lazarists, Edmond Jolly.[8]

Early in the morning of July 13, 1789, the first act of organized revolutionary violence in Paris leading to the more famous attack the next day on the Bastille was the sacking of Saint-Lazare for its grain stores.[9] The sackers were well-organized, and efficient in their labors. Following the departure of the heavily-laden grain wagons, crowds from the neighborhood eagerly finished looting the complex from top to

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[5] For the history of the union of the priory of Saint-Lazare with the Congregation of the Mission see, Pierre Coste, C.M. *The Life and Works of St. Vincent de Paul*, (New York: New City Press, 1987), 1:160-176.

[6] For background on the College-des-Bons-Enfants, see ibid., 1:144-148.

[7] This act of incorporation made Vincent de Paul and his successors feudal lords with the rights and obligations of dispensing "low, middle, and high justice." As a seat of justice Saint-Lazare would have always had a prison of some size in the complex.

[8] Edmond Jolly (b. 1622, d. 1697). Third superior general of the Congregation of the Mission 1673-1697.

[9] In an era in which Altar and Throne were united, Saint-Lazare as a royal foundation in Paris easily became both a symbol and target for revolutionary opponents of the monarchy and the Catholic Church. The coat-of-arms of Saint-Lazare was surmounted by a crown symbolizing this relationship. For more details on the sack see, George F. E. Rudé, *The Crowd and the French Revolution*, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1967).

bottom.[10] The Gardes Françaises in their nearby barracks refused to intervene to stop the pillage.

Over the next three years, the revolution quickly spun out of control and headed toward the end of the monarchy, the executions of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the Reign of Terror. The *Assemblée Législative* disbanded the Lazarists and confiscated Saint-Lazare and all of its properties and assets as of September 1, 1792.[11]

During 1794, Saint-Lazare was pressed into service as a prison to house enemies of the Revolution.[12] At its height that year the facility housed 721 inmates.[13] On December 15, 1794, the *Convention Nationale* designated the prison as a women's facility.[14] Prisoners began arriving almost immediately even though the buildings still lacked bars for the windows, and high walls to enclose the prison compound.[15]

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[10]Thomas Jefferson, then the United States ambassador to the Court of Louis XVI, noted this attack in a dispatch to John Jay in Washington. Jefferson served as United States ambassador to France from May 17, 1785 to September 26, 1789. He wrote to John Jay on July 19th: "The mob, now openly joined by the French guards, forced the prison of St. Lazare, released all the prisoners, and took a great store of corn, which they carried to the corn market." Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1907), 7:415.

[11] This was part of the suppression of the final "secular" congregations of men and women ordered by the National Assembly. This had been preceded by the suppression of the traditional religious orders of men and women with solemn vows.

[12] In 1790, the government required the Lazarists to submit an audit of their land and income. For a summary of this audit see: M.L. Tesson, *Léproserie de Saint-Lazare*, (process verbaux, séance du 9 juillet 1912), Commission du Vieux Paris, (Paris: City of Paris, 1912), 150. Hereinafter cited as *Vieux Paris 1912*.

[13] Ibid.

[14] The decree read: "Les femmes et filles condamnées à la detention ou à la reclusion et qui sont maintenant dans les maisons de Vincennes, de la Salpêtrière et de la Force, seront transfèrées, dans le délai d'une decade, dans la maison de Lazare, faubourg Saint-Denis." Quoted in, *Procès-Verbal*. "Séance du jeudi 11 juin 1903," Commission du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimiere Municipale, 1903), 189.

[15] Op cit.

On April 9, 1811, the Napoleonic government gave Saint-Lazare over to the Department of the Seine. After the confirmation of their legal re-establishment by the newly-restored Louis XVIII in February 1814, the Lazarists asked the king to return Saint-Lazare to the Congregation.[16] The monarch readily agreed to do so, until he was pointedly reminded of the exorbitant cost of building a replacement prison.[17] The original complex inherited from the Lazarists was later expanded in the 1820s-1830s at a cost of 1,500,000 F with the addition of a new chapel,[18] separate wings for the infirmary and the *section administrative* of the prison, and other upgrades.[19]

During the nineteenth century, the population of Paris grew substantially as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The prison which had once stood in a relatively undeveloped section of the city increasingly found itself hemmed in by the densely-populated *quartier Poissonnière* of *Nouvelle France* in the tenth *arrondisement* intersected by Baron Haussman's new boulevards and not far from two of the city's new train stations the *Gare du Nord* and the *Gare de l'Est,* as well as Jacques-Ignace Hittorf's magnificent basilica of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Hôpital Lariboisière.

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[16] At this point the Lazarists did not hesitate to refer to themselves as the "prêtres de la Bourbons," to remind Louis XVIII and later his brother Charles X of the long and intimate ties uniting the Congregation of the Mission to the House of Bourbon.

[17]Eventually, four years later in 1818, Louis assigned the Lazarists a new mother house located across the city at 95 rue de Sèvres; the former *hôtel particulier* of the Duc des Lorges. For more details see, Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *Jean-Baptiste Etienne and the Vincentian Revival*, (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2001), 99-104.

[18] It was during these renovations in 1823 that the old gothic chapel of the medieval Saint-Lazare facing the rue Saint-Dennis, which had been Vincent de Paul's burial place and shrine, was torn down. After the Revolution, the chapel had served temporarily as a parish church awaiting the construction of the new church of Saint Vincent de Paul by Jacques-Ignace Hittorff.

