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*SUMMARY

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MY NEW NOVEL ALLIES TO STALINIST SHOW TRIALS

At the age of 70, Tibor Dery, (1) one of the most outstanding Hungarian writers has produced a new novel called The Exonerator. This has not yet appeared in book form but three chapters of it have been published in the March, April and May 1965 issues of Kortárs, the Hungarian Writers' Association monthly.

Dery's last novel, Mr. G.A. in E, was written in prison. Excerpts from this utopian work were published in El Járás at the end of 1963. The book itself was published at the following year. The novel deals with the problem of freedom and order. In the mysterious city of E, Mr. G.A. finds a society which lives and works under the spell of freedom and irresponsibility, which leaves projects incomplete and allows everything to perish. With their singular philosophy, the inhabitants of the mysterious city find pleasure in enduring unpleasantness. The rich ruling class of the city is an object of pity. In this society, too, there are trials and prisons, but the judges are selected from among the prisoners and they talk submissively to the accused. Here it is an honor to be accused. Mr. G.A. joins this society, finds a mistress, but is unable to grow accustomed to the place. At an advanced age, he escapes back to his former life, back to the distorted world of traditional lies and of omnipotent money.

Dery's novel was strongly condemned by Communist critics although admitted that Mr. G.A. in E "marks a new and unexpected stage in Dery's progress as a writer... and that the novel is one of the most remarkable pieces of Hungarian fiction to appear in recent years." (2)

- (1) Biography of Tibor Dery. Background Report, Hungarian Unit, 10.9.1963.
- (2) The New Hungarian Quarterly, Spring 1965, No. 17.

Lery's new work, The Excommunicator, which appears from the brief excerpts thus far available, to continue in the vein begun by St. G.A. in X, is a historical novel which takes place in the Fourth Century A.D. and is based on events in the life of Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and one of the great teachers of the early Christian church. (3)

It is clear from the excerpts which have been published that the character of the novel is anti-clerical. Another interesting feature of the work is its symbolism. During the course of the description of a trial, the "accused accused" asks "to be burned at the stake" as well as for "a horrible death by torture." The accused not only praises "his merciful judges," but also "his pious torturer" ["God bless him!"] who puts him to the torture and who grows tired of the "understandably boring" and "soul-killing work" of interrogation. The dramatic tone used in the description of the trial recalls the history of trumped-up Communist trials, particularly that of Leonid Rajk.

Another part of the novel deals with the Synod of Aquileia, convened with the purpose of restoring the unity of the church. The persons invited to the council are cunningly selected. Of the many hundred Church dignitaries, only 30 are present, from the north Italian and Illyrian "faction" (sic!) as well as some African, south Italian and Gallic "sympathizers." The bishops of Eastern dioceses are missing. The Synod denounces and excommunicates Palladius and Secundianus, two Arian bishops. It is characteristic of the spirit of agreement prevailing among the cunningly selected members of the council that, following the speech of the Bishop of Milan, "they would have started rhythmically applauding were this to be reconciled with propriety."

It would appear that the strife and "factionalism" within the Church, as described by Lery, symbolizes the struggle in the world ruled by Communist creed.

A brief summary of the first three chapters of the novel follows:

Bishop Ambrose, noted as an ascetic who practices charity and performs miracles, has cleared the major part of Milan of the Arian heretics and has had their churches confiscated. One of the protectors of the heretics, the Dowager Empress Justina, living in Bragetto, in Pannonia -- today Hungarian territory --

(3) As in the case with many literary works based on historical backgrounds, Lery's new book takes some liberties with historical fact.

summons Bishop Ambrose to persuade him, through intrigues and threats, to return one of the churches of Milan to the Arians. The bishop remains adamant. On his way back to Milan, he meets Arians from Illyria seeking refuge from the Visigoths. The bishop allows them to set up camp outside Milan, buys them food with money obtained through the sale of church treasures and even pays ransom for their relatives enslaved by the Baybarians. Then the Arian bishop of Sirmium (Mitrovica in today's Yugoslavia) dies. The church dignitaries of the Danube provinces call a meeting in Sirmium, one of the centers of the Arian heresy, to elect a new bishop. The Bishop of Milan also attends the meeting and, through his good offices, a Catholic is elected to the vacant seat. During his absence from Milan, the Arians accuse Ambrose of having squandered the treasures of the church and take back one of the Milan churches from the Catholics by force. On his return to Milan, Bishop Ambrose publicly denounces the East Roman Emperor Julian Valens, who is also an Arian bishop and demands from the Emperor Gratian that the church taken away from the Catholics be returned to them. The Emperor does not wish to offend either his stepmother Justina, or her son, the joint Emperor Valentinian II, and, therefore, takes away the church from the Arians, but, instead of returning it immediately to the Catholics, has it occupied for six months.

