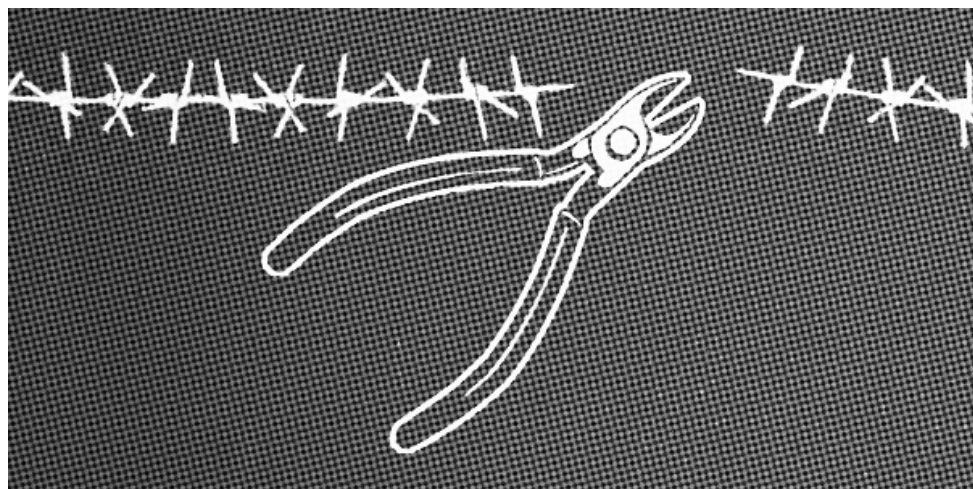


# Prison Round Trip



## **Prison Round Trip**

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Einmal Knast und zurück

Klaus Viehmann, arranca! #26

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**Note from the No Trace Project:**

The author of this text, Klaus Viehmann, was involved in urban guerilla activities in Germany in the 1970s. He was arrested in 1978, charged with membership in the 2nd of June Movement—a West German anarchist militant group active from 1972 to 1980—and a number of related activities, including bank robberies and the liberation of prisoners, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was released in 1993. He wrote this text ten years later.

Bang. The door to your cell is shut. You have survived the arrest, you are mad that you weren't more careful, you worry that *they* will get others too, you wonder what will happen to your group and whether a lawyer has been called yet—of course you show none of this. The weapon, the fake papers, your own clothes, all gone. The prison garb and the shoes they've thrown at you are too big—maybe because they want to play silly games with you, maybe because they really blow “terrorists” out of proportion in their minds—and the control over your own appearance taken out of your hands. You look around, trying to get an understanding of where you'll spend the next few years of your life.

What is the point of talking about survival strategies today—years later? Is it worth trying to organize and sum up your experiences? It is, at any rate, difficult to bring them into words and sentences. Yet for those who will spend time behind bars in the future, they might be useful. Besides, since the experiences of (political) prisoners are neither extra-societal nor ahistorical, their survival strategies might also help those comrades who experience their everyday life as little more than a somewhat coordinated form of “getting by.” To focus on what's essential, to plan your everyday life consciously, to use your energies in meaningful ways—these are all qualities that are useful. Everywhere. Survival strategies are personal (which is why this text is, also rhetorically, directed at you, no abstract third person), but not egotistical. Emancipation and liberation do not happen within the individual—they are socio-historical processes. In the words of Peter Brückner,<sup>1</sup> “It was only the late bourgeois who has turned freedom and independence into a question of 'inwardness.’” This shows the limits of all individual survival strategies. Surviving can only turn into living through social liberation. But this is another story, one in which prisons will hardly play a role...

In prison, the necessity of survival strategies is immediate; without them you are at the mercy of the enemy. Prison is a hostile environment, and it has been designed as such by people who see you as their foe. Have no illusions about that. In regular prisons—especially old-fashioned ones—conditions are often atrocious and sometimes violent, but there are at least

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<sup>1</sup>*No Trace Project (N.T.P.) note:* Peter Brückner (1922–82) was a psychologist popular with the 1960s protest movement.

social structures. In isolation or maximum-security units, social relations are controlled, regulated, abolished. Isolation means the absence of social life and the presence of yourself. You have nothing but yourself, and you have to find ways to deal with it. This is possible, but it is not possible to know beforehand who will get through prison okay and who won't. For someone with little life experience, limited political self-motivation, and uncertain (possibly egotistical) future plans, it will be difficult. A colorful biography in which prison does not mark the first rough period, optimism even in the face of a dire situation, and the ability not to take yourself too seriously all help.

