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Main entrance on the rue Saint-Denis.
Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL

Pictures from the Past: Saint-Lazare as a Prison: 1792-1940

BY

EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M., PH.D.

Introduction

In *Ancien Regime* Paris the name “Saint-Lazare” would have immediately conjured up images of the venerable mother house of the Lazarists located on the rue Saint-Denis just outside the city gates. This vast headquarters, of arguably the most influential and powerful religious community in France, was also the site of the oft-visited reliquary shrine containing the remains of the quintessential French saint, Vincent de Paul.

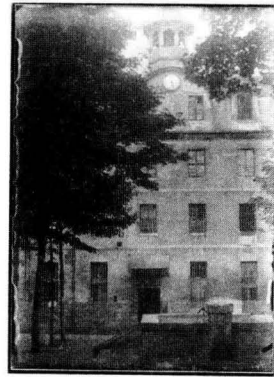
However, in Paris, throughout the nineteenth and into the first third of the twentieth century the name “Saint-Lazare” would have immediately conjured up popular and even sinister images of a prison housing prostitutes and other women convicts. The name and the place, in both cases, are one and the same.

From January 1632 until September 1792, when it was confiscated by the revolutionary government, Saint-Lazare served as the mother house of the Congregation of the Mission. From September 1792, until its destruction beginning in August of 1932, these same buildings served as an infamous Paris prison.

Originally founded in the late twelfth century 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. With no lepers in residence, and only a handful of aging Augustinian monks, the last prior, Adrien LeBon, was



Corner of prison façade, on the rue Saint-Denis.
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View of interior courtyard, water well,
 bell tower, and clock.
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searching for a way to put the property to a new ecclesiastical use, and guarantee the retirement needs of his dwindling community. Vincent de Paul and the vibrant, newly-founded Congregation of the Mission (1625) were an answer to his prayers.¹

Vincent's Congregation of the Mission had its first headquarters in Paris at the run-down *College-des-Bons-Enfants* near Saint Victor's gate.² Although he was initially very reluctant to take on the burden of administering such a large enterprise as Saint-Lazare, Vincent de Paul was ultimately convinced to take the step and the ancient priory became the mother house of the Congregation of the Mission.

Early in the morning of 14 July 1789, the first act of revolutionary violence leading to the attack on the Bastille was the sacking of Saint-Lazare. Over the next three years, the revolution spun out of control heading toward the Reign of Terror. The National Assembly disbanded the Lazarists and confiscated their mother house and all other properties as of 1 September 1792.³ The facility needed very little adaptation and soon opened as a prison to house enemies of the Revolution; it was then transformed into a women's prison.

After the recognition of their legal re-establishment by the newly-restored Louis XVIII in February 1814, the Lazarists immediately asked the king to restore Saint-Lazare to the Congregation. The king agreed to do so, until he was reminded of the high cost of building a replacement prison. Eventually, four years later in 1818, Louis found the Lazarists an affordable new mother house located at 95 rue de Sevres.⁴

¹ 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*, 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1987), 1:160-176.

² For background on the *College-des-Bons-Enfants*, see *Ibid.*, 1:144-148.

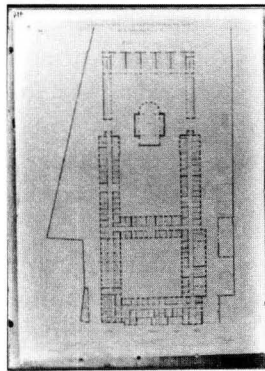
³ For more information on the fate of Saint-Lazare see, Edward R. Udovic, C.M., *Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival* (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2001), 7-19. Hereinafter cited as *Revival*.

⁴ Udovic, *Revival*, 99-104.

“An immense edifice of imposing and repulsive aspect”⁵

In his classic 1845 novel, *The Mysteries of Paris*, the French author 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.⁶



Plan and overview of the prison site.
Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL

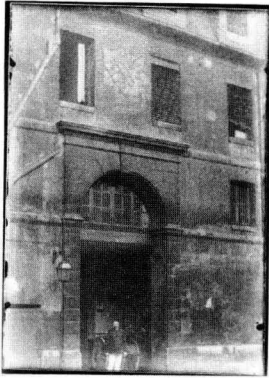
During the mid-nineteenth century Saint-Lazare, or “St. Lago” as it was colloquially called by its inmates, became a model women’s prison attracting the attention of prison reformers from as far away as the United States.

