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Nys, Laura

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Herman Diederiks Prize

Distance and proximity

Interpersonal Relations Between Pupils and Educators
in the Belgian Reform School of Mol (1927-1960)

Laura Nys

This article focuses on interpersonal relations between staff members and juvenile delinquents detained in the State Reformatory of Mol, a disciplinary institution in Belgium, between 1927 and 1960. While historical scholarship provides ample knowledge of the history of disciplinary techniques, coercive practices and subtle resistance by detainees, it fails to address the broader spectrum of social interactions coexisting alongside formal coercion. This article argues that alongside coercive practices, there was a multiplicity of social interactions taking place within the walls of the reformatory. Ego-documents from both pupils and educators provide insight into the micro-interactions between staff members and detainees. The first sections elaborate upon the coexistence of different pedagogical styles among the staff members, depending on their function in the reformatory and on the time period. The subsequent section illustrates how pupils contested their educators' behaviour, in particular regarding self-restraint. Lastly, it discusses the balance between face-to-face and epistolary interactions in the relation between pupils and the director, both during and after the detention. While this article does not deny the violent nature of carceral relations, it does seek to show that, to address the complexity of carceral relations, it is necessary to acknowledge the coexistence of multiple ways of interactions, their nature, and their changes throughout time.

Cet article se concentre sur les relations interpersonnelles entre les membres du personnel et les jeunes délinquants détenus dans l'école de bienfaisance de Mol, une institution disciplinaire en Belgique, entre 1927 et 1960. Si la recherche historique fournit une connaissance approfondie de l'histoire des techniques disciplinaires, des pratiques coercitives et de la résistance subtile des détenus, elle n'aborde pas le spectre plus large des interactions sociales qui coexistent avec la coercition formelle. Cet article soutient que, parallèlement aux pratiques coercitives, une multiplicité d'interactions sociales se déroulaient entre les murs de la maison de correction. Les documents personnels des élèves et des éducateurs donnent un aperçu des micro-interactions entre les membres du personnel et les détenus. Les premières sections décrivent la coexistence de différents styles pédagogiques parmi les membres du personnel, en fonction de leur fonction dans la maison de correction et de l'époque. La section suivante illustre la manière dont les élèves contestent le comportement de leurs éducateurs, notamment en ce qui concerne l'autocontrainte. Enfin, il est question de l'équilibre entre les interactions en face à face et épistolaires dans la relation entre les élèves et le directeur, pendant et après la détention. Si cet article ne nie pas la nature violente des relations carcérales, il cherche à montrer que, pour aborder la complexité des relations carcérales, il est nécessaire de reconnaître la coexistence de multiples modes d'interactions, leur nature et leurs évolutions dans le temps.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thousands of minors were sentenced to periods of detention in juvenile reformatories, in an effort to transform problematic youngsters into obedient and respectable citizens. This ramified network of institutions began in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the penal policy in many Western-European countries was oriented towards an ever-growing classification of imprisoned criminals, separating not only women from men, but also juvenile delinquents from adults. As in other western countries, the Belgian juvenile justice system witnessed profound changes in the early twentieth century. The Child Protection Act of 1912 removed juvenile delinquency from the regular penal justice system and installed an autonomous Juvenile Court. This Court, modelled after the pioneering example of Chicago, was chaired by an independent Children's Judge who was assisted by probation officers and scientific experts. The juvenile justice system no longer "punished" delinquents for actions they had already committed. Its goal was now to "re-educate" minors that constituted a potential risk.¹ As in other realms of the penal justice system then, the focus was no longer on the criminal act itself, but on the individual behind it.

In this article, I focus on the interpersonal relations between staff members and detainees in a Belgian reform school between 1927 and 1960. Scholars have documented how the juvenile justice system and juvenile guidance clinics used psychological and psychiatric experts to assess the personality of the children and their potential for re-education.² Much of the scholarship on the pedagogical practices in the reformatories stresses the enduring tension between punishing and educating; the pedagogical methods swinging from "the iron fist" to "the soft approach" in endless waves of reforms.³ In terms of interpersonal contact, scholars have shown how, in spite of grand pedagogical ideas, the institutional practices remained underpinned by a repressive regime. Often, the daily interactions were characterised by enmity and tension, if not violence.⁴ The detainees, however, were not passive recipients of these disciplinary practices.⁵ Using ingenious methods to read institutional sources against the grain, scholars have revealed various ways in which youngsters "tested the limits" of the hierarchal system. The passing of clandestine notes, the use of humour or singing are considered examples of so-called "infrapolitics"; subtle and hidden forms of resistance against the power-holders.⁶ Conversely, Massin

¹ For a recent overview of the Belgian context, see De Koster *et al.*, (2015). For the international context, see for example Trépanier, Rousseaux (2017).

² Bultman (2016); Quevillon, Trépanier (2004); Schlossman (1978); François *et al.* (2011); Jones (1999).

³ E.g. Dekker (1990); Fuchs (2015); Shore (2012); Menis (2012); Delicat (2001); Schlossman (1977).

⁴ E.g. Yvarel (2007); Massin (2011b).

⁵ The overview above is limited to juvenile reformatories. For the notion of power, agency and emancipation in adult prisons, the work of Herman Franke is paramount. Franke argued that prisoners transformed their suffering into two major sources of power. First, in not showing moral improvement after release, (ex-)prisoners undermined the very purpose of imprisonment as advocated by policy makers. Second, prisoners increasingly succeeded in making the harsh conditions of prison life a topic of public concern as society became more sensitive to suffering, Franke (1996). A brilliant assessment of conceptions of power and discipline in criminal justice is found in Spierenburg (2004). For the daily life in prisons, see e.g. Spierenburg (1991, esp. Chapter 9); O'Brien (1982, esp. Chapters 3, 5, 6).

⁶ Christiaens (2002); Myers, Sangster (2001); Wills (2008). The notion of infrapolitics was coined by Scott (1990).

masterfully swapped the notions of norms and unruly behaviour, considering unruly behaviour not as a reaction against existing rules, but as a source of new disciplinary regulations.⁷

As much as this scholarship adds subtlety to the agency of the detainees, the history of interpersonal relations in the reformatory remains predominantly framed as one of permanent confrontations between detainees and the institutional authorities, more often than not resulting in a sanction inflicted upon the detainee. A history of social interactions in the reformatory however, is not a history of sanctions only. Educators applied a range of other strategies too, such as individual reprimands, the granting of privileges or even attempts at humour. These strategies often took place prior to or after a formal sanction and were not always included in the formal sanction reports. I will argue that even in the context of asymmetrical power relations, the social interactions showed more tactics than coercion only. Moreover, a focus on aggressive confrontations between staff members and detainees tends to reproduce a dichotomous view of “the” detainees versus “the” faceless institution, while the institution was embodied by human actors that each held a different position on the hierarchical ladder, and held different functions that interfered with their behaviour. It is necessary to take into account the diversity among the staff members, their different functions and to a limited extent their personal style.

Thirdly, the staff member’s function was also important for the very way of communicating with the pupils. Whereas lower staff members such as educators, for instance, had daily face-to-face contact with the detainees, this was less common for the director. Consequently, detainees more often addressed the director in the form of letters. I will consider the interpersonal relations as constituted both by face-to-face contact *and* by correspondence.

