

Letters about Polanyi, Koestler, and Eva Zeisel

Walter Gulick

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Arthur Koestler, Eva Striker Zeisel, Polanyi family, Gyula Hevesi, Alex Weissberg, David Cesarani, Soviet imprisonment.

*Illuminating letters by Barbara Striker and Bela Hidegkuti respond to Walter Gulick's review of David Cesarani's book, **Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind in Tradition and Discovery** 29:2 (2002-2003), 50-55. The letters and accompanying commentary shed light on the details of Eva Striker Zeisel's USSR imprisonment and release, her relationship to Arthur Koestler, the lives of George and Barbara Striker (Polanyi's nephew and wife), and the circumstances and sources of Cesarani's biography.*

The following two letters were sent in response to my review of David Cesarani, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*, published in *TAD* 29:2 (2002-2003), pp. 50-55.

The first letter is written by Barbara Striker (1913-), widow of Gyorgy (George) Striker (1913-1992). George is the son of Michael Polanyi's sister Laura (Mausi) and younger brother of Eva Striker Zeisel, prominently mentioned in the review. In many respects the letter supplements and corroborates my review, but it also contains valuable firsthand information about Eva Striker Zeisel's imprisonment that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been published previously. The letter corrects my imprecise comment that "the Polanyis spoke German at home" to the more accurate statement that the Polanyis spoke German with Mama Cecile Polanyi, who never learned to speak Hungarian, although she could understand it well. Hungarian was the usual language of her salon.

On August 7, 2003, I was privileged to visit Barbara Striker in the Budapest apartment where she has lived the past 55 years. Mrs. Striker was a most gracious hostess and provided the information summarized in these several paragraphs. She showed me a bookcase containing two shelves of books written by members of the greater Polanyi family. A third shelf was filled with volumes edited by her late husband for IMEKO, an international society of applied physics concerned with measurement. She shared family photos as she sat under the painting of the sixteen year old Laura Polanyi, her mother-in-law. The walls also displayed pictures of many other family members and several paintings by Eva Striker Zeisel.

Mrs. Striker spoke of her emigration to the United States in 1938. She and George struggled at first to find suitable work (for a short while she ironed shirts for famed physicist Leo Szilard), but soon in Chicago she found a position in chemistry and George was employed as a research physicist in radio. In 1948 George decided to return to Hungary because he felt he could be of greater use in a small rather than in a large country. Mrs. Striker mentioned that George had strong socialist beliefs, quite at odds with the views of Michael Polanyi, but that their political differences were never a source of friction between them. At any rate, George's political views and some feeling of guilt about coming from a wealthy family contributed to his decision to return to Hungary, and Barbara went along as a devoted wife. The years of harsh communist rule soon beset them. The Hungarian authorities were suspicious of anyone who would voluntarily move from the United States to Hungary, so George was kept under constant surveillance, the Strikers later learned.

Barbara Striker worked in Hungary for a non-governmental society that facilitated international sharing of scientific and technical information. After helping it grow substantially, she retired in 1976. Now she and Eva Striker Zeisel are the last living members of their generation. Mrs. Striker confirmed my suggestion that Koestler had long lasting and deep feelings for Eva, and indeed supported the review's general portrayal of Koestler.

As I readied to depart, she entrusted me with her only copy (the only copy?) of the most detailed Polanyi family tree of which I am aware. As I made photocopies of the document, I recalled with gratitude a very special evening visit.

The second letter is from Bela Hidegkuti, a Hungarian living in Australia since 1956. It is largely self-explanatory. Hidegkuti's 1995 article on the Koestler-Polanyi relationship appeared in volume 4:4 of *Polanyiana* (pp. 8-31) and includes extensive excerpts for the letters of each man. I appreciate receiving Mr. Hidegkuti's permission to print his interesting observations.

April, 2003

To the Editors of *Tradition and Discovery*:

The following are remarks and corrections to the review by Walter Gulick of David Cesarani's *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*.

