

Harold R. Isaacs

Harold R. Isaacs died at age 76 on July 9, 1986, in the Massachusetts General Hospital a week and a day after open heart surgery. He was a major figure as an actor in and chronicler of the China scene, and as both a journalist and a scholar-analyst of world affairs. He pioneered the field of ethnic studies with his work on group identities; he broke ground with his explorations of the mental images American leaders had of Chinese and Indians. He left us with much more than "scratches on our minds"—he left us with deep, indelible impressions of a truly exceptional and spirited man who had a remarkably adventuresome life.

First there was New York City and Columbia University where Harold had his beginnings as a journalist, reporting for the *New York Times* on Protestant church sermons—for which he was paid \$3.25 each Sunday, \$3.00 in wages, 10 cents for the subway and 15 cents for the collection plate. Then it was off to Shanghai to be caught up in the turmoil of the labyrinthian politics of Chinese intellectuals of the left. There he boldly founded and edited the *China Forum*, a publication that became a vehicle for the tormented articulations of progressive writers. He associated with such illustrious figures as Lu Xun, China's greatest modern author, Song Ching-ling, the widow of the founder of China's Republic, Sun Yat-sen, who he knew fondly as Suzie, and the later-to-be-famous, Ho Chi Minh.

With Song Ching-ling, Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, Yang Qian, and Agnes Smedley, Isaacs founded the China League for Civil Rights to expose the Kuomintang's mistreatment of writers. In time, however, the league was taken over by the Stalinists in the Chinese Communist Party as their front group. Isaacs with the help of Lu Xun and Mao Dun selected some of the best writings from the *China Forum* in the expectation that the collection would be published in New York, but by the time the manuscript was completed, with Lu Xun's preface, none of the leftist publishers would accept a work associated with an "enemy of the

people" as identified by Moscow. *Straw Sandals* lay in Isaac's files forgotten until he rediscovered and published it in 1974.

When, after two years the *Forum* had to close down because of the irreconcilable conflict between Harold's idealistic principles and the Communists' rubbery changes of "line," he went on to Peking and to a phase of withdrawal from activism as he toiled to make his mark as a scholar-author by writing his great work, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. There were then the years, first as journalist with Agence France and then, as war came to Europe as well as Asia, he became a script writer for the CBS radio program Report to the Nation, which featured an imperious Orson Welles. He soon found that dealing with that irascible egotist and the trivial quarrels of the executive suite were intolerable, especially at a time of momentous world events, and he happily signed on at *Newsweek* as war correspondent for Chungking, New Delhi, and Mountbatten's headquarters in Ceylon. Then came tours as a roving observer of the end of colonial rule in Southeast Asia and of the American liberation of South Korea. His findings were put together in a disturbingly prophetic book, *No Peace for Asia*. All of this before his academic years in Cambridge.

From the moment Harold Isaacs joined the Center for International Studies in 1953, and thereby began his second career as an academic, he became a vital force in provoking intellectual curiosity about urgent, real-world problems among a band of colleagues who were often more absorbed with spinning out their own worlds of theoretical abstractions. Coming late to academic life, he was never intimidated by the verbiage of the social sciences. Indeed, Harold had a lasting pride in his identity as a onetime journalist, and he was always slightly amused at finding himself a professor. He had a keen eye for the foibles of academia and enjoyed quoting C. P. Snow's definition of a university as a place "where men indulge themselves by bestowing honors upon each other." Harold was able to preserve such a bemused feeling for academia because he kept enough distance to avoid learning

about academic administrative politics. He was finally trapped into becoming a full-status, full professor by the ingenious but questionable administrative ruling that he could only be given a parking sticker if he became a bonafide faculty member. With that status Isaacs soon became both a lively role model for students and a sympathetic listener to those who had personal problems.

In carrying out the research for his first M.I.T. book—*Scratches on Our Minds*, called a “classic” by the *New York Times*—Harold, in probing interviews, peeled back layer after layer of the memories of American opinion makers to get at the deeply buried images they held of Chinese and Indians. That study of the importance of unconsciously held predispositions of influential Americans convinced Harold once and for all that the personal, human factor was far more important in shaping history than the class categories he had once used. Consequently, he turned his considerable energies to exploring the critical role of changing group identities in contemporary world politics. On a two-year trip for the Center for International Studies he collected material for a series of studies on the attitudes of American blacks toward Africa, or American Jews living in Israel, of Untouchables in a changing India, English-educated Chinese in Malaysia, Filipinos emerging from American colonial rule, and of generational changes in Japan. His first-hand studies were subsequently enriched by extensive book-learning to produce his wide ranging and profoundly thoughtful book, *The Idols of the Tribe*, which still stands as the pioneering work of the now popular field of ethnic studies. As he observed in that work, “The evidence of current human affairs seems to suggest that the House of Muumbi is where man really lives, that his essential tribalism is so deeply rooted in the conditions of his existence that it will keep cropping out of whatever is laid over it, like trees forcing their way through rocks on mountain sides a mile high.”