Lastly, it is important to consider these interactions as historically changing. Researchers have pointed to changing pedagogical and emotional practices both in the field of education⁸ and in the private realm.⁹ A history of interpersonal relations in the reformatory then, should take into account the historicity of relations as well, shaped by factors both internal to and external of the juvenile justice system. The goal of this article is to show the spectrum of social interactions that existed alongside coercive practices; a spectrum that illustrates the differences among staff members in their relation with the detainees, that takes into account both face-to-face and epistolary interactions, and, moreover, a spectrum that considers interpersonal relations as historically changing practices.

To grasp the interplay between the different actors at play, I use Mark Seymour’s concept of the “emotional arena”.¹⁰ This concept is grounded in the history of emotions, a research field addressing emotional cultures and their change over time. Emotions then, are not universal and ahistorical, but socially constructed and dependent on the cultural and historical context.¹¹ An “emotional arena” is a contentious space where actors from divergent communities meet, causing tensions between their emotional styles and practices. Seymour’s emotional arena enables

⁷ Massin (2014).

⁸ Landahl (2015); Frevert *et al.* (2014).

⁹ Stearns (2019).

¹⁰ Seymour (2012).

¹¹ Rosenwein, Cristiani (2017).

an analysis that focuses on contention yet transcends the dichotomy between “the” powerless and “the” powerful. In this article, I use it to differentiate between different staff members such as the educators, workshop masters and the heads of the institution. Second, Seymour acknowledges the interrelation between practices inherent to the institution, with practices influenced by social axes such as gender, class and age, thereby acknowledging the multiple layers of one’s identity. Thus, emotions and behaviour are not considered in isolation of the societal context. They are considered as historically changing practices.

Looking to carceral relations through the prism of the history of emotions is not only enriching for the history of juvenile justice, but also for the history of emotions. It has been stated that in the history of emotions, “often left out are the voices of the poor, the illiterate, the enslaved”,¹² producing knowledge about emotional norms and experiences almost exclusively within bourgeois and middle-class milieus. The case of reform schools enriches the knowledge of emotional practices of marginalised groups, as the pupils often came from underprivileged backgrounds.

In pointing to the social interactions alongside the formal sanctions, it is by no means my intention to minimize the many forms of violence and abuse that detained children had to endure. Physical abuse, exploitation, negligence; these were all real. It is not without reason that governments in several national contexts have installed formal investigation committees¹³ or have apologized for the violence committed in boarding schools and reformatories.¹⁴ For the Belgian context, a trial in 1953 caused outrage over physical abuse in the reformatory for delinquent boys of Saint-Hubert,¹⁵ while Massin pointed to the high occurrence of violence in the girls’ institutions of Bruges.¹⁶ However, precisely in order to understand the complexity of carceral relations, I argue that we should question the very *nature* of these interpersonal relations, not only exposing their violent character, but revealing how interpersonal violence *coexisted* with other forms of social interaction.

SOURCES AND METHODS

I use the State Reformatory of Mol, Belgium, as a case study. I focus on the period between 1927 and 1960. The State Reformatory of Mol, opened in 1894, was a disciplinary wing for boys who, through continuous misconduct, were considered dangerous to other detainees. The State Reformatory of Mol is not to be confused with the Central Observation Institute of Mol (COI). The two institutions were located on the same terrain and resided briefly under a single director, but they had different buildings, different staff members and they especially differed in their purpose. Established in 1913, the COI had a threefold goal: psycho-pedagogical assessment of children, formulating advice concerning the child’s re-education and developing a scientific classification of the children with delinquent behaviour. Thus, juvenile judges could send their “pupils” to the COI where they were subjected to a lengthy

¹² Matt, Stearns (2014, 50).

¹³ E.g. in the Netherlands. See Wubs, Ham (2019).

¹⁴ As is for instance the case for the Flemish Parliament (Vlaams Parlement, 2014).

¹⁵ Dupont-Bouchat (2012).

¹⁶ Massin (2011b).

observation, on average taking three months. The COI then formulated advice about the best-suited re-educative measure for the child in question, such as an admonition or confinement in a reformatory.¹⁷

Within the network of reformatories, the State Reformatory of Mol was meant as a last resort. Its residents were boys who had been expelled from the more lenient institutions of the juvenile justice system or who were deemed dangerous by the judge or psy-experts.¹⁸ In many ways, the social profile of the detainees in Mol resembled the profile of minors in other state institutions. They came from underprivileged backgrounds, predominantly from industrial regions and large cities in both the French and Dutch speaking part of the country. Most of them were seventeen years or older upon their first entry in Mol, slightly older than other institutions. This is explained by their experience with previous measures or institutions before ending up in Mol. The average time of confinement in Mol was just under one year, but the recidivism rates were high. The average population varied, from 129 boys (in 1921), to 173 (1947) and 76 (in 1954).¹⁹ The boys were divided in different sections, according to their individual progress and according to their language. Depending on their progress, they could switch to a better section. The higher the section, the more privileges the pupils enjoyed, such as more leisure time or more correspondence with their family members. Apart from the regular sections, Mol also had a “special section”; a prison regime for those who were being punished. The days were spent mostly by engaging in vocational training, of which the metallurgy and the shoe workshop were the most important.

Being a last resort for the “hopeless cases”, the regulations in the State Reformatory of Mol were harsher than in other institutions. House regulations stated that the general manners for the educators ought to be imbued with “cautiousness, cool temperateness, brevity and clarity when giving orders”.²⁰ The usual tone of the educators was an “unconditional command, without explanation and with no acceptance of back talk [by the pupils]”.²¹ While these house regulations give a hint of the general conduct, they are not sufficient to assess the daily interpersonal relations between individuals. As shown for other institutions, regulations and practice do not always match. Moreover, the house rules were not an etiquette book. Most of the behavioural rules were not explicitly prescribed in the regulations. How then to get insight into the social interactions between detainees and staff members?

For each minor entering the institution, a personal case file was created. This file contained a myriad of documents, ranging from administrative and judicial files to psychological observations, sanction reports and personal correspondence.²² Sanction reports and evaluations offer insights into the behaviour of detainees. Since it was left to the discretion of the educator to decide what counted as “unruly behaviour”, these sanction reports often contain descriptions of the detainees’

¹⁷ See for example De Koster, Niget (2015); Van Ruyskensvelde, Nys (2020).

¹⁸ For more details, see François (2005, 227, 425).

¹⁹ State Archives Antwerpen-Beveren (hereafter: SAAB), M17, 36-54, annual reports; and 341-347, registers of arrival.

²⁰ SAAB, M17, 61 Documents concerning regulations, “Further notes regarding discipline in the sections”, 1932.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² On the use of case files, see e.g. Bantigny, Vimont (2010); Iacovetta, Mitchinson (1998).

behaviour, therein being a valuable source not only to assess unspoken rules about behaviour but also the detainees' subtle ways of resistance, as mentioned earlier. The patterns in these sanctions reveal the unspoken rules: the unspoken rule becomes visible upon its violation.

However, these reports typically give more insight into the behaviour of the detainees than into the behaviour of the staff members; thus revealing more about the powerless than the powerholders — an observation pointed out by Foucault, who stressed the connection between power and visibility: “Disciplinary power... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility”.²³ Revealing the behaviour of the educators then forms a double challenge: the behavioural rules remain unspoken; their behaviour remains unseen.

