

1954 "The invisible writing"

BOOKS

Out of the Labyrinth

THE INVISIBLE WRITING (431 pp.)—Arthur Koestler—Macmillan (\$5).

It was perhaps a comradely warning when seedy Otto Katz (who was later purged in Prague) told seedy Arthur Koestler (who lived to write about it) that everyone had inferiority complexes of various sizes but that Koestler's was not a complex. It was a cathedral.

The time was 1937. The place: Paris. Both men were Communist functionaries. Koestler, in fact, had just been sprung from a Franco prison and, as a liberal martyr, was welcomed with flowers at the Gare du Nord. But by then Comrade Koestler had already changed ideological trains. The moment had come during the Spanish Civil War when he was in jail as a Red spy. In cell 40, Seville Prison, the wisdom of Marx and Freud proved nothing against the presence of death and the pity for those who went nightly, crying "Madre!" before the firing squads. Into the ear of a warden, Prisoner Koestler whispered: "I am no longer a *rojo*." Henceforth he recognized that the text of reality had been written by no man, and that he would spend the rest of his life trying, in rare moments of grace, to decipher its invisible writing.

Sad Sagittarii. In Volume I of his autobiography (TIME, Sept. 22, 1952), Koestler started chasing after his "arrow in the blue." He was pursuing "the absolute cause, the magic formula which would produce the Golden Age." In Europe of 1931, such sad Sagittarii were foredoomed to Communism: duly, at 26, the Hungarian ex-duelist, ex-Zionist and perpetual student joined the party that promised to heal all wounds, including inferiority complexes. *The Invisible Writing* tells the next stage of Koestler's intellectual vagabondage, through the labyrinthine ways of Marxism, to safe harbor in London, where he will "live happily ever after, until the Great Mushroom appears in the skies." Along the way Koestler compiles from skulls, rusted barbed wire and interviews with shattered survivors, the history of his old regiment—the commissars, *aparatchiki*, intellectual spivs, poets, peasants, pimps, betrayers and betrayed, who composed his "crusade without a cross."

Journalist Koestler made his pilgrimage to Russia just in time for the great 1932 famine, and traveled all the way to fabled Bokhara, where the muezzin had been replaced by the morning loudspeaker ("Get up, get up, empty your bowels, do your exercises . . ."). When he fell in love with a breathtakingly beautiful employee of the Baku Water Supply Board (whom he later denounced to the police as a suspected spy), Koestler found in her pathetic ignorance of the outside world his first seeds of disgust with Soviet Russia. But he still had a long way to travel before he was free. The journey took him across the face of Europe which he was

helping to devastate, doing assorted party propaganda jobs, watching the Reichstag fire and the Soviet purges from afar, living in cheap hotels, and writing his first novel (a story about collectivism in a children's home, from which Koestler now prints excerpts for the first time; it sounds somewhat like *The Rover Boys* as rewritten by Howard Fast). He also found time, as "Dr. A. Costler," to write a potboiling *Encyclopedia of Sexual Knowledge*, and to pay some attention to the neurotic women's auxiliaries of the class-war army.

On the way out of the labyrinth, memory was a better guide than hope. Koestler proved faithful to the links of a Jewish family—to those who loved him without Freudian gimmicks—his father, a lovable crank who went broke backing quack in-



Fred Stein—Pix

EX-COMMUNIST KOESTLER

Until the Great Mushroom appears.

ventions; his mother, so invincibly bourgeois that she *knew* her son could never have been a jailbird.

Who Will Listen? It is easy enough to say, with Elmer Davis, that eminent piece of journalistic litmus paper, that ex-Communists are bores. But Koestler is no bore. He transformed history into literature of such reality that it, in turn, became history. His masterpiece, *Darkness at Noon*, was based on the Moscow trials and told how Old Bolshevik "Rubashov" confessed falsely to a plot against the party, because confession was "the last service" he could render the party. While Koestler was writing that novel, Walter Krivitsky, ex-head of Soviet Military Intelligence for Western Europe, was writing a factual account of how a false confession had been extracted from a real-life Old Bolshevik. Koestler cites Krivitsky's eerie, almost-word-for-word confirmation of his own brilliant intuition of why "Rubashov" confessed.

Ex-Communist Koestler writes of his seven lean years in the party with a kind of choked-up reluctance; in a sense, he has already made bigger and better confessions in his fiction. *The Invisible Writing* is nevertheless a fascinating document in which Koestler reaffirms membership in the company of those who, like Silone, Malraux, Chambers and others, have "seen the future" and are very much afraid that it may work. Koestler confesses to a recurring dream in which he shouts warning of terrible danger to a crowd, but no one will listen. With his faculty for making his nightmares come true, he is now living in England, whose natives "believe . . . that prisons and firing squads [and] slave camps just 'do not happen' to ordinary people."

Koestler has found out that in Britain the Reichstag fire trial has been safely over for 350 years (when the right man was convicted, name of Guy Fawkes). The pilgrim has been given to understand that inferiority complexes should be of more moderate size than cathedrals—more on the lines of a semi-detached villa which may have terra-cotta griffons on the roof but no real monsters within. It is a "cosy" doghouse, Koestler admits, and in gratitude affirms that this mild race lives "closer to the text of the invisible writing than any other."

No one in Koestler's new home would dream of asking a stranger what France's André Malraux once asked him: "Yes, my dear chap, but what do you think of the Apocalypse?" Koestler seems to think that it is always with us, and toward those who ignore it, he can be scathing. Replying to some letters asking whether a description of a mass killing was fact or fiction, Koestler wrote a blast that many readers—many of his fellow intellectuals—will have to take to heart: "You would blush if you were found out not to have heard the name of any second-rate contemporary writer, painter or composer . . . but you don't blush . . . to ask whether it is true that you are the contemporary of the greatest massacre in recorded history . . . As long as you don't feel . . . ashamed to be alive while others are put to death; not guilty, sick, humiliated because you were spared, you will remain . . . an accomplice by omission."