

POEMS OF PEACE AND FREEDOM

By Doxey A. Wilkerson

The Prisoners, by Walter Lowenfels. Whittier Press, Philadelphia, 50 cents.

The morning newspaper carries a picture of "9 PHILADELPHIANS CONVICTED AS REDS"; and sitting in the forefront among them, head held high in seeming defiance, is a 56-year-old poet from whose pen I read: "Peace itself is the poem of our time."

The line comes toward the end of *The Prisoners*, and is followed by this moving summation of the author's "Credo":

Each generation lives its own morality. Ours is being born right now—in the flame of being, all of us together, for peace, to win peace, to bring peace from its long orphanhood, its million-year embryo—into the warm human embrace of being alive, now.

It was to be expected that the war-bound Eisenhower Administration would try to silence so powerful a voice of peace, and that poet Walter Lowenfels would join his Philadelphia comrades and seventy-two other working-class leaders who have been "convicted" of the new crime of *conspiracy to teach and advocate the scientific world-view of Marxism-Leninism*.

But the dozen brief poems in this volume alone—some tender lyrics, others stirring calls to battle, all precisely turned, beautifully symbolic and deeply significant—attest that this eloquent voice will long be heard and honored by the peoples for whom it speaks. And the message of Lowenfels' verse is imperishable:

A song is sung and dies away
but out of every hill
the freedom song we hear in jail
is never, never still.

The dominant theme of *The Prisoners* is expressed by its subtitle, "Poems for Amnesty". The "Dedicatory Sonnet", for Eugene Dennis, identifies the cause of amnesty with the supreme political issue of our time:

The loveliest prisoner of today, peace,
awaits eternal freedom from her chains;
She lies with us The Burned, The Jailed, The Banned.

For Elizabeth Gurley Flynn there is a poem of Biblical symbolism which concludes:

Goliath seemed a giant
till David laid him low,
the strength of all his people
in one great freedom blow.

There are also sonnets for Ben Davis and for Claudia Jones, a stanza "For A Political Refugee", a warm and highly perceptive "Letter to Steve Nelson"—"You who wash so freshly the human name", and this challenge to the whole American people in "On Bail":

My first night out. I wander through the house
 touching things, making as if free.
 At my side eight whispering voices
 saying: *Remember me, remember me!*
 I drink a cup of coffee, draw up plans
 to help set my eight companions free,
 one hundred and sixty million other voices
 whispering: *Remember me, remember me!*

Interspersed among these poems are brief quotations from great champions of freedom throughout history—from Da Vinci: "It is easier to resist at the beginning than at the end"; from Bruno: "Those who condemn us are in greater fear than we who are condemned"; from Goethe: "He alone earns his freedom, his existence, who conquers them freshly every day"; and others from Emerson, Montesquieu, John Brown, Shaw, Douglas, Lincoln, Du Bois, Dennis. They further heighten the fighting quality of this little volume.

Lowenfels writes as a Jew, and his verse reflects notable sensitivity to the oppression of other peoples.

I saw the martyrs of my land
 Indians and slaves freed
 the Hyam Solomons from whom I come
 planting the liberty seed.

And from the "Sonnet for Ben Davis":

Six million Jews speak here in us: *We*
your outposts, sentries watching sun or rain
challenging—must the dead be dead again?
His prison measures all your liberty
as we did once. Read us! Our empty faces
were human once like you—
washed, combed, curled,
fresh-cheeked like you, we say!

What jail he paces!—
 not one black man, not Africa only—the world
 beats from his bars—peace truth, all human graces
 cry out, and freedom's thunderbolts are hurled.

Commenting on Lowenfels' imprisonment under the Smith Act, Louis Aragon—in an article translated by Mike Gold from *Les Lettres Francaises* and here reproduced—cries out: "Let our France, which saw the youth of this poet, listen now to his Prayer written from prison, and sent to free men everywhere like a solemn warning. Let the voice of freedom ring with bold and powerful echoes here and everywhere, rising from the heart of man *and from his anger, rising from that enormous power which is the love of peace and which is capable of breaking all man's chains.*"

Such is also the message of *The Prisoners—Poems for Amnesty*. The fighting power of this little volume of verse reflects a consummate artistry which has matured through deep understanding, direct participation and confidence in the working-class and people's struggles. It should be made the property of thousands who cherish freedom and peace.