Yet, the case files not only contain reports written by the educators, but also letters written by the minors. In providing descriptions of occurrences taking place in the reformatory, these letters offer insight into the behaviour of the educators. Moreover, they are not merely descriptive, but also attest to how the pupils *evaluated* their educators' behaviours. These letters were often written to complain about their treatment, either addressing the educators, the director or the judge. Thus, just as evaluations written by the educators about the minors reveal the behaviour that was expected from the pupils, the complaints of the minors about their superiors reveal that the pupils *too* had certain expectations of how their superiors ought to treat them. These letters are insightful sources to assess interpersonal contacts within the walls of the reformatory.

Since recent years, correspondence has sparked interest among scholars working on the history of juvenile justice, offering more nuanced readings of interpersonal relations. Wills for instance showed how detainees used the censorship system in letters to communicate indirectly with the director,²⁴ while Victorien examined the triangular relation between a reform school, the pupil and the family through correspondence.²⁵ Others probed the discursive strategies employed by (ex-)pupils in their requests for favours from the juvenile justice.²⁶ In this article, I use personal correspondence between the detainees and different staff members.

Three methodological remarks are necessary to point out at this juncture. First, Vehkalahti showed that in the reformatory, letters were not merely used as a means of communication, but also as a pedagogical tool, therein brilliantly pointing to the flimsy border between correspondence and pedagogical writings.²⁷ Correspondence then was not merely a tool for communication, but also a disciplinary tool in which pupils appropriated the institution's values. In the case of Mol too, pupils and educators used the letters as a platform to legitimate their behaviour, thus appropriating the values they should adhere to aid their own agendas. For this article, documents such as these provide insight into the boundaries of what was conceived permissible, not *despite* the fact that they were crafted to conform to the norms, but precisely *because* they were crafted to meet the norms. Second, not all

²³ Foucault (1995, 187).

²⁴ Wills (2008, 222).

²⁵ Victorien (2010).

²⁶ Rivière (2009).

²⁷ Vehkalahti (2008).

the powerholders became visible. While the behaviour of lower ranked staff became exposed, higher ranked personnel, such as the doctor or the director, often remained in the shadows. Third, even if the letters did not mention interpersonal violence, this does not prove its absence. In pointing to a variety of interpersonal relations, it is not my intention to deny the possibility of violence.

I analysed a total of 80 personal case files from boys entering Mol in four sample years: 1927, 1937, 1948 and 1958. These sample years cover both the interwar and the post-war period; periods witnessing changes in pedagogical and social practices. Due to the lengthy confinement and the high rates of recidivism, these files are often quite extensive. The files were chosen using criterion sampling, whereby the presence of ego-documents was the main criterion. Selecting cohorts of boys entering the institution in the same period, and not for instance spread out over decades, enabled me to unravel the social networks and interactions among the boys, deepening an understanding of their social world.²⁸ I draw mainly on the minor's correspondence with the institution's staff members and occasionally use the minor's correspondence with extra-mural actors such as the juvenile judge, in cases where these outgoing letters have been copied and preserved in the institutional case file. Since it is the goal of this article to analyse the interpersonal relations within the walls of the reformatory, I do not analyse correspondence with family members. While these letters contain indeed precious information on the emotions of the minors, their analysis would require different methodological checks, taking into account for instance censorship and different discursive strategies. The ego-documents are complemented by evaluation forms, sanction registers and normative documents stipulating the behavioural rules for both detainees and staff. The original sources are both in Flemish and French. The former are translated to English. The latter are quoted as in the original, including spelling mistakes. I use pseudonyms to respect the privacy of the individuals involved.

This article consists of four sections, each of them illustrating a different aspect of the social interactions in the reform school. First, I elaborate on the relationship between one pupil, his different educators and the director. I show how his relationship differed with each individual but also how the educators used different strategies alongside physical violence. In the second case, I use a pupil's outrage at the obscene humour of his workshop master to discuss the various ways in which the staff members kept the detainees under control, therein not only using formal sanctions, but also humour, the granting of privileges and deployment of humiliation. The third section examines the loss of self-restraint by staff members. I discuss the meaning behind such behaviour in relation to the reformatory and its wider societal implications. I show how the emotional style of the educator became an object of negotiation between the pupil, the educator and director, therein adding a historicised dimension to the notion of *infrapolitics*. Lastly, I focus on the communication between pupils and directors; a relationship that — in Mol at least — was constituted through correspondence more than through face-to-face contact. I discuss how the meaning of this physical distance shifted in the case of letters written after the liberation of the pupils. I begin with an overview of the staff members working in the State Reformatory of Mol.

²⁸ These 80 cases are part of my PhD dissertation, in which I analysed a total of 200 case files of 4 Belgian state reformatories. For a detailed explanation on my source selection, see: Nys (2020, 18–26).

SITUATING THE STAFF MEMBERS IN THE STATE REFORMATORY OF MOL

As stated earlier, the early twentieth century saw significant changes in juvenile justice with an increasing focus on the individual pupils. Writing about the role of the educator in particular, Willemse distinguishes between the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century philosophies underpinning the reformatories.²⁹ The rationale guiding the nineteenth-century institutions was determined to counter the morally perverse environment in which a child lived, with a morally sane environment. Within this ideological framework, the exposure to daily structure, labour and moral guidelines would naturally instil children with moral order. In contrast, twentieth century thought put more emphasis on an active intervention upon the individual psyche of the child. Only if the child was persuaded of its faults, could a profound and successful re-education take place. Consequently, educators should not merely ensure the stability of the moral environment, but should take up a more active role, forging individual contact with the pupils. Throughout time, more attention was paid to the professional training of the educators. In the interwar period, schools of social work were established and individuals within the Belgian child protection called for a professionalization of the staff members in the residential care institutions. Regarding the staff of the disciplinary state reformatories, structural changes only occurred in the late 1950s.³⁰

Evaluations of the staff members are revealing of how this new idea of the educator was enacted in the State Reformatory of Mol. For the interwar period, yearly evaluation forms have been preserved in the archives, providing insight into the behavioural styles that were expected from staff members. The evaluation forms show that expectations were dependent on the function a staff member had, showing differences for the educators, night guards and the workshop masters. The educators were in closest contact with the pupils. They guarded them throughout the various daily chores and controlled their proper behaviour. For educators, it was especially appreciated if they conveyed authority and dignity when interacting with the minors. Various evaluation forms appreciate the golden combination of “being good for the pupils and strict where necessary”.³¹ The heads of the sections, a position slightly higher in rank than the common educators, were expected to possess the same qualities as the common educators, but on top of that, they were expected to study and improve their knowledge. The so-called “masters of the workshop”, that were to teach the minors vocational skills, were in the first place evaluated on the basis of their professional knowledge. Nevertheless, they too were evaluated on their pedagogical qualities. While Master P.J.T. for instance was labelled “sufficient” for his profile as “Very diligent, well-estimated professional merit; was able to put his workshop in order and to work”,³² Master W.P. received the label “very good”, a label that he earned not in the least for “his calm self-management”. The form furthermore states that “his seriousness and the value of his education have always earned him great esteem and respect from his students”.³³ In contrast, key words for

²⁹ Willemse (1987).

³⁰ Zelis (2001); Massin (2011a); Nys (2020, 225, 245).

³¹ SAAB, M17, 136, Evaluation of Educator D.R., 5.1.1928.

³² SAAB, M17, 136, Evaluation of Work master P.J.T., 19.02.1929.

