



QUAKER COUNCIL FOR EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

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Fact Finding Visit to Ilguciema Women's Prison, Latvia on 29 July 2005 by the Quaker Council for European Affairs

Methodology

On the 29/7/05 a QCEA female staff member visited Ilguciema prison in Riga, Latvia accompanied by a male independent interpreter. The visit included two lengthy interviews with the deputy governor, a senior staff member and the head of the mother and baby unit. A tour was taken of the health-centre, classrooms, mother and baby unit, juvenile unit, visiting block and a middle-security accommodation block. Brief interviews were held with a prison doctor, senior guard and the prisoners, including juveniles, in the presence of guards.

Basic Information

Ilguciema Prison is now the only women's prison in Latvia, it holds juvenile girls as well as adults. There are 384 prisoners. 225 of these are sentenced, the remainder on remand; this includes 10 juveniles, 5 of whom are on remand. There are 11 children up to 4 years of age with their mothers in the prison. The prison does not keep statistics on children of prisoners outside the prison as it is 'not their task to know'. (But see Keeping in Touch section.) They do not have a social worker, the chief of the unit has to fill in for this role. None of the prisoners we saw wore uniforms.

In general the buildings were in poor condition, material deprivation is due to lack of resources not a deliberate part of the regime. The gardens and yards were large though unkempt. The prison is made up of low buildings spaced around the site rather than one large building which means fresh air and natural light is more readily available.

Staff and Management

All the staff seemed committed to their job and were willing to talk to us. They freely acknowledged faults in the prison such as the poor condition of the buildings. They seemed to have good relationships with the prisoners. At the end of our visit the Deputy Governor, the head of the mother and baby unit and a

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senior guard were all eager to know what we thought of the prison. They asked how it compared to conditions in the West and ways it could be improved.

The head of the mother and baby unit told us about conferences she had attended discussing issues such as contact with families. There had been a long discussion in Latvia about the ages prisoners' children should be held in prison which had 'turned her hair grey'. She had succeeded in pushing the age up from 2 to 4. The staff had had discussions with MPs and were interested in alternatives to custody and ways of improving contact with families.

Staff utilised external connections well. Using NGOs and charities for both sharing good practice/information and providing services, as well as sponsors/donations from businesses.

When asked what she would like to change about the prison a senior staff member replied: more space allowing 2 prisoners per room and more showers; more people working directly with prisoners such as tutors and more psychiatrists etc to deal with prisoners' problems; the government to intervene more with tax-reductions and benefits enabling prisoners to earn a living.

Training programmes for staff include aggression, psychology and health protection. There is 6 months compulsory training at the police academy and a college for prison workers. When recruiting guards they look for those with secondary education and professional training. Unit chiefs have a university degree, the head of the juvenile unit has a psychology degree. Officers have higher education.

Sentencing

The average sentence is 3½ years. Offenders get 6 months for minor crimes involving theft; those who cannot pay fines may be in prison for 30-40 days but the prison cannot predict how long they will stay for. Prisoners get early release for good behaviour. There is only 1 lifer in the prison.

The probation service is a recent addition to the Latvian criminal justice system. Offenders are worked with for 6 months prior to release and then in the community. There is a need for social service provision particularly for the homeless. There are no half way houses for women. A parliamentary deputy in Riga has just started an apartment with 3 places for women; there is a night lodging house with 20 places for homeless people.

There are no women imprisoned for prostitution.

Foreign Nationals

There are only three foreign national prisoners held at Ilguciema Prison, two of these are on remand, all are held for drug offences. Previous crimes committed by foreign nationals include drug offences, illegal immigration (from Belarus) and the organization of trafficking.

Keeping in Touch and Visiting

Visits

The number of visits allowed varies for different prisoners. There are 3 stages: if prisoners are in the first 1/5 of their prison sentence they are allowed four short and four long (48 hour) visits a year; the next level is 6 short and 6 long visits a year and the last stage is 8 short and 8 long visits a year.

In fact relatives/friends are usually unable to use all these visits, due to the unavailability and cost of transport especially for those in full time work and those who live rurally.

Relatives coming for long stays need a medical certificate. Those with alcohol addiction are not allowed to come.

Children

The prison authorities know when the children of prisoners held in care move orphanages and help them to keep in correspondence with their mothers. If the child is younger than 4 years they will help with the paperwork to allow that child to reside in the prison.

Vacation

The prisoners have 7 days vacation a year from prison. This is dependent on good behaviour and on the conditions where they will be staying. Relatives write an application to host the prisoner and guarantee security, the prison then contacts the police to check the address. The police may say the security risk is too high and the vacation will not be allowed. If prisoners' relatives are in bad health additional leave is granted.

