

Billington, James H., contribution to 'An American Remembrance' of Isaiah Berlin held at the British Embassy in Washington on 28 January 1998; repr. as one of three biographical memoirs of IB in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 150 no. 4 (December 2006), 663–72, at 664–6

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## Tribute by James H. Billington

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The amazing man we remember and honour tonight populated, loved, exemplified and enriched at least four distinct worlds: four concentric circles into each of which he radiated powerful waves of thought.

The inner circle was Oxford and the microworlds within it: old ones like Corpus, New College and All Souls; the new one he created with Wolfson; the special one he created at Headington with Aline.

He enlivened Britain, our gracious host tonight, and Isaiah's broader, second circle – its academy, its opera, both its traditions and its scepticism, and its enduring decency.

His third circle was even wider – encompassing all of Europe – its many languages and literatures, its varying forms of art and modes of philosophising.

He was a one-man European community, his own simultaneous translator, the creator of an expansive pantheon that stretched from Vico and Verdi in the Mediterranean to Hamann and Herder in the Baltic, from the young Marx to the old de Maistre, from fragments of the pre-Socratics to the undeconstructed Jane Austen.

He brought the third and first circles together with characteristic brio in his great set piece comparing Oxford colleges to the countries of Europe.

The fourth circle, enriching all the other three, was his modern Jewish sensibility. The Europe of Moses Hess, the Britain of Benjamin Disraeli, the Oxford of Isaiah Berlin. Unique perspectives and the hidden burden of great names: Moses, Israel, Isaiah.

He was a very sunny son of Britain, the only great power that fought against Hitler from the very beginning to the very end of World War II; and a believer in the New Israel that emerged from that war: a secular but moral state which like the Old Israel was meant to realise justice in time in a world too long preoccupied with extending power in space.

To have affected all four of these circles would be an amazing accomplishment even for a relatively long life span. But Isaiah also deeply touched two other worlds on the periphery of Europe: Russia and America.

I was fortunate to have him as my doctoral supervisor, meeting with him about every three weeks for two-and-a-half years during and just after the last days of Stalin. He sat by a great stack of shillings with which he periodically fed the inadequate and flickering heating element in his tower room at All Souls. He often graciously cut me in on part of the conversation he had just had, or was about to have, with the continuous procession of gloomy Europeans, displaced Russians and itinerant Americans who were forever tramping up that cold staircase to see him.

But how did this extraordinarily generous, totally unpatronising teacher have such an extraordinary impact on his time that reached so far beyond those who knew him personally? Not, of course, through any traditional academic magnum opus and not just through the extended essays and sparkling conversation that we all treasured. But, I would contend, in four rather unique ways that connected learning with life and that have left a lasting legacy and, like all these words, began with the letter L.

First: the Lectures. Diana didn't need a title; Isaiah didn't need a professorship. But he couldn't resist a name like Chichele, and he turned a chair into a fountain that had already overflowed at Bryn Mawr, in the Mellon lectures here in Washington, and in his lectures on Russian thought at Harvard in the late 1940s. I first discovered Isaiah through someone else's notes of Isaiah's Harvard lectures, in which he brought back to life the creative and individualistic Russia of Herzen and Tolstoy.

That, unfortunately, was not the Russia of the late Stalin era, as Isaiah warned in his second vehicle of outreach: his Letters – a series of them in the early 1950s through which, once again, I met Isaiah in absentia. The letters were not addressed to me, then a very junior Army officer, but to some very senior US Government officials whom I was serving as an aide and a filter. These letters provided the best description of the inner dynamics of the Soviet system I have ever read, helping key Americans of that time understand that the Soviet system had a certain logic and inertial force that could not be easily rolled back but should not be accommodated and would not last for ever.

The third L is that through which the great teacher reached people inside Russia itself. Isaiah, not exactly as the prophet, but as the great story-teller who revalidated in our time, even amidst all its indecencies, the Legend of Liberty.

The BBC lectures in 1952, his famous essay on two concepts of liberty, his own blend of Mill's reasoning with Schiller's spirit of play and his continuing link with the best in a Russia that he knew as a boy; the Russia that produced probably the greatest constellation of poets in this century.

As with his lectures and letters, I discovered his legend in absentia sitting in the Moscow kitchen of the widow of the poet Osip Mandelstam in the late 1960s and listening to her describe what Isaiah's celebrated long evening with the other great poet Anna Akhmatova had meant to both of those senselessly bereaved women – and how fascinated with Isaiah had been the old Pasternak and was the rising young Brodsky. As I listened to Nadezhda Mandelstam that evening tell me things I never knew about a man she'd never met, I realised that good Russians inside Russia were happy – even proud – that Isaiah had lived the life they might have had – rather the way Russians a century earlier were grateful that Herzen in London had seen so much for all of them and helped keep a culture alive in difficult times.

This brings me to my last letter L – the living links Isaiah forged in recent years with some of the godfathers of the new Russia: Isaiah was a guest scholar at the Library of Congress in the fall of 1988 at a time when Andrei Sakharov was also in Washington. Sakharov was ill and tired when he met Isaiah but was revived and seemed exhilarated by Isaiah's stream of elegant St. Petersburg Russian, which was itself a kind of poetry.

Just a few months ago in St Petersburg, I had a long conversation with Dimitri Likhachev, Sakharov's main defender within the Soviet Academy of Sciences and, in many ways, Sakharov's successor as the conscience of Russia. Likhachev is a lonely survivor of the first of the twentieth century's death camps, Arctic Solovetsk of the 1920s. He is today, at 91, the last living representative of the pre-revolutionary culture of the city in which Isaiah was born – just as Akhmatova was its last great lady.

Likhachev became highly animated as he described a long conversation he had with Isaiah at Oxford last year, smiling as we all do when recalling meetings with Isaiah. Likhachev spoke warmly of Petersburg's creative and cosmopolitan past and of the new Russia which he believed would better honor the variety of peoples who had always been there. Isaiah had clearly started off another wonderful train of thought, and as I left Likhachev's flat, a new student generation was climbing up the unheated staircase to meet with him. It reminded me of earlier processions up the stairs long ago at All Souls. It gave me the warm feeling that Isaiah, who helped us understand so much of the twentieth century, was still sending out rays of light and liberty and hope for the twenty-first.

Alas, the champagne with which we toast the passing of time – the pink champagne, I like to think of a Jerusalem sunset – has lost for ever the sparkling effervescence of this great and good man.