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A Seventy-Year Friendship

Eva Zeisel and Arthur Koestler

"The characters in this book are fictitious. The historical circumstances which determined their actions are real. The life of the man N. S. Rubashov is a synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of the so-called Moscow Trials. Several of them were personally known to the author. This book is dedicated to their memory." So writes Arthur Koestler at the start of his best-known book.

The potter and industrial designer whose married name was to be Eva Zeisel was amongst those to whom Arthur Koestler in 1940 dedicated Darkness at Noon. She had spent sixteen months in NKVD prisons, including the notorious Lubyanka in Moscow, mostly in solitary confinement, with no hope of ever getting out alive. To this day it is not clear whether her liberation was thanks to her mother's energetic fight and influence or to international pressure. Koestler blended what he learned from Eva with his own experience of prison in Spain, as well as with details of Bukharin's life, who had figured as the principal accused in a notorious show trial. Koestler used the figure of Rubashov in the novel to make clear the hideousness of the purges and show trials of the 1930s Soviet Union. A crucial element in Darkness at Noon can also be traced back to Eva's account: Rubashov, just like Bukharin, is persuaded in the interests of the party and the Soviet people to sacrifice himself, to confess to crimes he did not commit, then to be executed. In his memoirs, Koestler tells how at his meeting in London with Eva in 1938, following her release, she told him how the GPU tried to persuade her to plead guilty and admit her role in a conspiracy against Stalin. Charges against her included concealing swastikas in her designs for mass-produced tea cups and concealing two pistols under her bed so as to shoot Stalin at the next party congress.

Eva Striker and Artúr Köstler, as they were called then, were born in Budapest's sixth district in 1906 and 1905 respectively, just a few streets from each other, to assimilated Jewish middle-class families, who were on friendly terms; Artúr was sent by his parents to an experimental school for young children run by Eva's mother, Laura Polányi-Striker. The two children were in the same class, but only briefly, for—as Koestler mentions in his memoirs—his stunned parents removed him from the school after only a few months when he asked at home whether babies really were hatched from their mummies' tummies.

Eva's mother made a point of calling herself Dr Laura Polányi-Striker. Hers was an extraordinary family: her mother's salon was the meeting-point for the city's intelligentsia; her

two—later world-famous—brothers were the chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi and the economic historian Karl Polanyi; Laura obtained her doctorate in aesthetics, English literature and history at the Budapest University for a dissertation on Maria Theresa's economic policy. She was an outspoken feminist throughout her active life. According to Eva Zeisel's own account, her mother suggested she look up Koestler in Paris where he was working as a journalist. The friendship continued down the generations. "I believe he [Koestler] considered us family," she wrote in a memoir. It was thanks to these family ties, that I, as her nephew, met Arthur Koestler on a few occasions in the late 1970s.

This gives us two principal characters: an almost archetypal man and an equally archetypal woman. Koestler was the archetypal man forever following new, promising ideas and theories in the hope of a better world, investigating more humane and just societies, and daring to traverse uncharted intellectual seas; a man who, wherever he went, was awaited by a woman who worshipped him. Eva Zeisel on her part was the archetypal heroine, throughout her life creating beautiful objects, pleasing to the eye, radiating love. At the age of 70, Koestler wrote to Eva: "Yes, the world is thinning out. However, I keep telling myself 'vieillir, c'est les autres'. At any rate I have my work, and when I finish a book I get excited about the next one."

Eva Zeisel's creative aspirations were expressed in a different sphere, in a different way. In her words: "When I see my bowls in a remote village in Western India or in the restaurant at Zurich Airport, I feel like a mother who has many well-behaved children all over the world."

We learn much about this friendship from Koestler's well-known memoirs and Eva Zeisel's still unpublished recollections. In Paris in 1929 they lived in adjacent rooms in a small pension, and the womanizing writer, who said of himself that he kept a 'harem', noted at their first encounter that his new neighbour was a stunningly beautiful girl with dark hair. Eva would always have breakfast ready for Koestler after the young journalist had posted two versions of the same story at daybreak, one to a bourgeois paper, the other to a social democrat. Sometimes she would accompany him to the post office, and on one occasion she demanded to know, with reference to Koestler's report on a tidal wave, how anyone had been able to establish that the waves had been seven metres high; he responded quite firmly that readers would believe anything he wrote, provided he put it in an interesting enough way. By this stage their relationship was surely more than mere friendship, but ended in defeat for the demanding Koestler: he was unable to have independent-minded Eva to himself.

After Paris their ways parted, but a few years later, in Berlin, they would meet regularly, for neither could live outside a social circle in which Eva was every bit as popular as Koestler. I never forget how, as a visitor one summer, when my aunt was over 80, I picked up the telephone when she was out of the house: the voice of the man at the other end of the line turned from one of optimism as he learned that he had Eva's number right to one of evident disappointment when told that she was not yet a widow.

The social milieu of the relationship of their youth was a mutual circle of friends in which influences, feelings, friendships and mutual attractions created a world that was much wider than a series of couplings, yet at the same time very tight-knit, although after the 1930s their

old friends were mostly scattered all over the globe. Their conversations concerned the present and future, democracy, communism and changing the world. Eva Zeisel's recollection is that the Polányi uncles had already made them feel that all the world's problems were their personal responsibility. "Leó Szilárd and Arthur Koestler were the second generation, but they were never in doubt that if they did not interfere in the ways of the world, then theirs would be sins of omission". Eva, as she has admitted, had the impression that the Hungarians around her "were responsible for the whole world", or at least they lived, thought and acted as if they were. This group of people naturally attracted those of like mind, such as the Communist physicist Alex Weissberg, Eva's first husband, and Hans Zeisel, her second husband. Later, in the United States, Hans Zeisel would, like Koestler, fight for the abolition of the death penalty.

This intellectual social life of friendly discussions, meetings and connections swept Arthur and Eva to journeys and adventures where they found themselves in bizarrely similar circumstances as if in parallel. Koestler, disillusioned with totalitarian communism, made his way to a Spain in the throes of civil war. And while Eva was the inmate of a Soviet prison, for three months Koestler found himself awaiting execution in one of Franco's prisons in Seville.

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