³³ SAAB, M17, 136, Evaluation of Work master W.P., 31.12.1937.

the night guards were “seriousness” and “punctuality”. The absence of pedagogical key words in their evaluation forms is indicative of the different function they fulfilled. The nurse was described as “very careful, gentle and patient towards his sick”. The reports, in other words, show that different qualities were expected of the staff members according to their function.

At the same time, even within one function there was a certain margin to take on a personal style. While it was shown earlier that educators should be able to keep the control, one educator was particularly praised for his “quiet” nature, “gentle with restraint”.³⁴ The report furthermore states that he always treated his pupils with an “earnest benevolence, which made him acquire great affection [among the pupils]”. This emphasis on gentleness is not prevalent in the evaluations of other educators, showing that the forms were not empty, standardized formality but were tailored to the individual characteristics of each staff member. While it can be doubted how “gentle” the pedagogical practices really were, the form does suggest a pedagogical view that stands in stark contrast with other reformatories in the same period. For the State Reformatory of Bruges, a disciplinary wing for girls that was the counterpart of Mol, the director judged the sisters as “too naïve, too indulgent”; a criticism that was absent from the discourse in Mol.³⁵

The evaluation forms in Mol did reveal criticisms — be it quite subtle. A report on the gardener mentioned that he “works to the best of his abilities in a difficult middle (...). Adapts himself to this difficult task. Knows well his style of gardening. Will certainly be able to adapt himself to the needs of our pupils and to get rid of his old thoughts of the juvenile prisons”.³⁶ This veiled criticism, reprimanding the gardener for his old fashioned authoritarian style, points again to the fact that the forms were filled out accurately and are useful to assess the pedagogical views of the institution. How these views were put into practice by the educators, is illustrated in the next section.

FERNAND & MR. W.: VIOLENCE AND PROXIMITY

On the 16th of March 1929, nineteen-year old Fernand addressed a letter to the director. In his letter, Fernand described his difficult relationship with “Monsieur B.”, one of his educators. “*Monsieur le Directeur, je prend la respectueuse liberté pour vous écrire cest quelque mots pour vous faire savoir que voilà deux jours que ça ne marche plus avec monsieur B.*”³⁷ In the eyes of Fernand, Mr. B treated him unfairly, punishing him more often than the other pupils: “*Si j’ai le malheur de dire un mot il me puni aussi vite mais avec les autres élèves je vois bien qu’il ne le fait pas car il sifflent et ils chantent et il ne leurs dit rien, tandis qua moi si j’ai le malheur de siffler ou de chanter tout de suite il dit qu’il va me punir.*” It is but one of the fifteen letters Fernand wrote during his stay in Mol. His case file also contains numerous letters and reports written by his educators, summing up Fernand’s unruly behaviour (“smashed his working tool [new one!] to pieces”), the sanctions they

³⁴ SAAB, M17, 136, Evaluation of Educator R., 19.02.1929 and 31.12.1937.

³⁵ Cited in Massin (2011a, 141).

³⁶ SAAB, M17, 136, Evaluation of E.C.D.P., 19.02.1929.

³⁷ SAAB, M17, 466, File 5170, Letter to the director, 16.03.1929.

applied (“sanction cell”), and ultimately the recurrence to violence (“I ordained to put on the straitjacket. He refused. We applied the straitjacket with force”). While Fernand’s case attests to the imminent threat of violence in the reformatory, his file also attests to the different relationships he had with each of his superiors.

About Monsieur G., his workshop master, Fernand had nothing favourable to say. Nor did he get along with Monsieur B., one of his educators. Yet his relationship with the head of the section, Monsieur W., was different. Fernand addressed several letters to Mr. W., confiding his feelings, admitting to having been wrong on several occasions but also his feelings of having been treated unfairly, and promising to do better in the future. The confidence of Fernand in Mr. W. is illustrated by the fact that, in Fernand’s eyes, Mr. W. knew him better than any of the other educators: “*Vous savez monsieur W. comme je suis, car si vous ne me connaissez pas encore après 6 ou 7 mois eh bien il n’y aura jamais personne qui s’aurait [saurait] dire qu’elle [quelle] caractère les élèves ont*”.³⁸ Moreover, Fernand even wrote: “*Si j’avais eu un père comme vous je [pense] que je ne serai pas ici parce que malgré qu’on n’est pas vos enfants vous faites tout pour nous plaire comme si se serait a vos enfants que vous le [f]eriez* !”³⁹ This is in spite of the fact that Mr. W., like the other educators, had punished Fernand multiple times. In fact, it was even Mr. W. who had forced Fernand to wear the straitjacket. And yet, it is this very Mr. W. that Fernand confides in, and not any of the other educators. These letters demonstrate that even in one penal system, educators develop small differences in their emotional styles when interacting with the youngsters.

Other case files too show evidence that the detained boys valued an individual relationship with one of their educators over other relationships within the institution. To some, a good relationship with the head of their section was the fulcrum for their overall detention experience. Rémy for instance was promoted to the honours section in 1949; the highest section. However, in a letter to his judge, he admitted that he missed his old section: “How I would have liked to have stayed with my [own] section superior, because he helped me in word and deed.”⁴⁰ His current educator in contrast, gave him bad grades for no reason, Rémy stated. Moreover, “talking with him does not help, as he does not want to understand me”. This last sentence suggests that another educational style was possible, in Rémy’s experience.

Moreover, Rémy did not refer to the section using the section’s official name, but used the name of the educator that headed the section. It reveals how important the educators could be to the sections and suggests that the educators enjoyed a limited autonomy to impose their own style. The idea that the detention experience might differ tremendously depending on the section, complicates the idea of “the” prison experience. On early nineteenth century juvenile prisons, Shore writes that, “for juvenile offenders, their perception of prison, and the manner in which they coped, seems to have depended largely on the shifting tides of discipline and reformatory practice during these years”.⁴¹ But the cases of Rémy and Fernand show that there was not necessarily one single detention experience, but multiple. This is not to deny the influence of overarching institutional structures and reforms, but this is

³⁸ SAAB, M17, 466, File 5170, Letter to educator W., 24.03.1929.

³⁹ SAAB, M17, 466, File 5170, Letter to educator W., 24.03.1929. *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ SAAB, M17, 576, File 6949, Letter to the Judge, 13.11.1949.

⁴¹ Shore (1999, 124).

precisely the advantage of the micro-perspective: it reveals subtleties that remain hidden otherwise.

Second, it is worth paying attention to the notion of the “paternal” style, as mentioned by Fernand in his letter. On the one hand, Fernand’s letter can be read as a clever way to flatter his educator; and an example of how the powerless appropriate the discourse of the powerholders as a discursive strategy.⁴² But in that case too, the conflation of his educator with a fatherly figure is telling: it demonstrates that the notions of paternity and confidentiality were pivotal to the script that Fernand appropriated. In other words, it demonstrates that Fernand was very well *aware* of the educator’s plight to adopt a fatherly style. Of course, it is questionable whether this “fatherly” style was adopted by all the educators. But clearly, the image of the “prison guard”, prevailing in the nineteenth century juvenile penitentiaries, had been replaced by the image of an educator who was supposed to forge an individual relationship with the pupils. The fact that Fernand also perceived his educator’s role as such, suggests that the reforms did find new expression in the actual practices of the reformatory.