[19] See, *Fresnes*, 40. The architect was Louis-Pierre Baltard.

Les prisons des philanthropes vs. Les prisons des doctrinaires.

In his writing on the history of the modern French prison system, Christian Carlier, frames the nineteenth century debates (held not just in France, but internationally) about the nature and purpose of penal institutions and the subsequent architecture and practices that should guide the building and administration of prisons in terms of two opposing schools of thought represented by the *philanthropes* on the one hand, and the *doctrinaires* on the other.[20]

Broadly speaking it can be said that the *philanthropes* favored the more traditional religious approaches and attitudes toward prisons and prisoners that had characterized the last years of the Ancien Régime and the period of the Restoration.[21] In this view, prisoners were to be the recipients of a level of charitable care and spiritual concern that always recognized their true, if flawed, humanity. Incarceration and the deprivation of liberty were seen in themselves to be sufficient punishment for criminal and anti-social behavior, and effective deterrents that would prevent most recidivism.[22] The conditions of incarceration were to be strict and Spartan but always fair, proportional, and as humane as possible. Since prisoners were at the absolute mercy of their jailers, special care always needed to be taken to ensure the protection of inmates.[23]

It was thought that the creation of a religious atmosphere and space within a prison through the employment and spiritual activities of chaplains would help to sustain the redemptive, reformative, and protective functions of the institutions.[24] It would also lead,

[20] See, *Fresnes*, 29-90.
[21] Ibid., 32.
[22] Ibid., 33.
[23] Ibid., 34
[24] Ibid.

eventually, to the employment of nuns within the prisons. During the nineteenth century, Saint-Lazare was "*la prison la plus chère a la cœur des philanthropes*.[25] If indeed this is true, then it is just as true to say that Saint-Lazare as a *prison des philanthropes* was the prison most criticized and opposed by the *doctrinaires*.

Les Sœurs de Marie-Joseph: Sœurs surveillantes

From 1794 to 1838 the guards at Saint-Lazare were all men, which led of course to many problems and abuses within the prison. Following this, lay women were hired to serve as *surveillantes*. This arrangement also proved problematic. The prison became well-known "for its state of disorder and incessant scandals."[26] This included an incident that occurred when one of the guards "*par un excès de philanthropie*" helped an inmate to escape.[27]

In 1849, the Parisian prefect of police, François Carlier, confided responsibility for the internal management of the prison to the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph. Thirty-six sisters arrived on the evening of December 31, 1849. They found Saint-Lazare in a state of chaos. The previous guards had simply locked all of the prisoners in their dormitories, and then abandoned the buildings.[28]

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[25] Ibid., 40.
[26] P. Panici, S.J., *Avec les Femmes en Prison, Les Sœurs de Marie-Joseph, éducatricés*, (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1964), 33. Hereinafter cited as *Femmes en Prison*.
[27] Adolphe Guillot, *Paris Qui Souffre: Les Prisons de Paris et Les Prisonniers*," (Paris: Libraire de la Société des Gens des Lettres, 1889), 284. Hereinafter cited as *Paris Qui Souffre.*
[28] *Femmes en Prison*, 37.

In a relatively short amount of time, the sisters established a sense of discipline and order within the prison.[29] The religious atmosphere of the institution was palpable as the nuns decorated the complex with crucifixes and statues of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Joseph, and the saints. The prisoners' days began and ended with the call by the sisters of "*Vive Jesus!*" followed by communal prayers. A large Roman Catholic chapel stood at the heart of the complex and was served by a full-time chaplain.[30] The sisters lived with great simplicity among the inmates, treating them firmly but always with dignity and respect. For example, the nuns never referred to the prisoners as "*les filles*" but always as "*notre filles*."[31]

Dr. Léon Bizard, who had spent years working as a doctor at Saint-Lazare's infirmary, described the difficulties faced by the sisters in their prison ministry: "as one can imagine their work is particularly difficult because they must earn the respect of women who, for the most part, totally lack any aptitude for obedience."[32] Their success could be attributed to "the considerable moral influence" that the sisters came to exercise with the prisoners.[33] Bizard noted for example, that one could see a young sister sitting by herself

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[29] The dozens of sisters were supplemented by a small number of male *gardiens* who tended to the overall security of the complex, and who were available when there was a discipline problem among the prisoners that the sisters could not handle. However, they could not enter the prison interior without authorization from the prison's director. See Léon Bizard, *Souvenirs d'un Médecin des Prisons de Paris*, (Paris: Grasset, 1925), 31-34. Hereinafter cited as *Souvenirs*.

[30] Penal legislation provided that: "*Le culte catholique est partout établi; toute maison central a sa chapelle et son aumônier*." Eventually, the prisons would also make accommodations for non-catholic and Jewish prisoners who belonged to what were described as *cultes dissidents*. For more information see, Jules-Armand Lainé, *Traité élémentaire de droit criminal,* "Systèm général des peines," (Paris: Libraires du Conseil d'État, 1881), 2:387. Hereinafter cited as *Droit Criminal*.

[31] *Femmes en Prison*, 179.

[32] *Souvenirs*, 29.

