

THE MAN WHO LOVED SING SING

By Harry Thompson

THE TRIPLE-LOCKED gates were behind him. Americo Roia, 71, had said his last farewells, shaken hands with the guards, and smiled when Warden Denno wished him luck. Now, as Roia stood outside the last grim gate, tears trickled down his cheeks and he ran his hands through his close-cropped white hair. An automobile pulled to a stop.

"Americo!" a voice called.

"Mama mia," Americo answered, as he stepped into the car, kissing her.

"Don't cry," she whispered, "it has been a long time —"

"Twenty-five years and one month —"

"Now maybe we can go south, and you can fish and swim —"

"Yes, Agnes mia, but this is a heartbreaking day for me. I've spent the happiest days of my life in Sing Sing and if I wasn't 71, I'd like to spend another 25 years here, for I have a song in my heart about Sing Sing."

"Sing it another time," said Mrs. Roia, "and let's go home. I made spaghetti and meat balls."

The shy, gentle-natured, soft-spoken Americo Roia sat in the living room of the Roia's lovely apartment in Fuller's Gardens in Ossining. Needless to say, Roia did not serve his 25 years and one month in Sing Sing as a prisoner. He was superintendent of the tailor shop. Now he had left his work behind him, pensioned by the State of New York and by the government of the United States—for Italian immigrant though he was, he had fought for his new country in World War I.

"During my years in Sing Sing I 'dressed in' over 30,000 prisoners," said Roia. "I also measured some 250 for the civilian clothing they wore when they walked from the death house to the execution chamber. I had a ring-side seat in Sing Sing which enabled me to acquire a remarkably broad understanding

of man, and a keen comprehension of human feelings.

"I learned that the life the inmates lead is a life of hopelessness, loneliness, boredom and frustration. I learned too there is no line between people and that they are basically all alike. Not all convicts are 'criminals' as the word is commonly understood. Often, after listening to an inmate's story, and knowing it to be true, I knew I would have done the same thing under the same circumstances. I knew I was no better than they were, but only more fortunate because I had never had to meet the kind of crisis which had caused them to be sent to prison. I could truthfully say to myself, there, but for the grace of God, go I."

THE ROUTINE of Sing Sing's "dressing in" followed during most of Roia's quarter century in the prison explains what he meant by his "ring-side seat." When a prisoner arrives, a receipt is given the officer who delivers him, and he is sent to the receiving room. There his civilian clothing is removed. He is photographed, fingerprinted and a complete record made of him and his family. The record includes scars, birthmarks, physical deformities, etc. Then there follows a complete check by a prison doctor. After a shower, the prisoner is issued sterilized over-night clothing. The next day (until but recently) he was taken directly to the tailor shop,

and that's where Roia came into the picture.

Roia personally measured every prisoner before dressing him. While the clothing was not exactly custom-made, it always fitted.

A plentiful supply of sizes in the 30's, 40's and 50's — made by Roia's inmate assistants under his supervision — was always in stock. (Roia will smilingly relate that if your size suit is less than 30 or over 58 your chances of going to prison are as slim as a size 28.) Alterations, if necessary, were made on the spot.

The issue, then as now, included underwear, socks, shirt, trousers and coat (except for summer dressing in) and black shoes. A prisoner may wear his own shoes, or shoes sent him from home, if black — but not until these have been X-rayed for secreted saws or small weapons. Prisoners are permitted to replace the prison coat (for which each is responsible) with any gray lumber-jacket or windbreaker, received from the outside. Following the "dressing in," prisoners are assigned to cells and to prison duties.

To Roia, his most unpleasant task was going to the death house to measure both men and women for their final "going away" clothing. "Sometimes it was heart-breaking," mused Roia. "Sometimes I had no appetite for dinner that night."

For men, Roia made black trousers which were well fitted — only to have his handiwork ruined in the last minutes when the right leg was

split for easier adjustment of the electrode.

Frequently concessions were made, oddly enough, to extremely hot weather when the trousers were made of light gray flannel. Women were measured for dark dresses. Once, because of the huge size of a woman, Roia had to go outside the prison and buy a dress for her. But it is an unwritten rule that no person shall go to the chair in garments which have been worn in prison.

For all his close connection with the death house, Roia never saw an execution — the thought of seeing one sickened him.

There is a stock question always asked of Roia: "Who were some of the notorious prisoners you measured for the last mile?" Roia has a stock reply: "*All* prisoners who were executed between the spring of 1929 and the spring of 1955 — some 250 of them, I never kept actual count."

Roia says that, after his first dozen years in the tailor shop, he could almost guess the length of a new prisoner's sentence the moment he first saw him.

"The short-termers were not too sad," he said, "and the longer the face, the longer the sentence. I could tell, too, from the quips, as I fitted them, such as: 'Don't make it too good, Pop. I won't be around long.' 'Might as well keep my measurement, Dad. I'll probably wear out several of your suits before I get out.'"

