

POSTCARD

The Imaginary Society

By Ferdinand Protzman

New York Times Service

ST. AUGUSTIN, Germany — One way to conceive of the Société Imaginaire is as a dream state, a kind of international, intellectual Oz, with a movable Emerald City and a wizard born in Hungary, seasoned in Argentina and residing in upstate New York.

Then again, there are many ways to envision an organization that, as its name suggests, is mainly of the mind, with no institutional structure, permanent headquarters or rules of order.

Despite its ethereal nature, the society, founded in 1984 by a painter calling himself Batuz, has become a flourishing cultural phenomenon on three continents. Its activities — like the Correspondence Project, which brings together writers from different countries and then compiles, catalogues and archives the correspondence that later develops between them — are attracting media attention and support from governments, universities and individuals around the world.

The group's 500 members are a Who's Who of writers, artists, scholars and politicians from Europe, South America and the United States. They include the American poet Mark Strand; Julio Maria Sanguinetti, the newly elected president of Uruguay; Mexico's Nobel Prize-winning writer, Octavio Paz; and Stanislaw Baranczak, a leading Polish poet and a professor of literature at Harvard University.

Binding the unabashedly elitist membership is the shared belief that in an era of global pop culture and mass media driven by near-instant transmission of information, genuine communication between individuals is dwindling.

□

Its founder, Batuz, a 61-year-old Hungarian-born painter whose name was originally

N. M. D. Mahr-Batuz, set out to create an international community of the spirit, where national cultural barriers would be broken down by face-to-face meetings, correspondence and conversation.

The idea was born from Batuz's personal experience and study of history. "Writers like Flaubert and Turgenev read each other's works, but also corresponded and visited each other," he said. "On a cultural and intellectual level, the world was a smaller community then than it is today. Now hardly any American writers know their counterparts in Latin America or Eastern Europe or vice versa. It is a shame, really."

Batuz, whose works can be found in museums around the world, fled Hungary with his family in 1944 as the battle lines of World War II approached, settling in Argentina five years later. He moved to Walton, New York, in 1973 and lives there when not traveling on business involving the society.

□

For the last decade, he has roamed the world promoting his group. Much of his time is spent in Germany, where a foundation was established in 1986 to support the society.

Although the society has an office in Nossen, Germany, near Dresden, its meetings, lasting from a few days to a week, have been held in a variety of places including Washington, Budmerice in Slovakia, Berlin and Buenos Aires.

Defining the society remains a murky business to some members. They seem to prefer it that way. "It is whatever we make it, whatever we put into it," said Strand, a former poet laureate of the United States. He was attending a lunch in this small town near Bonn for the recent opening of an exhibition about the society at the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.