[33] Ibid.

and supervising more than a hundred prisoners in a workshop in an atmosphere of "*parfait obeisance*." He was also impressed by the sisters' self-possession with respect to the foul language typically used by the prisoners. The nuns always responded to such language in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that conveyed that they were not easily embarrassed or intimidated. Finally, Bizard noted that "it was rare for the sisters to be obliged to call upon the prison authorities to deal with insolent clients."[34]

Founded in 1841[35] at Dorat (Haute-Vienne) by Mère Saint-Augustin Quinon (Anne-Marie), as an off-shoot of the Sœurs de Saint Joseph de Lyon, the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph had prison work and the rehabilitation of women prisoners as their apostolates.[36] At the government's request, in less than 20 years, the sisters were serving in thirty-five penal institutions throughout France.[37]

In a parliamentary debate on prison reform in 1838, Adolphe Thiers had declared: "Give me five hundred sisters: and I will re-establish order in the prisons of the

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[34] Ibid.

[35] In the period between 1796 and 1880 more than 400 new congregations of women were founded in France, attracting more than 200,000 vocations. These communities covered the map of Paris and of France with hospitals, schools, orphanages, asylums, settlement houses, and every other conceivable type of relief and charitable agency. See Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au feminin* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984).

[36] The constitutions of the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph described the *raison particuliére* of the order as assisting prisoners. "They (the sisters) dedicate their entire lives in these places of penitence to watch over their dear prisoners in order to give them a moral and religious education as well as training in a trade. They assist them in acquiring Christian virtues and the holy habits of order, obedience, temperance, and work. They (the sisters) consider their sacrifices as well worth the effort if they can offer to the Church repentant souls, and to society useful members which its justice will never again have to punish." *Femmes en Prison*, 58.

[37] As the laicization of public institutions reached its height under the Third Republic the sisters withdrew from most of their public institutions. However, their reputation in Paris was such that they survived at Saint-Lazare, Le Petite-Roquette, and Fresnes far into the 20th century. This reputation was confirmed in the 1920's when Mère Perpétue and Sœur Léonide from Saint-Lazare were both awarded the prestigious Legion of Honor with great fanfare and publicity. See, Ibid., 164

Kingdom! With their rosaries at their sides, they will have more influence than guards armed with swords."[38] A contemporary commentary on the penal code would also note:

> Disciplinary authority (within the prison) is entirely the responsibility of the director…In institutions for women, the surveillance of prisoners is confided to the religious belonging to the order of Marie-Joseph… These religious maintain an admirable atmosphere of propriety in these prisons, and they exercise a salutary moral authority over their prisoners. Also, recidivism is much less frequent among women than among men after their departure from prison.[39]

The presence and role of the sisters thus reflected the contemporary religious and social views that prisons existed as much for the moral rehabilitation, as for the punishment of inmates.

"Rendez à Saint-Lazare ce qui appartient à Saint-Lazare."[40]

The Classic Organization of the Prison

One of the first reforms instituted by the sisters was to divide the prison into two sections. The first section (*section judicaire)* was the *prison d'arrêt et de correction*. This was reserved for prisoners awaiting trial (*les prévenues*), and for convicts whose sentences were for less than a year (*les jugées*).[41] Some longer-term convicts with special skills also served their sentences residing in this section while staffing the central bakery,

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[38]Ibid., 33.
[39] *Droit Criminal,* 2:387.
[40] Urbain Rattazzi (Marie de Solms), *La Mexicaine*, (Paris: A Cabot et Degorce, 1866), 140.
[41] Comprised of 167 rooms with 447 beds. Christian Carlier, *Fresnes, prison modern. De la genèse aux première années*, (Paris: Syros la Découverte, 1998), 42. Hereinafter cited as *Fresnes*.

laundry, and *magasin général* located at the prison that served all the prisons of the Department of the Seine.

The first section also had three large cells (#12, #13, #14) reserved "*de la pistole*." These were available to be rented at a high price (7.5 F per month, paid in advance). This section was reserved for elite prisoners who were awaiting trial for a first offense that was not a morals charge, and who had been pre-approved by a judge and the prison director to enjoy this privilege. These prisoners, who typically lived two or three to a large cell, were largely exempt from following the regular prison routine; were attended to by a staff of four maids; and could arrange for their meals to be catered.[42]

There was also a quarter called "*la Maternité*" for prisoners and convicts who were pregnant, or who had children under three years of age.[43] Another dedicated quarter (*un maison d'éducation correctionnelle*) was called "*la Ménagerie.*" It housed minor girls who had been convicted of crimes, been committed by their families for delinquency under the terms of the French penal code, or been arrested for prostitution.[44] The girls attended classes, were taught catechism, and given vocational training while they were being held.[45]

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[42] See, *Souvenirs*, 13-16. This quarter was abolished after the public uproar surrounding Henriette Caillaux's use of these privileges during her imprisonment while she was awaiting her trial for the murder of the editor of *Le Figaro* in 1914.

[43] After the age of three, the children of prisoners and convicts were taken from their mothers and remanded to the custody of other family members, or placed in a public institution.