This leads to questions on the nature of this “parental” style in the reformatories. Parental styles are not static, as is shown by many.⁴³ Further research can examine potential parallels between changing parental styles in society and the practices in the reformatories. Parental styles moreover are highly gendered. This gendered nature was even explicitly mentioned in a meeting of the Observation Institute of Mol in 1939, whereby it was stated that “the head of the section is like the father of a family, and the [lower] educator, the mother.”⁴⁴ It raises questions not only about changing parental styles throughout time, but also about the (gendered) styles demanded of different staff members.

RÉMY AND MR. A. IN THE WORKSHOP SMOKING BREAKS AND OBSCENE HUMOUR

Yet, as much as the youngsters longed for normalized relations with their educators, devoid of authoritarian eruptions, a letter of Rémy also suggests unease when the style of an educator became all too informal. Rémy was confined in Mol between 1947 and 1949. From the age of twelve, he had lived in reform schools, from which he was time after time expelled until he ended up in Mol. His letter is addressed to the Minister, and it is not clear whether the letter has been sent. In his letter, Rémy complains about the behaviour of his workshop master, providing detailed descriptions of the practices in the workshop. Rémy described how “Miss José”, a seamstress working in the institution, arrived at the workshop to pick up repaired shoes. Upon noticing that one of the boys looked at Miss José, the workshop master said to him: “well, have you never seen a beautiful woman before?” The boy replied that he preferred his fiancée “Lisetje”, upon which the workshop master made an obscene comparison between the two women. Moreover, Rémy wrote,

⁴² Lyons (2015).

⁴³ E.g. De Singly (2017, esp. Chapter 1); Depaeppe (1998); Stearns (2004).

⁴⁴ SAAB, M65, 219, Documents concerning pedagogical conferences for the teaching staff, 28.03.1939.

“Mr. A. often reads love stories while we are working.”⁴⁵ Once, he showed a photo of “an almost naked woman sleeping on a canapé” to some of the pupils. When a pupil asked to see the picture, the workshop master showed it to him, exclaiming: “*Tu peux te branler dessous*”. Rémy’s outrage over the incident shows that the boys did not like an overly confidential relationship with the educators either, especially if this entailed vulgar humour.

Rémy’s letter addressed other complaints too. He described situations in which a pupil in the group is humiliated, first by the workshop master, followed by his fellow pupils. The boys participated enthusiastically, not only out of fear for the workshop master, according to Rémy, but also because Mr. A. granted his group far-reaching favours such as frequent smoking breaks. What Rémy’s letter demonstrates then, is that the workshop masters used a combination of privileges, formal authority, humour and humiliation to keep authority over their pupils.

This incident is set in the late 1940s; a period when the balance between these methods of power was subject to change. Traditionally, reformatories relied much on so-called “hard power”: deprivation of correspondence, reprimands or isolation. In the late fifties however, the State Reformatory of Mol provided more possibilities for “soft power”, that is, privileges and rewards that were to stimulate pupils, rather than punishing them. The introduction of more leisure activities such as football, movie projections and games, fit in this view. The urge to bring the pedagogical practices in line with the world of the minors is manifest especially in other institutions in the post-war period. In the neighbouring Observation Institute of Mol for instance, a scouts camp was organized in the early fifties, including a treasure hunt and a bonfire.⁴⁶ As a disciplinary wing, the State Reformatory of Mol allowed similar leisure activities later than other, more lenient institutions.

Parallel to the introduction of activities that matched the youth culture, the regulations concerning interpersonal styles changed too. Already from the interwar period, educators were urged to take into account the intention that had guided a pupil’s behaviour before sanctioning him.⁴⁷ The regulations of 1958 intensified the role of empathy. Of the “Ten Commandments for the Educator”, a document distributed among the educators of the State Reformatory of Mol in 1958, the last commandment urged educators to “think about the time when you yourself were a child.”⁴⁸ It is not unconceivable that they were a codification of practices that were already applied before they were officially adopted.

This is not to say that the reform schools lost their previous authoritarian character. The formal sanctions stayed in place, as did the freedom of the educators to apply sanctions. The regulations did not specify *which* behaviour should be met by which particular sanction — a caveat in the regulations that was already in place from the nineteenth century and endowed the educators with a large amount of discretionary power.⁴⁹ The occurrence of violence in other institutions in that time period, mentioned in the introduction of this article, is an important reminder of the continuity of old disciplinary measures. But not all institutions are alike, and in

⁴⁵ SAAB, M17, 576, File 6949, Letter to the Minister, ca. 1949.

⁴⁶ SAAB, M65, 223, Pedagogical meeting, ca. 1951, p. 6-7.

⁴⁷ SAAB, M17, 61, 1932, p. 10.

⁴⁸ SAAB, M17, 33, De tien geboden voor opvoeders, 1958.

⁴⁹ Christiaens (1999, 245,429); Massin (2011b, 437).

Mol it seems that new styles slowly found their way to the floor, on top of the older authoritarian layers.

How did Mr. A.'s style relate to these changes? Whether Mr. A.'s behaviour was what the institutions envisioned, is questionable. The practice of singling out one pupil to humiliate him publicly for instance, was met with disapproval in pedagogical circles in the interwar period. The regulations explicitly forbade this in the 1950s.⁵⁰ Rather, it was encouraged to reprimand the pupil in private and avoid any public humiliation. The rationale behind this was not only a growing empathic awareness of the detained youngsters, but also the idea that publicly humiliating a pupil could have adverse effects. It could result in pupils that had nothing to lose and therefore, nothing to fear.

Humour in itself was increasingly used in the 1950s, and it could take on a high degree of cynicism. A brochure from the neighbouring Observation Institute in Mol for instance contained a joke saying "*Je voudrais de l'arsenic – Tous mes regrets. J'en manque pour l'instant. Mais si vous êtes pressé, vous trouverez un armurier à droite, un coutelier à gauche, et on vend de la corde en face*".⁵¹ Yet, the obscene humour of Mr. A was not precisely the type of humour that the reform school had envisioned. After all, the reform schools were to embody the values of the upper middle classes. It reminds one that among the staff, different social backgrounds were to be found. Possibly, the workshop master, with a background in vocational schooling, had a different style than the teacher or the director. We should be wary then, in making generalisations about "the" disciplinary styles applied within reform schools, for in the emotional arena each actor acts according to his function in the institution *and* his social identities.

AUGUSTE, MR. P. AND TRANSGRESSING THE RULE OF SELF-CONSTRAINT

This section focuses on the notion of self-restraint. I will show how not only the notion of self-restraint was subject to change, but also the ways it was used in negotiations between pupils, educators and the director. In April 1931, nineteen-year old Auguste was appalled by an incident in the classroom. He sent a letter to the director to appeal his case:

Why was I sent to the cell? By way of punishment? Certainly not! I do not feel the slightest regret nor remorse, for the matters are very simple: I have done absolutely nothing that infringes good manners humanity. I have been asked by the esteemed Mr. teacher to write a letter for an ignorant pupil. Well, I refused politely, Mr. P. asked me for what reason, and I replied calmly and politely that I could not do it, since there was no obligation for me to do so, bref, much to my regret, Mr. teacher has forgotten himself, has fallen into wrath, and has told me that this was not reasonable, that he would take note of this immediately. I have tried in a very gentle manner — I myself am surprised that I was aible (sic) to do so — to address the matter, since I believe that if someone asks to do something that is outside one's duty, one should, as a free man, have the liberty to decline or to accept.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Recueil des circulaires, instructions et autres actes émanés du ministère de la Justice ou relatifs à ce département* (1959, 139).

