

# TWO LIVES – ONE CENTURY: MANÈS SPERBER AND ARTHUR KOESTLER

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Arthur Koestler will be considered in the light of Manès Sperber and compared with him, the aim being to elucidate certain features of Koestler's personality and certain aspects of his work and to prompt new questions.

## 1. Life story and personality

The names of Koestler and Sperber are uttered in the same breath in countless publications, so that a comparison suggests itself automatically.

*Almost like twins ...*

Their biographies have an amazing amount in common: both were born in 1905, were Jewish, lived and worked at some of the same places, were preoccupied with Zionism, joined the Communist Party but then left it. Both achieved world fame with their literary treatment of the experience of totalitarianism in the well-known novels *Wie eine Träne im Ozean (Like a Tear in the Ocean)* (Sperber) and *Sonnenfinsternis (Darkness At Noon)* (Koestler). On the whole, their biographies tend more towards the paradigmatic rather than being untypical of Jewish intellectuals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*... and yet completely different in their subject matter, their thinking and their language*

The comparison brings out their unique individuality: the variety of the themes, the strict logic and the uniformity of Sperber's terms of reference (Adler/Marx) contrast perceptibly with the diverse themes tackled by Koestler - his unconventional approach to terms of reference and the intensity of his language.

*... and in their personalities*

Sperber and Koestler were both obsessive. Sperber's obsession throughout his life is fixed on his criticism of totalitarianism, whereas Koestler devotes himself to a variety of topics. Koestler is more inclined to polarize and Sperber to integrate.

## 2. Attitude to the Jewish question

There is a difference in the socialization of their Jewishness: Sperber grew up in East Galicia in a Hasidic family and later joined the left-wing Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair in Vienna. Sperber was an atheist but maintained his links with Jewish traditions. Koestler came from an assimilated Jewish family. On moving to Vienna, he joined a student fraternity, where he discovered a revisionist variant of Zionism; Jewish traditions and religious feelings were on the whole alien to him. The differences in their attitudes to Judaism, Zionism, Israel, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust can be interpreted as an expression of the socialization of their Jewishness.

### 3. Experience and literary treatment of Communism

Sperber is a reliable heretic. His socialist attitudes remained consistent throughout his life; his criticism of Communism was directed against the compromising of ideals rather than against the ideals themselves. Koestler's experience of Communism was just a phase in his life. And his criticism of Communism was limited in duration but was all the more conclusive for that.

#### *Effect*

The most telling effect of their criticism of Communism was developed in their great novels. Koestler made a greater impact in the Anglo-Saxon and Romance-language countries, Sperber in the German-speaking world. With Koestler this impact was more immediate, whereas with Sperber it tended to be more long-lasting.

#### *Style of the retrospective treatment*

In his biographical writings, Koestler often allows short episodes to move rigorously and dramatically towards their crucial points and links them together, whereas with Sperber there is more of an epic, associative element, so that the full effect only emerges in the biographical texts as a whole.

#### *Epilogue*

Although Sperber wrote more about Koestler, and more personally, than the latter did about him, there are nevertheless indications that there was a certain symmetry to their friendship.

#### **Most important literature (without Koestler's texts)**

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