

Pre-Trial Detention 2

December 3, 2025

5 CHF per day

7 CHF per day for working

5 CHF per day for German course

The PD2 prison is the largest in the canton. It is located in the middle of the city and is not recognizable as a prison from the outside. I walk around the building. It strikes me as well-maintained and innocuous—like an administrative building. The prison is part of a large complex that is 120 years old, delimited by the PD2 public prosecutor's office on one side and the district court on the other. In the courtyard, ST and I ring the bell at a narrow white door bearing the cantonal coat of arms and the inscription „Prison PD2.“ The door opens and we stand in a passageway. ST waves to an officer at the gate to let us in. He indicates that we will shortly be collected by a manager (M). While we wait, a woman comes in with two small children and two bags full of clothing and snacks—a visit for an inmate.

M and a guard collect us and lead us through a second courtyard into the administrative building, to his office, where we leave our bags and phones. I sign a confidentiality agreement. Then we set off. M leads the way, followed by me, then ST, and then the two-meter-tall guard. Several corridors and doors later, we arrive in the prison building proper. Cells are spread across four floors. The smell of cigarettes hits me immediately. We start at the very top, the fourth floor. M explains that this floor houses the particularly difficult and disruptive inmates.

There are 25 men in group detention. The corridors are narrow and visibly run-down, the ceilings low, the rooms small, and the walls at least 80 cm thick. All windows are barred from the outside. Two inmates are sitting in the corridor in front of a cell, talking. M unlocks an unoccupied cell. It is furnished in the most rudimentary way: a „bed“ with a blanket and a stainless-steel unit combining toilet and sink. Also, a plastic tableware set from IKEA—a cup, a bowl, a plate, a knife, a fork, and a spoon, each in a different color, like in a kindergarten. The colorful set looks out of place in the small, dark cell. The light switch can be operated by the inmate from the inside, the television is mounted out of reach,

high on the wall. Subject to good behavior, one can purchase television time for one franc per day. The window runs lengthwise just below the ceiling. You have to tilt your head back to see the light coming in. ST explains that cells used to be built this way so that incarcerated individuals would have to look up to God and pray for their sins to be forgiven.

The fourth floor has its own exercise yard, located on the roof. It is half covered and half open-air, the open section, is, however, enclosed with barbed wire. There is a ping-pong table, two plastic armchairs, a punching bag, and some sports equipment. Ashtrays are placed on the two benches. M hands me one of the ashtrays: „They’re made of rubber. In the past, inmates used to hit each other—or themselves—in the head and face with them and break their noses.“

We leave the roof and descend to the third floor. The pervasive smell of cigarettes is foul; it reinforces the run-down look of the building. M explains that smoking is permitted in individual cells. „I’m very glad about this rule. In the prison where I used to work, smoking wasn’t permitted at all. It was a constant topic with the inmates. They were furious about the ban and there was continual trouble because inmates found ways to light their cigarettes inside the building anyway. One of them ripped the cables out of his television and used them to create sparks to light his cigarette.“

By now, all the cells are unlocked and the men can move freely on their floor for up to 10 hours a day—group detention. They are only locked in their cells during staff breaks and from the evening onwards. Suddenly I find myself surrounded by prison inmates. I try not to let my tension show. M shows me the music room, the common room, the kitchen, a dining room, and the in-house barbershop. The latter is a small room with glass walls, where an inmate is currently cleaning. M unlocks it so I can look around more closely; the four of us stand in the open doorway. An absurd situation unfolds, and my stomach turns. M says that Africans are particularly talented at cutting hair, and that the inmate running the barbershop accordingly has a lot of work. This inmate can hear every word and continues working calmly. As M speaks, I get the impression we are talking about an animal being observed in its cage. The fact that the inmate is present and can hear everything does not seem to bother M in the slightest; he talks about the inmate as though he didn’t exist. Elsewhere, outside this place, that would be unacceptable—here, however, it seems normal.

