

January 8, 1950

Roads to Communism and Back: Six Personal Histories

By REBECCA WEST

There is no subject on which it is more difficult to establish communication with one's fellow creatures than anti-communism; and here the gulf yawns particularly wide between Europeans and Americans. Europeans steeped in political activities of a minor sort according to the habit of their kind may speak of Communists with the tart exasperation of which comes of frustrating experience. Without number are the ways they may have been done in the eye by the comrades, and all are disagreeable.

For example, take the case of a member of the Labor party who has worked for a Labor candidate and seen him returned to Parliament, only to find that the constituency suddenly becomes riddled with ostensibly Labor activities which turn out to be, in effect, hostile to the Labor Government and to this particular member of Parliament; and it turns out that the promoter of these activities is none other than the candidate's election agent, who proves to be a member of the Communist party, though before he was admitted to the Labor party he had signed a declaration that he was not a Communist. Nobody likes to be told lies or to be cheated and a community would be in a poor way when it lost this instinctive reaction.

Europeans smarting from such experiences are apt to be indignant and impatient when they allude to communism as a pernicious nuisance and are looked at by their listeners as if their slips were showing. The idea, which has been successfully put over in some quarters, that anti-communism is dowdy seems to them cheap and frivolous. But equally, they feel repelled by the kind of sympathy they may involuntarily attract.

They have no desire to hold hands with their afflicted brothers and sisters who think that Russians are putting poison in their food; or who wish to suspend the protection given to all citizens by law in the case of suspected or proven Communists; or who want to make war on the airy off-chance that it may prevent another one. Above all, they do not want to be linked with people who hope to freeze the social system in its present state and so perpetuate injustice and cruelty. They are indeed anti-Communist because they believe Communists are one of the chief forces which prevent the transformation of the world into a commonwealth.

THE GOD THAT FAILED

A Confession. By Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, Andre Gide, Louis Fischer and Stephen Spender. Edited by Richard Crossman.

This book of essays, by four former members of the Communist party and two one-time friends of the party (Andre Gide and Louis Fischer), tells that European story. It is true that two of the essays are by Americans (Mr. Fischer and Richard Wright) and one of those describes and American situation; and that essay by Richard Wright is most moving of all. But the others relate to this specifically European exasperation which so often becomes tongue-tied when it ought to justify itself. One of them, indeed, may become a classic by reason of its subtle and candid and comprehensive statement of this typical experience of this age.

Arthur Koestler's essay is one of the most handsome presents that has ever been given to the future historians of our time. He is, of course, always an interesting writer. His work is three-dimensional because he is three people. In him there is a believing poet who perpetually changes into an unbelieving critic savagely eager to tear up all evidence of his previous manifestations of faith but never able to complete the work of destruction before he changes back into the poet who is equally eager to fill the wastepaper basket with all the evidences of the critic's skepticism; while another part of him, as tough and jaunty as a racetrack gambler, looks over the wall at this protean struggle quite unimpressed and comments on it with ribald wit. Here he recreates the most formative experience of his life, analyzes it, mocks it.

At 26 he was in Berlin working in the great liberal and anti-militarist publishing house of Ullstein. He was an old 26. Up till the age of 9 he had lived in the sort of cushioned and cultured home that was maintained by the Jewish mercantile class in Hungary. Then his father, who was an agent for British and German textiles, was reduced to poverty by World War I and was finally rendered completely destitute by the Austrian inflation of the early Twenties. At 21 Arthur Koestler left home to become the sole financial support of his parents.

Now he had established himself firmly in a community that had nothing firm about it. Around him stretched the peculiar panorama of the Weimar Republic in its last days: such a tatty and disordered landscape with here and there a vast undertaking (such as Ullstein's) looming up in unquestionable magnificence; such an infantile population that while the trumpet of doom echoed from the skies formed itself into a cops-and-robber game from which individual players sometimes detached themselves to engage in artistic intellectual achievement not to be surpassed in any other country.

He undertook to support this tottering civilization as he had taken on the care of his parents and to that end he joined the Communist party. Membership never came easy to him. The poet was scandalized by party jargon which stultified thought. The critic had to blink before he could swallow the policy forced on German Communists by Moscow, which, as he shows in some of the most interesting pages of the essay, never missed a trick in helping Hitler to power; the puerilities by which the Communists split the progressive vote and let the Nazis in will seem incredible if it is not borne in mind by the reader that the U.S.S.R. radio was every day blaring out its conviction that the threat to European peace lay in the armed might and the imperialist philosophy of France.

Also, the ribald part of Mr. Koestler was greatly amused by such naivete as that of the Communist propaganda chief who, to keep his mind pure, only read the official party organ.

Certainly Mr. Koestler noticed all these follies: for he can now recall his strangulated doubts regarding them. But he noticed them only as a partially anesthetized patient notices what is going on in his sickroom, and the name of the anesthetic was contentment. There is no doubt that this supremely gifted man found deep satisfaction, greater perhaps than any he has ever found elsewhere, in Communist party membership.

