

INTRODUCTION

by Peter Osnos

In late summer 1965, as I.F. Stone scrambled to find a replacement for an assistant who had landed a job at *The New Republic*, he took me to lunch at a restaurant in Washington, D.C.'s small Chinatown. We had, as I recalled, fish with ginger, wrapped in paper and dipped in boiling water. I was twenty-one and working for the *Providence Journal* in one of their local bureaus. Stone offered me \$100 per week and said I would earn every penny. I stayed until the following summer, got a raise to \$110 and an education in journalism (or what Izzy would have called "being a newspaperman") worth millions.

This was a particularly good period, personally and professionally, for Stone and his four-page *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. After years of being so hard-of-hearing that he had to wear an elaborate headset with antenna, making him look like a bespectacled Martian, Izzy's ears had been repaired by a doctor (Cohen was his name) who had performed the same operation on Chairman Mao. Many people would still talk to him as though he was deaf, especially on the phone, so speaking and listening habits of years duration were being relearned. Even news gathering was different. Izzy was especially well known for poring through transcripts and finding nuggets other reporters would miss. Now he could actually hear what was being said at events like press conferences. Izzy was naturally gregarious and excited to be part of any and all conversations. But he needed to also retain his relentless pursuit of news, hidden in the recesses of papers and documents other reporters largely ignored. His restored ears were both a thrill and a distraction.

The political tenor of the time was also working to his benefit. In the first half of the 1960s, the youthful idealism of the Kennedy years, as expressed in such ways as the Peace Corps, the Freedom Riders, and sit-ins, was evolving into what soon became the campus-based anti—Vietnam War and civil rights movements. This also coincided with the emergence of what was known as the New Left. The Old Left of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s was exhausted by the alliances and battles of that era: the Popular Fronts, for example; the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 and the Anglo-Soviet-U.S. partnership of World War II's later years; the sour loyalty tests of the Cold War and McCarthyism; the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Six months before the Hungarian upheaval, Izzy visited Moscow and wrote what turned into one of his most famous citations: "I feel like a swimmer under water who must rise to the surface or his lungs will burst. Whatever the consequences, I have to say what I really feel after seeing the Soviet Union and carefully studying the statements of its leading officials. *This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men.*"

History's view of the Kremlin has hardened considerably over the years, but at the time, only a decade after the Allies had defeated the Nazis, to break with Moscow in this way was a radical move—all the more so because Stone did not veer sharply to the anti-Communist right as so many other apostates of that era did. He held to his convictions about free expression, human rights, and the dangers of using anti-communism as justification for war in countries with nationalist aspirations—Vietnam, for instance. These positions made Izzy especially attractive to the New Left, whose manifestos, like the Students for a Democratic Society's Port Huron statement of 1962, rejected Communist orthodoxies but argued for profound social change at home and around the world. Izzy was already decades older than the students and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. But his writing was so vigorous, fresh, and clever that he appealed to this new generation with humor as well as insight. He was older and wiser, yet still able to identify with the instincts of the young.

In a 1969 piece called "In Defense of the Campus Rebels," Izzy wrote, "My boyhood idol was the saintly anarchist Kropotkin. I looked down on college degrees and felt that a man should do only what was sincere and true and without thought of mundane advancement. This provided lofty reasons for not doing homework. I majored in philosophy with the vague thought of teaching it, but though I revered two of my professors, I disliked the smell of a college faculty. I dropped out in my third year to go back to newspaper work. Those were the '20s and I was a pre-depression radical. So I might be described I suppose as a premature New Leftist, though I never had the urge to burn anything down...." Then, after affirming his own objections to the intolerance and violence pursued by some in the antiwar and civil rights movements, he concluded, "I feel about the rebels as Erasmus did about Luther. Erasmus helped inspire the Reformation but was repelled by the man who brought it to fruition....I feel that the New Left and the black revolutionaries are doing God's work, too, in refusing any longer to submit to evil, and challenging society to reform or crush them."

Izzy entertained his readers and forced them to examine their beliefs. This refusal to be doctrinaire and his exuberance (despite the sometimes intimidating erudition that went with it) was a vast asset to his expanding circle of readers. The *Weekly's* circulation climbed from 5,000 in 1953 to 70,000 when he ended it in 1971 and shifted his main writing to *The New York Review of Books*. He was treasured by his friends, like Bernard Fall, the great Washington-based French-born expert on Vietnam, whom Izzy admired for his knowledge and his *savoir faire* (Fall was killed by a mine in Vietnam in 1967), and Richard Dudman, the dapper and daring Washington correspondent of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, who had run-ins with both the Khmer Rouge and the Viet Cong. But it was a major challenge to be his assistant.

I was expected to have read thoroughly by 7:30 A.M. *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and several other out-of-town newspapers (though, mercifully, not *Le Monde*, the Paris paper that Izzy seemed to most admire). In the course of my day, I would swing by the Capitol and the State Department to collect handouts, read the wire services, attend hearings and press conferences, and generally cover the beat the extended, as did Izzy's interests, very widely. He liked to say "there is a great story hanging from every tree," but to me it seemed that there were a great many trees. Stone's home and office was at 5618 Nebraska Avenue in northwest Washington. I worked in the basement, maintained the enormous clip file, and was summoned upstairs by buzzer. The kitchen was on the way and Izzy's wife, Esther, who as circulation manager was the *Weekly's* only other employee, kept a supply of peanut butter and other snacks in the fridge that maintained my stamina as the day wore on. In the evening, I digested the *Congressional Record* and other formidable official publications in search of revelations. Izzy also encouraged me to write my own pieces and gave me a fistful of bylines, an honor rarely accorded an apprentice.