Page 51, paragraph beginning with "The coup de grace"

Eva Striker, the daughter of Laura Polanyi Striker, related her "experiences" in Soviet prisons to Koestler—but not as it is stated in this chapter. Eva Striker became the Arts Director of the Dulevo Porcelain Factory near Moscow, where she designed several beautiful sets. She was arrested in May, 1936—taken into prison from the home of her brother, who was a specialist in charge of the Patent Department of the Invention Office headed by Gyula Hevesi, a former official of the 1919 Hungarian Council Republic, in whose apartment Eva sublet a room before moving to her brother's place. Eva was not charged with spying and sabotage but with belonging to a subversive group whose aim was to kill Stalin. According to the testimony of the group's leader, she was assigned to commit the killing. At the search of her former room at the Hevesi place, they found the revolver with which "she intended to do the killing." She surmised that what they "found" was planted evidence.

Of course she denied without results all these charges she was confronted with by her investigator or by her denouncer. She stated she was an artist solely interested to prove that one can produce beautiful articles in a socialist country.

At times she was in cells with common criminals, but most of the time she was held in solitary cells. At one time her investigator pressured her to sign an untrue statement by threatening her if she does not sign it, she will rot in the prison all her life without trial.

The night after the signing she slashed her wrists with a razor hidden in her shoe heel, which she got from one of her former inmates. The woman warden saved her life and Eva related to her the reason why she

wanted to commit suicide. The warden told her she should address a letter of complaint to Stalin against her investigator, and as a matter of fact he was recalled (a usual procedure, of course). After that she was never forced to sign any falsehood.

She was not “freed from the USSR,” nor was she released from prison with the help of her separated husband (Alex Weissberg) and the Austrian consul, but with the very brave help of her mother, who collected affidavits from famous scientists—among them the world known physicist Kapitca. She was released from prison and directly from there expelled and put on a train to Vienna, where her brother—my husband—and I met her. The very first night she related to us all the above.

Moreover, Weissberg, who was also arrested in Charkow (Kharkov), was not freed with the help of Koestler and Polanyi but in 1939, after the Nazi-Soviet pact signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov during the occupation of Poland. He was taken to the Soviet-German border of Poland and was delivered by the Soviets to the hands of the Gestapo. An Austrian Communist scientist, Weissberg escaped with the help of the Polish underground to Sweden before Germany invaded the USSR.

Page 51, paragraphs 3-4, “Who is Vera?”

Vera is Adolf Polanyi’s eldest offspring—she was born in 1908 and not in 1909—and certainly could be around Laura Polanyi-Striker’s school—but she was not the person whom Koestler as a grown-up met at several places and times in his life.

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Eva Striker Zeisel was not only teaching porcelain design in the Pratt Institute in New York, but she was a very sought art designer of porcelain and ceramic articles and sets in many famous manufacturing plants in the USA and Europe. And, by the way, while she truly did not identify herself with the extreme views of Koestler, they met often until his death.

Eva Striker Zeisel visited Hungary in the 1960s. At that time she met Gyula Hevesi again (who, by the way, spent the years between 1938-46 in Soviet prisons and gulags in Siberia) and from him she received the fact that at the time of search in his apartment in 1936, the NKWD found in Eva’s former room Hevesi’s 1919 revolver, which he forgot to declare and hid in Eva’s room...

Page 53, from line 7

There is no reference to the status of “Mama Cecil who also never learned good Hungarian.” Mama Cecil was born in Vilna, was sent to her father in Vienna, worked there, and met and married P. Michael.

Further it is stated that the Polanyis spoke German at home. Was the author present in their home? All their offspring graduated at Hungarian universities. Laura studied history and English language and literature, and wrote her doctorate work in Hungarian history. They spoke to their mother in German, but otherwise all that time and even later they spoke a beautiful Hungarian.

In Mama Cecil’s famous literary salon over many decades the most forward-looking writers and poets, among them Frigyes Karinthy, Gyula Illyés and Attila József, discussed certainly not only “intellectual issues of the world,” but actual Hungarian issues too.

There are therefore many superficial statements and opinions in this review. That is the reason why I as one of the last survivors of those times felt it necessary to comment on them.

