

A Visit That Became

By Grace Lichtenstein
New York Times

Thornton, Colo.

Laszlo Toth says he is a nonspy who has come in from the cold.

A little more than a year ago, the 44-year-old chemical engineer, a naturalized United States citizen, returned to his native Yugoslavia with his wife and daughter for a combined business and pleasure visit.

It turned into a Kafkaesque nightmare when he was arrested, accused of economic espionage at a sugar refinery and sentenced to seven years in prison.

His confinement ended July 23 when the U.S. ambassador in Belgrade, Laurence H. Silberman, managed to get him released.

The Toth case caused an internal dispute in the State Department. But in the interview in his unprepossessing middleclass home in this Denver suburb, Toth insisted that he was the innocent apolitical victim of a frameup.

He made it clear that he didn't want his opinions misconstrued because he and his wife both have relatives in Yugoslavia. He declared only that "a group of people had arranged a certain intrigue. It was not personally against me."

He declined to elaborate.

Nevertheless, Toth talked vividly about a year of what he called "psychological torture" behind bars in a homeland whose system of justice he had previously considered fair.

"I just want to put a muffler on my voice all the time because of

trouble for my family," the balding, energetic engineer said in his distinctively accented voice as he and his wife, Zora, sipped tea.

Neither he nor his family had ever been involved in Yugoslav politics, he said. He had never had any contact with the U.S. State Department, either.

The first and only time he saw Silberman was at the Belgrade airport about an hour before he left on a plane to return to the United States, he said, adding that no one had debriefed him or had advised him since his return.

At the time of Toth's release, Silberman said that for a year he had to contend with opposition from both Yugoslav officials and the State Department's Eastern European desk. He said the desk had not only failed to back his efforts on behalf of Toth, but also had sought to have Silberman reprimanded for "undiplomatic conduct."

In Washington, the State Department said the desk's rift with Silberman over Toth was an ordinary disagreement over alternatives.

The story of Toth and his wife begins like an updated version of the classic immigrant tale — one of a talented couple who moved to the country of opportunity to seek a more fulfilling life and found it.

In 1966 he was manager of a sugar refinery in Yugoslavia and his wife was the chief chemist. With their daughter, Vera, now 18, they lived a comfortable life.

A "help wanted" advertisement in a European trade magazine



AP Wirephoto

LASZLO TOTH
He denied spy charges

persuaded him to accept a job with the Michigan Sugar Co. He emigrated from Yugoslavia legally, he said.

The Toths spent five years in Michigan before moving to the Denver area in 1973. Toth became manager of the research and process development laboratory for Great Western Sugar. Twice before last year, he made brief uneventful trips to Yugoslavia to visit his ailing father.

On July 4, 1975, the family set out again for Yugoslavia. It was Toth's idea that he visit some sugar enterprises abroad at the same time.

"I wanted to freely exchange technical information," he said, pointing out that he had sent letters

a Nightmare

to this effect.

He also noted that Yugoslav sugar experts visited American plants many times without incident, taking many pictures.

On July 14, 1975, he met with a West German manufacturer in Belgrade who wanted him to see a certain piece of equipment. It happened that the Pik Vrbas refinery, where he had once worked, had such equipment and he had arranged a tour of it.

He visited the plant, asking the director if it would be possible to take photographs of the equipment to show to his superiors back in Colorado.

"Take as much as you wish," Toth said the director had told him in the presence of witnesses.

But some days later, when he came to the factory with his camera, a man at the reception area who didn't identify himself told Toth he could not take pictures.

"I felt I was still a guest," Toth recalls, "and I shouldn't be hard-headed, so I said 'To hell with the pictures.'"

However, he did complain to the research director, who offered first to take the photos himself. But instead, the research director turned Toth's camera over to the factory's official photographer so he could take them.

In fact, he was a secret policeman, according to Toth. That night, two plainclothes policemen came to the home of Toth's father, where he was staying, and took his passport. When Toth arrived at the police

station the next day, he was questioned.

In the days following, the questioning continued.

On Aug. 4, 1975, the same day President Ford left Belgrade, the Yugoslav authorities refused to let Toth leave the country.

They told Toth he was a suspected presidential assassin. Two days later, he was arrested on charges of spying. So were the factory research director and the photographers.

"I was terribly confused, excited and mad all at once," he recalled. He protested to the local court and demanded to see someone from the American embassy. For the next 11 months, he was told the embassy wasn't answering his request.

In a crowded primitive jail, where his only food was beans, cabbage and potatoes, he met with his attorneys.

After a secret trial before a judge, an assistant judge and three "jury" members, he was pronounced guilty. The photographer was given a two-year sentence, the research director three years, Toth seven.

For four months, he was not allowed to see anyone but a lawyer, nor to get any letters. Eventually, he was moved to a better jail and allowed to write letters to his wife.

But no one was ever able to inform him that Silberman or anyone else was trying to get him released.

He was never physically harmed, he said, but confinement

Fatal Father And Son Duel

Ankara

A 77-year-old Turkish man and his 30-year-old son shot and killed each other in a duel to settle their rival claims to a plot of land in the western Anatolian village of Ozdemirci, the Turkish newspaper Hürriyet reported yesterday.

Hundreds of villagers watched the fatal exchange of fire and heard the son's last words: "I also am a father and must think of my son's future," the paper said.

Reuters

was still "psychological torture" for several reasons.

"When you are arrested you suddenly lose your personality. Imagine if until yesterday you had your honor, you had your position, you said 'Good morning' to others and they said 'Good morning' to you. Suddenly, you are in jail and you are a nobody. You say 'thank you' and others say nothing," he said.

Last month, he was suddenly notified that he was being let go. No explanation was given.

When Toth got back to Thornton, he discovered that the West German manufacturing concern had mailed to his Colorado office color slides of the equipment he had wanted to photograph in Vrbas. He held them up to the light. "For worse slides than you see here, I got seven years in prison in Yugoslavia," he said.