
REVIEWS

David Cesarani, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*. New York: The Free Press, 1998. Pp. x + 646. ISBN 0-684-86720-6, \$30.00, hardcover.

In 1980, Magda Polanyi, Michael's widow, wrote a bitter and accusatory letter to Arthur Koestler.

You should hear what people say about you – don't you care about that? "He is known for stealing other people's ideas" said to me famous and important literary personality a couple of years ago. It would be time to repair your reputation, instead of PERSEVERING TO LIVE ON OTHER PEOPLE'S – mainly Michael's — ideas. (quoted in Cesarani [C], 558)

David Cesarani's biography does not provide sufficient evidence to make a well founded judgment about the legitimacy of Magda's complaint; an accurate assessment would require careful review of the publications and personal papers of both Koestler and Polanyi.¹ But Magda's comments alert one to the importance of a relationship that lasted 35 years. Bela Hidekuti's article in *Polaniana*, "Arthur Koestler and Michael Polanyi: Two Hungarian Minds in Partnership in Britain," provides excerpts from their correspondence which suggest mutuality rather than dependence. Hidekuti concludes his article by indicating that comparison of their intellectual links in scientific matters would make an excellent Ph.D. dissertation for some history of science student.² I certainly agree, although I believe history of ideas rather than history of science would be the most productive category of comparison.

At any rate, there are striking similarities

when one examines the lives and interests of these two Hungarians, but sharp differences when one compares their personalities. Both were born into secular Jewish homes in Budapest, Arthur (1905) 14 years after Michael. Both left Hungary after World War I for German speaking lands, and both later fled the Nazis to make their homes in England. Each was interested in science and the world political situation, although the order of their immersion in these fields was reversed. Each ended his career by paying special attention to philosophical and religious issues of broad import, seeking to overcome the division between the two cultures.

Yet the fact that they had such different personalities is significant. Polanyi was emotionally low key and often self-effacing; he was generally an excellent partner in conversation because he was both a good listener and generous with his ideas and insights. Koestler tended toward unpredictable emotional extremes and was generally domineering; one did not so much converse with him as either submit to his often intriguing but also controversial interpretations or argue with him (see C 560 on this point). Perhaps the two were friends for so long because Michael's accommodating personality could adjust to Koestler's extremes, but just as surely Magda's protective and sometimes domineering personality would clash with Koestler's opinionated views and self-interested actions.

Polanyi initiated the relationship by writing Koestler in 1941 after reading his magnum opus, *Darkness at Noon*, published the year before. This historical novel made public Koestler's renunciation of his former Communist ties; it is about the Moscow trials of the 1930's, exploring the logic that led innocent persons to confess to the crimes with which the state charged them. In his letter Michael invited

Koestler to contribute a chapter on Soviet repression of science and scientists to a volume supporting free scientific inquiry.³ Thus began an exchange of letters and books that lasted into the 1970's. Koestler's name was better known to the public than Polanyi's name during the middle decades of the century, yet Polanyi's worldview was more comprehensive and better grounded. Because of Polanyi's stability and depth, Cesarani's judgement seems accurate: "The influence of Polanyi on [Koestler's] thought cannot be underestimated. 'Misi,' as he was affectionately known, was a sounding board and a touchstone for Koestler" (C 200).

In the course of his detailed exposition of Koestler's life, Cesarani implicates another member of the Polanyi clan as being crucially involved in the development of Koestler's thought in several phases. Eva Striker (later Zeisel), the daughter of Michael's older sister Laura (Mausi), furnished Koestler with the account which inspired him to write *Darkness at Noon*. Eva followed her fiancée, the physicist Alex Weissberg, to Kharkov, Ukraine, where they were married in 1932. Their home served Koestler as his base of operations when he traveled to the Soviet Union in 1932-33 as a recently minted communist to write a book on the progress being made in the Soviet world in contrast to the depression-bound West. The trip Koestler took into Soviet central Asia was particularly disturbing to him. In addition to finding depressing filth in this part of the world, he observed courtroom injustices being rendered. The recent convert was taken aback; his faith in Communism began to ebb.