[44] A. Valette, *Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare*, (Alençon: Imprimerie Typographique F. Guy, 1889), 27. Hereinafter cited as *Libérées I*,

[45] For a fascinating glimpse into the French treatment of juvenile offenders at Saint-Lazare and elsewhere see for example: M. Louis Perrot, *Statistique des Prisons et Établissements Pénitentiaires pour l'année 1855: Rapport a son excellence Le Ministre de l'Intérieur*, (Paris: Imprimerie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1856). 58-69, 74-75,

The second section (*le section administrative*) of the prison housed prostitutes (*les femmes de mauvaise vie détenues administrativement, maladies ou bien portantes, soumises ou insoumises*).[46] Numbers of these women were arrested nightly for *prostitution clandestine* by the vice squad (*police des moeurs*) in sweeps through their well-known neighborhoods and haunts.[47] The women (*les mutines, les jeunes)* were then held by administrative fiat for anywhere from three days to two months at Saint-Lazare.[48] The section also acted as a hospice, and received elderly former prostitutes (*les vieilles*) who had nowhere else to live out their final days.[49]

In 1835, there was a special infirmary wing (*blanchisserie*) added to this section that was designed to receive up to 360 *femmes en traitement* for syphilis.[50] Upon arrest, unregistered prostitutes were tested for venereal diseases. Registered prostitutes from all over the city were required to come to the infirmary for regular check-ups.[51] If any were found to be infected they were immediately hospitalized and treated. They could not be released until they were disease free.

The infirmary saw and treated thousands of patients a year. At times the facility seems to have been over-crowded and grossly under-staffed by second-rate doctors whose gynecological examination practices were alleged to be unsanitary and

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88-92. These annual reports provide a wide variety of statistics not just for the juvenile prisoners at Saint-Lazare, but for the entire prison.

[46]*Paris Qui Souffre*, 285.

[47]Ibid., 142. In 1877 for example 2,582 women were arrested for being unregistered prostitutes. 1,500 of this number were minors. 900 were infected with venereal diseases.

[48] Ibid., 288.

[49] Jean Celte, *Les Mystéres de Saint-Lazare*, (Paris: Imprimerie Bonne-Nouvelle, 1896), 3-4. Hereinafter cited as *Celte*.

[50]*Fresnes*, 45.

[51] For a discussion of the French jurisprudence governing prostitution during this period see, Albert Decourteix, *La Liberté Individuelle et Le Droit d'Arrestations*, (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Générale de Jurisprudence, 1879), 128-135.

dangerous.[52] However, after reforms instituted in 1888[53] the infirmary became an internationally respected research and treatment center for venereal diseases.[54]

The complex also had a number of solitary confinement cells reserved to punish the most troublesome prisoners. All infractions of the rules were reported by the *sœur surveillantes* to their mother superior, who in turn reported them to the prison director, who then meted out the appropriate punishment.[55] There were four levels of punishments prescribed for serious violations of prison rules: "*le séquestre, la cellule, le pain sec, le cachot*,"[56] The solitary confinement cells (*les cachots*) were tiny, poorly lit, vermin infested, with only a naked plank for a bed. They were stifling in summer and freezing in winter. The prisoners were sometimes so frightened of this punishment that they refused to go to *le cachot* voluntarily and had to be forcibly placed there by the handful of male guardians who were reserved for this work. These guards were also available to quell the fights or other disturbances that arose frequently enough within the prison.[57]

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[52] See for example, *Les Mystéres*, page 121-123.
[53] See, *Fresnes*, 45.
[54] See for example, Alfred Fournier, *Prophylaxie de La Syphilis*, (Paris: J. Rueff, Éditeur, 1903).
[55] The annual report for the French national prison system would typically report the numbers, and forms of punishment meted out to prisoners. See for example: M. Louis Perrot, *Statistique des Prisons et Établissements Pénitentiaires pour l'année 1860. Rapport a son excellence Le Ministre de l'Intérieur, sur Les années 1856, 1857, 1858, 1859, 1860*, (Paris: Imprimerie Administrative de Paul Dupont, 1862), 118-119.
[56]See, Une ancienne détenue, *Les Mystères de Saint-Lazare*, (Paris: L'Avenir Français, 1891), 44. Hereinafter cited as *Les Mystères*. *Le séquestre:* for this punishment the prisoner was removed from the workroom, and thus could earn no income to buy items in the prison cantine. *La cellule*: for this punishment the prisoner was placed in solitary confinement during the day when the other prisoners were at work. *Le pain sec*: The prisoner was given only bread and water. *Le cachot*: The prisoner was placed in solitary confinement day and night and given only bread and water.
[57] In her memoirs, Marguerite Steinheil gives a description of a typical fight among prisoners. See, Marguerite Steinheil, *My Memoirs*, (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1912), 338.

The prisoners from the various sections and quarters of the prison shared the use of the seven workrooms, chapel and refectory.[58] The separation of the groups of prisoners was kept as strictly as possible. Moreover, there was also a strong sense of antagonism between the two main types of prisoners. One commentator noted:

> The debauched women (the prostitutes) have a certain pretention to probity. They rarely refer to their own sad condition, but they are quick to speak with scorn about the women who have been arrested for criminal offenses. These other women, (who nine times out of ten are thieves and perpetrators of other vicious crimes) love to put on a virtuous air as they speak of the other prisoners (the prostitutes) with scorn.[59]

The complete separation of the various classes of prisoners was always difficult if not impossible to enforce in practice, and caused problems in maintaining prison discipline and effective rehabilitation efforts. As one commentator noted: "*malgre toutes les divisions et subdivisions, la plus grande promiscuité règne à Saint-Lazare.*"[60]

Prison reformers believed that contacts with hardened convicts and prostitutes had a harmful effect on younger prisoners who still had the potential of being rehabilitated. As another commentator noted:

> Despite precautions, dangerous conversations between prisoners are inevitable, particularly in the work rooms. The prisoner sitting next to you is likely be someone who has been arrested numerous times. Such a prisoner plays the role of devil's advocate giving bad example to the other

[58] There were seven workrooms, each dedicated to a particular task or product. See, *Fresnes*, 46.
[59] *Paris Qui Suffre*, 287
[60] *Celte*, 4.