Ernst Bloch<sup>2</sup> might have said that “those who acquire their knowledge only from books should be put onto shelves,” but it is not necessarily a tragedy if the knowledge about certain things only comes that way. I have not experienced physical torture, death threats, or confinement in dark cells. Personal or literary descriptions of such experiences, however, can help you to understand your own experiences better and to get through them.

The empirical basis (if you will) of this text are fifteen years' imprisonment. Seven years—after 1978—were spent in isolation or with small groups of inmates, five out of these in maximum-security units (in Moabit and Bielefeld). From 1986 until my release in 1993, I was in a special “security cell” in Werl, an old German prison. I had one hour in the yard every day with other inmates. My visits and my mail were monitored, I was separated from my lawyers by a bulletproof glass window, I was hardly ever allowed to buy extra supplies, had no visits of other prisoners in my cell, showered alone, was allowed a maximum of thirty books, no radio, and five or six subscriptions to newspapers and magazines. Mail restrictions were eased during my last years there, and from 1991 to 1993 I was permitted to jog in the yard twice a week. What I am writing here is the quintessence of my experiences. During the first five or six years of my imprisonment, I learned the survival strategies that got me through the last ten. These are the experiences I'm summarizing here.

Back to the first day in prison. You have no conception of the day you will be released. Five thousand, five hundred days are beyond what is

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<sup>2</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) was a German Marxist philosopher.

imaginable, even when I look back at it. What you see at the time is what you need to know to survive right there and then: Where do I get reading and writing material? Where do I hide secret messages? When should I expect a cell search? Where are the cells of my comrades? There is a lot to do. Boredom is the least of your concerns. Besides, you know why you are in there—an enormous advantage compared to those who have no idea. It was a radical political challenge that got you there; one that you could see as “just another step” in a life that you had chosen by engaging in militant left-wing politics. Sure, *they* were one up on you at that point, but prison was a new terrain and they still had to prove that they could break you. This is exactly what you must not allow them to do—and this, in turn, defines your struggle from the first day to the last.

To have a clear objective and clear front lines enables you to fight well. You must never allow them to persuade you that there are no clear front lines and that “big brother” is your friend. Ulrike Meinhof's<sup>3</sup> declaration that “the fight of the people against power is the fight of remembering against forgetting” sums this up perfectly. The ability to remember requires political and/or moral conviction. Those who lose this conviction refuse to remember and get lost in self-reflection, self-pity, and lack of orientation. This is the steep decline where desperation can turn into suicide and political denial into betrayal. Solitary confinement and the control of social contact (letters, visits, news), you can also call it brainwashing, aim at causing you to forget and to become egotistical. Resistance, solidarity, responsibility, collectivism, and a corresponding personality shall vanish.

Maximum-security prisons also follow the bourgeois-capitalist principle of “everyone is his/her own best friend.” Those who adopt this principle do not survive—they turn into someone else. Not because they grew and achieved emancipation, but because they regressed and desocialized. The consequences are depoliticization and the disintegration of the personality. True survival means to experience yourself as a human being who is socially, politically, mentally, and emotionally autonomous and self-responsible. This requires breaking your isolation and finding reference

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<sup>3</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Ulrike Meinhof (1934–76) was a German left-wing journalist and founding member of the Red Army Faction (RAF), a West German far-left militant group founded in 1970.

points outside your cell. Those who cannot transcend their own imprisonment and who cannot understand it in a wider context will be unable to find meaning in their arduous situation. The narrower your horizon, the more paralyzing and desperate your personal fears. Jean Améry<sup>4</sup> once described these “reference points” in connection with the most extreme of all experiences, that of Auschwitz:

“You must realize,’ a believing Jew once told me, ‘that your intelligence and education is worthless here. Me, however, I know that God will take revenge.’ A German leftist comrade, in the camp since 1933, expressed this more bluntly: ‘There you are, you bourgeois know-it-alls, and you shiver when the SS appears. We do not shiver, and even if we will perish in here miserably, we know that the comrades who follow us will line them all up.’ Both these men transcended themselves and projected themselves into the future. [...] Their belief or their ideology gave them a stable point in the world that allowed them to see the downfall of the SS-State.”