The coup de grace of Koestler's identification with Communism occurred when he next saw Eva in 1938 after she was freed from the USSR. She told him the story of how, during the Soviet purges, she was charged with spying and sabotage and then had been arrested and imprisoned for sixteen months. With the help of Weissberg (from whom she had been separated in 1934) and the Austrian consul, she was released, but then Weissberg was arrested. In turn, Koestler and Polanyi were among a loose network of those who

worked to free Weissberg, a task that eventually was successful.⁴ At any rate, when Koestler heard Eva's account of her incarceration, this helped precipitate his writing of *Darkness at Noon*, a work that along with George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* helped convince even many of the radical thinkers of the time of the unacceptable flaws in Soviet Communism.

Does Koestler's relationship with the Polanyi family go yet deeper? In the first volume of his autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue*, Koestler relates that his mother sent him to a progressive kindergarten operated by one Lolly, a daughter in a famous Hungarian family. Lolly is a pseudonym for Michael Polanyi's sister Laura, who opened her school in 1911 and closed it in 1913.⁵ There is a photograph of young Arthur and Eva among the dozen or so children in Laura's little school. Koestler tells how he experienced his "first true and real love" at this school: he fell for a little girl he calls Vera, being particularly fascinated by the vaccination mark on her arm.⁶ Who is Vera?

Vera is said by Koestler to be the daughter of one of the leaders of the Hungarian Socialist party. Among those who might have been indicated by the rather fluid term "socialist leader" are Karl Polanyi, Georg Lukacs, and Oszkar Jasci, but none of them had a daughter named Vera. Michael and Karl's older brother Adolf, with his cousin Odon Por, organized a Socialist Students Club and then was a labor organizer. His first child was named Vera. But Vera was born in 1909 and Koestler says he attended the school in 1910. Koestler's chronology is inaccurate, because the school was not opened until 1911. Moreover, Koestler mentions that Laura told the children that she was pregnant – but her last child was born in 1913, indicting that Koestler would have been at the school in 1912. What, if anything, is one to make of the confusion?

One possibility is that Vera Polanyi, Adolf's daughter, was admitted to the school even though she was three years younger than the other children, and she was the object of Koestler's infatuation – another Polanyi family connection. Maybe Vera is the daugh-

ter of some other “Socialist Party leader” (Szabo, Korvin, Fogarasi, Seidler, etc.) whose children are unknown to me. But maybe Vera is really Eva Striker disguised “to protect the innocent.” Cesarani demonstrates that Koestler’s remarks about his mother and his upbringing are frequently distorted to prove some self justifying point. Suspiciously, no last name is given to Vera. Moreover, Vera means “true,” as in true love; it could well be a fabricated name, a device Koestler often used. Koestler tells how his beloved Vera confronted him many years later during his first trip to America. She threw him off guard right before an important speech in Carnegie Hall, a speech that Cesarani reports helped confirm Koestler’s status in America, but which Koestler claims was a fiasco. Eva had immigrated to New York shortly after seeing Koestler in 1938 and had for years been teaching ceramic design at the Pratt Institute of Technology; certainly she could have been the one who presented herself to Koestler.

If Vera was in fact Eva, then note how significant she became not only for the direction of Koestler’s life, but for the worldwide struggle against Communism. Her presence in Kharkov would surely have been a motivating factor in leading Koestler to undertake the trip to the Soviet Union, the trip that started changing his mind about Communism. Later, her story of her imprisonment spurred him to become proactive in the fight against Communism and led him to become a world famous figure. Interestingly, however, Eva did not want to be identified with *Darkness at Noon* and Koestler’s attack on Communism, indicating that despite her incredibly harsh treatment by the Soviets she refused to be associated with Koestler.⁷ That would explain why Koestler would have taken care to conceal her identity.