⁵¹ Municipal Archives Mol (thereafter MAM), Justice Dep. 1.87, *Journal de l'E.C.O.*, june 1950, n° 26, p. 64.

⁵² SAAB, M17, 468, File 5188, Letter to the director, 29.04.1931.

Rhetorically speaking, August's letter is marvellous. Auguste portrays himself as a polite pupil who is gently declining an open request, in contrast to the teacher who loses his temper. Therein, he underscores the weight of this transgression: the boy who is detained in order to be disciplined, has a better composure than his superior, who is supposed to instil good manners in the boys. While loss of temper occurred amongst both boys and staff members, the transgression was far worse for the latter. For the detained minors, loss of self-control was an offence, but in a way, it also proved the necessity of their confinement. Loss of self-temper might influence the evaluation of their progress, but it did not affect their identity as detainees. For the educators on the other hand, loss of self-control implied a *loss of status*: the failure to live up to the standards associated with one's hierarchical position. That self-constraint was considered pivotal for the staff members, is clear from the meeting records and the regulations. The house regulations specifically stipulated that an educator should never act "*sous l'empire de la colère*".⁵³ Furthermore, a pedagogical meeting in 1929 in the Observation Institute on the 'the art of giving orders' emphasized the importance of good leadership: "a good leader should first of all be a man, who knows how to control himself and hence only demand obedience when he is undoubtedly in his right to do so."⁵⁴ Losing his temper in the presence of Auguste thus seriously undermined the teacher's authority.

The link between self-composure and social status, however, went beyond the institutional walls. Self-restraint was an important marker for the identity of the middle-class man, in contrast to the working class, women, and children. This is not to say that men were not supposed to show emotions, as Shields pointed out. According to late nineteenth century gender norms, well controlled masculine passions could be put in the service of reason and could empower social action.⁵⁵ However, uncontrolled emotion was a failure to exercise the very capacities of intellect and will that were associated with middle class masculinity. Second, the very notion of self-control also has a history. The early twentieth century increasingly stressed the individual's responsibility in keeping self-control, while at the same time replacing the nineteenth century's strict formal manners with a more casual — but no less controlled — behaviour.⁵⁶ Thus, behind the teacher's outburst lay layers of institutional and societal expectations. By portraying himself as the exemplification of calmness in contrast to his short-tempered teacher, Auguste undermined the latter's authority as a teacher in the institution, and as an adult, middle-class man.

It is not known how the director reacted to Auguste's letter, for whatever his reaction was, it has left no paper trail in the archives. This however, would change fundamentally in the 1950s. In this period, three changes can be seen: reports in which educators had to justify their interventions increased massively compared to earlier times,⁵⁷ the educators' discourse shows an increasing emphasis on self-constraint, and the reports are actively followed up by the director. An incident

⁵³ SAAB, M17, 61, p. 10.

⁵⁴ SAAB, M65, 219, Documents concerning pedagogical conferences for the teaching staff, 05.07.1929.

⁵⁵ Shields (2007, 98, 106).

⁵⁶ Wouters (2008).

⁵⁷ In total, I found 68 of these reports. 42 of them were found in files of the year 1957, 4 in 1947 and none in 1937. The files of 1927 contain 22 reports, of which 16 were about one boy, giving a disproportional average.

between Alphonse and his educator in 1958 demonstrates these changes. I focus not so much on the incident itself, but rather the way both Alphonse and the educator described their behaviour. From his side Educator S. emphasised twice that he “had let everything pass by calmly and had not said a word”, whereas Alphonse had been “rude and impertinent”.⁵⁸ The stress on his calmness upon the insults of Alphonse is notable. This report was clearly read and acted upon by the director, who seemed to have his doubts on the educator’s version of the facts. The sentences where Educator S. stressed his calm composure, were underlined in red. Other sentences were accompanied by question marks. Moreover, the director ordered that “Mr. S. will try to arrange the affair Wednesday with the person involved.” By Thursday, however, Alphonse found himself in the sanction cell again. This time for “boasting and not admitting his mistakes”. While Alphonse’s case indicates that the power relations remained highly asymmetrical and that the educators kept their discretionary power, it also indicates that a shift had occurred in the way the educators had to report about their interventions.

This change, however, is not only a reflection of the changing winds within the State Reformatory of Mol itself, but is also a reflection of societal events. In 1954, fourteen educators of the reformatory for delinquent boys of Saint-Hubert were brought before the court, causing public outrage about their structural abuse of boys under their guard. After the trials, Saint-Hubert was forced to close.⁵⁹ The exponential increase of reports and the continuous insistence on self-restraint in the State Reformatory of Mol then, reflects the juvenile justice system’s growing awareness of the social practices in its institutions. The changes regarding the role of self-restraint for the educators should be read in that regard, alongside other factors such as changing pedagogical views and the director in charge’s particular policies at that time.

However, there is one more factor: the boys themselves. It is not unlikely that the pupils were aware of these trials and consequently used them to their advantage. The heightened sensitivity of the educators about the intensified control is illustrated again by the case of Alphonse. When he tried to explain the incident with Mr. S. to another educator, the former — according to Alphonse — cut him off after each sentence: “Après chaque mot Monsieur S. intervenait ‘tu n’as rien à dire, tais-toi ou tu vas derrière...’”.⁶⁰ When Alphonse asked to go together to the director “pour régler cette affaire”, the educator in question was not amused. Alphonse wrote that his proposition “l’a malheureusement encore plus irrité.” Upon hearing that, educator S. sent Alphonse immediately to the sanction cell.

The way in which Alphonse and educator S. later described the situation, is much telling for how the educator perceived Alphonse’s attempt to use the director’s higher authority to intervene in the matter. Alphonse, for his part, wrote he “proposed” to go to the director to discuss the matter. Educator S., however, stated that Alphonse “wanted to pressure me by threatening to go to Mr. Director”.⁶¹ The very word “threatened” highlights the heightened sensitivity of the educators to the thought of their own surveillance. The educator in question had a good reason to fear the

⁵⁸ SAAB, M17, 677, File 7759, Report of educator Sm., 13.10.1958.

⁵⁹ Dupont-Bouchat (2012).

⁶⁰ SAAB, M17, 677, File 7759, Letter to the director and to educator Sw. 14.10.1958.

⁶¹ SAAB, M17, 677, File 7759, Report of Educator Sm, 13.10.1958.

reaction of the director. Three years prior to the incident with Alphonse, he had been reprimanded for hitting a pupil.⁶²

In a Foucauldian reading, one might consider the aforementioned detainees' letters as a sign that the disciplinary process of the panopticon had reached its ultimate goal. Those subjected to power had internalised the norms to the core and actively saw to it that the social norms were observed in all circumstances. The reformatory had become a system of complete and absolute control, its gaze directed at both the boys and the staff, a disciplinary gaze that presented itself even in the smallest fibres of the institutional canvas.

Yet, another reading is possible. Rather than seeing these letters as an expression of the institution's success only, they can also be seen as a subtle form of resistance, as mentioned in the introduction. Appropriating the norms to the extremes and demanding that they be followed by their superiors, can be seen as a way to assert agency. Moreover, it is a form of subtle resistance that poses a different threat than unruly behaviour. In contrast with acts such as impoliteness or disobedience that clearly transgressed norms, demanding to be treated *according* to the norms confronted the authorities with a form of contestation that was more complex to deal with. A "*tactique*" to counter the "*stratégies*" of the powerful,⁶³ then, I would argue, rather than a climax of the disciplinary process.