> prisoners by her words and actions. These prisoners are then put '*en garde,*' and become possessed by a spirit of revolt and disobedience. This influence destroys any positive effects of exhortations to reform.[61]

These activists also felt that having the prisoners sleep together in large dormitories instead of individual cells "presented dangers that were easy enough to understand…In these places perverted morals were everywhere to be seen; giving examples and lessons of immorality."[62]

According to the *doctrinaires* the core problem at Saint-Lazare was the *mélange singulier* of hardened convicts, minors, first-time offenders, prisoners awaiting trial, and prostitutes.[63] Contemporary opinion in the *science pénitentiaire* focused attention on the *danger de agglomeration*[64] of up to 1,500 such women at Saint-Lazare.[65] The solution of reformers was clear they advocated the separation of the various types of Saint-Lazare's prisoners into new specialized prisons.

The influence of these opinions led in June 1875 to the passage of a law whose provisions now required that prisoners would be housed in individual cells, kept separate from each other day and night, with all communication between prisoners forbidden (the

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[61] Jules Arboux, *Les Prisons de Paris*, (Paris: A. Chaix et Cie, 1881), 128.
[62] Ibid., 132.
[63] Ibid., 119.
[64] Ibid., 121.
[65] In 1912 for example, the total number of prisoners housed at Saint-Lazare was 15,345. Of this number 12,116 or 79% were prostitutes, and 3,229 or 21% were non-prostitute offenders. This would also mean that each night an average of 35 prostitutes were arrested and brought to the prison. The maximum number of prisoners held on any day during the year was 988. See, M.C. Just, *Statistique Pénitentiaire pour l'anée 1912. Exposé Général de la Situation des Services et des divers Établissements, présenté a Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, Ministre de la Justice*, (Melun: Imprimerie Administrative, 1914), 220-221.

régime cellulaire).[66] As required by the new law a detailed plan to apply the provisions of the new law to the entire French penal system were drawn up in the so-called *programme de 1877*.[67] As always, however, legislating reforms was one thing; implementing them was quite another.

Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare

In his 1845 novel, *The Mysteries of Paris*, Eugène Sue begins a chapter dedicated to Saint-Lazare by noting:

> The prison of Saint-Lazare, especially devoted to female thieves and prostitutes, is daily visited by many ladies, whose charity, whose names, and whose social position, command universal respect. These ladies educated in the midst of the splendors of fortune-these ladies, properly belonging to the best society-come every week to pass long hours with the miserable prisoners of Saint-Lazare watching in these degraded souls for the least indication of an aspiration towards good, the least regret for a past criminal life, and encouraging the good tendencies, urging repentance, and, by the potent magic of the words, *Duty*, *Honor*, *Virtue*, withdrawing from time to time one of these abandoned, fallen, degraded, despised creatures, from the depths of utter pollution.[68]

Eventually, the visits and efforts of these individual women would be organized into a lasting and effective charitable organization.

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[66] *Fresnes*, 95-96.
[67] Ibid., 102-107.
[68] Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris*, (Paris, 1850), 169.

In 1865, Pauline Michel de Grandpré came to Saint-Lazare for the first time to visit her uncle who had just taken up his position as the prison chaplain.[69] She was deeply affected by what she saw there, and she was particularly struck by what she learned about the fate of most prisoners upon their release:

> Once prisoners depart Saint-Lazare they find themselves alone on the streets of Paris. Sometimes these poor women leave only with the clothes on their backs, and almost always they leave without any money. Under these circumstances, even if they sincerely wish to rehabilitate themselves, because of their appearance they are not easily hired. They find nothing but scorn and rejection awaiting them, and most fall prey to recidivism and return to Saint-Lazare! Those that retain a germ of honesty have been known to throw themselves into the Seine.[70]

Founded in 1870, the *Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare* took on the mission of "preserving women, regardless of their religion or nationality, who are in danger of being lost, and furnishing to those released from prison the means for their rehabilitation."[71] Even though early in its history there were some religious overtones from Catholicism the *Œuvre* developed into a secular philanthropy.[72]

The women of the *Œuvre* established a shop where freed prisoners could obtain needed clothing. Next, they located an office near the prison where the *libérées* received

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[69] See, Pauline de Grandpré, *La Prison Saint-Lazare depuis vingt ans*, (Paris: E. Dentu, 1889).
[70] *Libérées I*, 4.
[71] Ibid., 12.
[72] For example, the 1870 organizing meeting of the Œ*uvre* was held in the presbytery of the parish of Saint-Eustache. Ibid., 4. Also, the reference in the organization's mission statement to its outreach to women irrespective of their religion is further evidence of the group's philanthropic secularity.

counseling and assistance with finding housing and work. This was followed by the establishment at Billancourt of an asylum and clinic to temporarily care for the young children of prisoners and ex-prisoners. All of these services were given to clients free of charge.[73]

