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12-31-2014

The Diary of an Ex-Con

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Evelyn Litwok, 63, never thought she would have a life experience that would come close to mirroring the struggles her parents. They were both Holocaust survivors from Poland. That changed in 2010 when she started a two-year prison sentence at female Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia. Witnessing how inmates were treated, “like a concentration camp” was what came to mind when asked to describe prison life.

On Wednesday, The Associated Press reported that correctional officers at Rikers Island used excessive force about 4,000 times last year; and mostly directed at teenage inmates. The day before, city officials had announced their plans to end solitary confinement for inmates under the age of 21 at Rikers Island. The policy change has put New York in the limelight regarding prison reform on a national level. It’s a major step in changing a criminal justice system where the voices of abused inmates often remain unheard.

Before she was incarcerated, Evelyn Litwok taught financial literacy to women across the country during the 1970s. She had become tired of travelling and after visiting her mother, a neighbor suggest the idea of her working on Wall Street. The neighbor had set up an interview with Merrill Lynch where she was hired and went on to becoming a successful broker.

“I used to call myself the wandering Jew,” said Litwok. “I would go from conference to conference and make a little Merrill Lynch table and say ‘I’m new in this business, but if you show me what you have, I’ll go do some homework and tell you what you can do or not do.’”

After years of working on Wall Street, Litwok decided to leave the brokerage business and start her own private fund. In the beginning the hedge fund was going well, but she realized she could not devote a majority of her time to monitoring the trades and managing the operations of her business. She knew she needed help.

“To be good, I was very tunnel visioned,” said Litwok. “When the stock market closed at 4pm, I was still wrapping up trading by 5pm, reading news reports and listening to more news report. By 7pm, I was watching the next trading session in starting Tokyo; so I slept very little. I was totally absorbed by this.”

Through her network, Litwok was put in touch with Dalia Eliat. Eliat was an architect looking for an investor to launch a new business venture. Eliat presented her idea to Litwok. Instead of providing money, Litwok decided to offer her Eliat a job as manager of her private fund.

“I will give you a quarter of a million dollars salary to run my business properly and to make sure everything is done but trading,” she said “You can take that salary and use it to make a demo for your new business.”

Litwok gave Eliat complete access to personal and business accounts in order to pay the bills and taxes. Litwok said that Eliat stole about four million dollars from her.

“My biggest mistake was that I didn’t check the bills she was paying and that’s on me. That doesn’t make me a criminal that just made me stupid,” she said. “ I figured if I paid her enough money she wouldn’t steal from me. It didn’t dawn on me that she would steal. So no I didn’t supervise her.”

In 1997, Litwok sued her in July of in Suffolk county court and said that Eliat reported her to the US Attorney’s office and the postal inspector for unpaid taxes. Unwilling to take plea deal for a crime she said she did not commit, it marked the beginning of a 17 year legal battle with the court system.

Litwok was barred by the Security Exchange Commission which forced her to rely on her father for financial support.

“He was a believer. He loved America. It was American soldiers who liberated him and he could not get over what he saw as a miscarriage of justice,” she said.

However, Litwok worried that they may not have one their case and asked him to remove her from his will so that the rest of her family would not be affected by the case’s outcome.

It was 12 years had passed before she was convicted of four counts for tax evasion and mail fraud. In 2010, Litwok, who was 59 at the times, was sent to a women’s Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia.

Instead of hiding the values her parents had brought her up with, she revealed them in jail.

“I come from a background which says I need to fight for my rights,” she said. “One of the things my father and mother engrained in me since childhood, engrained, is that whatever Hitler can do to jews, whatever happened to the jewish people, can happen to other people and you have a responsibility to make sure that it doesn’t happen anywhere in the world.”

In Alderson’s prison, she saw a woman get diagnosed with a large lump in her breast. She said that one year had passed before the medical department did anything about it. The woman was taken into surgery immediately to have her breast removed.

“Because she wasn’t dealt with a year and a half earlier when they found the lump in her breast, she now got a death sentence,” said Litwok. “You can’t sit still and not be angry if you are who I am.”