Günter Anders<sup>5</sup> has called this the “paradox of hopelessness creating hope.”

In the much less dangerous world of West German high security prisons, it is rare that your physical survival is threatened. There is enough food, clothing, warmth, and hygiene—an enormous difference from the conditions in, for example, military prisons in Latin America. Despite such differences, however, you have to figure out how to survive with your personality intact. How do you protect yourself? How do you organize your defense? And when do you have to attack? The first impulse of course says: *Always!* But to act politically means to assess power balances and the consequences of your actions—also in prison. For example, there is no point in destroying your cell if no one on the outside will ever know about it. It might be fun, sure, but it will almost certainly cause time in the hole and repercussions. However, when in 1980 the first prisoners were meant to be transferred to the newly constructed maximum-security unit in Moabit, it made sense to barricade yourself behind the dismantled furniture of your cell. This was a sign that you refused to go to this unit

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<sup>4</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Jean Améry (1912–78) was an Austrian author, resistance fighter, and Auschwitz survivor.

<sup>5</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Günther Anders (1902–92) was a German philosopher.

voluntarily, that you refused to accept a worsening of your conditions without resistance. If you do not show such resistance, it will make *them* overconfident and you will feel powerless in your new surroundings. In the case of Moabit, comrades protested on the outside, there were militant actions, and the media coverage was huge. For surviving the maximum-security conditions, this was all extremely helpful.

The hunger strikes of the 1970s and 1980s were—despite the critique of their exact circumstances and certain demands—“survival strategies” for prisoners in isolation and maximum-security units. The solidarity campaigns that followed the deaths of Holger Meins and Sigurd Debus<sup>6</sup>—killed by medical negligence and force-feeding—definitely helped the survival of their imprisoned comrades. Here is an example for an immediate survival strategy from my own experience: In 1983, the authorities intended to implement a new model of isolating small groups of prisoners in the maximum-security unit in Bielefeld. It was planned to supplement the maximum-security architecture with an extremely rigid regime: for a dirty sink, you would lose three days in the yard, turning off the common room's idiotic, prison-selected TV program meant confinement to your cell for two weeks, etc. Forced labor programs were added to this: assembling three thousand clothespins in an eight-hour workday, five days a week, under CCTV surveillance, with disciplinary measures for poor output. The enforcement of repetitive and mind-numbing activities is essential in all psychological conditioning, a classical means of brain-washing directed at the body. To assemble clothespins for years equals a slow mental death. Punishment for work refusal was the hole. Since a hunger strike (possibly of several weeks) is difficult under such circumstances, and since everything seemed at stake anyway, the only available means was a thirst strike. Thirst strikes do not last long—one way or another. Public pressure has to be mounted fast, and this pressure has to become stronger than, in this case, *their* interest in implementing the new maximum-security forced-labor model. The survival strategy in this case was to challenge them to explain why three thousand clothespins a day were worth a human being's death. Besides, there was an unspoken,

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<sup>6</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Holger Meins and Sigurd Debus were imprisoned members of the RAF. Both died in prison, in connection with a hunger strike.



yet clear, understanding that if they did implement forced labor within the maximum-security units, attacks on the prison labor system would become so strong that it would be impossible to maintain prison labor even in the regular units, which would have caused substantial loss of income. *They* gave in after five days, having suffered significant property damage: the Revolutionäre Zellen<sup>7</sup> had bombed the prison bureau and the offices of two companies profiting from prison labor. Added to this were demonstrations, a riot in the maximum-security unit in Köln-Ossendorf, and bad press. Since then, no further attempt has ever been made to implement forced labor in maximum-security facilities.