Health

The health centre is small but appeared to be well-equipped. There are consultancy rooms and surgeries and small, clean rooms for patients with large windows, mostly with two beds to a room. Patients have radios, newspapers and magazines.

The health-centre has 6 specialists including gynaecology, psychiatry, dentist, and ear, nose and throat. There are 5 nurses.

All women are able to see the doctor in privacy and are allowed to attend the on-site medical centre without supervision. Juveniles have separate times for attending the centre.

Prisoners are given a compulsory health check when they start their sentence, including an AIDS test and gynaecological tests. About 100 of the prisoners have AIDS, this information is kept confidential. Sadly some prisoners arrive at the prison not knowing they have AIDS and only find out on being tested. Medical care and drug treatment is given for AIDS. Full information on AIDS is given to all prisoners.

Women are able to have a general health check every three months. We were told medical care is likely to be better inside the prison than outside as it is freely available and the opening hours are good.

Drugs

There are cases of drug-addiction for all drugs except cocaine. 90% of drug addicts have Hepatitis C. All prisoners are able to get drug and alcohol rehabilitation but some "do not recognize they are ill" (prison doctor). Drug addicts can get replacement-drugs. Alcoholics can see a psychotherapist for one to one support.

Mental Illness

A high proportion of the women suffer from mental illness which may be exacerbated by drugs and alcohol. Some prisoners have learning difficulties. There are no cases of schizophrenia.

According to the prison deputy-governor the courts may not recognize an offender is mentally ill but when they are in Ilguciema this may be noticed and the woman transferred to a mental hospital. This has happened three times in recent years.

There is 1 psychologist in the prison. There has been one case of suicide 8 years ago. There are a small number of self-harmers. There is a procedure in place for when this is noticed involving the psychotherapist, psychiatrist and a social worker which is put into action immediately. According to the prison doctor the prisoners can "tell everything" to her and some bring photos of their family to her. A prisoner told us she would speak to the chief of the unit if she had personal problems.

On release, offenders with drug and alcohol addiction may continue their programs in the community, a prison doctor will register them. The same

happens for AIDS sufferers. However staff admitted continuing a drug programme can be difficult on release.

see also 'Maternity'

Education

Ilguciema prison has a contract with a vocational school from which prisoners can gain diplomas. Their success is celebrated with a graduation ceremony; the name of the prison is not recorded on these certificates. There are two sewing groups and one hairdressing group, this year a chef's diploma has been added. There are not enough places for the number of women who want to take part. There are also recreational Art classes. Next year a new vocational qualification will be offered in painting and decorating after consultation with the prisoners; they hope to offer one in design later. A member of staff from the juvenile unit said that 3 courses on offer was good for a Latvian prison. Education is complicated by some prisoners speaking Russian and some Latvian. There are language classes available in Russian, Latvian and English.

There is also a contract with a night-school offering education up to 9th grade (age 15-16 in the mainstream system). There is no academic education at a higher level than this. There are approximately 15 or 16 people in every year of education up to 4th grade (age 10-11) and 5-10 people in the later grades. Prisoners going to school do not have to work. Prisoners may spend half a day at school and half gaining a vocational qualification.

There are several good sized classrooms equipped with blackboards and sewing machines and a hair-dressing salon, where the public can get their hair cut. Apart from the salon and the sewing equipment (old equipment and materials from a company) the classrooms are bare and under-resourced. The women keep what they make in sewing classes.

Work

Legislation requires prisoners to work if they are able but jobs cannot always be provided; about 80% of inmates have jobs. Juveniles have to go to school if they do not have an education; they can work 6 hours a day in the school holidays. The prison has just got a new contract sewing and gluing packages. Sometimes the standard of work is not high enough and the work is not accepted by the company.

Prisoners get paid less than the general population. Wages are paid into bank accounts not given in cash. If they have been sentenced to pay a fine or child-

maintenance they have to pay this out of their wages but this cannot be more than 50% of their wages. Inmates can spend money in the prison shop and send money to their children. Some spend money on medicines that are not available from the health centre or on other health consultants. We were told some inmates do not have the initiative to work and so get low wages, others have money sent them by their families (Deputy Governor). Inmates can have part of their wages held back for release (this used to be compulsory). Legally prisoners should have the minimum salary when released but in fact there are no funds for this. Clothing, shoes and money to get back home is provided plus 20lv. Those with children get children's things too. On release prisoners will register at the Employment Office to get welfare as they are registered as 'employed' whilst in prison.