We go down to the ground floor and out into the exercise yard. The center of the yard is covered, sheltering the fitness equipment beneath. As I look around the yard, more and more inmates arrive. They walk together in a circle around the yard, anticlockwise, talking. There must be around 60 men. M says you can read a lot from the dynamics in the yard—who gets along with whom, who walks alone, who is having problems and who is causing them. Two inmates approach M and ask whether they can share a cell, because one of them doesn't get along with his current cellmate. M says he will have to look into it. Off the exercise yard is the kitchen, where 3 inmates are working. Only plastic utensils are used in the entire kitchen. We move on to the so-called kiosk. Inmates can order items there once a week on a designated day. There are snacks, tea, toiletries, and stationery.

Next, we look at a cell reserved for particularly aggressive inmates. In the small anteroom, protective equipment for staff is stored. M shows me a device that can be used to cut clothing off a person's body. On the floor lies a torn mattress in a bag; the blanket on the chair is also torn. The items in this cell need to be extremely durable and virtually indestructible, as inmates take out their aggression on them, M explains. Even though the cell is specifically designed for such cases, there are always inmates who manage to take everything apart. He presses the shredded blanket into my hands, along with a pair of underpants packaged in plastic. He tears open the packaging and then rips the underpants apart. „The fabric is so thin that it tears immediately, so inmates can't use it to hang themselves.“

From the outside, PD2 looks like something out of a picture book — a castle-like structure with thick walls and bars on the windows. Inside, everything is small, dark, and run-down, and the acrid stench of cigarettes drifts through the complex. Compared to PD1, I find this place to be profoundly inhumane; it fills me with an overwhelming sense of bleakness. I cannot imagine how anyone could ever lead a „normal“ life again after being incarcerated here. And yet it feels almost less oppressive than PD1, and that is clearly due to the interior. PD2 has existed for 120 years. It is dark, cramped, and full of corners and recesses in the corridors. But it feels „lived-in“; there are pictures on the walls and in the cells. PD1, by contrast, is new, brutalist, and stark. What a paradox.

Objectively, the architecture and design of PD2 have serious shortcomings—no light, spaces and corridors that are too narrow,

everything in a dilapidated state, in use for far too long. Clearly, I am not the only one who feels this way, as the building is scheduled for demolition and reconstruction in 2028. And yet it feels, in a strange way, more pleasant than the new, almost sleek building of PD1—which is spacious, clean, and flooded with light. This is due to PD1 being radically direct, leaving no room for ambiguity. It shows no weaknesses, it is unmistakably powerful. This observation makes clear to me just how central interior design is for creating a more humane atmosphere.

To an outsider, the inmate population at PD2 appears homogeneous. According to M, Arabic is the most widely spoken language, which is why two Arabic-speaking custodial staff had to be hired. In addition, though, there are a significant number of Polish inmates, and a considerable proportion of the staff is also recruited from Eastern Europe. Also notable is the physical appearance of the male staff, who tend to be tall and powerfully built—in contrast to PD1.

The policy at PD2 is as follows: those who behave well are granted more freedoms and opportunities. Those who fail to comply with the rules—for example by losing control, resisting orders, attacking others, or harming themselves—have their privileges removed. I am not sure what to make of this approach. A thought experiment: an inmate feels lonely, his entire future is uncertain, he misses his family and is in despair. This leads him to start rampaging in his cell and destroying objects. As a punishment, his family visits are cancelled, and he is placed in solitary confinement for a day. This cannot be a sensible way of dealing with the situation, and it does not address the underlying problem either. M can order up to two weeks of solitary confinement on the 23/1 principle for an inmate who violates rules, for example by attacking staff. He says that afterwards those affected are usually cooperative because they have „understood something.“ In my assessment, after such a long time they are simply worn down and no longer have the energy to be uncooperative. I doubt this punishment leads to genuine insight.

After the visit, I ask ST whether there are also hopeless cases where even the most valuable approach simply fails to have any effect. Yes, he says, such cases exist—but they are very few.