In any case, the Koestler-Polanyi connections run deep. Learning about Koestler and his world should surely assist one in understanding more about Polanyi and his world. But why turn to David Cesarani’s biography when one could simply examine Koestler’s own well received autobiographical writings, noteworthy for their candor. Why another biography when

several have previously been published?

The Cesarani biography is distinctive in at least two respects. He was initially attracted to writing about Koestler “as a Jew who exemplified the Jewish experience in Europe during the twentieth century” (C vii). He soon found that toward the end of his life Koestler dissociated himself from his Jewishness, and indeed such denial “was a necessary price to pay for being useful to American anti-Communists” (C 343). Of course, he could not obscure his early commitment to Zionism nor disown his influential work of 1949, *Promise and Fulfillment: Palestine 1917-1949*. But Cesarani demonstrates rather exhaustively, in contrast to most interpretations, that Koestler’s consciousness of his Jewishness contributed to his feelings of alienation and was an important factor influencing many of his actions.

Secondly, Cesarani found he could not take Koestler’s self-interpretations at face value. By making full use of all the papers in the Koestler archive for the first time and incorporating other material and interviews not previously considered in a biography, Cesarani demonstrates that Koestler, for all his vaunted openness, was not a reliable guide to his life experiences or his psyche. Much in the tradition of Rousseau, he rationalizes his erratic and often shocking behavior, shrouding it in idealized abstractions reinforced by psychoanalytic and mystifying theorizing.

He entered into adulterous liaisons and played the game by engaging in systematic deceit. It is hard to say whether Koestler’s knack for duplicity was a cause or an effect of his political gyrations, but dissembling to himself and others was second nature. His ‘autobiography’ was perhaps his most stupendous act of deception. (C 414)

To be sure, Koestler acknowledges in his self-interpretations that his character is flawed and he has tendencies to violence. But he has a convenient explanation for his shortcomings: it is his mother’s fault. No doubt his mother was often stifling, moody,

and unpredictable in her relation to young Arthur. She seemed to see herself as a well-born Viennese stuck in provincial Budapest, and she restricted Arthur's access to "ordinary Hungarians" and other children. Interestingly, she does not seem so different in this regard from some of the mothers of other Hungarians who rose to world significance. Mama Cecile also never learned good Hungarian; the Polanyis spoke German at home. Her famous salon attended to intellectual issues of the world rather than local Hungarian issues. Georg Lukacs "tormented his mother by speaking to her in Hungarian, a language she never managed to learn completely."⁸ Michael Polanyi, however, had a far more positive relationship to his mother than either Koestler or Lukacs. Significantly, he had a far greater appreciation of the liberal turn-of-the-century political economy than either Koestler or Lukacs—and a sweeter disposition. The thrust of these comments should not be taken to blame mothers for their sons' alienation. Hungarian society at this time was strongly patriarchal in nature, and talented women were bedeviled by a liberal culture that seemed to promise opportunities for self-realization without ever delivering on these promises. This is a classical formula for frustration and familial disharmony.

In any case, Koestler, like Lukacs, early on felt alienated from his parents, other people, and his culture. "His lack of exposure to other children left him awkward in company. He felt compelled to construct a 'complete false personality' in order to interact smoothly with the other schoolboys" (C 28). He became the cocky know-it-all seeking to cover lack of self-confidence.

Eventually sexuality came to be the means whereby he rationalized he could overcome his alienation. In short, he became a womanizer, sometimes managing numerous affairs at once. What Cesarani says of his early liaisons in Palestine seems characteristic of his later affairs as well: "They were all marked by infatuation, and obsessive involvement, followed by growing lack of interest and rejection. While he was in the thrall of an affair he seems to have been almost unbelievably self-centered" (C 53). He was the

demanding bully who treated marriage as a farce. "To him, heterosexuality was the norm, men were dominant partners and women were submissive" (C 217). Koestler was not blind to his preferences and his behavior. Speaking of his partners, he stated, "I always picked one type: beautiful Cinderellas, infantile and inhibited, prone to be subdued by bullying" (quoted by C, 402). At times his bullying was indistinguishable from rape; Jill Craigie, the wife of a good friend who was a member of parliament, attested to that (see C 399-401).

