Comrade Lindemann's Conscience

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From Berlin comes this dramatic story of a benevolent hoax by means of which a People's Prosecutor with a conscience, Herr Lindemann, freed five innocent men from Soviet prisons.

The West Berlin radio interrupted its regular program one day last July to make a startling announcement. Five prominent political prisoners of the Communists had escaped from the heavily-guarded and supposedly escape-proof East German prisons of Zwickau and Waldheim, and made their way to the safety of Berlin's western sector. As details began coming over the air, it became clear that they had not broken out—they had been released by the Communist prison authorities, who had been hoaxed by forged release orders and telephone calls from a spurious State's Attorney.

As West Germany laughed, the Red satraps and their Soviet masters in East Berlin raged. The State Security Service and the People's Police dropped all other business to find the authors of the escape plot. Sixty ranking police and judicial officials were summarily discharged, many of them arrested. The Communist press and radio screamed that dastardly American agents had been at work.

Actually, the daring skulduggery had been devised by a young German named Hasso Lindemann and two of his friends. Hasso, a bookish, 23-year-old law student, had been rocketed to a position of Communist power by circumstances not unusual in East Germany. In 1949 the Communist authorities of Leipzig had discharged almost all of the experienced judges and prosecutors in the district as "politically unreliable." A milkman, an organ grinder, and a 21-year-old girl became Leipzig's People's Prosecutors. They had power of life and death over their fellow-citizens, but they had no knowledge of legal procedure and needed someone who commanded at least the forms and language of the law to advise them. Lindemann, who had worked for some time in the Ministry of Justice as a clerk seemed "politically activistic" and obedient. He was appointed assistant to the State's Attorney.

At first, Comrade Lindemann more than lived up to the expectations of his superiors. He was a shrewd investigator and wrote brilliant briefs in impeccable Communist legal style. His record was soon impressive. A number of prominent industrialists whose cases he investigated had their properties expropriated and were sent to prison for long terms. A dozen young agitators regarded as dangerous by the Communist leaders were sent to jail after Lindemann had made the cases against them. Comrade Lindemann, wisely modest and retiring, let the People's Prosecutors take the credit for these triumphs, and as a result was popular with his chiefs. He was well fed and housed, relatively well paid, and had a promising career ahead of him.

The Comrade's Eyes Open

But Hasso Lindemann had a conscience. He had been a convinced and faithful Communist but as the terrible parade of Red injustice and cruelty—the trumped-up charges, faked evidence and brutal sentences against innocent people—crossed his desk he began to rebel. "All the Communist philosophy in the world," as he puts it, "could not excuse for me the monstrous things I was doing. Somehow I had to devise a way of setting these people free."

One afternoon, when almost all of the personnel of the State's Attorney's staff were at their weekly Party "indoctrination meeting," Lindemann saw his chance. From his chief's desk he took a number of form letters used to order the release of prisoners. By evening he had fled to the Western Sector of Berlin with the documents hidden in his clothing. "The State's Attorney's forms, the clothes on my back, and a few Marks were all I had." Lindemann blinked through his spectacles as he said it. "I had left everything else behind—job, future, everything. But I felt much, much better."

There were five cases in particular that Hasso Lindemann decided to rectify at once. Seventy-year-old Karl Mende had committed no crime whatever, even under Communist law—the government of the "Democratic German Republic" had simply wanted his prosperous glass factories. He had been convicted of "industrial sabotage" and sentenced to six years at hard labor; his factories had been expropriated. Arthur Bergel, a prominent woolen manufacturer, was the victim of a similar conviction; his "offense" had been to pay his 1700 workers a higher wage than the government allowed. Horst Schnabel, a high school boy of 17, had been sentenced to two years in the penitentiary, to be followed by transportation to the uranium mines, for possessing a book banned by the Communist authorities. Jurgen Poppitz and Ekkehard Schumann, 20-year-old students, had received four-year terms for firing rockets which showered the center of Leipzig with anti-Communist leaflets.

Lindemann had participated in the prosecution of all these cases. "And I was determined to get these men their freedom," he says quietly, as he tells the story.

The obstacles in Hasso's way seemed insuperable. He had few friends in Berlin. As a former Communist of importance he was suspect to the various organizations that help refugees from the East. Even after he had convinced the two principal anti-Communist committees that he was sincere, they considered his plan a mad escapade doomed to failure.

