

FOUR YEARS IN A RED HELL

Fr. Rigney Sets Matchbox Record

By The Very Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D. Divine Word Missionary

The day was Sept. 21, 1954. An officer in the T'sao Lan Prison, where I had been incarcerated since July, 1951, ordered me to pack my belongings.

My heart leaped in going to be released. I thought I was nervous as I packed and I became excited when the prison guard led me to an ante-chamber where I was told to open my bundles for inspection.

As I unpacked I pointed out what I could do better. I left the prison (gets his) would call on the Holy Ghost Missionary Society in Peiping and thank them for the food packages they sent me. I would inquire after the confessor how I would have my first mass in more than three years.

Almost oblivious with happy news over the prospect that the dawn of freedom was soon to become a reality I followed the guard to the entrance of the court where a woman interpreter accompanied me.

"You are going to be sentenced," she said. Momentarily I stammered but my optimism could not be overcome and my spirits rose again. My thoughts ran this way:

"Indecently, I will first be sentenced. Then a second order will be pronounced, reducing my term to the time already spent in prison. This would entail my immediate release or discharge."

Convinced of Order. Convinced this would be the order of things, I entered the court with the interpreter. The judge was alone.

The interpreter turned to me and said: "You are about to be sentenced."

I stood at attention as the judge read by sentence. He was a new judge; I didn't recall having seen him before.

Hazily, I recall the sentence. It stated: That I had been sent to China by the U.S. government to take over German influence in China; that I collected and reported economic, military, political, educational and social intelligence to

made movement a problem at all times. So when a movement was begun, with propaganda and pomp, I pledged that I would increase my current output of 2,500 to 2,800 matchboxes a day. I reached this mark easily. Gradually my quota was raised and I was soon turning out 4,000 matchboxes daily. Because this was one of the top figures in the prison factory, my work won commendation, and I made a name for myself.

I tried to shoot for 5,000 a day, but this was beyond my capacity, and the most I ever turned out in a day was 4,200. Mind Is Occupied The making of matchboxes occupied my mind; it was something to do. But it didn't blind me to the evils of the prison labor system instituted by the Chinese Communists. I had always regarded slave labor as the vilest and lowest form of exploitation. But China's prison labor system was even more vile. At least a slave is clothed, fed and cared for by his master. But the prison worker gets none of these from his Communist overseers. He is not even provided with such essentials as toilet paper and soap.

Passed On To Next. When this task was completed, the box was passed on to another worker who pasted the bottom on it. This was light factory work, but all who toiled at it were obliged to develop more and more speed at their task. The problem, as before, was the hostile attitudes of the leaders and my fellow prisoners.

But even this underwent a change in April, 1955 after I was shifted from Cell 111 to Cell 113. There the leader and his assistant were surprisingly considerate. The rest of my "mates" following the lead of the pen-chang were equally affable.

Can't Expect Miracles. Of course they didn't treat me as well as they treated their fellow Chinese. But I couldn't expect miracles. After all, I was an American and a Catholic priest.

But I was given better working facilities. Well, I thought, these are good signs and may indicate the Communist government is taking a more favorable attitude toward me and is considering the possibility of releasing or deporting me.

I must do my part so they can release me without losing face. I have not and will not become a Communist, but the way for me to get favorable consideration is to work well.

Technique Saves Time. Inasmuch as I had already built upon a new time-saving technique, my output of matchboxes increased steadily.

Prison Factory. Dazed, I was taken to an American jeep and driven to Tzu Hsing Lu, a prison factory in a prison county, where I began serving my 10-year sentence.

The food in Tzu Hsing Lu was somewhat better than the fare at T'sao Lan Tzu. We ate three times daily. The work was unvarnished and steamed maize and pal tsai (cabbage soup) were frequently supplemented with hsiun tsai (a salted vegetable).

Once a week, during the autumn and early winter, we received a ration of rice and a soup garnished with four to six pieces of meat, each about the size of a 25-cent piece and perhaps twice as thick. After the Chinese New Year, in mid-winter, this ration was cut down to once a month.

Chief, Assistant. The cell had one chief leader and an assistant leader. The crowded conditions in the cell

der the Communist lash. It became equally apparent that the economy of this police state was founded on prison labor. Copyright, 1955 by the Very Rev. H. W. Rigney, S.V.D. All rights reserved.

Next Week: Father Rigney's hopes rise and fall and he tells why he grew a beard.

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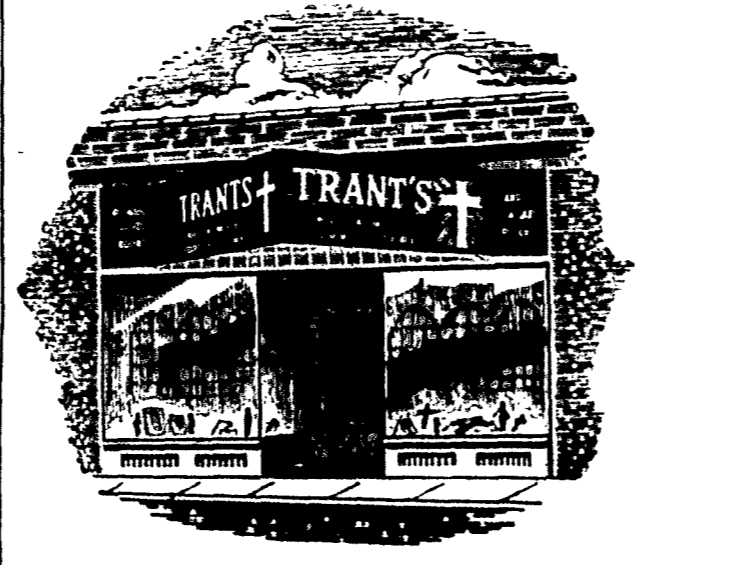
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