In 1853, under the conservative and pro-Catholic empire of Napoleon III, day-to-day administration of the prison was turned over to an order of catholic nuns who specialized in this ministry: the Sisters of Marie-Joseph. The presence and role of the sisters reflected contemporary religious and social views that prisons existed as much for rehabilitation as for punishment of inmates.

In 1872, a book entitled *The Prisoners of St.-Lazare* written by one of the Parisian

⁵ Eugène Sue, *The Mysteries of Paris* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1845-46), 1:191.

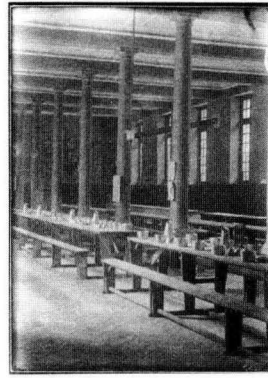
⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:190-191.



Side entrance for prisoners being transported to and from the prison. Note sun dial dated 1683 over the doorway.

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Interior view of the refectory.

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ladies who worked in the *Ceuvre des Libereés de Saint-Lazare* was translated into English for an American audience.⁷ The translator, Mrs. E.M. McCarthy noted, “the evils that fester within the bosom of French society may have peculiar features of their own, but it cannot be denied that there is at least sufficient parity in the state of affairs here to make this book useful to the American public.”⁸ She suggested that the model of Saint-Lazare was worth considering. She noted:

Society owes it to itself to shield the honest poor, especially those of the weaker sex, from the danger to which destitution exposes them, and to do so in a way that will not wound a just pride. It ought to protect those who, once unfortunate, desire to return to the paths of virtue and honor... In the incarceration of women for transgressions of the law, moral reformation, more than merely vindictive punishment should be the object kept in view. This is to be accomplished not by obtrusive measures, not by violating the religious freedom of the prisoner, but by means and opportunities ever present and ever accessible to her, by which conscience may be awakened, or directed when awakened, and a path made clear by which she may escape a life of ignominy.⁹

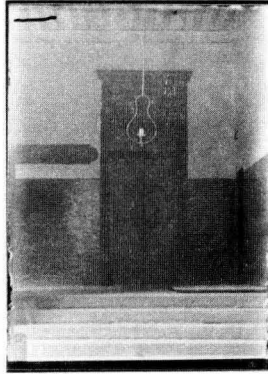
The prison was always the object of a fair amount of publicity and morbid curiosity on the part of the press and public. For example, in October 1904 the

⁷ Madame ****, *The Prisoners of St.-Lazare*, trans. Mrs. E.M. McCarthy (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1872), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

popular Parisian weekly *Le Monde Illustré* published a detailed and lavishly illustrated article describing the different types of prisoners, daily life at the prison, the infirmary and workshops, and highlighting the almost monastic atmosphere introduced by the nuns.¹⁰ The prison had a large chapel, and the hallways and refectory were decorated with numerous shrines and religious images. Interestingly enough, accommodations were even made for meeting the religious needs of Protestant and Jewish prisoners.



Entrance to the refectory.

Vincetiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL

“A House of Morale Corruption and of Contagious Illnesses”¹¹

As early as 1811 there was talk of tearing the old prison down.¹² Time-and-time-again over the course of the next century such talk would appear and reappear. The prison would seem to be doomed, and then nothing would happen.¹³ In 1875 the *Conseil générale de la Seine* resolved to demolish the prison, yet still more decades passed.¹⁴ In 1902 the same body voted to devote five million francs to the demolition of the prison.¹⁵ Yet, still more decades passed and the price tag of the demolition, relocation, and building of a new prison escalated. In 1927, the *Conseil Municipal* again voted for the plan and divided the project into three phases, as funding became available.¹⁶

In the meantime, conditions within what had once been a “model” prison deteriorated with each passing year. In February 1931, the French pacifist, anarchist,

¹⁰ E. Lapage, “Saint Lazare,” *Le Monde Illustré*, 8 October 1904, 292-294. Hereinafter cited as Lapage.

¹¹ Jeanne Humbert, *Le Pourrissoir (Saint-Lazare) Choses Vues, Entendues et Vécues* (Paris: Editions Prima, 1931). Hereinafter cited as Humbert.

¹² Jean Robiquet, *Les Vieux Hopitaux Français: Saint-Lazare* (Lyons: Les Laboratoires Ciba, 1938), 43. Hereinafter cited as Robiquet.