At Justina's initiative, two attempts are made on the life of Bishop Ambrose, both unsuccessful. The first conspirator fully confessed his crime at the ensuing trial and discloses the name of the investigator. The bishop finally decides to liquidate all the Arians. In this endeavor, he gets support from Gratian, joint Emperor of the East Roman Empire as well as from Theodosius, the Great Emperor of the East Roman Empire. The edict of tolerance published in Sirmium is withdrawn and in Byzantium, the seat of the East Roman Empire, the Arian churches are confiscated. The Ecumenical Council of Constantinople expels from the Church "every kind of accursed faction."

The list of participants at the Synod of Aquilee is drawn up by Bishop Ambrose with cunning purpose. Church dignitaries who might have stood up for the Arians are not invited. Exception is made in the case of the Arians Palladius and Serundianus, both of whom are excommunicated by the council.

The excerpt below was taken from the chapter published in the April 1965 number of FORGOTTEN. It describes the court trial of Innocentius, one of the men who conspired against the life of Bishop Ambrose. This excerpt recalls to mind some of the absurdities which occurred during the courses of recent Communist show trials. It is quite likely that the court trial, described by Berg with bitter sarcasm and biting irony, is designed to symbolize these trials.

Judge: Bring out the accused prisoner!

Innocentus, fettered and chained, is brought into the judgment chamber by armed jailers and made to stand before the dais, on which, on either side of the judge, sits an assessor. In accordance with legal practice, the trial starts at midnight, and only members of the tribunal and of the imperial constabulary may participate, by the light of nine candles, each of two pounds' weight.

Judge: I direct that, for the duration of the trial, the heavy fetters and chains be unfastened from the accused prisoner.

Innocentus: O merciful and righteous judge, I crave permission to keep on me, for the duration of the trial, the heavy chains and fetters fastened, plainly at God's decree, about my ankles, wrists and neck, to curb my wicked body and mind.

Judge: We shall graciously comply with the accused prisoner's wish. What is your name and occupation?

Innocentus: Innocentus, scribe. I was born -- would that I had never been -- in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ three hundred and thirty in Rome, as the first-born son of pagan parents, to the injury and vexation of mankind.

Judge: Shall I state the charge? Or shall we hear it from the fidd, lying south of the accused prisoner, for the sake of greater authenticity?

Innocentus: I shall confide with my own fidd, lying south that every word of the charge is true, nay, truer than true, for it relates only an insignificant fragment of my guilt, and out of decency, is silent on by far the greater part. I shall not scandalize you too much with it, for who could bear to hear at one sitting the detailed description of so many wicked deeds!

Judge: Do I understand that you withdraw your earlier, lying confession? The law lays down that even the most contemptible prisoner has that right.

Innocentus (sobbing): Did I not say that, in the entire Roman Empire, including the Eastern Empire, too, there is no other judge so merciful as he who at this moment weighs my miserable fate in his long-fingered, white hands. I do not wish to withdraw, but to amplify the partial confession I made on the rack, rightly described in the gracious words from the Bench as

lying, for it is but a limited part of infinite truth, indicating only the visible part of the invisible, and is thus, in the final analysis, imperfect, like every work of man.

Judge: Let the accused prisoner return to the subject at hand.

Innocentus: With humble heart, then, and contrite repentance, I admit that, in my unimaginably corrupt youth, I studied with great diligence, among the best Persian masters of the period, the skills of a sorcerer and magician, forbidden by the law, including chiromancy, divination by the stars, the interpretation of dreams, the evocation of incubi and succubi and the other evil spirits, nay, even the arch fiend...

Judge: The accused prisoner must not repeat, but only amplify his confession.