"MR. DIRECTOR": AUTHORITY, PROXIMITY AND PHYSICAL DISTANCE

In this section, I focus on the relationship between the pupil and the director. The power that the director embodied, had a significant impact on the nature of this relation. I illustrate this with a letter of Frans. In the summer of 1929, eighteen-year old Frans appealed to the director: "Mr. Director, on many occasions you recommended me to write to you if I found myself in a peculiar situation. So, I will take up the pen and tell you what has happened yesterday and in what circumstances."⁶⁴ He then set out to explain how a dispute with one of his fellows ended in a fist fight: "Victor hit the table with his ruler (...) and Laurens told him to shut up and I told him *he* should shut up and he wanted to say something and I made him shut up with my fist". Frans then mentioned how the pupils wanted to fetch the educator to settle the dispute, upon which more fighting broke out.

The first sentences reveal a great deal about how Frans perceived his relationship with the director. They suggest that the director could afford to take up the role of confidant with the youngsters. As the director, he did not have to deal on a daily basis with the disciplining of seventeen to twenty-one-year old minors in an institution that was during certain periods, understaffed.⁶⁵ Keeping the detainees in check was the job of the lower-level staff members. In his essays on "total institutions", Erving Goffman pointed out that high-ranked staff members enjoy more authority than lower staff members. Lower staff members had to *earn* the respect of the detainees

⁶² SAAB, M17, 83, Staff roll, p. 40.

⁶³ De Certeau (1990, xlvii).

⁶⁴ SAAB, M17, 465, file 5156, Letter to the director, 01.08.1929.

⁶⁵ E.g. SAAB, M17, 65, Meeting of the inspection committee, 01.07.1922.

on a daily basis.⁶⁶ The director in contrast, enjoyed a higher degree of “legitimate” power; a source of power that stemmed directly from his position of authority.⁶⁷ The confidential tone in many of the letters suggests that the director could afford to take a less authoritarian stance vis-à-vis the pupils, than the educators who always needed to be able to dominate the pupils in face-to-face contacts.

The incident with Frans is furthermore illustrative of how the layers of authority within the institution played out. When the dispute erupted between Frans and Victor, the latter tried to settle the matter by appealing to the educator. When this gave no satisfactory result, he appealed to the authority that stood above his educator: the director. These layers of appeal show that there was no dichotomous border between the “subculture” of the boys and the authorities. On the contrary, the pupils wanted to *use* the authorities to manage relationships with their fellow pupils. The layers of authority thus show the different nature of the relationships Frans had with different institutional actors. His first contact was his educator, second in line was the director, who had authority over the educators.

While lower staff members had the power to affect the daily lives of the boys, the director had a different power: he could influence their future. According to the juvenile justice system, the length of the detention was not decided during the trial but was constantly re-evaluated until the goal of re-education was reached. The director had no legal power to decide the liberation of the pupils, as this was the prerogative of the Children’s Judge; however, he did have a considerable influence on the decision. His institution delivered updates and advised the judge about the progress of his pupils. It is not known how well aware the children and their parents were of this system, as many letters addressed to the director contained requests for liberation. Apart from this major influence, the director also had the power to grant (and deny) other favours such as visits, correspondences and switching to other workshops. The power of the director significantly affected his relationship with his pupils.

Moreover, while the educators predominantly interacted with the detainees face-to-face, the interaction with the director of Mol more often took place via letters. This is reflected in Frans’s case as well; he spoke to the educators but wrote to the director. I would argue here that letters between pupils and staff members are not merely reflections of a relationship, but they are *constitutive* of it. The impossibility of the pupils to address the director in face-to-face interactions was solved by complementing the physical relation with an epistolary relation. After all, as Anne Thomazeau writes about boarding schools, it was difficult for teachers and educators to establish an individual relationship with pupils that they only saw as a group.⁶⁸ The letters then — both to the director and to other staff members — were means to complement face-to-face contact.

Nonetheless, as the opening of the Frans’s letter indicates, the director’s relationship with the detainees was not restricted to correspondence only. Indeed, Frans refers to “many occasions” during which the director gave him the advice to write to him. In this case, it is not known whether these “many occasions” took place via correspondence or face-to-face. Other case files, however, clearly show

⁶⁶ Goffman (1961, 108).

⁶⁷ Hepburn (1985, 146).

⁶⁸ Thomazeau (2005, 163).

that the directors in Mol did have face-to-face contact with the boys, especially the directors of the post-war period. The letters that the boys addressed to them refer to conversations and visits more frequently than in the interwar period.⁶⁹ Letters with an apology of, or explanation about unruly behaviour are not only important as a disciplinary or pedagogical tool, but should be seen as social tools that could create and complement personal interactions.

POST-PENITENTIARY CORRESPONDENCE: AUTHORITY AND PHYSICAL DISTANCE RECONSIDERED

In the previous section, I argued that the physical distance was an inherent part of the relationship between the pupils and the director. The nature of this distance, however, changed upon liberation. For most pupils, liberation meant the end of the relationship. However, some boys stayed in touch. Post-penitentiary correspondence is found in many reformatories.⁷⁰ As in other institutions, many of the post-penitentiary letters addressed to the director of Mol were motivated by a request of some sort: Georges needed documents for the municipal bureaucracy,⁷¹ Jean needed a proof of his stay in Mol to apply for unemployment benefit.⁷²

Sometimes though, between the lines of these letters, one encounters a sentence that cannot be explained as purely instrumental. Marcel, for instance, asked the director to send “*un certificat de bonne conduite*” five years after his release. In this same letter, he also mentioned that he visited the reform school years ago: “*Si vous vous rappelez je suis venu, vous voir chez vous, j’étais avec mon camion, vous m’avez offert un verre de vin.*”⁷³ While reminding the director of this visit would have helped support his request, it is striking to know that he visited Mol after his liberation. Lucien, writing from his army base in Germany in 1951, also had a request to ask: “*Aux moi d’octobre j’ai un congé, et je voudrai vous demander si je ne pourrai pas venir rendre visite à tous mes éducateurs*”.⁷⁴ Whether another request would come to light during the visit itself, remains unknown, but other letters too are void of underlying motives. Indeed, Henri’s postcard depicting a war monument simply said “*Recevez cher protecteur, les meilleurs amitiés d’un de vos élèves*”.⁷⁵ Maybe Alfons did not have anyone else but his old director to tell that he was “off to Korea”, when he sent a postcard in 1951.⁷⁶ After all, many of these minors came from difficult familial backgrounds. It is possible that to some of them, the institution remained an important reference point. The silence of the many ex-detainees is as loud as these examples of post-penitentiary correspondence. But some of them clearly felt the urge to continue their epistolary contact with the director, even if there was no clear material gain.

⁶⁹ E.g. SAAB, M17, file 7759, letter 21.12.1958; file 7007, letter 18.06.1950; file 5858, undated letter; file 5849, 28.06.1938.

⁷⁰ Schlossman (1977, 193); Christiaens (1999, 265); Massin (2011b, 487).

⁷¹ SAAB, M17, 520, File 5849, Letter on 12.09.1941.

