

Isaac and Tamara Deutscher

The following biographical sketch was composed by Tamara Deutscher in May 1968, and formed the preface to *The Non-Jewish Jew & Other Essays*.

For appreciations of Tamara Deutscher's own life, published at the time of her death in August 1990, click below.

[‘Tamara Deutscher’](#), by Daniel Singer

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ISAAC DEUTSCHER

1907- 1967

by Tamara Deutscher

Isaac Deutscher's reputation was made first of all as a poet when at the age of sixteen his first poems were published in Polish literary periodicals. His early verse, still remembered by the scattered remnants of his reading public, has strong echoes of Jewish mysticism, motifs of Jewish history and mythology, and fuses Polish romanticism with Jewish lyrical folklore in an attempt to bridge the gulf between Polish and Yiddish culture. He also translated a great deal of Hebrew, Latin, German, and Yiddish poetry into Polish.

As an extramural student he attended lectures on literature, history, and philosophy at the medieval Jagellon University in Cracow. Evenings devoted to readings of his poems became notable events in the life of this artistic and scholarly Polish city.

At the age of eighteen he left Cracow for Warsaw; he also left poetry for literary criticism, and a more profound study of philosophy, of economics, and of Marxism. About 1927 he joined the outlawed Polish Communist Party and very soon became the chief editor of the clandestine and semi-clandestine communist press. In 1931 he travelled widely in the U.S.S.R., acquainting himself with the economic conditions of the country under its first Five Year Plan. He declined offers of academic positions at the Universities of Moscow and Minsk as a professor of history of socialism and Marxist theory. In the following year he was expelled from the Communist Party.

The official reason for his expulsion was that he 'exaggerated the danger of Nazism and was spreading panic in the communist ranks'. Soon after his return from the U.S.S.R. he had founded, together with three or four comrades, the first anti-Stalinist opposition in the Polish Communist Party. His group protested against the party line according to which Social Democracy and Nazism were 'not antipodes but twins'; and when one day the communist underground papers came out with the headline 'Danger of Barbarism Over Europe', the chief editor was expelled from the party and excommunicated. From that day two sleuths shadowed him: one employed by the Polish police, and the other a volunteer from the Stalinist party cell.

In April 1939 Isaac Deutscher left Warsaw for London as a correspondent of a Polish-Jewish paper which had employed him for fourteen years as a proof reader. It was his good fortune that, when the war broke

out and he was cut off from his income, a Yiddish newspaper in London rejected his contribution. This compelled him to apply himself with the utmost energy and zeal to learning English. Flanked by dictionaries, grammars, and textbooks, he wrote his first article in English and sent it off to *The Economist*. It was published the following week and from that time his contributions appeared regularly.

In 1940 Isaac Deutscher joined the Polish Army in Scotland, but most of his 'army life' was spent in the punitive camps as a 'dangerous and subversive element' - the return for his unceasing protests against the anti-semitism rampant in that army. Released in 1942, he joined the staff of *The Economist* and became its expert on Soviet affairs, military commentator, and chief European correspondent. He also joined the staff of *The Observer* for which he became, inter alia, a roving European correspondent writing under the pen-name Peregrine.

In 1946-7 he left Fleet Street and regular journalism for less ephemeral work. *Stalin, A Political Biography* was published in 1949. Described as 'the most controversial biography of our time', it went into very many editions and appeared in a dozen languages. The enlarged 1967 edition contains a postscript on Stalin's last years.

The publication of *Stalin* led to the recognition of Isaac Deutscher as an authority on Soviet affairs and the historian of the Russian revolution; his *Trotsky* trilogy - *The Prophet Armed* (1954), *The Prophet Unarmed* (1959) and *The Prophet Outcast* (1963) - established his reputation also as a master of English prose. His biography of Trotsky is based on detailed research into the Trotsky Archives at Harvard University. Much of the material contained in the third volume is unique, for he received special permission from Trotsky's widow, the late Natalya Sedov, to read through the Closed Section of the Archives which, by the will of Trotsky himself, is to remain unopened till the end of the century.

Isaac Deutscher planned to conclude his biographical series with a study of Lenin, and he often expressed the hope that his works would be seen as 'a single essay in a Marxist analysis of the revolution of our age and also as a triptych of some artistic unity'.

As G. M. Trevelyan Lecturer at Cambridge University for 1966-7, Deutscher addressed overflow audiences and was rewarded by their extraordinary attentiveness and warm-hearted response. The same response was granted him during his six weeks' stay at the State University of New York at Binghamton, Harpur College, and also when he lectured at New York University, Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia in the spring of 1967. The G. M. Trevelyan Lectures, under the title *The Unfinished Revolution*, appeared almost simultaneously in fourteen or fifteen countries. But none of his books, though they went into many editions and were translated into many languages, has so far been published in the countries of the Soviet bloc. There is evidence, however, that even there he has not a few courageous and devoted readers.

A speaker of spellbinding powers and a debater of great argumentative force, Isaac Deutscher frequently addressed large audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1965 he took part in the first Teach-In on Vietnam, in the course of which fifteen thousand students gathered on the Berkeley University campus to listen to his indictment of the Cold War.

[Note: A recording of his lecture at this event can be accessed via the Related Links page of this site]

Such was Isaac Deutscher's extraordinary vitality that, although engaged almost single-handed on his

monumental literary work, he still followed the course of current politics with passionate interest, and for fourteen years his analyses of major international events were widely read in the main newspapers in Europe, in the U.S.A., Canada, Japan, India, and Latin America.

He worked till the very last day of his life and died in Rome on 19 August 1967.

Tamara Deutscher: 1913-1990

By Daniel Singer, published in The Independent, August 10th 1990.