The success of these activities attracted the favorable attention of the government which in 1885 recognized the association as being *d'utilité publique*. Public funds were now available to support the work. The members of the association also received the special permission necessary to access Saint-Lazare itself to visit and prepare women before their release. Later, as various types of prisoners were funneled from Saint-Lazare to new prison locations, the activist women of the *Œuvre* extended their outreach to these places as well.[74]

The *Œuvre* prided itself on its professionalism, and its creative responses to the changing needs of its client base.[75] Careful records were kept to illustrate stewardship of resources, assistance trends, as well as the ability to keep track of individual clients and their needs.[76] Assessment of all the work's efforts was ongoing and sophisticated.[77] The organization developed effective governance, recruitment, fund-raising, and public

[73]For the complete statutes of the *Œuvre*, see Ibid., 66-71.
[74] Because Saint-Lazare became so identified with the prostitutes who formed the great majority of its prisoners the *Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare* also became identified in the public mind as a work dedicated solely to the rehabilitation of prostitutes. Since the work of the *Œuvre* was dedicated to all *femmes et aux jeunes filles en danger de se perdre*, the name of the organization was eventually changed to the *Œuvre de preservation et sauvetage de la femme*.
[75]Léon Leleux, *Œuvre des Libérées de Saint-Lazare*, (Orléans: Imprimerie Auguste Gout et Cie, 1911), 31.
[76] Ibid., 26-32.
[77] *Libérées I*, 59-64.

relations structures.[78] It also developed a variety of partnerships (*solidarité des œuvres de patronage*) with other French charitable organizations to encourage cradle-to-grave care for women in danger.[79] Representatives also participated in international conferences held in Rome, Washington, D.C., and St. Petersburg on prisons, prison rehabilitation, and a variety of contemporary social issues facing women.[80]

As the nineteenth century drew to a close Saint-Lazare was always the object of a considerable amount of publicity and morbid curiosity on the part of the press and public in Paris. This was particularly true as newspapers, tabloids, magazines, and even lurid romance novels became widely-available, affordable, and popular. Some of this attention was due to a succession of sensational scandals that resulted in incarcerations at Saint-Lazare and which were reported in great detail. There was also an abiding fascination on the part of the public with the shadowy and titillating world of pimps, johns, prostitutes and prostitution in the City of Lights. Prison reformers were not above manipulating this attention to build a case for the closure of Saint-Lazare.

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[78] Ibid., 72-76.

[79]Ibid., 66-68. In addition to the work of the *Œuvre* there were a variety of other charitable organizations who worked directly with prisoners and ex-prisoners of Saint-Lazare. Some of these included: the *Œuvre du Refuge du Bon Pasteur,* the *Société pour le patronage des jeune détenus et des jeunes libérés du department de la Seine*, the *Société de patronage des prévenus acquittés de la Seine*, the *Œuvre protestante des prisons de femmes*, the *Société de patronage des prisonniers libérés protestants,* the *Société générale pour le patronage des libérés*, and the *Patronage des détenus, des libérés, et des pupilles de l'Administration pénitentiaire*. For more information see for example, *Liste des Œuvres Affiliés à l'Union des Sociétés de Patronage de France*, "Patronage des Prisonniers libérés. Défense des Enfants traduits en Justice," (Paris: Bureau Central, 1926), 5-11.

[80] For example in 1887, the Italian Government honored the *Œuvre* with a medal awarded at the international penitentiary congress held in Rome. See, *Libérées I*, i. See also, for example, *Report of the International Council of Women, assembled by the National Woman Suffrage Association,* (Washington, D.C.: National Woman Suffrage Association, 1888), 90-94.

"Cette hideuse maison qui est la honte de Paris."[81]

Women Prisoners, Prison Reforms, and the closure of Saint-Lazare prison

As early as 1811 there had been talk of tearing down the old prison.[82] Time and time again over the course of the next century such proposals would come and go.[83] The institution would appear to be doomed, and then nothing would happen. In 1875, the *Conseil Générale de la Seine* resolved to demolish the prison, and did so again in 1884. Yet, still more decades passed.[84] In 1897 the minor girls were moved from Saint-Lazare to Nanterre.[85] In 1898 a large new prison was built at Fresnes, but Saint-Lazare continued to operate. In 1902, the *Conseil Générale* voted to devote five million francs to the prison's demolition.[86] Still more decades passed.

Saint-Lazare was not without its defenders among the last of the *philanthropes*, who hoped to save women and minors from being submitted to the "*folie cellulaire*."[87] These defenders resolutely denied the public charges made against the prison. One commentator noted:

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[81] *Visite de la prison de Saint-Lazare*, "Ville de Paris, Commission du Vieux Paris, Séance du mardi 9 juillet 1912," (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1912). 151. Hereinafter cited as *Vieux Paris 1912a*.

[82] Jean Robiquet, *Les Vieux Hopitaux Français: Saint-Lazare*, (Lyons: Les Laboratoires Ciba, 1938), 43.

[83] One issue which delayed the building of new prisons was arguments over the location of such institutions. Many urban planners objected to the presence of any prisons within the city limits of Paris and advocated that the old city prisons be relocated out of sight in the suburbs. Prison reformers objected that distant suburban locations would make it difficult for the visits of lawyers, family members, and those who wished to work for the rehabilitation of prisoners. See for example, *Patronage des Prisonniers Libérés. Défense des enfants traduits en justice*, "Bulletin de L'Union des Sociétés de Patronage de France," (Paris: Librairie Marchal et Godde, 1913), 14.