Maternity

Women give birth in hospital and have pre-checks and scans in prison. A guard goes with them to the hospital, they are not handcuffed. During the birth the guard waits outside the door. Doctors at the hospital do not like the presence of guards. (Prison doctor) There have been two cases of women escaping this way. At present there are four pregnant inmates. Abortion can be arranged and is free.

Whether or not a child should reside in prison with their mother is decided by the "Orphan Court" or "Child's Rights Agency" which is part of the new Ministry of Children and the Family. Its first priority is the welfare of the child and one of its concerns is to keep families united; it also deals with adoption. This agency carries out expert inspections and found Ilcugemia to be good. As soon as a woman becomes pregnant a decision is made which may take a few weeks. The prison supplies information to the court in writing. A woman may decide to give a child to relatives but most wish to keep their children with them in prison. One woman was refused a place in the mother and baby unit with her second child as it was said she did not care properly for her last child (she did not visit the child when he/she was in hospital for 6 months).

Mother and Baby Unit

Mothers with babies under a year live in a special mother and baby unit in which conditions were very good, staff having made this a priority. The unit can hold 6 women with a maximum of 20 children. At present there are 8 women in the unit but this did not appear to cause serious overcrowding problems.

In the unit there is a small sitting room with a television and storage-units and a kitchen where mothers prepare baby food. The individual bedrooms are all slightly different with large windows and are painted in pastels. Bedrooms

contain a bed, a chest of drawers and a cot, including some soft furnishings: rugs, curtains and tablecloths. The women have photos and personal belongings, children's mobiles and toys.

A nurse is on duty 24 hours a day and a female doctor is in charge of the unit. There is a room for medical treatment. Off this room is a bedroom for new mothers to adjust to the unit before they move to one of the rooms with the other mothers. New mothers are taught how to care for their babies.

Children up to four years old live in the mother and baby unit while their mothers live in normal prison accommodation. Mothers of older children go to work/school and are required to visit their children twice a day in the unit. Older children have a separate dormitory with paper decorations on the walls. There is a large play-room with toys and a small play-room with more toys and little desks. A US Methodist Church sponsored Montessori training and these principles are written up on the wall. There is a large garden with swings, sandpit and slide that the mothers and children can use whenever they like. There is a large kitchen where nurses prepare food according to nutritional requirements for the older children.

There are no mothers with drug or alcohol addictions but we were told mothers would not be denied visits if this were the case.

On release the mother is given 2 sets of papers for her child/children, one including the child's residence in prison and one which does not, so that the woman can use whichever is more suitable for welfare or job seeking.

Juveniles

There are 10 juvenile girls, 5 on remand and 5 convicted. Remand and sentenced juveniles are not supposed to be kept together but the court allowed it because conditions are good in the unit. The longest sentence is for 1 year and the shortest for 8 days. All the girls are between 16-18 but stays can be extended until age 21.

The juveniles share a home like unit next to the mother and baby unit which includes a sitting room with easy-chairs, rugs and a kitchen where they can cook their own meals if wanted. There is a small windowless room which is used as a chapel; they pray there when they are sad they told us. There is a good sized, well equipped gym with purple walls, half a dozen machines, weights, aerobic mats etc. They have aerobics and dance classes every day which they clearly enjoy. The girls share bedrooms which are rather small and dark but with personal belongings and soft furnishings. There are two toilets and showers upstairs. There is a large garden adjoining the mother and baby unit garden

which they look after themselves, they also painted the walls themselves. They are allowed in the garden whenever they like except at night. There are two pet doves in the sitting room and two computers with games and a drawing programme.

Before conviction some of the girls were in school but not all. All were now in education between 6th - 9th grade (11-12 to 15-16), mostly in 8th or 9th grade, except for 3 who had graduated inside the prison. Both those who had graduated and those still in education took vocational qualifications, those who were in for the longest amount of time had graduated from all the vocational courses.

The policy of the unit is not to separate juveniles from the outside world. An effort is made to provide different activities for the girls such as handicrafts, a poetry competition, plays and dances. There is a piano which one girl plays. A favourite activity was drawing. Volunteer organizations and NGOs from various countries have visited for workshops and courses, including male tutors to create normal conditions. These included spiritual care and a course specially designed for teenagers dealing with women and sexual health, anger management, emotions and communication. When the girls take part in activities like plays they get thanks from the administration and are taken on excursions such as a walk around the city or a trip to the zoo.