Most times, however, the life of a prisoner is less heroic. After all, the natural enemy of the hero is daily routine. Here is an example, though, of a tiny survival strategy: If your request to see the prison dentist remains “overlooked” for two days, you can tape it to the toilet which can then be demounted and, at the next opportunity, placed in front of your cell—just so it won't be “overlooked” any longer. This will lead to some money being taken from the solidarity account and will result in a disciplinary measure, but you will see the dentist. Such an action works because the denial of dental services becomes official with the property damage, which needs to be registered. This means you will have the option of filing a legal complaint—something that the prison administration usually does not want to deal with in such petty cases.

Of course, you cannot rattle your bars or kick against your door all day. You won't be able to keep that up for very long. However, not being able to tear down the bars or to kick in the door does not mean that you have to accept the prison's regime and be forced into norms that are a lot narrower than those on the outside. You can keep your individuality only by resisting these norms. Live or be lived. An acceptance of the norms means an end to your own development. You lose interest in social contact and refuse to accept that circumstances and situations change. To adapt to the prison regime means to forget individual strength and success. The adaptation reproduces itself endlessly, both because you fear the actual regime and the personal consequences of resistance. You lose hope. Eventually, accepting

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<sup>7</sup>*N.T.P. note:* The Revolutionäre Zellen (RZ, *Revolutionary Cells*) were a German far-left militant group active from 1973 to 1995.

the wrongs turns into embracing the rules. Not only optimism is dependent on activity, resistance is too. Being lethargic makes you dumb. Merely thinking about resistance (what the Nazi pawns called “inner emigration”) is no survival strategy; it is cynicism: you think one thing, but you do another, or you refuse to draw the consequences of your thoughts.

The praxis of imagined resistance has a name: expected behavior. When you are passive, you internalize fear and hopelessness. This creates—and reproduces—the obedient, neurotic prisoner. This prisoner's daydreams about spectacular escapes or unexpected pardons fall under the authority-sanctioned category of “Give-us-our-daily-illusion.” Within the “false life” of prison, there can be no absolutely correct ways of acting. However, fundamental decisions about your actions can still be made—decisions that are an important part of your survival strategies. They are not dogmatic. They have to be revised again and again. Is it wrong to give in? Are the old principles still valid? You always have to know this; you always have to convince yourself anew. Your responses must not just be habits. You ought to be curious and open when it comes to the experiences and perspectives of others, and you ought to appreciate friendly advice.

To make clear decisions on the basis of your memories and your knowledge, while accepting contradictions and acknowledging the change of social and political realities, in other words, to think dialectically, is a solid basis for your own conviction. Rigid and inflexible thinking can only make an exterior frame that does not even allow for the tiniest of cracks. If one detail seems off, everything seems off... This is why it is such tiny cracks that can sometimes cause those who once professed a “150 percent” conviction to crumble. The next thing they do is to look for a new frame. Not one that necessarily makes much sense, but one that might lead to an earlier release. Look at the example of Horst Mahler:<sup>8</sup> after a lot of ideological meandering, he finally settled on the far right when, after studying the relevant literature extensively, he came to the brash conclusion in the late 1970s that Marx had misunderstood Hegel and that we all ought to reconsider our understanding of the State. In a

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<sup>8</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Horst Mahler (1936–) was a founding member of the RAF who later became a Maoist before switching to neo-Nazism.

Spiegel<sup>9</sup> interview, he managed to outdo even the minister of the interior in his praise for the State institution. He was released early.

Of course, you will develop politically, reflect on the political praxis you were engaged in before you went to prison, etc. Yet dialectical thinking will only foster your conviction that exploitation, oppression, poverty, and war will not disappear without the overthrow of the prevailing order. This is what will always separate you from a minister of the interior.