TAMARA DEUTSCHER, although a gifted writer and intellectual in her own right, devoted most of her active life first to collaborating closely with her husband, the well-known socialist historian Isaac Deutscher, and then to perpetuating the influence of his ideas.

She was born Tamara Lebenhaft in 1913 in Lodz, the Polish Manchester, in an intellectual family that was to be almost entirely wiped out by the Holocaust. Having gone to school in her home town and then to college in Belgium, she came to Britain in 1940 after the fall of France and lived here most of her adult life. Indeed, it was in wartime London that she took the crucial decision that was to shape that life.

A beautiful young woman of great charm and a budding literary critic, Tamara was greatly admired in the highest circles of the Polish government in exile, with which she was professionally connected. But she chose as partner for life a fellow Pole who was for them an outcast, the very enemy of the establishment, the socialist and Marxist writer Isaac Deutscher, who was then at the beginning of his journalistic career.

The two travelled together as war and post-war correspondents in Germany. Tamara, however, decided to interrupt her own career, convinced as she was that Isaac was destined to accomplish more lasting things. She encouraged him when he, in turn, chose to give up journalism and devote himself full-time to writing books. There followed a long period of intensive creative activity.

These were also the years of the Cold War and, therefore, of awkward, painful isolation. In their ivory tower, Tamara was not only the wife and mother of their beloved Martin, she was a most efficient assistant, a thorough researcher, a devoted critic. The books, notably the three-volume biography of Trotsky (1954-63), were at the same time, as she put it, deep "links in their friendship". By the mid-sixties came the psychological reward. Deutscher's books were no longer just greeted with critical acclaim. They were a source of inspiration to an entirely new generation brought into politics by the movement against the war in Vietnam. But they were to have very little time to enjoy this new mood. In 1967 Tamara's world was shattered by Isaac's sudden death.

In the many years that followed she did show, to some extent, what she had sacrificed in order to help in a major intellectual venture. Her essays and reviews revealed a lively pen, a witty mind, a critical spirit. She produced, *inter alia*, a Lenin anthology (*Not By Politics Alone*). Others, notably Professor E.H. Carr, could now get an idea what a valuable assistant and collaborator she could be.

And yet, to a very large extent, she went on with her former task. Devoting her time to the Deutscher memorial prize committee, editing and prefacing his books and essays, preserving and extending the

circle of younger friends, notably of the *New Left Review*, she had the feeling of remaining true to the cause of genuine socialism.

These last months, as the countries of Eastern European were opting for capitalism and the Western world was proclaiming the end of history, the wind clearly was not blowing in her direction. She would have preferred, say, if her former compatriots had chosen other gods, or rather no god at all. But this did not shake her fundamental confidence. She had a sense of perspective and had no doubt that, sooner rather than later, the monumental Trotsky trilogy would have a seminal influence in Russia and throughout the former Soviet empire. Altogether, she was convinced that the crucial choice she had made was not only highly rewarding in personal terms, but was also historically right, whatever the current odds.

Daniel Singer

Tamara Lebenhaft, writer, born Lodz 1 February 1913, married 1947 Isaac Deutscher (died 1967; one son), died London 7 August 1990.

An historic partnership

by Ralph Miliband, published in The Guardian, August 9th 1990.

TAMARA Deutscher who died on Tuesday [August 7th 1990] at the age of 77, was best known as Isaac Deutscher's collaborator; and their partnership was indeed very close, never more so than in the years of work that went into Deutscher's three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky. She was an accomplished linguist, a lucid writer, and a painstaking and critical scholar. She was born in Poland, worked there as a journalist, and came to England at the beginning of the second world war, when she met and married Isaac. They had one son, Martin.

Everyone who knew Tamara admired the courage and resilience with which she bore the dreadful blow of Isaac's sudden death in 1967 at the age of 60. From then onwards, she dedicated much energy to the publication of collections of his essays in book form, among them *Russia, China and the West* (1970), *Marxism in our Time* (1971), and *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions* (1984). She also edited and published *The Young Lenin*, which was the first chapter of a biography of Lenin on which Isaac was working when he died; and she was a devoted member of the jury of the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize.

For some years she was the greatly-valued collaborator of E. H. Carr, in the preparation of the final volumes of his *History of Soviet Russia*; and she wrote some penetrating essays and reviews. Tamara Deutscher was a great admirer of Trotsky; and she was delighted, a few short weeks before her death, to take part in a film on Trotsky, based on home movie footage. On the other hand, she was no blind worshipper, of Trotsky or anyone else, and she took an impatient view of the sectarian squabbles of groups which claimed Trotsky's inheritance.

She was an independent, tough-minded socialist in the classical Marxist mode. She followed the transformations which were occurring in her native Poland and in the Soviet Union with passionate interest, but also with apprehension about the direction in which they were moving. "Yet it moves", she wrote in a letter on July 1, but added: "Whether it moves in a direction quite congenial to us is another matter".

Her earliest political memory, she sometimes recalled, was of a tramway strike in Lodz, caused by the employment for the first time of a Jewish driver; and she was saddened by the evidence of the renewed vitality of ancient prejudices. So, too, did she deplore the uncritical worship of the "free market economy" in ex-Communist countries. But she rejoiced in the interest shown in Isaac's work in Poland, Hungary and the USSR, and was eagerly awaiting the proposed translations of some of his books in those countries.

She remained to the end utterly faithful to her life-long conviction, which were tempered with a sharp sense of irony and humour. Her interests ranged very wide and she had a deep knowledge and appreciation of music, literature and the theatre. She had a large circle of devoted friends, and was close to members of the editorial board of *New Left Review*. "What will Tamara' think?" was a question which mattered to many people.