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'I Was a Mental Patient'

Inmates Sleep on the Floor, Mutter, Stare Into Corner

On the basis of complaints from men and women who had been patients in the Kings County Hospital psychiatric division, the World-Telegram last month assigned staff writer Michael Mok to investigate the Brooklyn institution. Without the knowledge of any authorities, he told a carefully prepared story of emotional difficulties to win admission to the psychiatric division as a patient. He spent eight days in the locked wards. Today he tells how he was admitted to the hospital and the conditions he found there.

By **MICHAEL MOK**,
World-Telegram Staff Writer.

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"G" Building of Kings County Hospital has a faceless, institutional look—a nondescript pile a stroller might glance at and never see.

When I saw it first under a gloomy morning sky smeared with streaks of rain, it looked menacing. My tall, 20-year-old wife felt it too, because she pressed my arm with all her strength.

On entering the building, my wife went to the information desk, which directed us to the admissions office on the opposite side of the first floor.

This area is bleakly furnished with bulky wooden

benches. It is divided like an old-time Quaker meeting house—men to the right and women to the left.

Didn't Identify Himself.

A man wearing a gray uniform jacket whom I took to be a doctor beckoned us into a cluttered office where we took seats next to his desk. He did not introduce himself.

He recorded the usual biographical statistics on a form and I noticed that he phrased highly personal questions with considerable tact. When he finished he told me to wait outside on the benches until a doctor could see me. Because I had mistaken him for the doctor, it was like learning that I had to go through an uncomfortable experience twice.

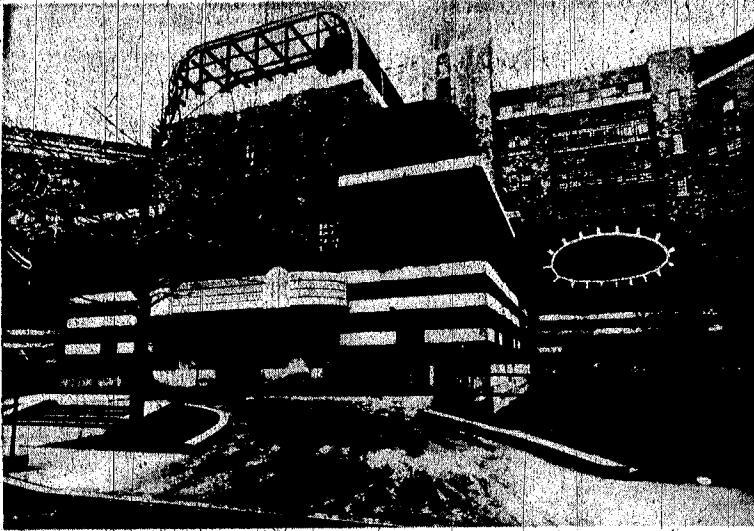
The wait lasted about half an hour, and because the walls were posted with "No Smoking" signs, we stepped outside twice to puff on cigarettes.

Man Discussed Openly.

An ambulance squealed up to the door and provided a diversion. A guard and a female attendant wheeled in a man strapped to a stretcher and parked him within five feet of where we were jittering.

The guard, the attendant and staff members free-

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This is a view of the main entrance to "G" Building, Kings County Hospital's psychiatric division. Staff writer Michael Mok spent part of his time in a locked ward indicated by circle. Photo by Du Marzio.

'I Was a Mental Patient' Faceless Building Shields Gloomy World

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ly discussed the sick man, who was lying there with his eyes rolling. They made no attempt to lower their voices or move to another room out of respect to me, or to spare a 10-year-old boy who was waiting his turn within earshot.

"Has he ever been here before?" asked one member of the hospital staff, gesturing to the man.

"Yes, sir," replied his mother.

"What happened to him after that?"

"They took him to Brooklyn State Hospital."

"Well, if he's just out of Brooklyn State, why didn't you take him back there?"

Before I could find out what happened, I was called into the psychiatrist's office. The doctor questioned me gently and with great patience and skill. I allowed him to drag from me a story I had prepared very carefully.

I told him in considerable detail that emotional difficulties had been aggravated by heavy drinking and had created severe problems.

After the session, the doctor said he was going to admit me to the hospital "for a couple of days," and I was taken into a small dressing room while the doctor talked to my wife.

