

Sheila's Middle-Class World Crumbled

By John Carmody Washington Post Staff Writer
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Sheila Ryan is 22, with big, Galway-blue eyes, a troubled complexion, and long brown hair that she keeps convent-neat with a big blue ribbon. She speaks in a little-girl voice and sits primly with her hands in her lap, her back very straight, as she talks to a visitor at the Womens' Detention Center here and says: "I'm not a martyr."

Yet her confederates in the local Students for a Democratic Society think she is. They think Sheila Ryan is a political prisoner. The Washington Free Press—the local "underground" newspaper that has surfaced far on the New Left in recent issues—prints second-hand accounts of her troubles at the Detention Center.

Sheila Ryan admits the accounts of jail "brutality"—arm twisting and other physical indignities—sometimes get "blown up a bit" in translation. But nevertheless, the accounts reappear in other New Left publications around the country and she gets letters from "friends" in Mexico and California and New York.

LAST AUGUST, Sheila Ryan was jailed with six others for 180 days—the maximum sentence for the misdemeanor of illegal entry into a Federal building. The seven had staged a sit-in the White House in March, 1965, over the Selma, Ala., racial crisis underway at that time.

All the others have since been released. But Miss Ryan, after a series of jail incidents—the most notorious occurring when she refused to wash dishes during the interment of the Oct. 21 Pentagon demonstrators—was barred from release by Municipal Court Judge Thomas C. Scalley.

MISS RYAN—and her New Left acquaintances—insist that Judge Scalley has subsequently set two "impossible conditions" for her release: that she must return to the custody of her family in Braintree, Mass.; and, more crucially, that she submit to psychiatric treatment on her release.

Allen Avery, the Corrections Department assistant director who is in charge of such matters, denies that such conditions have been set up: "They'd have to come

through my offices and I've never seen such a thing."

Miss Ryan says the conditions—real or not—make it impossible for her to apply for release. "It would just give the jail people an excuse to say 'Poor Sheila, she's been undergoing treatment since she left here, you know.'"

So the image of the "political prisoner" persists—if not in Miss Ryan's mind or Allen Avery's file—certainly among her New Left supporters.

"I am not a martyr," she says repeatedly today. But it is plain that Sheila Ryan does feel caught up in a long, irreversible process—part personally-invoked, part historical—that in some deep way satisfies her at the same time it leaves her lonely and alienated in a world she insists she wants to change.

SOMETIMES another Sheila Ryan shows through. She says things like "I'd like to be married and have 16 kids."

Or she will grimace and giggle like a young too-far-from-home postulant and say "Oh, God!" when a visitor reminds her that a few years ago she was an all-Massachusetts finalist in the Betty Crocker Homemakers contest at Archbishop Williams High School in Braintree.

And then, she will brag she did all the cooking for the 10 people at the Free Press co-op last summer before she went to jail—on a food budget of \$45 a week.

She does not remember precisely when she began the long journey from Braintree to a jail in Washington. She spent, she says, "17 very, very happy years with my parents in a comfortable home."

HER FATHER is a well-to-do civil engineer. She has two younger sisters (one of them in Vassar) and a brother.

In 1962 she won a Boston Archdiocesan scholarship to Catholic University here and was quickly immersed in the bookish world of the philosophy major—Aristotle, Plato, the neo-Thomists—and the moderately austere controls of an all-girl Catholic dormitory.

In her sophomore year she began working at the Receiving Home for Children on weekends. The middle-class world she had known, as she recalls now, began to crumble then.

"There is nothing so sad," she says, "as to see 8-year-old children in jail—that's what the Home really is, you know—who are there because of something done to them—not for what they'd done."

SHEILA RYAN understands that this was not a particularly unique revelation for a college student. But she took a relatively unique path (although it seems almost commonplace on the campus of 1967) away from what she calls my "schizoid college life."

"It's almost impossible for a middle class white American to lead a meaningful life today," she says. "But activity is meaningful." For Sheila Ryan that meant the peace and civil rights movements in the already-softening center of the 1965 liberal left.

She answered telephones at the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee headquarters here.

She appeared in Cambridge, Md., and before the White House.

She traveled to Mississippi. And the Hegel and Heidegger on the bookshelves gave way to Frantz Fanon and C. Wright Mills and books like "Mau Mau Detainee"—which she is reading these days in jail.

"I began to be aware," she says. "When I sat in the White House that time I didn't think about jail. I wasn't aware that maybe I was one of the oppressed—that people who have no control over their lives must be oppressed."

"But later I saw people who only wanted to vote being hit by police with clubs—they had no control over their own lives."

SHE INSISTS she is not a "straight Marxist." "I am



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not a complete dialectician. There are really so many different things that can still happen in the world to change things. You can't predict."

But she speaks straight Marx when she talks about the "racism and global economics compounded with Imperialism—not just American, either—" which demand "a re-allocation of the control of goods and the means of production in this country."

"Since I've been here," says Sheila Ryan, I've realized the function of a jail in this society is to control people who don't relate well to oppression. Its function is to put people in total immersion in oppression so

they adjust better to the oppression outside again."

She wants to be a journalist—although she admits with a smile that "pamphleteer" might be more accurate. On her release from the Center in mid-January, she plans to write a series of articles on the jail for the Free Press.

SHE ATTENDS Mass frequently ("lots more than just Sundays") and most of all she waits—as political prisoners, real or imagined—have waited throughout all history and all societies.

There are very few visitors. The SDS used to pose as brothers or sisters until the Center officials caught on. A steadily-changing stream of SDS-hired attorneys almost never has the time to come by for a chat—or to see Judge Scalley.

Three times a day, seven days a week, the Betty Crocker Homemaker finalist washes the dishes of 84 fellow prisoners.

And all the while, the parents in Braintree, Mass., worry. And Sheila Ryan, when the fire dies out in the blue eyes, says she knows they worry. And when a visitor leaves, Sheila Ryan stands behind a jail door and watches through the heavy window until the elevator going down has left again for the world she wants to change.