"Once I was very badly fooled by a young man. He was smiling and

very cheerful. You would have thought he was being measured for 'out' not 'in' clothing. His black eyes danced and his white teeth gleamed. With pins in my mouth, I muttered: 'Two years for you, yes?' He looked at me and smiled and do you know what he said? He said: 'You'd be right, Pop, if you multiplied that two by fifty.'"

NO MAN ever had greater love for a place of business than Roia. "His" tailor shop, and "his" inmate helpers are his favorite topics of conversation. Roia had, at all times, from 45 to 50 such helpers, who, when first assigned to the shop, became his pupils. Throughout the quarter of a century, he directed the work of countless hundreds of men. There he taught tailoring, shirt- and cap-making, trades which many of his "graduates" have successfully and happily pursued on the "outside." Roia was more than happy with his work because he felt he was lending a helping hand where it was most needed.

I talked to a guard about the shop and he told me: "Roia's helpers always represented just about every type of criminal, but the place always had a cheerful atmosphere and I think the men who worked for Roia were the happiest, as a lot, in the whole prison. Roia is a gentle soul and while discipline was at all times maintained, he let the men do their time as easily as possible while they were in his shop. Prisoners felt

they had been done a big favor when assigned to him."

Roia is proud of the fact that in a quarter of a century he never had to report a man for disobedience.

"There was just one thing wrong with the set-up," said Roia. "I got too many short-termers. I'd get a bright young man who was quick to catch on and then — boom — we'd be making him some going-away clothes. But I was enabled to teach trades to a great many who were in the shop for longer periods, and I did turn out several fine tailors."

There's one man of whom Roia is particularly proud. Call him Frank, which is not his given name. When Frank was assigned to the tailor shop, he was bitter, completely disillusioned, and worked, most of the time, with tears in his eyes. Bit by bit, Roia learned his story.

"He was what the law calls a murderer," Roia said. "He had been a hard working and successful man with a spotless reputation. Then, one day, he returned home unexpectedly with a surprise for the wife he loved so dearly. But she had the surprise for him for he found her with a lover. In the heat of passion, he killed her. He was given a long sentence. Well, I went to work on him in my own poor fashion, and pretty soon he was taking a keen interest in his work. In time he became my most skillful assistant. Frank was with me for 13 years and then he was freed."

Roia's eyes sparkled as he awaited

the expected question: "So what happened to him?" "Today," beamed Roia, "Frank is head tailor in one of the biggest and best known custom-made tailoring establishments in — well, let's just say in the country."

ROIA thinks most convicts have a sense of humor. There is one prison story which he believes will never die. It has been told throughout the years in every prison in the land. It has to do with one of those prisons where, for two-bits, morbid people are taken on a conducted tour and enabled to stare at their less fortunate brothers. The guide in this prison was a convict, a trusty. There was that day when, during a tour, an elderly woman kept edging up to him with the demand: "Show me a murderer." The guide promised. Finally, as the tour neared its conclusion the old lady testily said: "But you haven't shown me a murderer." The trusty made a wry face. "We didn't happen to see one," he answered, "but take a good look at me — I'm doing life for murder." The elderly lady, who had been clutching his arm, fainted.

"Sure," mused Roia. "there are laughs to be had, and laughter to be heard, even in a prison. But my opinion, after 25 years at Sing Sing, is that the life of a convict is just plain hell and I know without knowing that the man who wrote 'stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage' never did any time."

Herbert Hoover

STATESMAN EXTRAORDINARY

IN THE select company of those who deserve the unofficial title of Elder Statesman, Herbert Hoover towers like a giant. The qualities that brought him outstanding success as a mining engineer and led him to abandon it for public service raise him far above personal or political pressures.

Nearly 35 years ago, Herbert and Mrs. Hoover were given a dramatic opportunity to choose between public service and a tremendous fortune. In January 1921, shortly before becoming Secretary of Commerce, Mr. Hoover was offered a partnership in the vast Guggenheim mining enterprises, with a minimum Guaranteed Annual Wage of half a million dollars. This was quite an offer to one who had been an orphan and had walked 80 miles to a new job because he could not afford to ride. Instead he chose the Secretaryship of Commerce and did not even accept its \$15,000-a-year stipend. Both it and his salary as President never reached his personal pocket.

It was as a humanitarian that Herbert Hoover first became widely known. Serving under a Democratic President, there was no partisanship

by
**RUTH A.
INGLIS**

in the Belgian relief program of the First World War which Hoover so ably and tirelessly directed. Later he became United States Food Administrator,

and after the war played a major role in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Europe.

The long hectic hours of service bore the fruit of a rare kind of personal satisfaction when, many years later, Hoover was to meet men and women who owed their lives to his efforts. One of the cruel disappointments of his life was the denial to him of the opportunity to serve his government in a similar way during World War II.

It is almost a miracle — indeed a measure of the man — that Hoover did not become bitter during the long years from 1933 to 1947, when his unheeded warnings were proved all too true while he stood by helplessly. Despite the accuracy of his predictions in both domestic and foreign affairs, Hoover does not sing the “I Told You So” blues. His is a creative and constructive nature, as well as a practical one.

Solid accomplishments have marked the past eight years.