¹³ Lapage, 292.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

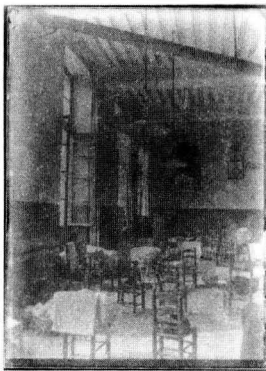
¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Robiquet, 44.

and feminist, Jeanne Humbert published a passionate manifesto demanding that Saint-Lazare be torn down, as a symbolic beginning of the reform of the entire French penal system.¹⁷ She noted:

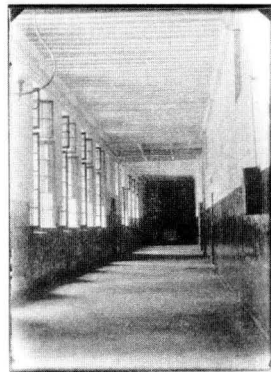
It is impossible for one to write too violently against the Saint-Lazare prison. One cannot speak out enough against the survival of this leprosy at the heart of Paris. One cannot protest enough against the ignoble tactics that are employed by the jailers, nor against their crying injustices, nor against 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 not cry loud enough against this house of detention which is not only the foyer of all vices, but also that of tuberculosis.¹⁸

In her socialist critique Humbert was clear in that she was not just attacking the penal system, but also 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 considerably the number of evildoers... Abolish poverty and you will abolish the prisons."¹⁹



Sewing workroom.

Note religious images and shrine on the far wall
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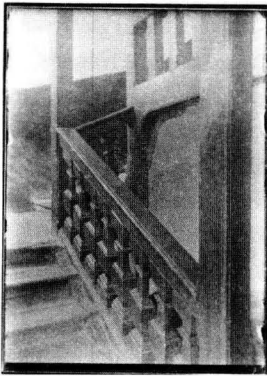
View of interior hallway.

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¹⁷ 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. See Humbert, preface.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

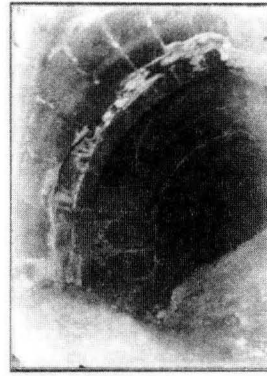
¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.



Interior stairwell.

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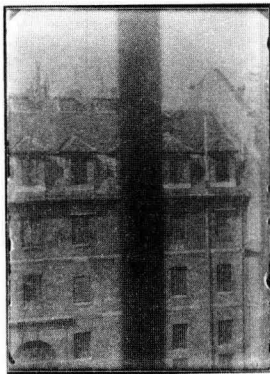
View of ancient vaulting below the prison.

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By August of 1932, relocation of the prisoners and the other judicial functions of the prison was complete, and old Saint-Lazare was ready for demolition.²⁰ However, it would be eight years before the wrecking crews would finally demolish all the prison's extensive fabric of buildings and walls. Preservationist groups tried in vain to prevent the destruction of the oldest parts of the complex.²¹ Saint-Lazare had escaped its last death sentence, however, and after almost seven centuries the buildings disappeared with hardly a physical trace remaining.

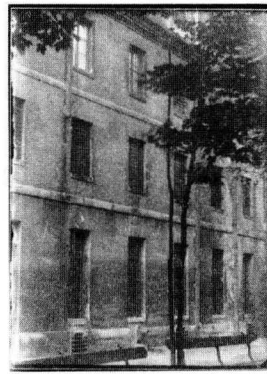
However, there are other traces of old Saint-Lazare still to be seen. In this case they are photographic traces. Sometime in the early years of the twentieth century



Interior view from the upper floor section of the prison dedicated to housing prisoners awaiting trial.

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View of the prison wing from within the interior courtyard.

Vincentiana Collection,

DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL

²⁰ Anonymous, "Lazare Day," *Time Magazine*, 22 August 1932.

²¹ Robiquet, 44.

an unknown photographer took a series of photographs of the prison Saint-Lazare, and of the Lazarists' new mother house complex on the rue de Sevres. These old glass plate negatives were recently re-discovered in the Vincentian archives in Paris. The photographs document old Saint-Lazare at its height as a women's prison, and they capture the walls, hallways, stairways, and doorways that would have been so familiar to generations of Lazarists from Saint Vincent's time to the French Revolution. A selection of these photographs is published for the first time to accompany this article.



Exterior view of the prison wing.

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