⁷² SAAB, M17, 580, File 7010, Letter on 16.04.1952.

⁷³ SAAB, M17, 524, File 5890, Letter on 12.9.1946.

⁷⁴ SAAB, M17, 577, File 6952, Letter on 01.09.1951.

⁷⁵ SAAB, M17, 576, File 6943, Letter on 22.03.1949.

⁷⁶ SAAB, M17, 583, File 7046, Letter on 22.11.1951.

It has been stated that personal correspondence serves to bridge the physical distance between the respondents.⁷⁷ The physical distance then, is considered a handicap; the letters are a substitute for face-to-face contact. In the case of ex-detainees however, I would argue that the physical distance is a *precondition* for a relationship. During the detention, the relationship could not be anything but asymmetrical. The director embodied the full power of the reformatory. After the liberation, this power decreased. Thus, it is this very physical distance separating the director from his ex-pupils, that created the possibility for a cautious proximity between the correspondents. Post-penitentiary correspondence created the possibility for a different kind of relationship — a relationship not between a director and his pupil, not even always between a director and an ex-pupil that needed a favour, but also a relationship between a director and a man. Indicative of this change in the power dynamics of the relationship is the way the writers signed their letters: no longer “the pupil W. in cell N22”, but a full name: “Antoon W.”⁷⁸ While the power dynamic would never vanish entirely, the conditions of the relationship had clearly changed.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined the interpersonal relations between detainees and staff members in the State Reformatory of Mol, a disciplinary wing for delinquent boys in Belgium. I focused on the period between 1927 and 1960. Ego-documents of both pupils and staff members illustrate that, while all interactions in the reformatory took place within a power structure, the range of social interactions was far broader than practices of formal coercion only. The level of the microanalysis makes it possible to go beyond generic concepts of “reform” and “punishment”, enriching our knowledge about the complicated web of social interactions in reformatories.

In analysing the State Reformatory of Mol as an “emotional arena”, several elements come to light. Theoretically speaking, the arena makes it possible to transcend the dichotomous view of “the” detainees versus “the” institution, as is often implicitly taken when analysing carceral relations in reform schools. The boys had different relationships with different staff members. These differences are partially explained by the different functions, and accordingly different hierarchical positions that staff members held — the most notable difference being between the educators and the director. As the reformatory of Mol was divided in different sections, each headed by an educator in charge, those educators had, to a limited extent, a certain autonomy to create a personal style. Consequently, there was not necessarily one singular detention experience, but subtle differences in the experience depending on the sections.

Methodologically speaking, I argued that the personal correspondence between the pupils and the staff members should not only be read as a disciplinary or pedagogical instrument, but also as a social instrument that complemented face-to-face contact. Thus, the correspondence not only reflected social interactions, but the very act of corresponding *forged* interaction. While this article was limited

⁷⁷ Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1998, 16).

⁷⁸ SAAB, M17, 520, File 5839, undated letter, ca. 1937-1940, and post-penitentiary letter on 12.09.1941.

to interpersonal relations between *intra-muros* actors, questions arise as to the epistolary and face-to-face contacts between detainees and *extra-muros* actors, such as the juvenile judge and family members. In this article, I occasionally referred to letters to the juvenile judge that have been copied in the case file established by the institution. The archives of the juvenile courts contain more correspondence between the judge and his or her pupil that can give insight in their interpersonal relation.

The analysis of these micro-interactions allows one to assess three ways in which relations shifted throughout time. The case of Fernand illustrates the changing nature of the educator, evolving from a guard to a paternal educator that ought to nurture an individual relationship with the pupils — an individual relationship that was not devoid of violence, but that consisted of both violence and a certain proximity, as far as the institutional structure allows. More research is needed to study the possible parallels between changing styles in the reformatories and changing parental styles occurring in this period. The letter of Rémy on the other hand reveals that his work master used humour and privileges to manage his pupils in the 1940s, a decade before this became common in the institutional guidelines. This raises questions about the input of the educators in pedagogical reforms, suggesting that lower staff members too could affect changes in pedagogical practices. Letters from Auguste and Alphonse, respectively set in 1931 and 1957, illustrate not only the norms of self-constraint that superiors had to abide by, but also the way in which the director reacted differently to the transgressions of these norms. These two developments can be seen in the context of changing cultural norms on self-constraint and in the context of changes within the juvenile justice under pressure from public opinion. This active contestation of behaviour adds a new dimension to the subtle forms of resistance against the authorities, requiring us to historicize the notion of *infrapolitics*. Lastly, a change also occurred on the level of the individual (ex-)detainees. While physical distance is often seen as a handicap that is overcome by correspondence, I argued that in the case of detainees' post-penitentiary correspondence, physical distance was *necessary* to mitigate the unequal power distribution of the relationship. Overall, the focus on micro-interactions shows a broad spectrum of personal relations, coexisting with practices of violence and coercion.

Yet, how does the microcosmos of Mol relate to other institutions in the Belgian juvenile justice system? As mentioned throughout the article, researchers have revealed violent practices in Belgian reformatories, not in the least for the State Reformatory of Bruges, a disciplinary wing for girls that can be considered the counterpart of Mol. In her elaborate study of Bruges, Massin has revealed the harsh coercive practices inflicted upon the girls. Massin stresses the violent nature of the institutional landscape, not only for the disciplinary institutions, but also for the more lenient reform schools. The difference between these institutions, according to Massin, lies not in different pedagogical realities, but in the degree of coerciveness: “*Ces deux circuits sont deux faces d'une même réalité présente à tous les niveaux de l'intervention judiciaire ou institutionnelle, avec plus ou moins d'acuité*”.⁷⁹ This article however, showed that differences in the detention experience amount to more than the degree of coerciveness. A difference between Mol and Bruges that cannot be explained by the degree of coerciveness only, for instance, is the relationship between the pupils and the lower staff members. In both Mol and Bruges,

⁷⁹ Massin (2011b, 525).

pedagogical practices entailed violence. Yet, while the pupils and lower educators in Mol interacted both face-to-face and via epistolary practices, there is no trace of correspondence between lower staff members and the girls in Bruges. It is unclear yet what explains the absence of correspondence between lower staff members and detainees in Bruges.⁸⁰ Did the small scale of the disciplinary wing in Bruges make this correspondence superfluous? Or is this indicative of an entirely different emotional climate of both institutions? Looking at the relations as consisting of both physical and epistolary exchanges and differentiating between lower and higher staff members then, opens up a new way of assessing the reformatories. These different interactions between pupils and lower staff member cannot be captured by looking at broad patterns of reform and punishment, nor by reading the interpersonal relations through the lens of sanctions. It requires us to ask different questions, to delve into the microlevel, to unravel the depth of the interpersonal relations in the reformatories.

We cannot close our eyes to the many forms of violence inflicted upon detained children — physical, emotional or otherwise — that took place within the a framework of structural institutional violence of the reformatories. Nonetheless, social relations within these institutions, including abusive ones, were more than formal coercion. To grasp the ambiguous nature of carceral interpersonal relationships inside reform schools, it is necessary to acknowledge the coexistence of multiple types of interactions, their nature and how they changed over time.

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Laura Nys

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, South Korea (Department of Dutch) & Ghent University, Belgium (Department of History)
laura.nys.hufs@gmail.com

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⁸⁰ There is however abundant correspondence between the director and the detainees.

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