

Prisoner with a Necktie

AGE OF ASSASSINS: THE STORY OF PRISONER NO. 1234. By Philippe Soupault. Translated from the French by Hannah Josephson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1946. 315 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by
ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR.

A RECENT anthology has reminded us of the contributions imprisonment has made to literature. The twentieth century has done more than its share to sustain this flow by putting writers behind bars (though modern penal methods have managed to choke off many witnesses before release). Philippe Soupault's "Age of Assassins" is a minor but thoughtful addition to the contemporary literature of incarceration.

Soupault, French poet and novelist, active in the early days of the surrealist movement, was one of the writers drawn into government work in the thirties. From 1938 on he was director of press and radio services in Tunis. Vichy took over in North Africa after the 1940 armistice; and, when Britain survived the summer and the Free French began to gather behind Charles de Gaulle, small centers of resistance sprang up spontaneously all over Tunisia. The Vichy police set out to break up these centers. Soupault's name was on an early list of suspects because of his well-known contempt for Pétain and for Hitler, and on March 12, 1942 the order was given to arrest him.

"Age of Assassins" is a story of prison, not of resistance. Soupault was picked up, given preliminary questioning, and then thrown into the Tunis military prison. He was confined to the north cell block, among the "dissidents"—political prisoners—and spent forty-five days in solitary. Then he was allowed to mingle with the other prisoners. He heard their stories, probed into their inner lives, observed the healing work of comradeship and the simple, passionate desire for freedom. After six months he was released, and two months later the Allies landed in North Africa.

As a writer, an older man (he was forty-five), the only prisoner to wear a necktie, Soupault occupied a special place among the inmates. They confided much in him, and he is particularly interesting in describing the mechanisms of psychological adjustment to prison life, especially the compulsive dreaming. "The life within prison walls, the lack of exercise,

and the insistence on silence, all encourage men to dream. . . . Dreams were not only an escape—they were life on a larger plane, more free even than life outside of the prison. None of them struggled against it; they all abandoned themselves voluptuously to the current that led to the unknown." Perhaps too these explorations into the shadows were given "not as a means of escape, nor even to give us a sense of freedom, but rather to allow us every night to take our own form of revenge."

As more political prisoners came into the cell block, as favorable war news filtered through, as Vichy's demoralization became more unmis-



Philippe Soupault: "... within prison walls . . . dreams were life on a large plane, more free even than life outside."

takable, the prisoners were brought together in solidarity against the rotten regime which had taken away their liberty. "Prison compelled us to know each other better, comradeship forced each man to develop his most genuine qualities, loyalty and natural generosity." Outside the prison men were being turned into slaves, and the prisoners felt closer to freedom than those who had been bribed or frightened into submission. Far from breaking the will to resist, imprisonment solidified it, gave life and freedom new meanings.

It is obvious that Soupault's experience was by current standards mild. Even in solitary he could call for what books he liked; the regimen of the prison was not intolerable, the food was apparently edible, physical torture was practically non-existent, and the prison staff, infected by the corruption and panic of Vichy, sought

increasingly to insure itself against Allied victory by playing up to the prisoners. However unpleasant for a sensitive person, the material conditions did not conspire against the foundations of moral existence. You had none of the agonizing horrors of Buchenwald and Dachau, where Nazi diabolism triumphed in creating an atmosphere of degradation which made martyrdom meaningless and set prisoners fighting each other for the privilege of maintaining internal discipline on behalf of the SS. You did not even have conditions as grim as those in the camps run by the French for anti-Nazi refugees.

That is why I would call "Age of Assassins" a minor addition to prison literature. Its theme is disgust rather than terror. But, as Soupault writes, "an experience of half a year in jail seems short, especially to those who have never been in jail." One advantage of the short term is that sensations are not dulled; and Soupault's record has the precision and immediacy of one who never became fully accustomed to the life. "I never stopped being surprised during the whole period of my detention. I could not then, and I cannot even yet, accept or resign myself to it."

His book is an honest and sensitive account which, if neither very powerful nor very profound, yet supplies sympathetic insights into a predicament which the war against the Axis has not solved. In an age in which the dominant question is getting to be whether you believe in the police state or not, we should all know at least what we are being asked to accept. Hannah Josephson's translation is, as usual, admirable.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 150

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 150 will be found in the next issue.

K BMGP GLPACMLMGT MG

CDP NMFGC KCCFMRHCP XN

K EXXJ LFMCMML

OKTPG SXBPSS—

GDKWPGAPKFP XZLP TXFP

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 149
Any nose may ravage with impunity a rose.

ROBERT BROWNING
Sordello.