Other blows fell. A new State's Attorney, whose signature Lindemann did not know, was appointed for Leipzig. One of the new incumbent's first rules was that no release order was to be obeyed unless the prison director to whom it was addressed first checked its validity by a personal phone call to the State's Attorney or his immediate subordinate.

It took Lindemann three months to obtain, from a friend in Leipzig, a document signed by Chief State's Attorney Adam, more time to practice a flawless forgery of the signature. He had to make sure of the exact technique and timing of the telephonic verification. Gradually, all this information was gathered by friends of Lindemann in Leipzig and passed on to him by a complicated system of couriers and deftly worded, seemingly innocent letters.

Perilous Assignment

Finally, the months of painstaking preparation came to an end. One of Lindemann's aides, Hans Schmidt, was put in charge of the first operation. Hasso had wanted to perform it himself, but his friends had persuaded him that his face was too well known to People's Police and State Security Service men.

With forged release orders for Mende and Bergel in his briefcase, Schmidt began the dangerous journey from West Berlin to Leipzig, deep in the Communist zone, and to the particular postbox in that city from which such communications from the State's Attorney's office were always mailed. Twice on the way he almost met disaster.

The first episode occurred when two police officers suddenly appeared in his compartment and ordered him to open his briefcase for inspection. Such spot checks are routine in East Germany. Hans obeyed, his heart in his mouth. The policemen saw the envelopes stamped "Chief State's Attorney's Office." "You are a courier of the *Herr Oberstaatsanwalt,*" one of them barked. "Of course," said Hans in the same tone of voice. "We are sorry to have disturbed you, sir." Heels clicked, salutes were exchanged and, without asking for his papers, the officers walked away.

At the postbox Hans had his other bad moment. Two People's Police were watching the box, on guard against the mailing of clandestine leaflets. But again the envelope stamped "Chief State's Attorney's Office" commanded immediate obeisance, and one of the *Volkspolizei* even politely held up the box-flap as Hans dropped the letters in.

That night neither Schmidt in Leipzig nor Lindemann in Berlin slept a wink. The release orders should reach the warden of Zwickau Penitentiary in the morning. If the warden should telephone the State's Attorney's Office before the plotters could act, the game would be up.

Schmidt braced himself and telephoned Zwickau. "This is *Oberstaatsanwalt* Adam," he roared in the loud staccato which high German officials usually use with their subordinates. "Give me the Director at once." Since the German bureaucratic caste system under the Communists is as strict as it ever was, Hans calculated that the voice of an exalted Chief State's Attorney would not be too familiar to a warden. He was right. The Director answered with great deference.

"Have you received the release orders for Mende and Bergel?" snapped Hans.

"No, *Herr Oberstaatsanwalt.* But I will attend to them personally the moment they arrive."

"See that you do," Hans barked. "No return call to my office is necessary to verify these orders. Is that clear?"

"Of course, *Herr Oberstaatsanwalt.* I will not disturb you. I have been deeply honored by your personal call."

When Hans hung up he was sweating from every pore. The most dangerous part of the operation, however, still lay ahead. Mende and Bergel would think that their release was legal and would doubtless go home to Leipzig. There they would soon be re-arrested. They had to be warned as they left the prison to flee at once to West Berlin. Hans went to Zwickau to wait for them.

At the Prison Gates

Watching Zwickau Penitentiary is a hazardous task. It is the grim old castle of Osterstein, and from towers on its battlements guards look out not only over the prison itself but over the broad avenue that girdles it. Anyone who appears to be loitering nearby is immediately reported to the People's Police detail that patrols the periphery. But Hans found a café from which he could watch the institution's main gate. He sat and drank beer—and more beer.

Hours went by and the gates did not open. Hans pretended to be intoxicated and explained at great length to the café-keeper that he was trying to drown his domestic troubles. A People's Policeman examined his papers, fortunately rather carelessly. Finally Hans decided something must have gone wrong. The forgeries had probably been detected, and the State Security Service was doubtless even now on his trail. Dejectedly he started back toward Berlin to report to Lindemann that their months of work had ended in failure.

Actually, the release orders had merely been slow in reaching the penitentiary. And when they arrived, the prison director, still awed by his personal conversation with the *Herr Oberstaatsanwalt,* proved as good as his word.

Both Mende and Bergel were amazed and then apprehensive when guards, suddenly smiling and affable, appeared at their cells with freshly-pressed civilian suits. Each suspected that he was being readied