Izzy would take the finished *Weekly* to his printer, McDonald and Eudy, on Wednesdays and then celebrate with dinner out and a movie. Sometimes Izzy and Esther went dancing, which they both adored, and for years, their summer routine included traveling across the Atlantic on oceanliners because they especially enjoyed the nightly *dansants*. By Sunday morning Izzy was in full stride again on the next week's issue and so, therefore, was I. In retrospect, I recognize the enormous benefits and experience I derived from my year with Izzy, but at the time the long-term gains were obscured by the torrential work load and the fact that I was too busy to satisfy a growing urge to kick up my own heels a bit.

Someday when I go through the papers I have stored in various trunks and boxes, I hope to find the letter Izzy sent me after I left the *Weekly*. I was working in London as the assistant editor on *The Washington Post's* news service and writing occasionally for the paper as a stringer. (This position, for all its obvious virtues, actually paid less than the *Weekly* did, \$80 a week). The message of the letter was that having endured my tenure as an assistant, I was now eligible for friendship. And that is what happened.

Over the next thirty-three years until he died on June 18, 1989, Izzy and I were very good friends. Once in the late 1960s, I had a book review in the *Post* of a new work by Herbert Marcuse, a dense, philosophical tract by a much-admired German émigré icon of the New Left. Stone told the *Post* operator to tell me that Marcuse was calling and then, in his distinctive high-pitched voice, tried to impersonate a German accent. When I challenged the caller's identity, he feigned outrage that I would critique him in the newspaper and then defy him on the phone. I was, among other things, very flattered that Izzy had noticed the piece. Over the next decade as I worked abroad for *The Washington Post* in Vietnam and Moscow, Izzy would take me to lunch whenever I was in town, often at a favorite restaurant called the Piccadilly on Upper Connecticut Avenue. He was very careful about his weight, but insisted that I order and eat the desert trifle—which he would not.

One of our last sustained encounters was around his eightieth birthday in 1989. I had the idea of renting Town Hall and having a celebratory evening in his honor. I had approached several of Izzy's other admirers, including the publishers of *The Nation* magazine, *The New York Review*, and Pantheon Books at Random House, and raised the cost of renting the venue. I called to tell him the news and get some dates.

"You sure are a pistol, Pete," he said. "I never should have let you go." But then he pointed out that one of his principal sources of income at that time was public speaking so that rather than a "charity" event, he would prefer the occasion be observed at a place where admission would be charged and he could receive the proceeds. The evening was eventually held at the New School. The moderator was *Nation* Editor-in-Chief Victor Navasky and it was a sell-out. When Stone died in 1989, Esther and Izzy's two sons, Jeremy and Christopher, and their daughter, Celia, asked me to organize the memorials in Washington and New York. We selected the Ethical Society auditorium on Central Park West and the Friends Meeting House in Washington. Izzy was a Jew, of course, but his religion was humanism, even though he did invoke God, as in the piece quoted above. The cover of the program for the memorials was a syndicated cartoon by Pat Oliphant. It is St. Peter at the Pearly Gates on the phone, talking to a higher authority, with Stone, holding a pencil and notebook standing by. St. Peter is saying, "Yes, that I.F. Stone, Sir. He says he doesn't want to come in—he'd rather hang around out here, and keep things honest."

The New York event was on a warm day and the air conditioning at the Ethical Society was barely functioning. Many in the crowd were fanning themselves and one woman ostentatiously took out a battery-powered fan to cool off. Sensing the mood and as the presider, I took off my jacket and said, "Sorry about the temperature, but I'm sure that on an occasion such as this, Izzy would prefer that we were all a little uncomfortable." Thinking about that comment now, I'd go even further. I.F. Stone liked people, especially, and particularly his readers, but he did prefer that they were a little uncomfortable as they wrestled with the eternal nature of certain problems in contemporary life. Reading this collection, so well edited by Karl Weber, I see that we are still coping with the same issues today as we did fifty years ago, when *I.F. Stone's Weekly* was launched: nuclear weapons, religious and ethnic fundamentalism, racial bias, and the instinctively repressive and/or dissembling nature of so many governments. A first-rate biography of Izzy being published

this fall by Myra MacPherson is called *All Governments Lie*. The rest of the quote is, "But disaster lies in wait for those countries whose officials smoke the same hashish they give out." In the Vietnam era, Izzy parsed government statements to reveal the reality of what was happening in the war. He would be equally robust today in unraveling the justifications and, subsequently, rationalizations for the Bush administration's forays into Iraq and Afghanistan.

What makes this collection of *The Best of I.F. Stone* valuable is that it seems so relevant to our times. Some aspects of language have changed: calling oneself a "newspaperman" seems quaint in today's media-driven, gender-neutral world, but otherwise, Stone's wisdom, informing his perceptions and framing his arguments, reads with spectacular currency. One small measure of Izzy's lasting influence can be found in a quintessential twenty-first exercise. If you type in "I.F. Stone" on Google, you come up with 237,000 items. That is an impressive amount for what Izzy described in 1963 as a "four-page miniature journal of news and opinion," a publication long gone, but clearly not forgotten.

PETER OSNOS

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