

Author's Jailing Dramatizes Loss of Liberties in Uruguay

By JOSEPH NOVITSKI

Washington Post Service

MONTEVIDEO — Juan Carlos Onetti is back on the job, slowly climbing the dingy stairs of the Montevideo Municipal Library from dusty office to dustier bookstacks, stopping to catch his breath and to flirt with the librarians.

The women seem to love it. They missed Onetti, an old man and Uruguay's most prominent author during the three months and five days he was imprisoned by the Uruguayan police.

The charge was that he had served on a literary jury that awarded its first prize to a short story, titled "The Bodyguard," which the police found offensive and pornographic.

First a military and then a civil court found that the story, by Nelson Marra, was neither offensive nor pornographic.

The charge was dismissed. Onetti, another member of the jury and three editors of Marcha, the weekly that organized the short story contest, were released.

But, until the courts got around to them, Onetti and the other intellectuals were held prisoners.

They became celebrated hostages, whose absence called international attention

to the unpredictable way in which civil rights are suppressed here.

The government is headed by an elected president, but it became a dictatorship a year ago when he seized unlimited powers.

President Juan M. Bordaberry is dominated, from behind the scenes, by military commanders.

At subordinate levels, police and military intelligence services have shown that they can arrest whom they please and do to their prisoners what they please.

"I'm fine, I'm fine — now," Onetti said the other day. He

sat behind a scarred wooden table in his office, that of director of Montevideo's 18 municipal libraries.

The small, bare room smelled of dust and of the leather bindings on a collection of the Parisian "Revue Des Deux Mondes" from 1895 to 1945, shelved against the walls.

The author wore his lumpy black overcoat, because three hours of steam heat each day is not enough to drive winter chill out of the cement walls.

It is easy to see Onetti because, as his visitors tell you, he is a gentle, hospitable man.

His arrest, so far as Onetti remembers, was his first political involvement in 33 years of writing on both sides of the River Plate, in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires and in Montevideo.

Writing and politics often mix in both cities. A younger generation of involved South American authors, among them Argentine Julio Cortazar and Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, call him "the master" — but for his writing talent, not his political positions.

A police clerk filling out a form last Feb. 9, when he was arrested, asked Onetti to

identify his political affiliation or sympathies.

"You mean which of all these parties and currents we have do I support?" Onetti remembers asking. "I don't believe in any of them."

"Aha," said the police clerk, and he filled in "anarchist."

"It sounds funny, now," the author said, "but those things have a way of coming back to cause problems, when you want to get a passport, for example."

And Onetti wants to get a passport. He has been invited to live and work in Spain, Mexico and Venezuela. He

has been invited to Italy to accept the Italian-Latin American Institute's literary prize for 1971-1973, awarded for "The Shipyard."

Onetti is getting ready to make up his mind to leave Uruguay, as he puts it, although "they never treated me badly."

His jailers did not torture him. But they kept him incommunicado in a police station isolation cell for eight days. Then they transferred him with other political detainees to "el Clindro," a musty covered stadium here.

"Onetti only lasted four days in el Cilindro," one of

his fellow prisoners recalled. "He's always had a problem of anguish. You can see it in his books. In the stadium he couldn't sleep and he stopped eating. We called his wife to get him out of there."

"It was not because they didn't give me food," the author said. "It was because I felt bad, lousy, anguished."

The police transferred him to a private psychiatric hospital, the Echepare Sanatorium.

"It's an insane asylum," Onetti says, "because to call it a sanatorium is to distinguish it beyond its pretensions." The Echepare is a

large, one-story building with halls of stained gray cement. There is a balding lawn in front and, while Onetti was there, a police guard was on duty during visiting hours.

The author stayed in a room with rusting iron bars on the window and no door in the doorway to the bathroom, until the police said he could leave. But his family paid for his stay.

"I was fine," Onetti said. I made friends with all the nurses. There was one particularly nice woman who cleaned the room. Her only defect was that she filched my detective stories."

