



Molteto

FLORENCE & PAUL IGNOTUS
Through a prison's walls, footsteps of courtship.

HUNGARY

After the Cinema

Leftists who get caught up in the Communist confession mills have a fair idea of what to expect these days. As long ago as 1940, Budapest-born Arthur Koestler in his novel *Darkness at Noon* explained something of the techniques used. Thus, when onetime Hungarian Cultural Attaché Paul Ignotus, an active Social Democrat who had read his Koestler, returned to Budapest from Britain to see his ailing father in 1949, he knew the

"Time", June 10, 1957



danger he risked. Picked up by the AVO security police a few days after his father's funeral, he was not altogether surprised to find himself in the hands of the Communist "confession experts." But he still had no hint of the particular debt he would owe ex-Communist Koestler in the course of the next seven years in Communist prisons.

Ignotus* got the full treatment. At a secret trial at the end of 1950 he confessed: "I said that I hated the workers. I admitted I was a willing tool of the Western imperialists and capitalists. I recited fully the lesson I had spent a year and a half learning." (What made tough, hawk-nosed Ignotus accept his lesson? Says he: "Koestler is right. The emphasis is put on the psychological part of the treatment, the dogged, merciless, relentless job of indoctrination. But the torture—maybe Koestler underestimated that. The torture is horror.")

Even today Ignotus refuses to give details of the advanced methods used by the AVO ("These are things I want to forget"), but is ready to talk of the lack-of-sleep technique which "though not a strong enough torture to induce people to confess," has its own terrors. "At a certain point you go to sleep all the same," he says, "even standing with a light glaring in your eyes. It is not a proper sleep, but a kind of half-dreamed nightmare. Hungarian prisoners call it 'the cinema,' and when you say you 'have been to the cinema,' it means that you have passed out on your feet and had visions."

To the Hairdresser. Not all political prisoners warrant the skill and attention of the "confession experts." About the time Ignotus was facing his secret court,

* A name meaning "unknown," which his journalist father first used as a pen name and then took as his own.



youthful Florence Matay, daughter of an English mother, who worked as an English translator in semiofficial jobs in the Communist regime, left her office to visit the hairdresser.

She was picked up by the AVO "while my hair was still dripping wet" and put in solitary confinement as a spy. Two years later she was moved to the women's dormitory at Fo Utca, where "39 women slept in 14 bunks, breathed air that came through a tiny window blocked by an iron plate. The stench was terrible. For 14 months not a drop of hot water to wash with. In winter the water was so cold that it froze solid. Once, we sacrificed six precious bowls of hot soup to wash our hair."

When Imre Nagy became Premier in July 1953, conditions improved. The following year, learning that AVO Boss Gabor Peter had been arrested, Florence decided to appeal her case. She was moved to a special prison where she was given a bed of her own. Says she: "Compared to what I had been through, it was paradise."

Tap Lessons. Florence, too, had read her Koestler. "One day I heard a tap-tap-tap, muffled, irregular, but methodical. I remembered the alphabet in *Darkness at Noon*: one tap for A, two for B, and so on.* I listened and for a long time could make no sense out of what I heard—until I realized that the language was English." She tried to join in the conversation, but the others were suspicious of her. At first there was no answer. But after repeatedly tapping out her name she discovered that the man in the cell below hers was an old friend of her father's. The man in the cell next to his was Paul Ignotus.



Conversations in the simple system Koestler had described, relayed from one cell to another, were slow and ceased altogether when suspicious guards were listening, or the prison plumbing gurgled. Then Florence tensely listening discovered that her footsteps could be heard by Ignotus, and a new system of slow and heavy pacing was adopted. In the next year of paced conversations, Paul and Florence carried out one of history's unique courtships. Says she: "I never walked so much in my life."

Her father's friend soon dropped out ("I think he was a little annoyed at having his serious conversations with Paul come to an end"), and the talks became steadily longer and "more frivolous." They talked about their favorite authors, especially Thomas Mann, their health, their childhood—intimacies trudgingly told. One day Paul idly asked Florence how she was dressed. She described her clothes, was playfully beginning a description of her underwear when Paul began stamping heavily on his cell floor. Thumped he: "I won't have my future wife discussing her underclothes in the presence of strangers." After that they discussed marriage, a honeymoon, children. Ignotus began writing

* Dividing the alphabet into rows of five, A-E F-J, etc.; thus, G is two taps followed by a pause and then two more taps (to indicate the second letter of the second row).

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poems to Florence, one of which, happily paced out, began:

*Despite the iron bars and wall
I hold her hand in mine.*

Set Free. One morning around Easter 1955, Florence tapped and got no answer from Paul. Later that year, for no given reason, she was released from prison. Months afterward she received a secretly relayed message from Paul. He had been taken to another prison and had no hope of freedom. But then, as he had reached "the limit of human endurance," the incredible happened. Russia's Bulganin and Khrushchev, planning to visit Britain and not wishing to be embarrassed by British labor leaders' demands for the release of a long list of jailed Social Democrats, ordered Ignotus, among others, set free. Paul and Florence met for the first time. She, at 33, was somewhat recovered from her prison experience; he, at 56, accustomed to long sessions "at the cinema," was hollow-cheeked and scraggy-necked, with bowed shoulders, but with a jutting chin and a strong, level gaze. A couple of weeks later they were married.

As president of the Hungarian Writers Association, which sparked the Hungarian revolution last October, Paul Ignotus fought to free all of Hungary. Even when the Soviet army tanks moved in, Ignotus still thought something could be done, but when the Russians kidnaped Premier Nagy he knew the game was up. Paul and Florence walked all night through the marshy swamps and minefields to freedom across the Austrian border.

Now "confession experts" are back at work preparing new witnesses for the trials which will be held to prove the correctness of the Kadar regime. Honeymooning with Florence in Italy last week, Paul commented wryly: "Chiefly for the files. That is how Communists make history."