Misadventures of an Heiress

OUT OF THIS CENTURY. By Peggy Guggenheim. New York: The Dial Press. 1946. 365 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by PHILIP WYLIE

THE dubious practice of *Memoires* has fallen on hard times. Mr. Miller's revelations of himself in "Air Conditioned Nightmare," Mr. Wilson's pensive disclosures of life in Hecate County, and now Miss Guggenheim's confessional and travelogue in sixth-grade English have "left no field of literature untouched" and touched none that they did not abort. These three books are concerned with the same people, places, and period—the same passions, pendants, and perversions—personalities, postures, and pornography—perhaps the same everything beginning with "P." With Art, as well, and artists, Intellect and Intellectuals, the glamorous Twenties and the gleety Thirties.

Mr. Miller is a Saint of the Era, Mr. Wilson a Satyr, and Miss Guggenheim a Priestess who has been faithful to every ritual on the altar. If man survives the decades of delirium tremens, these books will become gauges of his persistence, and source material, besides, for centuries of satire.

Miss Guggenheim. In this work she first characterizes, with a few neat strokes of the mallet, all Guggenheims—the copper clan. She next dwells upon her pitiful childhood amid the gems, governesses, tapestries, mistresses, and spite which afflict the rich. Her utter devotion to herself must have been apparent in the first hours of her life, and it is a quality which grows geometrically. As a young woman, we behold her in a sweat to lose her Americanism, her virginity, and part of her nose. She manages. She always attempts the impossible, she says, and moves mountains. This is confused; she merely behaves impossibly and causes landslides, the gay, little expatriate!

Her many years abroad are not exactly chronicled, but rather inventoried. She whizzes like a flea around the hot, discontented surfaces of between-wars Europe, living with men, marrying men, having affairs with men, supporting artists, buying acres of abstract and surrealist canvas, financing galleries, drinking, meeting everybody including people known to us all, going to movies at whorehouses. Would we not forever fall in love with people who were "Christ-like" and when we met somebody else, fall out of love because they

were too Christ-like? Having nothing to exhibit but ourselves, would we not make a shrinking violet of Narcissus? Or, as a Sybil and a soft touch in a world of infantile adults, what one of us but would try to reconcile cha-teau, brothel, paradox, catlet, and morning bird?

I am getting Surrealist myself.



Wherefore sample Miss Guggenheim:

"He was a frustrated writer, a pure Intellectual."

"She had been an underwater dancer but came from a bourgeois family."

"The desert is a vast sea of sand which rolls in all directions and in

all shapes." And this bit of insight:

"One night I sprained my ankle when we were walking home. Again I fell into some *merde*. It seemed to be my fate." Or:

"The day Hitler walked into Norway I walked into Leger's studio and bought a wonderful 1919 painting."

She is, Miss Guggenheim admits, irresponsible, childish, spoiled, and ridiculous. It has never occurred to her that steps could or should be taken. Let me suggest a measure: that the manuscript of this opus should have gone direct to a psychiatrist, and to a printer, never. It is an anatomy of what went wrong with art, letters, intellect, morals, and man in our era; as such, its publication represents great if unwitting self-abnegation by The Dial Press.

True, these are the *dramatis personae*, the backgrounds, and the situations which enthralled such writers as Scott Fitzgerald. But nowadays, every fool knows the moral of their tale: glamor is the neon sign over the saloon of self-pity. Miss G. is no doubt the girl sitting on the bar in the torn Schiaparelli dress. But with Miller and Wilson we've retched enough on reminiscence. I cannot honestly review her autobiography beyond these words; for however much Miss Guggenheim and her dazed associates may have contributed to the emancipation of art, it has not been enough to let me print what I really think of this book, anywhere on earth.

Your Literary I.Q.

By Howard Collins

CHARACTERS AND HANDS

For one reason or another, the hands of the characters in this week's quiz are memorable. Can you identify them and name the authors who created them? Allowing 5 points for each correct answer, a score of 60 is par, 70 is very good, 80 or better is excellent. Answers on page 20.

1. Walking in her sleep, this woman complained that all the perfume of Arabia would not wash the smell of blood from her hand.
2. This pirate wore an iron hook in place of his right hand, which had been bitten off by a crocodile.
3. This retired sea captain also had an iron hook in place of his right hand, which he occasionally replaced with a knife for peeling potatoes.
4. Trying to rescue his demented wife from the burning house which she had set afire, this man lost his left hand.
5. This Chinese card sharp had on his long tapered fingernails what is frequent in tapers—wax.
6. Their heads are green, and their hands are blue, and they went to sea in a sieve.
7. This lawyer's clerk was constantly squeezing his clammy hands together or wiping them surreptitiously on a handkerchief.
8. While telling fortunes in a railway compartment, this palm reader discovered that his five fellow travelers were marked for imminent death.
9. One eye was red and one was green; her bang was cut uneven; she had three fingers on her hand, and the hairs on her head were seven.
10. The amputated hand of this dead scholar carried on a malicious life of its own after his death.