[84] Ibid.

[85] *Patronage des Libérés*, "Bulletin de l'Union des Sociétés de Patronage de France," no. 1, Janvier-Février-Mars, (Paris: Librairie Marchal et Billard, 1897), 38-39.

[86] Op cit.

[87] *Fresnes*, 48.

> When one views this prison from the outside with its somber entrance way and its dark walls seemingly stained by the leprosy of vice, one is disposed to believe that there is surely no exaggeration in the horrible stories published about this place. Under these circumstances anyone would be surprised to find within these walls large walkways which rival tranquil country roads; and behind its high walls a tranquil and calm garden filled with beautiful trees. This prison, which is assumed by so many to be so defective is infinitely more happy, more healthy, and above all more charitable than all the others.[88]

The remaining *philanthropes* were not the only critics of the reforms demanded by the *doctrinaires*. Critics looked at the new prisons that had been built "with their large cells, their comfortable beds, their libraries, and magnificent courtyards as well as heating systems, running water and baths" and thought they resembled "the comfortable homes of *bourgeoisies*."[89] These critics accused the reformers of being naïve do-gooders who glamorized the prisoners, and down-played the gravity of their offenses against society.

One critic even went so far as to claim that the new prisons were now so comfortable that they encouraged the poor to become criminals and thus escape a winter of hunger and cold."[90] The cost of the prison system also came under severe criticism, it was noted in 1898 that the average cost-per-day to the state of supporting a prisoner was 1 fr. 30, while the cost of a soldier was only .90.[91]

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[88] *Paris Qui Suffre*, 48-49.
[89] Paul Escudier, *Prisons et Prisonniers*, Revue Municipale. Recueil d'Études sur les Questions édilitaires, (Numero 14, 1st series, Volume 1, 29 janvier 1898), 211-212.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.

Generations of activists continued to press home their demands for prison reforms joined with strident criticisms of the deteriorating physical and humanitarian conditions at Saint-Lazare.[92] These criticisms extended to the quality and quantity of the food and the quality of medical care in the infirmary.[93] In the end, these sometimes sensationalized arguments convinced both political authorities and public opinion which then finally overcame budgetary, political, and planning restraints.[94]

At its meeting of December 21, 1927 the members of the *Conseil Municipale de Paris* debated the fate of Saint-Lazare. They noted with evident frustration that "over the last twenty-five years there has not been one session of this body which has not considered this question."[95] The majority of members now favored a "definitive solution."[96] At the conclusion of the debate they approved the closure of Saint-Lazare. However, the resolution also noted that the implementation of the decision depended on the success of a number of separate funding decisions.[97] Although it would take five years for all of the pieces to fall into place, the fate of old Saint-Lazare was finally sealed.

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[92] One source intimated that conditions were so bad at Saint-Lazare that magistrates seriously considered letting some guilty prisoners go free rather than to send them to the prison where they faced "*une corruption certain et irreparable*." See, *Code d'Instruction*, 187.
[93] *Celte*, 6-8.
[94] *Procès-Verbal,* "Séance du samedi 25 février 1928), Ville de Paris, Commission du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1928), 42. Hereinafter cited as *Vieux Paris 1928*.
[95] Ibid., 24.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 42.

This decision, however, did not apply to the *section administrative* and its infirmary. This part of the prison and its mission to supervise and treat prostitutes would remain intact *in situ*, and be renamed as the *hôpital Saint-Lazare*.[98]

In February 1931, frustrated by the delays in implementing the 1927 decision, the French pacifist, anarchist, and feminist, Jeanne Humbert published one last passionate manifesto demanding that Saint-Lazare be torn down, as the symbolic beginning of an entire reform of the French penal system.[99] Victor Margueritte wrote in the preface to this work:

> It is impossible for one to write too violently against Saint-Lazare prison. One cannot speak out enough against the survival of this leprosy in the heart of Paris. One cannot protest enough against the ignoble tactics that are employed by the jailers, nor against their crying injustices, nor against the scandalous abuses, nor against the revolting exploitation of the detainees. One cannot say enough about the insolence and brutality of the guards. One cannot say enough against the promiscuity and the vermin that infest the dormitories; let alone the repulsive filth of the hallways and cells. One cannot cry out loudly enough against this house of detention which is not only the foyer of all vices, but also that of tuberculosis.[100]

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[98] *Procés-Verbaux*, "Séance du 1 January 1928," Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1932), 35. Hereinafter cited as *Vieux Paris 1932*.

[99]Humbert (1890-1986) knew conditions at Saint-Lazare firsthand having been imprisoned there for a year's time because of her activities in support of a woman's right to have access to birth control. Jeanne-Henriette Humbert-Rigaudin, *Le pourrissoir, Saint-Lazare: Choses Vues, entendues et vécues*, (Paris: Éditions Prima, 1932). See, preface by Victor Margueritte.

[100] Ibid., 185.

In her socialist critique Humbert not only attacked the prison but also the entire penal system, and the society which produced it:

> I speak in order to seek a more just humanity, to demand an equal sharing…that will establish the equilibrium necessary to maintain social order, that will facilitate fraternal understanding and solidarity, and diminish considerable the number of evildoers…Abolish poverty and you will abolish the prisons.[101]

By February of 1932, the relocations of the prisoners and the other functions of the prison were finally completed and the *section judicaire* stood hauntingly empty.[102]

"*Il est proposé de conserver lors de la démolition de la prison…"*[103]

A losing struggle for historic preservation

As early as 1912 when it appeared that the closing of Saint-Lazare might be imminent the *Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris* began to talk about historic preservation issues with respect to the ancient fabric of the prison.[104] The 1927 decision to close the facility had been accompanied by the authorization to tear it down.