Litwork wrote letters and articles to media outlets, but the prison never mailed them out. Recently, she visited a close friend who she had ask to mail an enclosed letter to Rachel Maddow on dated in June that was received it in November after she was released from prison.

Against the advisement of other inmates, Litwok also tried following protocol setup for inmates to communicate about prison life. She filed what is referred to as an administrative remedy; a complaint form against the medical staff in Alderson.

“They harassed me for almost the entire time I was there and they did not give me my medication as a result of my putting in the complaint,” said Litwok.

Litwok said most prisons discourage you from filing it because you’re going to become a target and prison life will become more difficult to endure.

“While congress gave us this administrative remedies; which we are required to use, it’s useless; dysfunctional and everybody knows it.”

At Alderson, new to prison, inmates asked if she was married and had children. Unlike many people who go into prison with their guard up and game face on, it took Litwok some time to adjust to her new environment and harden up.

“We have something that we refer to in prison as inmate.com. We used to call it telephone in the old days, where something you say goes right through the prison and in 5 minutes the entire prison; all the inmates and all the officers know everything.” said Litwok. “We call this our inmate.com. So inmate.com let the entire prison know that I am an open lesbian.”

The unit Litwok was in was managed under was by a white woman she describes as being openly racist and as homophobic as they come. Within 10 days, the manager called Litwok into the office and said that she had received complaints from other inmates who claimed that she had touched their behinds. Litwok found herself in another situation accused of a crime she knew she didn’t commit. She didn’t hold back from responding to the administrator.

“I said ‘lets get something clear, I haven’t been involved with a woman in 10 years; outside of prison and in the free world. If you think I’m going to get involved with somebody in prison, you’re mistaken,” she said. ““If you’re going to accuse me of touching people’s buttockes, I want them in here. I want them in here, or I want a lawyer in here. I wanto know the names of these woman. I want to know whether you’re lying to me or people really said these things--either way I’m going to find out’ and I said cause this didn’t happen and I don’t behave like that.”

Consequently, she was removed from an orientation unit given to neos in prison and placed into what she said was known as the ghetto; a bed near the bathroom that inmates would use all night and a noisy ice machine where they would go for drinking water. It was difficult place to get sleep.

Before being admitted into prison, Litwok filed an appeal. In 2011, the appeal went through and she was released from prison. One of the most memorable days of her life. A female administrator asked to speak her in her office.

“She looked at me and said ‘God damn you. You’re ruining my dinner. I fucking have to get you out of here by the order of the court,’” said Litwok. “Even in the case where I won my freedom, this woman was pissed that her dinner was ruined and never once was there a single officer when my conviction was overturned that congratulated me; not a single one.”

That day she was surrounded by the support of inmates who saw her as a symbol of hope; that a phone call freeing them from prison will ring for them one day.

Unfortunately for Litwok, she did not when her case for two charges and had to return to prison to finish the remainder of her sentence.

In 2013, she was released from the Federal Correctional Institution in Florida. Her father had passed away in 2002 and no longer had support from her family. She left prison a incarcerated jewish lesbian who now was homeless. Currently, she resides in a women’s shelter. She found a part-time job in a retail store in Queens. The rest of her days are spent at the library looking for better work, better place to live and events that address issues related to mass incarceration.

Although the time she has served is finished Litwok is still seeking a reversal of the two remaining counts of tax evasion and mail fraud.

“If I win, then it makes a big difference because then I would have been reversed [completely],” she said. “That allows me to collect money for the time I spent in prison.”

Following in her parents footsteps, she is determined to education others about the inhumane treatment that prisoner suffer. She has made strides as a member of the NY Jail Action Committee, undergoing orientation at JustLeadership USA, and created her own blog called ExOffender Nation.com to track prison reform.

“I hope to literally spend the rest of my life making sure that people understand that what we’re doing is unconscionable,” said Litwok. “I don’t think you can ever feel free again.”