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Notes of a Psi-Watcher

Koestler Money Down the Psi-Drain?

IN MARCH 1983, after a long, dramatic career, Arthur Koestler ended his life dramatically by killing himself. He and his wife, Cynthia, were found dead in their home near London, both having taken overdoses of barbiturates. The Hungarian-born writer, age 77, had been suffering from terminal leukemia. His wife, in her fifties, was not ill. A suicide note expressed Koestler's "timid hopes for a depersonalized afterlife beyond due confines of space, time, and matter, and beyond the limits of our comprehension."

Koestler's intellectual pilgrimage falls into three parts: (1) active communist, (2) active anti-communist and author of the influential anti-Stalinist novel *Darkness at Noon*, which made him famous, and (3) active promoter of the paranormal. Koestler was firmly convinced that parapsychology is ushering in a new Copernican Revolution.

The Koestlers left a will in which about \$750,000 was set aside for the endowment of a chair of parapsychology at a United Kingdom university. Oxford, Cambridge, and other leading universities declined the endowment on the grounds that it would cast doubt on their other research programs. Only two finally sought the funding: the University of Wales, at Cardiff, and the University of Edinburgh. Koestler's trustees finally gave it to Edinburgh.

Earlier, retired businessman Instone Bloomfield, a friend of Koestler, had independently established a Koestler Foundation. He announced that he would increase Koestler's endowment by another \$750,000 if the chairman of the new department planned a research program that his foundation approved.

At the time of this writing, the chairman has not yet been chosen. However, a psychologist at Edinburgh and one of the leading figures in British parapsychology, John Beloff, was a good friend of Koestler. Beloff's *New Directions in Parapsychology* (1974) has a postscript by Koestler. Although Beloff is noted for the negative results of his experiments, especially when he tried to replicate U.S. tests of psi, he is a firm believer in the paranormal, including the psi powers of the great mediums of the past, and in the powers of modern psychics like Uri Geller and Ted Serios.

Beloff has always been enormously impressed by the fact that the Scottish medium D. D. Home was never caught cheating, but he is not in the least dismayed that other famous mediums, such as Eusapia Palladino, were often caught in deception. In an article in *Encounter* (January 1980), he wrote: "Everyone knew that she [Palladino] would cheat if given half a chance to do so; but skeptics prefer to forget that the effects

she could achieve in this way were quite feeble and that her most spectacular seances were conducted under the most stringent conditions. . . ." In our own time, he continues, we have Uri Geller, now generally considered a mere entertainer. "He, too, is probably a mixture of the genuine and fraudulent." This view of Uri was shared by Koestler. Koestler was described as "visibly shaken" when he once saw Uri produce bursts in a Geiger counter, though he conceded later that Geller also at times resorted to trickery.

In 1975, Beloff reviewed three books about Geller: Geller's autobiography, Andrija Puharich's biography, and John Taylor's *Superminds*, in which Uri is the hero. Beloff opens this lengthy review (*Journal of Parapsychology*, September 1975, pp. 242-50) by deploring the tendency of his colleagues to turn away from Uri because of his money-grubbing show-biz background. "This attitude, though understandable, is, I am convinced, profoundly misguided. It is just possible that Geller may prove to be the most gifted all-round psychic subject that there has ever been, not excluding D. D. Home!"

"The Geller case," he continues, "has long since passed the point where it is sensible to doubt that Geller possesses paranormal powers. . . ." To support this, Beloff cites Uri's die test at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International), which he considers impossible to explain by deception. (This was written before information about the die test leaked out proving it to have been almost totally uncontrolled. See my *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus*, pp. 106-08, and "How Not to Test a Psychic: The Great SRI Die Mystery," in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Winter 1982-83, pp. 33-39.)

Beloff regards Uri's ESP and PK powers as so "indisputable" that he con-

siders it a "waste of time" to debate their "basic authenticity." The most indisputable, he argues, are those feats that Geller performs on order: fork-bending, starting stopped watches, and clairvoyance. His less predictable miracles, such as dematerializations and teleportations, "so familiar to those who have had the good fortune to work closely with Geller," are not quite so indisputable. Geller just *might* have used trickery.