On the other hand, Koestler was also prone to depression and thoughts of (also attempts at) suicide. Ultimately, he was successful at killing himself. His self-imposed death in 1983 might seem forgivable considering that he was afflicted with Parkinson's Disease and lymphatic leukemia. But he did not die alone; his third wife, Cynthia, committed suicide at the same time. Koestler's written explanation of his suicide includes this comment: "My wife decided that after thirty-four years of working together she could not face life after my death" (quoted on C 550). There is no sign that Koestler tried to dissuade her; was this his culminating act of selfishness?

Balanced against these negative characteristics, it must be said that Koestler had his brave, generous, and charming traits as well. His complex personality and tendency to participate in the great causes of the twentieth century brought him into dramatic encounters with many of the age's iconic figures. Cesarani's account of these encounters often gives us new insights into facets of the personality of such persons as W. H. Auden, Timothy Leary, Andre Malraux, Menachim Begin, Arthur Schlesinger, Bertrand Russell (with whose wife he apparently had an affair), Margaret Thatcher, Albert Camus (a great drinking companion, but one he also punched), Thomas Mann, Isaiah Berlin, David Ben-Gurion, Raymond Aron, Louis B. Mayer, George Orwell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir (with whom he had a one night stand), Edmund Wilson (with whom he was a competitor for the same woman), A. J. Ayer, Joseph McCarthy, Willy Brandt – the list could be greatly

extended.

One reading the biography is not only learning about Koestler but also about many world events. We gain insights into the complex history of Palestine and Israel from Koestler's Zionist activities and his experiences in the Holy Land. We virtually participate in the organizing activities of Communists from within and then learn how opposition to Communism came to a head. We participate vicariously in the Spanish Civil War and the chaos that was France early in the Second World War. At times it is an exhilarating ride through history. But at other times, it must be said, Cesarani as a guide exhausts us with lists of visitors and repetitive summaries. But these are minor flaws that pale when one considers what a monumental task it would be to communicate clearly what is most significant about an incredibly complicated life.

Similar to his relations to women, Koestler could muster momentary enthusiasm for living one place or another, but soon familiarity and negativity took over, and he sought another place. His restless spirit led him to live in such places as Wales, Cairo, the Swiss Alps, and Pennsylvania, but perhaps half a dozen cities seemed most like home to him: London especially but Vienna, Paris, Budapest, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv, and Berlin as well. His writing career was also spectacularly diverse. After he authored the series of political writings that established his reputation, he turned in his later life to writing about various realms of scientific history and speculation. Here his repeated emphasis on bisociation (a holding together two diverse ideas -- related to integration) and hierarchical levels of consciousness and being do indeed seem dependent on Polanyi's philosophical vision (but lacking in Polanyi's persuasiveness). At various times during his career he wrote not only novels and essays, but Jewish fairy tales, travel pieces, plays (stage and radio), memoirs, literary criticism, detective stories, film scripts -- he even was the major contributor to three encyclopedias of sexuality and initiated the leisure section of a newspaper. Whatever his topic, his general approach to writing was grounded in his early experience as a reporter.

Cesarani concludes his study by claiming that "Koestler was the classic homeless mind: the *émigré* in search of roots, the secular sceptic yearning for a faith and a Messiah. . . . His lack of self-worth, his habitual duplicity and his homelessness, which made him behave so terribly towards others, are thus rooted in his origins and his inability to resolve his identity" (C 569, 573). If, as Magda Polanyi claimed, he was an inveterate thief of the ideas of others, he was never able to internalize these ideas in a way that satisfied him. In many ways, he was the epitome of a man who could not return home because he had no home. Cesarani's subtitle is apt.