Obviously, one reason for this lay in the relief felt by a man who after having been overburdened with responsibility since his childhood surrenders his will to a powerful organization. But also it was a way of life which promised full employment to both body and soul in a world where unemployment in the sense of the inability of the body to work and the soul to believe was a constant overhanging danger. Perhaps the party's strongest card was that it pleased pride by demanding constant self-sacrifice beyond the point of enduring poverty and life on the run to prison cell and gallows.

Mr. Koestler is frank about the rewards that are open to the Communist writer: he gives an illuminating account of his journey through Soviet Russia in 1932, when eight of ten local state publishing trusts bought the rights of the same short story (always at something well over ten times the monthly salary of an average Soviet wage earner) and paid him advances on the Russian, German, Ukrainian, Georgian and Armenian rights of his unwritten book on the Soviet Union "which amounted to a small fortune." At that time he had not published a single book.

But it was plainly not this baksheesh that won him. It was working on that anti-Fascist propaganda for ten to twelve hours a day unpaid, with little food but a dish of pea soup at noon and walking several miles a day to the only free lodging he could find- a hayloft.

He liked best all of his service in the Spanish Civil War, which ended for him in four months in Spanish prisons, most of the time in solitary confinement and in expectation of being shot. There he found a peaceful ecstasy. Nevertheless, he left the Communist party, which had given him all these experiences. It was so great a wrench that he has plainly felt himself a maimed man ever since.

But it had been part of the revelation he had received in prison to discover "that the end justifies the means only within very narrow limits, that ethics is not a function of social utility and charity, not a petty bourgeois sentiment but a gravitational force which keeps civilization in orbit." This forbade him to pretend that the members of POUM, the Trotskyite splinter group that was participating in the Spanish Civil War, were traitors and agents of Franco, as the Communist party line pretended.

It made him suddenly revolt against purges and fight for the lives of two friends who were suddenly arrested on fantastic charges after having spent their lives in the service of the Soviet Union. Of this he writes bitterly, accusing all Communists and fellow travelers of participation in blood-guilt:

Every single one of us knows at least one friend who perished in the Arctic subcontinent of forced labor camps, was shot as a spy or vanished without trace. How our voices boomed with righteous indignation, denouncing flaws in the procedure of justice in our comfortable

democracies; and how silent we were when our comrades, without trial or conviction, were liquidated in the Socialist sixth of the earth. Each of us carries a skeleton in the cupboard of his conscience; added together, they would form galleries of bones more labyrinthine than the Paris catacombs.

The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact severed the last shred of his contact with communism. He had given seven years of his life to the party and it was his conviction that every moment of those years had been wasted. The means employed by the party only served to extend the sphere of those means. They never brought the ostensible end any nearer.

The story of this dissipation of vital energy on an intricate and useless technique is retold by the novelist Ignazio Silone, whose contribution includes a most interesting account of a Comintern meeting in 1927, where Stalin and Thalmann and Kuusinen and Kalarov wasted time and force on attempting to get him and two non-Russian colleagues to pass a resolution which could by no conceivable process have the smallest practical effect.

The same story is told again by Richard Wright, though he almost steps out of the volume by reason of his preoccupation with people as just people. This beautiful writer uses a bare style, but the men and women in his pages are there in their flesh; the economical dialogue is delivered in their several and unique voices.

It is retold again by the poet Stephen Spender in an essay which seems more hesitant and diffuse than others, but which contains pictures of intellectuals in the British Communist party so lively that they make Mr. Koestler seem a gently soul. Here, too, is a most serious discussion of the moral consequences of a bigotry which is repelled by atrocities only when they are committed by the opposition. ("It was clear to me that unless I cared about every murdered child impartially, I did not really care about the children being murdered at all. I was performing an obscene mental act on certain corpses which became the fuel for propagandist passions...")

Mr. Spender debates with extreme seriousness and intelligence the problem of what the anti-Communist should do to make his faith positive. He sees that the people and nations who love liberty must "lead a movement throughout the world to improve the conditions of the millions who care more for bread than for freedom, thus raising them to a level of existence where they can care for freedom."

At times the essayists seem to claim too much for themselves. Richard Crossman, assistant editor of *The New Statesman and Nation*, whose happy idea it was to compile this volume, and Mr. Koestler both arrive at the conclusion that people who are most likely to set the world at rights are the ex-Communists, on the theory that one who has descended into hell will thirst all the more for heaven. Andre Gide's enthusiasm for communism seems to have been a superficial experience and his disenchantment with it no more profound.

It must be remembered that all the writers of these essays, with the exception of Richard Wright, could have learned from others what they had learned for themselves about communism. The information was already available, and some lack of shrewdness, some masochistic urge must have led them to disregard it.

The value of this book is not that its authors showed themselves outstanding, but that they were typical. It is a truly contemporary book; it shows how at the moment Europeans of this kind regard Communism.