In the review, Beloff considers the notorious incident in 1973 when Geller, as he himself described it, was bodily teleported from the east side of Manhattan to Puharich's house thirty miles away in Ossining. Beloff concedes that Geller *could* have been playing a joke, but he adds: "I ask these questions because I want to emphasize that, where Geller is concerned, nothing should be allowed to go by default and nothing is too fantastic to be worth probing." Earlier cases in which powerful mediums were similarly teleported are cited. The tales may sound like the *Arabian Nights*, he admits, but "the word *impossible* does not belong in the vocabulary of parapsychology."

"Some people," Beloff goes on, find Uri "exasperating, but many more quickly succumb to his boyish charm and striking good looks. But what should make him of interest to readers of this journal is that his life, by all accounts, has been one prolonged poltergeist episode with amazing things happening at every turn. While, in the usual case, the poltergeist focus loses his [*sic*] powers in childhood, in Geller's case they appear to go from strength to strength as he gets older. He may well have reached the peak of his powers and, if we neglect him now, posterity may not lightly forgive us. The fact that he lacks the docile temperament to make a good experimental subject should not deter us. Great psychics, like



great geniuses in any field, are so rare and so precious we have to learn to accept them as we find them.”

Puharich’s crazy book, *Uri*, is criticized by Beloff on the grounds that Puharich was blind to the possibility that the tapes made by Geller, on which voices from UFOs were heard (before the cassettes mysteriously dematerialized or were erased), were not (as Puharich claimed) from extraterrestrials who were pumping psi power into Uri. More likely they were recordings made by Uri’s PK. A photograph in Puharich’s book purports to show three flying saucers. Beloff is of the opinion that this was a “typical Serios effect.” He is here referring to Ted Serios, the Chicago bellhop who claimed the ability to project his thought pictures onto Polaroid film. Beloff has written elsewhere about Serios, who he thinks was a powerful psychic.

John Taylor is praised for his

pioneer work with children who bend metal, and congratulated on having the privilege of being among the first to “witness some authentic bending phenomena with these subjects, whose powers usually seem to desert them when they are placed in a controlled situation.” It never occurs to Beloff that this may be because the children previously cheated. Taylor, by the way, later repudiated his ridiculous book and concluded that Geller is a fraud and that paranormal metal-bending does not exist.

By 1981, when Beloff addressed the 24th Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association, in Syracuse, he had become more skeptical of Geller, though not of the “Geller-effect.” He expressed his continued belief in its reality and said it had been strongly confirmed by the metal-bending of the French magician-turned-psychic Jean-Pierre Girard. “Indeed,” declared Beloff,

“the tests carried out by Crussard on the French metal-bender Girard were about as conclusive as one could well imagine . . .” (For details on these amateurishly designed tests see Randi’s book *Flim-Flam!*) It does not bother Beloff in the least that Girard, like Geller, was once a stage magician or that the metallurgist Charles Crussard is as naïve and ignorant of conjuring methods as himself. “If the effect is a real one . . .,” Beloff said, in the most sensible remark of his address, “it ought not be beyond the wit of man to prove it.”

Here is how Beloff ended his rhapsodic 1975 review:

After reading these three volumes it occurs to me that what we need even more than another good experimental investigation of Geller is a really reliable, detailed, and documented biography. And this work should be started as soon as possible while those connected with Geller are still available for questioning. If any wealthy benefactors would care to finance such an enterprise, they may be assured that parapsychology would be permanently in their debt.

At the time I write, the question of whether Beloff will be in a position to carry out this great project remains in doubt. He has stated that he has no

desire to chair the new department, but even if he is not appointed his input into how the funds will be used will be formidable. An objective biography of Uri would be of great interest. It is just possible we might learn how he managed to fly from Manhattan to Ossining, or how he was able to teleport Wellington, Puharich’s dog, through the walls of Puharich’s house.

There are hopeful signs that Beloff may be entertaining serious doubts about some of the phenomena he considered unassailable a few years ago. His office recently issued an official report of his investigation of a self-styled psychic identified only by the pseudonym of “Tim.” At Beloff’s request, Randi supplied detailed protocols by which Tim could be caught cheating, and Beloff—with considerable misgivings, which are expressed in his report—did adopt Randi’s simple procedures. The young man was caught blatantly cheating.

If the University of Edinburgh is capable of making sure that research conducted by the new department is in the hands of persons who know the meaning of “stringent controls” and who have the wisdom and courage to seek the help of the only experts on deception, the magicians, then perhaps the Koestler fortune will not flow down the usual psi drain. ●