Endnotes

¹ The two men do not often cite each other's work. However, Koestler dedicated his collection of essays, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, written from 1941 to 1944, to Polanyi, thus indicating his appreciation of his older colleague.

² See *Polanyiana* 4:4 (1995), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ On Koestler's actions, see C 151. Polanyi's activity seems to have been earlier than Koestler's, perhaps because as a relative he knew of the situation first -- see Lee Congdon, *Seeing Red: Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 47. Koestler's account of Eva's experience in Ukraine is in *The Invisible Writing* (London?: Collins with Hamish Hamilton, 1954), pp. 386-387; Congdon's summary is on p. 13.

⁵ The article by Judit Szapor, "Laura Polanyi 1882-1957: Narratives of a Life," *Polanyiana* 6:2 (1997), 43-54, provides helpful background information concerning Laura and her cultural context. Incidentally, Hidegkuti claims, apparently erroneously, that the school opened in 1909 -- see *op. cit.*, 10.

⁶ *Arrow in the Blue: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 56-59. Some of the details in this paragraph have been gleaned from the as yet unpublished Scott and Moleski biography of Polanyi.

⁷ Congdon, p. 66.

⁸ Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Basil

Blackwell, 1991), p. 9. Also helpful in seeing common cultural threads in Hungary just before World War I are Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukacs and Generation 1900-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) and Levee Branc, “Georg Lukacs: The Antinomies of Melancholy,” *Other Voices* 1:1 (March, 1997) available at www.othervoices.org.

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Philippe Baumard, *Tacit Knowledge in Organizations*. Trans. by Samantha Wauchope. Thousand Oaks, CA & London: Sage Publications, 1999. pp. 272. \$78.00 (ISBN 0761953361), \$27.95 paper (ISBN 076195337x).

Tacit Knowledge in Organizations is about the use of tacit knowledge by top managers. The book has ten references specifically to Polanyi and uses the concept of the tacit—mostly from a Polanyian perspective—throughout the book. Except that Baumard assumes more than Polanyi that the tacit is associated with the unconscious, the author’s understanding of Polanyi and the tacit is sound.

Baumard argues that tacit knowledge is a potentially valuable resource that senior managers tend not to appreciate, and therefore fail to exploit well. He notes that senior managers too often equate knowledge with explicit knowledge and generally fail to note that explicit knowledge relies on tacit knowledge. Relying on Polanyi’s notion that we know more than we can say and what we say means more than we can know, the author points out how small a portion of our knowledge we can articulate. Because managers fail to appreciate tacit knowledge, they try desperately to reduce knowledge to propositional knowing and to rigidify expertise when overwhelmed by the ambiguous and unpredictable. The senior manager, further, overvalues and takes for granted his formal knowledge frameworks to the extent that they will sometimes actually hinder a more comprehensive picture from

emerging.

Clearly, Philippe wants top managers to appreciate tacit knowledge.

When top managers don’t appreciate tacit knowledge, they are apt to misinterpret problems, which ultimately results in “disconcerted organizations.” Baumard describes a situation of tormented knowledge as a situation which exists in the midst of plenty of, even too much, explicit knowledge that consequently leads the organization to be overcome by the unpredictable and the ambiguous. The resulting problems are only amenable to solution by casting the mind forward using intuition and imagination across an unspecifiable “logical gap.”

Baumard gives four case studies where four companies overcame a major crisis—but did not know how they did it. Baumard attempts to show, retrospectively, how the role of tacit knowledge was critical in each case. At the end of each case study there is a summary of what was learned. The book concludes with a grand summary called, “The Tacit Foundation of Organizations.”

Baumard has a connoisseur’s passion for knowledge and the ways of knowing; in addition to Polanyi, he talks about Castaneda, *The Art of War*, chaos theory and many philosophers from Plato to Feyerabend.

I recommend the book.

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