



The Granger Collection

## Jewish Dynasty

by Richard J. Margolis

### The Thirteenth Tribe

by Arthur Koestler. 225 pp. Random House, \$8.95

This is Arthur Koestler's twenty-eighth book, and it would be churlish not to express one's appreciation for the whole remarkable *oeuvre*, though it must be said that the work in question is uncharacteristically dull. Now that Edmund Wilson is dead, Koestler may be the last writer of the Western world who appears to know everything. His subjects have ranged from amnesty to Zen, with quite a few astonishing stops along the way; but, like Wilson, Koestler exhibits no discernible pattern of development. Intellectually speaking, Koestler is a traveling man: he swoops down upon a likely topic, explores every monument and alleyway therein, and then packs up and moves on to the next attraction.

"Art," Koestler has written, "is the defeat of habit by originality," and much of his work has been true to that formulation—in his ideas, which are invariably bold, if not in his style, which is sometimes pedantic. He is nearly always ahead of the pack. With *Darkness at Noon*, that fine novel pitting the idealism of a tired old revolutionist against the cynicism of his young, Stalinist jailer, Koestler beat most of his liberal contemporaries to the draw in perceiving the ultimate debasement of Marxist utopianism with its blank-check assertion that the end justifies the means. Similarly, he spotted the philosophical tensions between East and West—in *The Yogi and the Commissar* and again in *The Lotus and the Robot*—long before Lederer and Burdick met their ugly American or Robert Pirsig mounted his Zen-powered motorcycle.

My favorite Koestlerism, perhaps because it betrays a rather unheralded puckishness on his part, occurs in *Re-*

*lections on Hanging*, his definitive attack on capital punishment. In an effort to demonstrate that some murders may be justified, Koestler cites the case of a woman in Liverpool who insisted on reading fan magazines and munching on bonbons during intercourse. Her husband, one dark night, shot her dead, and was promptly acquitted by what Koestler deems to be a most wise jury.

All of the above underscores my disappointment in *The Thirteenth Tribe*, an examination of the Khazars and their obscure Jewish empire which flourished in eastern Europe during the first millennium. At first blush the topic appears to be vintage Koestler, a perfect foil for his special traveler's brand of sojourner truth. Here, apparently, was a Jewish dynasty that held sway from the Caspian to the Black Sea for the better part of four centuries (700-1100 A.D.), about which practically nothing is known except that it fought many wars with the Muslims of the Middle East, the Christians of Byzantium and the West, and the surrounding tribes.

In the end the Khazars were overwhelmed by the Rus, those Viking-like pagans from the north country, who—according to the ancient *Russian Chronicle*—"shed blood, destroyed the women and children, took booty and raided and burned in all directions. . . ." The Jewish empire was dismantled and its citizenry dispersed, primarily westward to Poland and Hungary, in what Koestler describes as a second Diaspora.

Therein hangs Koestler's tale, or rather, his thesis; for if the Jews of Poland during all the ensuing years have been the sons and daughters of Khazars, then they cannot have been descendants of those Jews who participated in the first Diaspora, the one that followed the destruction of the

Second Temple 1,900 years ago. Indeed, the Polish Jews—not to mention a large proportion of other eastern European Jews and of American Jews as well—cannot be said even to be Semites. The Khazar's country of origin was somewhere in the Caucasus and nowhere near the Tigris or Euphrates. Koestler establishes beyond cavil that the Khazars were not "born Jewish"—they were converted to Judaism, or at least to their notion of what Judaism was, because they found themselves squeezed between two opposing forces: the Muslims and the Eastern Christians based in Byzantium. Their conversion was an instance of Third World politics, an attempt to create a cultural and military buffer zone between two hostile behemoths.

Alas, there is nothing more to the book; I have said it all. The rest, aside from Koestler's mountain of speculations, is puffery. As the reader plods through page after page of fussy footnotes and boring pedantry, it begins to dawn on him that the writer is trying to turn a plateful of leftovers into a banquet. There just isn't enough to go around. Koestler himself admits as much. Historians attempting to study the Khazars, he notes, have been "famished for facts" and "have nothing left but a few bleached bones to gnaw at. . . ."

Let us hope that Koestler's next scholarly excursion will focus on a topic sufficiently rich and varied to engage his extraordinary talents. □