Mrs. Barbara Striker
Daughter-in-law of Laura Polanyi Striker
Honorary Member of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association

April 4, 2003

Dear Professor Gulick,

The Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association has sent me a xerox copy of your review of Cesarani's book in *Tradition and Discovery* since I have some interest in Koestler and – to a lesser extent – in Michael Polanyi and his family. I edited a Hungarian language Koestler Festschrift (published in 1985 outside Hungary and re-published in 1992 in Hungary in an extended version). I think I put Koestler “on the map” for Hungarians by this Festschrift, for he was a taboo subject before the collapse of the Berlin Wall and similar other collapses elsewhere. I also wrote a study on the connections between Arthur Koestler and Michael Polanyi for *Polanyiana* which you know since you referred to it in your *Tradition and Discovery* article.

It is indeed intriguing who may have been the little girl with the vaccination scar who attended kindergarten together with Koestler. It was a very long time ago when I read *Arrow in the Blue*, before I started seriously to think about Koestler. To tell the truth I did not even keep the little girl's name in my mind. Many years later when I did further reading on Koestler I came across Eva Zeisel's name and I tacitly established in my head that she must have been the girl with the vaccination mark. Since I did not remember what name was given to this girl in *Arrow in the Blue* and I did not bother to look the book up again, it did not occur to me that there are two different names (Eva and Vera). What did cross my mind slightly was that Koestler's version of meeting again, viz. bumping into each other on the street in New York, was probably not exactly how it happened since they would not have recognised each other. My hunch was that Eva-Vera heard (probably from a newspaper article) that Koestler was in town and she sought him out or went to talk to him after a talk given by Koestler.

Indeed, as you point out, Koestler changed bits and pieces in his autobiographical works, mainly about people who were still alive. In my 1993 talk in Budapest at a booklaunch of the Hungarian publication of my Koestler Festschrift, I mentioned that Koestler probably deliberately omitted many events and persons from his autobiographical works because it was reasonable to suspect that several of these persons were still alive in Eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union. A mere mention by Koestler of these persons would have meant dire consequences to them. (I also mentioned that I wished that a full version of his autobiography would turn up from some archives.)

As far as Cesarani's book is concerned, I am not enthusiastic about it. The author of this book (Cesarani) seems to have collected and amassed, with the diligence of a little ant, virtually what Koestler had for breakfast, lunch and dinner in every day of his life. Cesarani seems to have a thinly disguised antagonism for Koestler. Indeed, he dines out on every adverse episode he finds in Koestler's life. He tries to explain everything about Koestler in terms of how Koestler accepted or did not accept his Jewishness. This reminds me

of Marxists who explain everything in terms of the class struggle or orthodox Freudians who have an explanation for everything in terms of sex. I had a malign satisfaction when I read an adverse review on Cesarani's book by the distinguished writer Julian Barnes.

Cesarani committed something unethical when he went ahead to publish his book and quoted in it bits he found in Koestler's papers but without asking consent from the Koestler Archives at Edinburgh University. (I know this from the the Curator of the Archives. It was also made clear in his letter that the curators of the Koestler Archive certainly would not have given permission to publish material gathered by David Cesarani would he have submitted the book's manuscript prior to its publication.) Koestler had an affair with a married woman and a child was born out of this liaison. The woman's husband accepted the child as his own and the child was raised as the husband's offspring. Cesarani committed an indiscretion when he blurted out the names of people involved, thus causing, presumably, discomfiture for a number of people. What "noble" purpose does it serve?

When I went through the Koestler-Polanyi correspondence, I also saw the letter from Michael Polanyi's widow to Koestler that Cesarani included in his book and you also mention in your review article. At that time I decided that I would not waste paper and pen, so to speak, to deal with the carping of an unhappy octogenarian lady. Besides, I did not see any evidence in Michael Polanyi's correspondence that he believed that Koestler plagiarized from him. He certainly would have known.

I hope I did not take up too much of your time with my musings about who may have been Vera-Eva and my opinion of Cesarani's book.

Yours sincerely,

Béla Hidegkuti

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi" which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi; (7) five essays by Michael Polanyi.