Innocentus: And I obey, of course, nor would it occur to me to protest. So, when I was stretched on the rack, my pious torturer -- God bless him! -- having given me a last stretch and firing in his understandingly tedious and soul-destroying work, declared the interrogation concluded and thus arrested the course of my hollowing confession, there were still so many sins burdening my soul that the Tiber could have been dammed with them. The attention of the Prosecution was unfortunately not given to these, which fact I ascribe to the tedious and revolting monotony of my heinous crimes. For this reason -- out of concern for the nerves of my gracious judges -- I will select from among them only one particularly vile and diverting case, namely my bold attempt to... I dare not let it pass my lips.

Judge: Why does the accused prisoner not dare to let it pass his fetid lips?

Innocentus: O distinguished judges! Now that my pious torturer and his assistants have encouraged and helped me to open up all, or at least approximately all my infamies, I feel that my soul has been in part purified and that part of my sense of shame has returned. Never has a criminal so repeated his crimes -- or at least seldom. I deserve a frightful death by torture, perhaps by burning at the stake, just for that one failed attempt of mine that I mentioned, the description of which I dare not allow to pass my fetid lips.

Judge: The accused prisoner must overcome his newly acquired sense of shame and complete his confession.

Assessor: And at the same time cease trying, with his flagrant remorse and contrition, to influence and corrupt the Court. For must he cherish hope of a spectacular death by burning at the stake, for that is a privilege of the holy martyrs.

Innocentus: May I then dare to let it pass out of my fetid, hog-like mouth and over my filthy tongue?... Thank you ... That crime of mine, to which I have referred, more odious than any other hitherto, was my attempt -- thank God, it did not succeed -- directed against the saintly Bishop of Milan, Ambrose, famous for his piety, the great leader of Christianity and the Church, an attempt, with the aid of wicked spirits, to do away with him, in plain Latin, to liquidate him. Thank God, it did not come off! Distinguished judges, words fail me, my limbs tremble, but it would be a mistake to attribute that to the rancor felt by my washed and tortured body. My agitation is caused by the belated stirring and beating of my airy conscience. I feel a little unwell.

Judge: Would you like a glass of water?

Innocentus: I do not deserve it, God bless your lordships.

Judge: If you should wish to sit down, I will have your heavy chains and fetters removed.

Innocentus: I do not deserve it, God bless your lordships!

Assessor: I warn the accused again that he must not allover round the incorruptible Bench with his cweeling admissions of guilt. His contrite admission is, it is true, mitigating circumstance, but I warn him to respect the good taste of the Bench and the limits of what their nerves will stand.

Innocentus: My lord assessor, I heed the warning. What else could I do? I also know, if you will permit me to say so, that subjective truth is independent of objective truth, chiefly, of course, in disturbed historical periods, but probably at other times, too, and I must adapt myself to that, both in the clear formulation of my confession, and in its humble ideological context. Am I wrong in so doing?

Judge: The accused prisoner is to proceed with his confession.

Innocentus: I climbed, then, on to the roof of the old

basilica in Milan, and from there, having made a sacrificial fire, I stirred up the people, with my bloodthirsty mouth, against their saintly bishop.

Assessor: One moment! What proofs can you offer to substantiate your self-incrimination?

Innocentius: If my lord assessor would alight up on to the roof of the church, he would find there the dead brands and charcoal, perhaps even the fine grey ash of the speech with which I stirred up the people. For even the most glowing fire turns in time, in my experience, into dead embers, cinders and ash.

Judge: Usher, support the accused, staggering prisoner, and give him a drink of water.

Innocentius: Yet it seemed to me that the more pertinaciously and circumspectly I practiced my verbal wickedness, the more faithfully did the people cling to the Lord's priest. And so, I called in devils to kill him, in plain speech, to liquidate him -- what else could I do?

Judge: Devils or evil spirits?

Innocentius: My lords, merciful judges, it is difficult to distinguish between them. For when we sell them up, now it is the former who appear in the form of the latter, now the latter in the form of the former, and at times even the most experienced Persian masters scratch their heads in astonishment, completely unable to establish their deceptive identity. Contrary to the popular belief, not even the smell of sulphur supposed to be left behind by devils, is a reassuring proof, for evil spirits are also able, when occasion arises, to develop an infernal stench around them, and even the fine, cultivated nose of the Persian masters is not always able to distinguish between the infernal smells and stenches. It is, incidentally, difficult to find one's way about in the comic hierarchy of the underworld. For there are wicked spirits which are more powerful than a devil of the lower ranks, yet which are incapable of spreading such an authentic stink, while on the other hand...

