A NEW WOMAN IN RUSSIA

The personality and vicissitudes of Ivy Litvinov are a good deal odder than those of her famous husband, and Mr Carswell's account of them is full, precise, vivid and very enjoyable.

Ivy's father was one of the 11 children of Maximilian Loewe, a Hungarian of Jewish origin who took part in the Hungarian revolution of 1848. After it was crushed by Russian troops, he fled to London, changed his name to Lowe, was converted to Anglicanism, and pursued a moderately successful business career. Two of his sons were knighted for services to the Conservative cause. His son Walter was less successful – after Cambridge he became a Fabian, worked in a correspondence college with H. G. Wells, with whom he remained on friendly terms) and married Louise Baker, who came of a long line of Indian Army officers.

Their daughter, Ivy Therese, retained the traits of both these very disparate traditions. Her family moved in a politically progressive milieu, the strongest influence upon her was probably that of her aunt Edith and her husband, David Eder, a remarkable, unjustly forgotten figure. Also a Jew, by profession a physician, he was at once a Fabian, a close friend of Shaw and Wells and one of the founders of the Labour party, almost the earliest disciple and champion of Freud in England, and with this a passionate, active, lifelong Zionist and a defender of the British Empire as a progressive and beneficent institution – and, by all accounts, a man of exceptional integrity, warmth of heart, generosity and charm.

Born in 1889, Ivy was a typically emancipated 'new woman' of her time, bold, headstrong, deliberately irreverent, *revoltée* and heterodox on principle, passionate, warm-hearted, observant, amusing, tactless, giving herself recklessly to people and to causes, not unlike her contemporary Rebecca West, but kind and neither obsessed nor egomaniacal. Her love was not politics but literature. She read and read; she read novels and poetry, and she wished to write, and later in her life she did. She liked Richardson and Fielding (a little less), Henry James and Gissing, D. H. Lawrence

(whom she knew), and much later, Henry Green, Auden, MacNeice, Adrian Bell. that she read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Gorky goes without saying. But most of all she adored Jane Austen, Trollope and Proust. It was in the circle of Dr Eder and his socialist friends that she first men Maxim Litvinov, like her paternal grandfather a political exile but psychologically her opposite in almost every respect.

Born Meir Wallach in the city of Bialystock on the borders of Russia and Poland, he was conscripted into the Tsar's army, and, unusually for a Jew (Jews were debarred from being commissioned), chose to remain in military service for some time. Like other members of oppressed minorities, he drifted into the revolutionary movement, and after being duly imprisoned, left Russia for the West. He moved from Paris to London as an accredited Bolshevik agent.

He was an exceedingly able, solid, serious, practical man, with little interest in the finer points of ideology which deeply divided Russian revolutionaries. His gifts were those of a wholly dependable executive, ready to perform any task assigned to him; he soon became clear that of all the Russian political exiles the Bolsheviks were the toughest and most single-minded, and that of them all, Lenin was the hardest and most realistic, least liable to debilitating doubts and self questioning. (It was doubtless for similar reasons that after Lenin's death he took Stalin's side against Trotsky: he was not dazzled by visions of intellectual brilliance; he believed in careful preparation and effective tactical steps.)

Lenin realised that in this man (who had finally chosen the name Litvinov by which he would be known to history) he had found an ideal subordinate, and entrusted him with the organisation of the party – particularly its finances – in London.

Review of John Carswell, *The Exile: A Life of Ivy Litvinov*
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