A man in a green uniform gave me a wrinkled but clean set of blue pajamas several sizes too small and told me to strip off my clothes.

The only pair of slippers he could find was tattered and worn and he apologized. When he saw me sweating and twitching—at this time it wasn't necessary for me to fake nervousness—he told me in a most friendly way to "take it easy."

Wedding Ring Taken

He also demanded my personal belongings, including my wedding ring. He explained it was for safekeeping, and made a note of it and my other things on an inventory.

The doctor came in, listened to my heart, took my pulse and checked my blood pressure. This was the extent of my physical examination. I got no other while in Kings County.

On the day I entered the hospital, I was wearing a bandage on my right leg because I had injured my knee in a judo match. But the doctor did not know this because he did not make me take off my pajama trousers for examination.

What was more important, I was not checked for venereal diseases or other communicable illnesses.

Other patients—some of whom came from ver-

min-ridden flophouses — told me later they got the same cursory examination.

The doctor granted permission for me to say goodby to my wife, and while the aide pretended to look away, she kissed me, began crying and left.

Locked Door With Eye Slot

The attendant led me to an elevator and we got off at the third floor. A short distance away was a locked door with a vision slot at eye level. My guide fished out a key about the size of a can opener and worked the lock with a great rattly-click.

A short passageway, another locked door with a vision slot; rattly-click and we were inside Ward 31. I looked around; it was a room about 60 by 30 feet, with numerous windows on two sides protected by heavy wire mesh. Heavy wooden chairs were stacked atop long wooden tables which I estimated would seat a total of about 60 people.

I later learned that this was the "day room." We spent most of our hours here. It served as a dining room, recreation room and sleeping room for the weary—the beds were locked away during the day. No smoking was permitted in the day room.

"The day room is being tidied up right now," the nurse said as she walked up. "Why don't you go in the back and make yourself at home?"

1½ Hours to Get In

I glanced at the clock which was set flush into the wall over the door I had entered. It was 11 a.m. Getting into the hospital had taken exactly an hour and a half. Getting out might take somewhat longer.

I walked slowly toward the back of the day room. There I encountered the nurses' station, a cage enclosed in glass and wire at the intersection of two passageways, one leading to dormitories which are locked during the day, and the other toward the lavatory.

I chose the second. Then I saw the other patients for the first time. Men and boys, all wearing pajamas and a few with bathrobes, were crowded in a long corridor.

Some leaned against the wall, others sat on the floor, and a few were sound asleep on the cold tiles. Stepping carefully over sprawled legs, I went down the hall to a bathroom which was crowded and smoky almost beyond belief.

Men were seated on the three seatless toilet bowls, others sat on the sinks. A man lay in an empty bathtub, another slept on the floor behind it.

Sitting on Damp Floor

Some were lying in the two shower stalls and a boy sat uncomfortably on the window sill. An old man

unshaven—stared into a corner with unseeing eyes and muttered to himself. But most people sat on the damp, filthy floor, because there was nothing else to sit on.

I heard a bleary-eyed individual bragging that his favorite bartender always poured him a tumbler of gin and whisky mixed, without his having to ask for it. He explained that this occurred when he had had a good day picking rags from garbage cans and could afford to splurge.

A whey-faced man was telling a companion that if he hadn't turned himself in to Kings County, his parole officer would have taken him back to Sing Sing.

Another man was busy drawing an obscene ink sketch. I have no idea how he got the pen in the hospital, because mine was confiscated. His canvas was the hairy stomach of a repulsively fat individual, who giggled uncontrollably as the work progressed.

A strapping fellow with the build of a Longshoreman was explaining to two young boys the right way to give themselves a "fix."

"Look Here," said the addict, "you only see puncture marks on my left arm. That's because I'm right-handed. If I tried to do it with my left hand I might miss the vein."

"And if I tried to shoot it in, my legs, that's bad. Just miss the spot and the herdin' will go wild and

your ankles will swell up big as your knees.

"The safest thing to do is to tie off your left arm just below the elbow, wait for that big vein to pop up, and zam!"

"Here's something I bet you don't know. . . . You could mainline it with goofballs (sleeping pills) or even aspirin, but they put something in them that doesn't melt, just so you can't do it."

For the first time I fully realized that I was in a madhouse.

TOMORROW:

Mok learns what it's like inside, and hears about the violent wards.

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