The question of whether it is “false to give in” can be put into simple terms: Do you want to talk to someone who locks you up during the day and who is ready to shoot you if you attempt to escape during the night? Do you want to talk to the head of a prison who prohibits any commemoration of those who, in 1943, were sent to die in Mauthausen from the very yard you walk in every day? Or do you want to talk with the one who attends military training as a “reserve captain”? Do you want to strike a deal with the Bundeskriminalamt,<sup>10</sup> an organization maintaining a department called “TE” for “terrorism” (formerly “Sicherheitsgruppe Bonn” and established by former officials of the Nazis’ Reich Security Head Office [Reichssicherheitshauptamt]) that spies on your visitors and was involved in the death of Wolfgang Grams?<sup>11</sup> Do you want to bow in front of them in exchange for nothing more than a few perks? The “reason” that they demand of you rocks the cradle of both madness and betrayal, and the “common sense” they evoke “is the little man in the grey suit who never makes a mistake in addition—but it’s always someone else’s money he’s adding up” (Raymond Chandler).

“It is sweet but dangerous to wait for letters...  
to lay awake till the morning and stare at the ceiling...  
Forget your age, beware of the spring evenings...  
It is bad to dream of roses and gardens, but good to think of mountains  
and oceans.

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<sup>9</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Der Spiegel is a German weekly news magazine.

<sup>10</sup>*N.T.P. note:* The Bundeskriminalamt (BKA, *Federal Criminal Police Office*) is the federal investigative police agency of Germany.

<sup>11</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Wolfgang Grams (1953–93), a member of the RAF, died during a shootout with police at the railway station of Bad Kleinen, a small town in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

My advice to you would be: read and write as much as possible—and ignore the mirror.”

— *Nâzım Hikmet*,<sup>12</sup> *letter to a fellow prisoner*

Nâzım Hikmet's lines express pure survival strategies. Letters are important fractures in the prison walls, but to focus on receiving them makes you dependent. Be happy when they arrive—look for something else to be happy about when they don't. To lie awake until morning and stare at the ceiling does not change anything. To read and write until morning, however, might, as it means that you are active. To forget one's age and the mirror eradicates the worries about missing out on life. Beautiful spring evenings can cause terrible yearning for the world outside. To dream of roses and gardens appeases you in a place where you shouldn't be appeased. To think of untamed mountains and seas puts your own problems into perspective. To read and write as much as possible is the most crucial advice; in the long term, this is the most important requirement of each and every survival strategy in prison.

Books can transfer you into a different world when the one you are facing is intolerable. They allow you to travel even though you are trapped. This is of inestimable value in solitary confinement. Besides, it helps your survival strategies in the long run to engage with thoughts and people through reading and writing. It might be difficult against the backdrop of the exhausting monotony of prison, but it is the precondition for you to be engaged. Being engaged means new social relationships and new thoughts that keep you alive. Nobody wants to hear the same stories from you year after year, about shoot-outs or eternal truths or your problems inside. The Salvation Army might want to listen to your laments, but nobody who sees you as a political subject will.

Once you have managed to resist repression during your first months and years of prison, time becomes your main enemy. Physically you can stay fit—you can exercise even in a prison cell, and cigarettes, coffee, and sweets are too expensive anyway. The sheer length of the years, however, affects the possibilities of creating a life trajectory, of experiencing life as a whole—something that forms an identity. It is difficult to understand your own

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<sup>12</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Nâzım Hikmet (1902–63) was a Turkish poet and communist.

patterns of behavior as coherent and meaningful. On the outside, you can be relatively certain in your knowledge that you are a person who—despite developing, of course—is always the same person, with his or her interests, ideas, reasoning, and self-confidence. Now you always have to check your personality, your consciousness, and your ability to think and see if all this hasn't somehow changed without you noticing. Without a rigorous self-reflection about your thoughts, emotions, and actions, you cannot be certain that you still think and act rationally—something you could take for granted before.

“You can understand things by changing them,” Bertolt Brecht<sup>13</sup> said dialectically, and it is this praxis of realization that Nâzım Hikmet describes above. To read Marx and Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg and Assata Shakur, Malcolm X and Primo Levi, Vera Figner and Peter Weiss,<sup>14</sup> or to read about the history of the Peasants' War or the Black Panthers, or about internationalism, natural sciences, art history, or chess games—all this does not cut through the bars of your cell, but it helps you to preserve your ability to think and discuss. In the worst case, you can use the Bible as the only book allowed in the hole: “To open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (Isaiah 42:7).