Juveniles on remand may phone home four times a month and sentenced prisoners six times a month. Phone cards can be bought from the prison shop or sent by families. Girls share these with each other if a girl does not have one. They may send as many letters as they want. They are allowed 12 long visits and 12 short visits a year. Both parents and girls are searched. On Mother's Day there is a 2 hour visit for which they prepare a singing concert and bake things to eat on the day, the parents also bring food to eat together. They get 10 days vacation a year. Families can send as much money as they please.

Juveniles may talk in confidence with tutors or the psychiatrist if they have problems. 7 of the 10 had used drugs in the past and 3 had not tried drugs. They can go to the health centre any day.

Clothing is limited and by law juveniles are not allowed more than 10 photos and letters in their room at one time. Old letters can be stored in a warehouse until their release. The girls have to go upstairs at 9 pm.

In general the girls seemed satisfied with the conditions, although we did not interview them in private. The head of the unit told us conditions may well be better for them here than at home. The girls seem to have a good relationship with the head of the unit who was quite young and did not wear uniform. They asked me what conditions were like in the West such as what time juveniles have to go to bed. The girls said the worst thing about being in prison was missing

their families and not having people who were close to them and that they were sometimes bored.

Spiritual Programme Unit

This unit has 16 places and is designed for women following a course of spirituality. There are 3 chaplains and 8 teachers who are prisoners themselves. Prisoners must participate in the programme for 3 months before entry and entry relies on good behaviour. Homosexual activity is banned. Prisoners may be removed from the programme for breaking the rules.

There are three stages of the diploma and it is equivalent to the first level in theology in university, it enables them to preach or teach or continue their education on release. Women taking the diploma can also go to the regular academic classes.

There is a stricter regime in the unit than in the rest of the prison but the conditions are better. There are two libraries and a kitchen where they can cook products they buy themselves. There is a pet bird. There are 4 people to a bedroom. In the bedrooms (which are wallpapered) are: 2 wardrobes, tables with tablecloth and chairs, mirrors, bedside tables, TVs, radios, plants and kettles and rugs. Women are able to subscribe to magazines, they also knit and sew.

Anyone may attend worship in the chapel.

Middle-Security Unit

There is one unit chief for 40-70 inmates and guards work only at night. The doors to the bedrooms are not locked and prisoners are free to come and go as they do not have a schedule. They are free to use the yards and gardens of the prison. The guard knocked on the bedroom door before we entered and generally guards seemed to treat the women with respect.

The material conditions in the middle security unit were noticeably poorer than the specialist units so far described. The flooring was concrete, the rooms were quite dark with few furnishings and not cheerful, empty bed frames were piled up in one room. They did have personal belongings, radios and sometimes TV. (Prisoners pay for the electricity for this.) There is a large, under-equipped kitchen with fridge, kettles etc where prisoners can cook the food they buy. It is locked at night. There was also a library, we spoke to one prisoner who worked in the library and said it was one of the good jobs.

We asked several women what their main worries were in prison. These were finding work and a home after release and not being able to help their children.

Visiting Block

The visiting block was small with poor material conditions and was generally spartan and depressing. There is one crowded room for visitors with chairs and small tables. There is a guard at the front who 'goes past every 10 minutes'.

Visits are two hours and take place on Saturdays and Mondays. By law visitors should be behind a barrier but fortunately they do not find this necessary so relatives are allowed to touch and hug. Most prisoners get visits. Visitors are only searched if the authorities are suspicious. Prisoners are strip-searched after visits, we were told by the staff that prisoners 'did not have a problem with this'.

There are separate rooms where prisoners can stay with their families for 48 hour visits. Bedrooms contain only beds, a chair and table and crockery for meals. There is a very small, windowless sitting room with one small sofa and a television. There is a small windowless kitchen so families can cook together; families can bring as much food as they want but no alcohol. Rooms are always available for those who want overnight-visits as there is a schedule in place for visits. Contraception is provided.

Other

Weddings can be, and have been, celebrated in prison, we were shown a photograph of the wedding with the bride in a white wedding dress.

Staff told us there was no bullying or hierarchy among prisoners. Verbal abuse was not tolerated and physical fights were punished. For recreation the prisoners put on dances, fashion shows and plays, much is made of the graduation ceremony. We were shown photos of all these.

Originally our visit had been scheduled to end at 13.00 but ended at 16.30, suggesting a degree of flexibility and an openness to engage with the outside world. We did not visit the high security unit; nor did we have the opportunity to talk to individual prisoners in private. However senior staff were obviously keen to improve conditions in the prison and to use our visit as one means of furthering their understanding of criminal justice.