

Prison wear store opens in Berlin



by Miguel Villagran, AP

A woman takes a look at a T-shirt designed by US prisoner 'Martin', who is currently imprisoned in the Polunsky unit in Texas, in a store in Berlin on Thursday, Feb. 21, 2008. The German label that translates into 'detainee' will open its first store, with fashion partially designed by prisoners, in the German capital. (AP Photo/Miguel Villagran).

By Kirsten Grieshaber, Associated Press Writer

BERLIN — A new store is selling fashions produced and inspired by prisoners, including a T-shirt that was designed by inmates in Texas. Striped shirts, gray hoodies and dark brown jackets are the mainstay of the men's collection which opened Friday in the German capital. Miniskirts made of coarse denim and sweaters with hidden pockets—useful for smuggling drugs past prison guards—make up the ladies' label. "Our entire look is robust and adjusted to prison," said a company spokeswoman. "We use hard materials and there will never be a lot of color

A limited T-shirt edition was designed by inmates in Texas—with prints of voluptuous women similar to the tattoos that adorn some prisoners' arms and chests. Convicts at prisons all over Germany are involved in the production and receive between \$2.65 and \$3.39 an hour for their work, said Ahmad, who opened the Berlin store. "The prison administrations love the whole idea and their inmates are really proud that their creations get recognition in the real world," Ahmad said.

Not all the clothes are created or designed behind prison walls—some of the street wear is produced by regular workers in Poland and India. But Ahmad says that 3 to 5 percent of every item he sells goes to prisoner-related charities, among them Amnesty International and the German Initiative against Death Penalty. Besides clothes, the company also sells bed sheets, dish towels and espresso beans roasted by inmates. The Berlin shop is the only one in Germany so far, but it's not the first to draw its inspiration from inmate apparel.

Saggy pants fashion in the United States is believed to have started in prisons, where inmates are issued ill-fitting jumpsuits but no belts to prevent hangings and beatings. The look was popularized in gangster rap videos.

The company began as an Internet-only shop in 2003, when a Berlin advertising agency came up with the idea of marketing prison garb as fashionable street wear. "The online shop was hugely popular," said Ahmad, who joined the team of 10 employees in 2007. "But they didn't really know how to professionally market and distribute the clothes." As for the prices, it's unlikely many real convicts could afford the products. T-shirts sell for between \$44 and \$59, buttoned-down shirts for \$117 and a brown women's coat costs \$412.