> First Article: The buildings comprising the *maison d'arrèt et de correction* of Saint-Lazare, located from the chapel to the *rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis*, and presently occupied by the *quarter judicaire* and the general services department, will be demolished. The land that will become

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[101] Ibid., 186
[102] N.a., *Lazare Day*, Time Magazine, 22 August 1932.
[103] *Vieux Paris 1912,* 153.
[104] The *Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris* is a municipal commission of the city of Paris established in 1897 and charged with a preservationist agenda over Parisian buildings and archaeological remains. It was one of the first preservationist bodies created for a modern urban city. It continues to operate today.

> available will be sold by lottery, with the provision that the central part of the lands will be reserved to create a public square with a minimum surface area of 3,000 *mètres carrés*.[105]

Once this decision had been announced, a sub-committee from the *Commission du Vieux Paris* visited the prison. They concluded that whatever "*moral, social, urbain"* reasons had created the "*veritable anathèmes*" against Saint-Lazare leading to its closure as a prison, the actual physical state of the historic buildings was "solid, perfect, and strong."[106]

The Commission went on record in 1930 as supporting the historic preservation of Saint-Lazare "*parmi les monuments historiques*" and floated a variety of proposals that envisioned this preservation within the context of a new public purpose for the buildings.[107] One proposal was that the edifice serve as an annex of the Museum of the History of the City of Paris (the famous Carnavalet) dedicated specifically to the history of the revolutions that had taken place between 1793 and 1848.[108] Another proposal put forward was that the complex could serve as a needed annex to the *Bibliotheque Nationale*.[109] There was even a plea, if all other efforts failed, to at least save the façade of the main building and re-use it as the entrance to the planned public garden space.[110]

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[105] *Vieux Paris 1928*, 41.
[106] Ibid., 48.
[107] *Procés-Verbaux, Année 1933*, "Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Hotel d'Aumont, 1973), 57. Hereinafter cited as *Vieux Paris 1933.*
[108] *Procés-Verbaux, Année 1932*, "Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1933), 13.
[109] *A Saint-Lazare*, " Les Potins de Paris," (Paris), Vol. 15, #2,275, 1 April 1931, 2.
[110] *Procés-Verbaux, Annèe 1928,* "Séance du 25 février 1928," Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1933), 49.

However, in March 1931, the *Commision des monuments historiques* declined to give protected status to the building on the basis of cost.[111] With all appeals finished, the demolition of the old prison started in June 1933 with the right wing of the second court.[112] It would take seven years until May of 1940, before the wrecking crews would finally demolish all the prison's extensive fabric of buildings and walls.[113]

Saint-Lazare Prison: A postscript

Even as the fate of the old prison was sealed, its prisoners diverted to other locations, and demolition commenced, attention shifted to the remnant of Saint-Lazare which would be left behind; the *section administrative* which would become the Hôpital Saint-Lazare. The new institution would become a "great medico-social centre for the treatment of venereal diseases among women, and especially among the so-called *femmes de moeurs lègéres*."[114] After renovations by the architect Gaston Lefol the facility opened in 1937.[115]

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[111] *Procés-Verbaux, Année 1931*, "Séance du samedi 9 mai 1931," Commission Municipale du Vieux Paris, (Paris: Imprimerie Municipale, 1931), 76.
[112] *Vieux Paris 1933,* 57.
[113] An interesting side note to the demolition of the prison was the fact that a small part of the complex facing the rue Saint-Denis had for years been rented out to a public letter-writing concern. For centuries, these businesses had existed to assist the illiterate population of Paris. The newspaper accounts of the demolition noted that this site at Saint-Lazare was the last one in Paris.
[114]For a complete description of this new hospital and its services see: Paul Blum, *The Hôpital Saint-Lazare in Paris: Its Past and Present History*, British Journal of Venereal Diseases, 1948, 52.
[115] The carved coat-of-arms for Saint-Lazare which had been embedded in the façade of the prison facing the rue Saint-Denis was saved in the demolition, and re-installed on the façade of the prison chapel which had been saved to become part of the new hospital. It can still be seen there today.

By 1955, changes in the law concerning prostitution[116] and the great decrease in the number of cases of sexually-transmitted diseases led to the institution being repurposed and transferred to the control of the *Department d'Assistance Publique*. At this time, the facility became associated with the nearby Hôpital Labiboisière and was used for a variety of medical purposes until it was closed in 1998. The complex was then returned to the city of Paris which owned the property.

In 2003, plans were drawn up for the re-use and remodeling of the facility. Two years later, in 2005, the buildings finally were given landmark status. In 2010, they re-opened as a *crèche* and *centre social* for the 10th arrondisement. Thus, after almost 900 years the social service memories, and present social services of Paris remain joined at this venerable site of Saint-Lazare.

[116] After years of discussion on April 13, 1946 the passage of the so-called *loi Marthe Richard* ended almost 150 years of legalized prostitution in France. The registers of prostitutes were destroyed and brothels closed. This put an end to the feeder system for Saint-Lazare.