

U.S. Mail to Hanoi Delegation Contained Pleas and Checks

PARIS (AP)—The manager of a moving firm is proud of the obscure role he may have played in helping to bring about the liberation of America prisoners in Vietnam.

For more than two years, Enile Coustie's warehouse was the depository for letters and petitions pleading for the prisoners. The letters were addressed to the Hanoi delegation, which systematically refused to accept them.

Coustie received only a token payment for storing the crates, sacks, trunks and cardboard boxes. At the end they weighed more than 40 tons and filled a good part of his storage space.

"The letters caused us nothing but work, trouble and expense," he says. "But I believe we made a modest contribution to the mobilization of world opinion on behalf of the prisoners, so it was all worth it."

When the talks between Henry A. Kissinger and Hanoi's Le Duc Tho made a break-through, the Americans discreetly arranged for the letters to be shipped back to the United States.

"I have no idea where they are now," Coustie said.

American embassy officials declined comment, but some sources speculate that the State Department may have wanted to sort out any mail addressed to the prisoners.

"Although the North Vietnamese refused to take any notice of the millions of letters, the accumulation of all these appeals was a massive and permanent reminder that world opinion was on the side of the prisoners," Coustie says.

The French post office came to regard his warehouse as the recognized depository for mail refused by the Hanoi delegation. On some days mail arrived by the truckload.

The bulk of the mail was in the form of petitions and write-in campaigns organized by various groups in the United States. Many well-wishers sent checks to these groups.

"I don't know how much money may have been buried amid the tons of paper," Coustie said. Some of the checks were for varying amounts of real dollars. Others, written on genuine check forms, were for "100 per cent support" in favor of the prisoners.

Coustie kept one such make-believe check as a souvenir. It was from Evelyn Griffin of Spartanburg, S.C. "There must have been thousands more like it," he said.

Coustie has never been in America, but an aunt, Irma Tillous, lives in Redwood City, Calif.

"A couple of years ago, she wrote to warn me that the Communists or some antiwar groups might try to do me some harm," Coustie said. "She meant well, but I didn't take any notice."