To read is an active exchange of thoughts with others. Language is practical consciousness. Writing is production. Intellectual activity that does not result in communicable thoughts, i.e., in speaking or writing (for others), turns, in the long run—not only in prison—into a Sisyphean task. You do not live and think and write on a mythical mountain, though, but in a specific social situation. In this case: in prison. You ought to be aware of the impact that the contradictions of your situation have on your thoughts. Certain essential political realizations might in fact come more easily with

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<sup>13</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was a German playwright and poet.

<sup>14</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) was a Polish and naturalised-German Marxist and anti-War activist during the First World War. Assata Shakur (1947–) is an American political activist who was a member of the Black Liberation Army. Primo Levi (1919–87) was an Italian author, partisan, and Auschwitz survivor. Vera Figner (1852–1942) was a Russian social-revolutionary who spent twenty years in prison due to her involvement in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Peter Weiss (1916–82) was a communist German author.

some distance from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but you ought to be very careful with all evaluations that require sensual experience... In any case, it is the connection of your theoretical reflections to the current problems of the left, i.e., the problems of your comrades and friends on the outside, that gives your learning and writing a practical meaning—something that can get you through many years.

Bang. The door is shut again. This time, however, you are on the outside. This does not come as surprisingly as the arrest and is significantly more pleasant. It is similarly confusing, though. You spin around like a Matchbox car. It takes a while—and hitting a few corners—before you stop and are able to really take a good look around. Your prison survival strategies helped you deal with an environment that is not really suitable for human life. Now all the strategies that you internalized get in your way. The prison experience teaches you to keep what is important to yourself, not to reveal anything, not to make yourself vulnerable. On the outside this appears—to put it mildly—as being insensitive. Friends cannot understand your (lack of) reactions. Others—certainly not your friends—raise “ex-prisoners” onto pedestals that are, in fact, closets. It is neither uplifting nor a political program to have spent time in prison. The inevitably acquired ability to make decisions for yourself often leads to avoiding challenging collective discussions. Not wanting to be dependent on anything complicates possible bonds. The ability to be alone turns into a desire to be so. Your resistance to norms and your struggle to stay afloat as an individual now makes you skeptical toward groups. After the seriousness of the prison experience, disputes within the left often appear irrelevant or even ridiculous—yet when you show this, you appear arrogant. It is difficult to switch off the control over your emotions that you have worked so hard to attain, just so that *they* wouldn't be able to use your emotions against you. Love, hate, passion—everything is secured in an intellectual bag, and you look over your shoulder carefully before you untie anything. Sure, you keep misery away from you that way. But happiness too. With time, this becomes less severe. Things become easier. Still, what a former Tupamaro<sup>15</sup> described with the following words will

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<sup>15</sup>*N.T.P. note:* The Tupamaros were a Marxist-Leninist urban guerrilla group active in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s.

stay with you: “You realize that one [...] cannot live a lie comfortably without being disgusted by oneself, because you believe that those who understand but live inactively in comfort will break.”<sup>16</sup> In any case, there is life after survival, and it is worth living. Sean McGuffin's<sup>17</sup> comment that “age and trickery will always beat youth and strength” is as much a comfort to you as the useful degrees of persistence, patience, and endurance that you could only acquire as a prisoner. You are still here, and you are still curious.

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<sup>16</sup>*N.T.P. note:* The quote is attributed to David Campora in the book *Los manos en el fuego* by Ernesto Gonzalez Bermejo.

<sup>17</sup>*N.T.P. note:* Sean McGuffin (1942–2002) was an Irish novelist imprisoned in the 1970s for alleged membership to the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Bang. The door to your cell is shut. [...] You look around, trying to get an understanding of where you'll spend the next few years of your life. [...] What I am writing here is the quintessence of my experiences. During the first five or six years of my imprisonment, I learned the survival strategies that got me through the last ten. These are the experiences I'm summarizing here.



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