

Intellectual Oz Embracing an Ideal Grounded in Reality

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Special to The New York Times

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 (pronounced BAH-toos), is real and 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 María Sanguinetti, the newly elected president

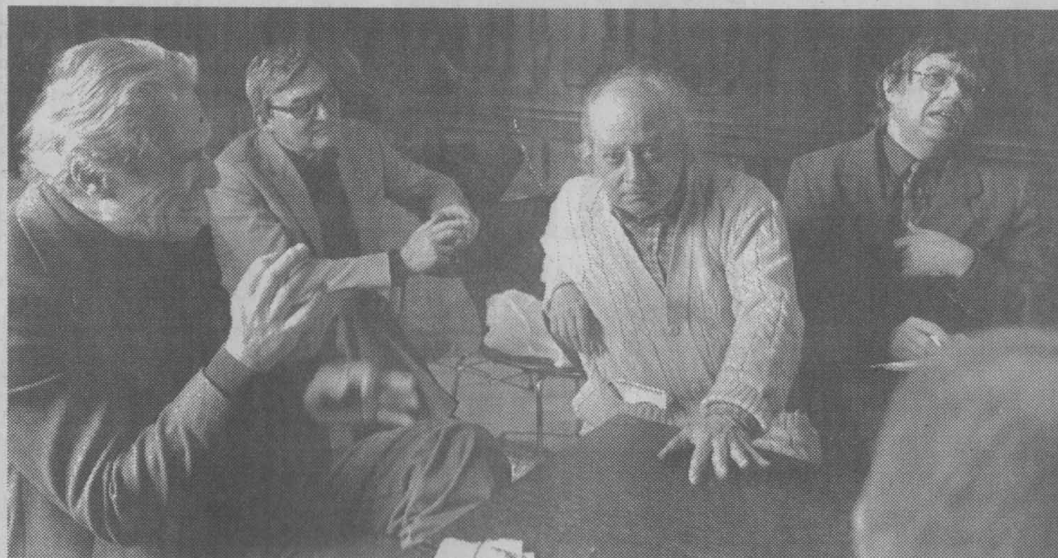
of Uruguay; Mexico's Nobel Prize-winning writer, Octavio Paz; and Stanislaw Baranczak, a leading Polish poet and a professor of literature at Harvard University.

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. The result is growing cultural isolation and ignorance. The society is their attempt to overcome that.

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.

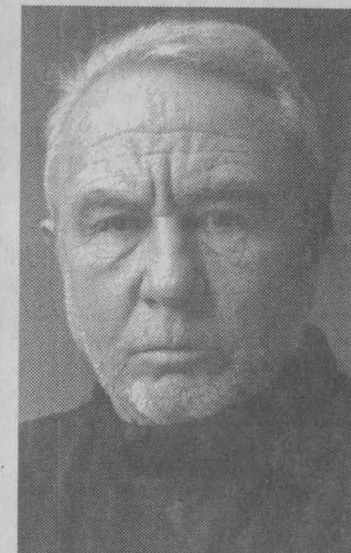
It would be a place where artists and intellectuals from various countries could "get to know each other like neighbors in a small town, only better, since a writer in Poland has more in common with a writer in Chile than with his actual neighbor," Batuz said. This "imaginary society," a name coined by Mr. Paz, would foster understanding, knowledge and creativity.

The idea was born from Batuz's personal experience and study of history. "Writers like Flaubert and Turgenyev read each other's works, but also corresponded and visited



Inge Morath/Magnum

Mark Strand, left, Alexander Kliment, Juan Sánchez Peláez and Ivan Klima at a recent gathering of the Société Imaginaire in Berlin. The society, founded in 1984, is a cultural phenomenon on three continents.



David Jennings for The New York Times

Batuz, a painter and the society founder, in upstate New York.

A quest to overcome cultural isolation and ignorance.

each other," he said. "On a cultural and intellectual level, the world was a smaller community 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 major museums around the world, was well equipped to bridge cultural boundaries. He 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, N.Y., 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. For two years in the mid-1980's, Batuz operated from the home of Rudolph Scharping, a board member of the foundation. Mr. Scharping also heads Germany's Social Democratic Party and was an unsuccessful candidate for the German chancellorship this year.

What attracts people to the society is the simple idea of getting to know like-minded individuals from other

lands in an informal, unstructured way. 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.

"Contacts among artists and writers are very much formalized," said Julia Hartwig, a Polish poet who joined in 1992. "We meet at symposiums or conferences organized by institutions. Batuz's idea found acceptance because it is so unreal, because there is no structure. People wanted to meet and exchange ideas informally. And there is no feeling that someone is trying to make money out of this. There is no commercial aspect."

The annual budget of the Société

Imaginaire is about \$320,000, Batuz said, with the money coming from federal, state and local governments in Germany and other countries, along with private donations.

Even 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 Mr. 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, a conservative political foundation affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union party.

In some ways, the society represents a return to the smoky coffee

Continued on Page 18

Intellectual Oz Embracing Ideal Of a Reality

Continued From Page 11

bars of its members' student days. Most members are at least middle-aged and well established in their fields. At gatherings like the St. Augustin meeting, they are free to talk, exchange ideas, be foolish, be politically incorrect, drink too much, eat too much, sleep too little and feel the adrenalin rush of artistic inspiration.

But the society's projects are not nostalgic. It received a boost in the autumn of 1992, when Mr. Baranczak published an article about its Correspondence Project in the *Harvard Review*, describing the effort as "a new context for dialogue." Each subsequent issue of the review has devoted about 11 pages to the society, including a remarkable series of anonymous letters in which members discuss their desire to be able to pursue their art without the burden of their well-known names.

"As long as the society is in a state of formation, it has a future," Mr. Strand said. "If it ever gels and becomes an institution, it would be finished. In some ways, the society, like art, is given over to perpetuating a process that will never be completed."