Judge: The accused prisoner must return to the subject in hand.

Innocentius: I called in, therefore, a few devils or evil spirits -- three or four in number -- and entrusted to them the task I have referred to, the name and character of which I had rather not allow to pass my filthy tongue.

Judge: That is to say, you accursed creature, you entrusted to them the task of being away with...

Innocentius: With Ambrose, the saintly, pious Bishop of Milan, the great leader of Christendom, the radiant lamb of the Church, the Cornerstone of the True Faith and its Gothic Tower, dripping honey... Oh, I shall collapse under the frightful burden of my sin!

Judge: Confess! Unburden your soul, accursed creature!

Innocentius: That is what I am attempting, with the kind permission of the distinguished Court, though I fear results are lacking for me! I am sinking under the awful burden of my sin, which I am beginning to see in its true light only now, now that my soul is partly purified and my sense of shame is part restored. God be praised that my attempted outrage, as you know, did not succeed. The devils or wicked spirits I sent to work my will came back in tears.

Judge: Come now, in tears?

Judge: What was the matter with them?

Innocentius: Not only were they unable to approach the saintly bishop, they could not even get near the door of his house, for the entire building was surrounded by impenetrable fire, which could be felt, singeing and burning even from a great distance. Indeed, it scorched my little devils! they showed me their winged claws and hooves.

Judge: What evidence does the accursed prisoner offer to prove that, in this instance, he is telling the truth, even without being tortured?

Innocentius: O merciful, pious judge, who would dare to doubt the truth of the words with which I began myself? For I am not denying my guilt, as the accused usually do, but acknowledging the sin, with my face burning with shame, a sin not exceeded in wickedness in the whole earth, even by Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon! not only would I not deny it, but I am ready to betray even my most secret thoughts. For I do not deny it, my lords.

Judge: Accursed prisoner, will you list your proofs?

Innocentius: In my bedroom, hidden under my pillow, I keep a deadly winged and scorched hoof, which one of the little devils cast off in his pain.

Judge: Usher, send a strongly built and bold-hearted courier to the accused prisoner to bring back, from beneath the pillow in the bedroom, the evidence of guilt referred to, well wrapped up in an oiled cloth, lest he burn his fingers.

Assessor: Prisoner, we shall have the exhibit examined by a veterinary surgeon. In the meantime, name the instigator of this crime, at whose order you incited devils and wicked spirits to do away with the saintly Bishop of Milan, the finest ornament and jewel of our Holy Christian Mother Church!

Innocentus: Oh, I cannot, my pious lords, I cannot name that person.

Judge: Accused prisoner, it is not your trifling person we seek, for what a worthless speck of dust you are compared with the immeasurable power of the Lord! Name your powerful instigator, in whose service you stand with your foul army of devils and wicked spirits.

Assessor: Prisoner, name the instigator who, through you and in you, has designs on the life of the pious Ambrose, the leader of our Church.

Innocentus: Woe is me, triple woe, I cannot name him.

Judge: Usher, call in the torturer with his instruments and assistants -- bring them at the run!

Innocentus: Oh no! oh no! My judges, my fathers, I would rather name the instigator who, through me and in me, has designs on the life of the great Bishop of Milan, the Prince of our Church. Yes, I will name his.

Judge: Accused prisoner, unburden your soul! Who is your instigator?

Innocentus: O gracious and upright judges, I will name him, however difficult it is for me. I confess and confirm with this tongue of mine, tortured on the rack, and though thereby my crime and my responsibility immeasurably grew, and though it can be foreseen that I shall sink and stagger the more under the weight of it, I confess that my only instigator and inciter was my own infinitely wicked nature, which in its envy would not tolerate...

Judge: Usher, bring in the torturer with his instruments!

Innocentus: Oh no! oh no! I will name him, I will confess.

Judge: Accursed prisoner, confess that it was the damnable Ariens who hired you to do away with the saintly Ambrose, the great leader of our Church.

Innocentus: I confess it, merciful Judge, my kindest friend.

Judge: Confess that it was as the agent of the hellbound heretics that you sent your little devils out against the great Ambrose, whom the Lord encircled with an impenetrable wall of flame and protected from their horns and hooves.