Harold Isaacs’s career progressions might suggest a restless person in search of himself, but this most certainly was not the case. He was, rather, a man of

singularly firm and unambiguous self-identity. His values were such that he always knew where he stood even while he explored with infinite care and sympathy the shifting uncertainties and psychic problems of people experiencing dramatic changes in their own sense of group identity. How he maintained the clarity of his attitudes and values was something of a mystery, for he was also a person possessed of exceptionally strong emotions which in someone of lesser character would have produced vacillation, contradiction, and ambiguity.

Harold’s powerful emotions must have been a major factor in shaping his fundamental career identity, that of a writer and author. He undoubtedly came to his calling as a writer the hard way, by forcing himself to discipline what could have been unruly outbursts of feelings. The agony of that disciplining process was, no doubt, learned as Harold struggled in the solitude of Peking to write his great work, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, in which he told in clear, precise, unvarnished prose the story of what he saw as two abominations, the Stalinists of the Communist Chinese Party and the thugs in the Kuomintang. In doing so, he practiced Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “strong emotions reflected in tranquility.”

In the years at M.I.T., Harold was usually hunched over his typewriter, pecking out words with the journalist’s two fingers, filling yellow pages with crossed-out words and scribbled, untidy revisions. But there was nothing casual about what he had done, as anyone so bold as to try to alter even one word would discover, for he was the consummate craftsman who worked tirelessly to find the precise words for what he had to say. He found the idea of copy editors abhorrent, for as he repeatedly noted, “Who would think of touching up a Rubens or even a Jackson Pollock, or add some notes to Beethoven or Mozart? So why is it acceptable to tinker with another person’s literary creation?” On the last day of his life a young doctor came in to see him and cheerfully said, “You look great,” to which Harold responded, “Young man, I have always tried to find the right word for whatever needs saying, and I am sure on this occa-

sion 'great' is not the right word."

Harold's reverence for language involved more than just the pride of the master craftsman; it was sustained by his frequently expressed belief that all serious writing is to some degree autobiographical, embodying an element of the identity of the author. Whatever truth his theory might have for others, it certainly was manifest in his last, and very moving book, *Re-Encounters in China*, in which a mature and very wise Harold Isaacs, with considerable bemusement, reflected on not only the pathetic fates of his one-time Chinese friends but also on his own youthful audacity in believing that Marxism-Leninism could be reconciled with honesty and justice.

Right alongside his fury at the state of the times was Harold's other contending passion, an outpouring of compassion and love for all those he embraced as his family. "Family" for him started with his immediate loved ones but quickly reached out to include that extraordinary network he called his "extended family." Isaacs invested tremendous amounts of energy and care in maintaining a wide range of friendships from every phase of his career.

The contrast between the youthful Harold Isaacs who was ready to change the world and the mature Harold Isaacs who attached supreme importance to the most private matters of personal identity and the bonds of friendship might suggest a person who had retreated from the world in disillusionment. Particularly since he also became a person given to moments of cantankerous derision of the vanities of public figures. This, however, would not be a correct reading of Isaacs's transformations, for in a very fundamental way he remained an idealist; it was only that his focus of concern had shifted from abstractions to concrete individuals. Isaacs continued to be a romantic; no longer in political terms but by clinging to an idealized vision of what direct human relationships can be.

As a result of this transformation, Isaacs became increasingly impatient with the thought that political considerations should rule personal relationships. He was thus both bemused and exasperated

that his Shanghai days friends would have nothing to do with him until the Beijing authorities declared him no longer pollution, and then when they finally met in his re-encounters it was as in a time capsule, for the Chinese sought to blank out all that had happened between those Shanghai days and Deng's reforms.

Although Harold Isaacs clung to his self-identity as a journalist, his enduring contributions will be in the realm of scholarship. First, for the meticulous historical reconstruction of devious and sordid events in the Chinese revolution, and second for his sensitive analysis of how people in a changing world have struggled to develop and maintain acceptable feelings of group identity. As an analyst of modern nationalism, especially among the emerging nations of Asia and Africa, he took as his domain the dynamic essence of world affairs. By focusing on the impact of passions on reason, and more particularly the profound human craving for asserting group identities, Harold Isaacs, a one-time master journalist, became a master authority of a central subject of political science.

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Richard W. Krouse

Richard William Krouse was born on September 23, 1946 and died in a tragic automobile accident on September 5, 1986. He had been at Williams College since 1975, having done his undergraduate work at Franklin and Marshall College (*magna cum laude*) and his graduate work at the University of Chicago and Princeton University from which he received his Ph.D. in 1978. His teaching and research were in the field of political philosophy with a specialization in democratic theory. He was also a very effective teacher of American politics.

At the time of his death Dick had published 13 scholarly articles and seven reviews. All of them appeared in distinguished professional journals and edited collections. They reveal a lot about their author—his substantive concerns, intellectual style, and even his personal