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The House Of Twenty Thousand Books



SASHA ABRAMSKY
THE HOUSE OF TWENTY THOUSAND BOOKS



Synopsis

The House of Twenty Thousand Books is the story of Chimen Abramsky, an extraordinary polymath and bibliophile who amassed a vast collection of socialist literature and Jewish history. For more than 50 years, Chimen and his wife, Miriam, hosted epic gatherings in their house of books that brought together many of the age's greatest thinkers. The atheist son of one of the century's most important rabbis, Chimen was born in 1916 near Minsk, spent his early teenage years in Moscow while his father served time in a Siberian labor camp for religious proselytizing, and then immigrated to London, where he discovered the writings of Karl Marx and became involved in left-wing politics. He briefly attended the newly established Hebrew University in Jerusalem, until World War II interrupted his studies. Back in England, he married, and for many years he and Miriam ran a respected Jewish bookshop in London's East End. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June 1941, Chimen joined the Communist Party, becoming a leading figure in the party's National Jewish Committee. He remained a member until 1958, when, shockingly late in the day, he finally acknowledged the atrocities committed by Stalin. In middle age, Chimen reinvented himself once more, this time as a liberal thinker, humanist, professor, and manuscript expert for Sotheby's auction house. Journalist Sasha Abramsky re-creates here a lost world, bringing to life the people, the books, and the ideas that filled his grandparents' house, from gatherings that included Eric Hobsbawm and Isaiah Berlin to books with Marx's handwritten notes, William Morris manuscripts and woodcuts, an early 16th-century Bomberg Bible, and a first edition of Descartes' *Meditations*. The House of Twenty Thousand Books is a wondrous journey through our times, from the vanished worlds of Eastern European Jewry to the cacophonous politics of modernity. Cover photo copyright Jane and Louise Wilson, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

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Customer Reviews

This is the highest rating I've ever given a book. I wish I had time to write a really nice review, but I don't, so I'll give some highlights. If you are a history buff, you'll like this book. If you like history that presents a perceptive look at a particular slice of humanity at a particular point in time, but with much historical background, you'll like it even more. If the slice of humanity consists of Jews, and especially Jewish intellectuals in the early to mid-20th Century, your pleasure will increase. (I am a WASP, so that is not special pleading). And if you like history centered on the life of a particularly engaging, important, and charismatic personality who was personally involved in important world events, portrayed in superb writing, you'll be overjoyed. That is my view of this book about Chimen Abramsky, written by his grandson, Sasha Abramsky. The tone of the book is set early on, when Sasha describes Chimen as the man who collected 20,000 books and kept them in his home, most of them "wondrously rare, bought over the better part of a century." You sense that you will be taken on a stupendous journey that combines the personal autobiography of this incredible person with revelations about the contents of many of those books, and the interplay between them. You are not disappointed. It is a unique person who in his life will be an expert consultant on rare manuscripts to Sotheby's and a card-carrying, dedicated member of the Communist Party until well into the 1950s, all the while presiding over one of the great salons of left-wing European intellectuals.

Two years ago, the New York Review of Books came out with a charming memoir by Sasha Abramsky titled *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*. Describing the home and life of his grandfather Chimen Abramsky, he offers a vivid depiction of a peculiar, brilliant man who assembled one of the greatest collection of literature in Great Britain in the twentieth century. Mr. Abramsky opens with the phone call announcing his grandfather's death in 2010 at the age of ninety-three, and then turns back to his grandfather's earliest years. Chimen was born in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and, as the son of a prominent rabbi, was forced to undergo substantial deprivations and political persecution before his family was allowed to immigrate and settle in London. There, his father became the head of the country's beth din and one of its most powerful Jewish voices. Despite his father's religiosity and his own unpleasant experiences with

Leninâ™s rule, Chimen embraced communism and remained a staunch advocate for nearly twenty years. The author makes clear throughout the book his discomfort at his grandfatherâ™s seemingly willful blindness to the atrocities of Joseph Stalinâ™s rule over the U.S.S.R. and his belated disavowal long after the tyrantâ™s crimes became known to the world. Although Chimenâ™s disavowal of his prior political faith would be forceful, he remained enamored of leftwing causes and associated with some of the leading figures of Great Britainâ™s Labour Party. This active involvement in politics is only a secondary subject of the book, however. The main focus and most interesting parts of the book revolve around Chimenâ™s home and his collection of literature. Over the course of sixty years, Chimen built up a huge collection of Marxist and Jewish history.

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