Innocentus: I admit it, o kind Judge and Father, I admit it was the heretics. And I can already feel how the more obscure half of my soul is slowly clearing in the purgatory of the Bench's cross-questioning. Is it possible that my wicked deeds will be regarded as forgivable sins?

Judge: Confess, accursed prisoner, that you were paid by the heretics, with their smell of wolves and their deranged minds, and that they intent on destroying the unity of the Holy Mother Church, bought your illegal and forbidden skills, your fetid mouth and your manual dexterity. What blood money did they promise, and how much did they pay you in advance for killing the great Ambrose, the hope of our Church?

Innocentus: I admit it... I admit it. I received 10 silver sestercii.

Assessor: So little value was placed on your skill?

Innocentus: Rightly, as became clear afterwards, for which thanks be to the Most High Lord.

Judge: Ten altogether, accursed prisoner?

Innocentus: Two on another occasion, o merciful Judge, protector of my soul.

Judge: Twelve altogether, then? Accursed prisoner, confess that you had access to high officials in the land?

Innocentus: I admit I have had access to them.

Judge: Even to the highest?

Innocentus: Even to the highest, o Distinguished Judge.

Judge: To the highest officials of the Sivium Imperial Court?

Innocentus: I understand you, o softly spoken, wise Judge. Even to high officials of the Sivium Imperial Court.

Judge: Even to the highest?

Innocentus: I understand. Woe is me! I had access even to the highest.

Judge: Accused prisoner, was it in their houses that you received the shameful commission and stipulated the blood money and the little advances?

Innocentus: O Fatherly Judge, Counsellor and Loved Friend. For some time, that is to say, from the moment when you began to speak more intimately to me, lowly and air-headed as I am, I have felt that I am being purified by your kind and flattering trust. I have no reason to deny that it was in the houses of those high personages that I received the cruel commission and command, as well as the little advance.

Judge: The ridiculously small advance was paid out by the Treasurer of the Imperial Exchequer into your filthy hands?

Innocentus: I understand... Woe is me, three times, woe! Yes, he paid me.

Judge: Accused prisoner, tell me who it was by name who gave you the secret commission and order, and swore you to secrecy, that you would never divulge his name, even on the rack?

Innocentus: Three times woe is me!

Judge: Four accused prisoner, I release you from your vow.

Innocentus: Five times woe is me!

Judge: Wakey, place on the table before the Bench the siled cloth, and open it out. The Bench ascertains with horror that the stinking little hoof, as black as soot, before it, smells unmistakably of sulphur, and, on further close examination, catches disgusted sight of wrinkled hair, likewise black as soot, sticking to one side of the hoof. On the basis of these facts, the Bench considers it proven that the poor accused prisoner told the truth on this occasion, even without the rack.

Innocentius: I said so, did I not? Woe is me!

Judge: Fear, accused prisoner, then who was it by name who gave the commission and demand to overthrow the saintly, pious Ambrose, the greatest orator of the age, the leader and pillar of Christendom?

Innocentius: Woe is me! May I say who it was?

Judge: Without beating about the bush.

Innocentius: I dare not.

Judge: Of whatever unimaginably high worldly rank the person may be, name him without further ado, peer accused prisoner.

Innocentius: If it be the highest, or at least nearly the highest, even then?

Judge: Especially then, peer accused prisoner.

Innocentius: And shall I not suffer worldly harm for my bold outspokenness? Now that my soul has been washed almost clean, my mouth largely cleared of stench, and I thus have hope that, when I eventually die, I shall, as a forgiven sinner, come into the purifying fire, must I now not tremble that lay executioners will seize me by my scrawny neck?

Judge: Fear prisoner, the course of the secret trials and their results will remain forever, till the Day of Judgment, a secret undivulged to anyone except God and the other people concerned.

Innocentius: May I then dare to name the name? Even if it is a person of almost the highest worldly rank, an august personage, disturbingly beautiful and very capricious in honor that I must point to?

Judge: Fear, peer prisoner, whisper his name.

Assessor: In my ear, too, prisoner.

Innocentius: At midnight, after I had been led through a secret underground passage by my female slave into her boudoir, the order was given to me for the destruction and annihilation, in any way and by any means, of the pious and saintly Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and leader of the Mother Church, by the widow of the immortal Emperor Valentinian I and the mother of the immortal Valentinian II, the ravishingly beautiful and capricious-humored Empress Justina. Eighteen times, woe is me!

(Hungarian Unit)