



Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 13

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Gavriel Cohen's Conversations
with Isaiah Berlin: No. 13



For more information visit bit.ly/GC-IB

© Ya'alah Cohen, the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust,
and Henry Hardy 2023

**First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online
and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library
4 October 2023**

Last revised 11 October 2023

Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 13

Conversation date: 6 July 1988

Selected topics

IB's last visit to Russia, March 1988, with Alfred Brendel
Soviet reaction to IB's 1947 broadcast on Belinsky and his 1960
introduction to Venturi
Brendel's concerts in Moscow and Leningrad
Likachev and his encounter with Gorbachev
Visit to Sakharov and Elena Bonner; their attitude to Akhmatova
Status of Akhmatova in the USSR
Origin of Akhmatova's *Requiem*
Her *Poem without a Hero*
Michael Straight publishes story of AA and IB in *New Republic*
Akhmatova's reaction to IB's marriage, as told to Elena
Chukovskaya
Akhmatova's 1965 visit to Oxford and her reaction to Headington
House
IB's immortality in Russian literature
Zhirmunsky's account of the poems by Akhmatova relevant to IB
Visit to Lydia Chukovskaya
Herzen and Lenin
The Herzen Museum in Moscow
Zoya Tomashevskaya
Pasternak's birthday party: Voznesensky, Yevtushenko, Richter
The man on the plane: Lenin a Kalmuck
Constitutions, change and monism
Origins of monism/pluralism: intellectual, moral, psychological
Fichte and William James on philosophical beliefs and
temperament
The Roman Empire and Christianity
The dogmatic, monistic nature of Communism
Gorbachev not a pluralist
Why IB didn't read Freud
The Church of England
Not understanding what 'God' means
The irrelevance of theology
The interest of religion and the narrowness of bone-dry atheists
Catholics in Oxford

Father D'Arcy
The absence of anti-Semitism at Oxford
Quintin Hogg and the Nazis
Crossman a left-wing Nazi

Side A

GC After we met in Headington last time, I thought that I would like to ask you some questions about Russia, and start with your last visit there. I think it's worth doing. I mean, just, even to find records. Many of the things that happened to you in this meeting, and that will be the starting point for another. Have you got here a copy of *Personal Impressions*?

IB In this room, no.

GC No., because when I prepared this meeting, I needed it, because I didn't remember what you wrote in your chapter on Akhmatova.

IB Quite.

GC And what I think I heard from you.

IB Yes.

GC So I'll check it beforehand, maybe.

IB Very good, very good.

GC I didn't find it at home and I couldn't.

IB You've got it here?

GC No, I didn't find it at home here. No, I don't have it here, but now I have time to take it.

IB Well, pick it up on Friday when you come.

GC Next time.

IB Pick it up on Friday.

GC All right. Because we'll come to Akhmatova. Now, the meeting, did it, the journey, it started with the idea of going with Alfred Brendel to his concerts, or ...

IB Well, I'll tell you, yes, it did. For years I didn't want to go back, I never thought, knew, whether I'd get a visa or not. I was last in Russia in 1956. But then I was a guest of the British Ambassador, and that's why I got a visa, but I just, I decided I was a *persona non gratissima* in the Soviet Union, because I had been attacked more than once in Soviet papers, by name. I may have been regarded as a Sovietologist, which I am not, have never been, and never wish to be. I don't much believe in that profession. But anyhow, I'm not. They regard me as an unfriendly Sovietologist.

GC When did that start?

IB Oh, from the very beginning. When I came back in 1945, I wrote – I had broadcast a piece on a famous Russian nineteenth-century critic, Belinsky, and I said that his attitude to the West was one of ambivalence. Love and hatred. I was then duly attacked in *Pravda* [*Izvestiya*], in the leading article,¹ which also attacked Toynbee and various other people. They were saying 'a certain Berlin, an enemy of all true culture, says that Belinsky was ambivalent, and so on. That is not true: he loved what was good and hated what was bad, which was a very different matter. And this is a typical Western attitude of a perverter of the facts.' So I knew I was not very popular after my visit in 1945. I don't quite know why, but that is so. That was quite early on, must have been 1947 [yes], that sort of period. Then, for example, I always occurred on the list of people who were the perverters of Soviet thought and history in the West. They produced catalogues, with Leonard Shapiro, God knows who in England, various – [George] Bolsover, all these sorts of people, always occurred in that sort of list. So I could see there was an animus against – largely, I think, probably because of the visit to Akhmatova in the end. Because of Stalin's personal rage.

¹ 'Literary Falsificators', *Izvestiya* no. 284, 3 December 1947, 3. See MI2 393 note 54.

GC That we'll come to.

IB Yes, that was probably part of the reason. But anyway – also because I was in the British Embassy, and that in itself was enough, and because, I suppose, when I met Russians in the Soviet Union then I didn't appear to be over-sympathetic, from their point of view. They were quite right to judge me as a non-friend. Then Venturi wrote a book called *Russian Populism*, and I was asked to write the introduction to, the English translation, which was called *The Roots of Populism*, or something like that [*Roots of Revolution*] – *Il populismo russo*, or something [yes] – and I there made disparaging, or what they thought were – two things: first of all I said the Narodniks to some extent were a quasi-religious movement, and then I also said something perhaps not entirely friendly about Lenin, so the review of the book, which was extremely favourable – at that time Venturi was well thought of; no longer, but at that time he was regarded as a great friend – said, 'Of course' – quoting a Russian proverb – 'there's no barrel of honey [or mead] without a spoonful of tar. The British Government would never have allowed this book to be published in England had this introduction not been attached to it, by their orders.' He then said, 'He says monstrous things like' this, that and the other – then the monstrous things are quoted. So I could see that I was not – mind you, in 1956 I did talk to a collection of philosophers and I dare say there one or two of them afterwards said to people like Jakobson and other Russian scholars that my attitude appeared highly reactionary. So from all this I gleaned that I was not exactly adored. And so then I thought, well, it would be very nice to go with Brendel, a good opportunity. Why not? I suddenly felt enthusiasm for being there again, and Gorbachev and all that. And then I thought, what shall I do? Shall I apply for a visa? And I consulted John Roberts, who is the Director of the Great Britain–USSR Association, which was the official body, cultural relations, on a committee of which I am, in theory. And he said, 'No, no, you can't just apply for a visa as a tourist. No, no, we must do better than that.' Then he wrote to the British Ambassador, who then invited us to stay. I knew then that I'd get a visa, because guests of the Ambassador they wouldn't refuse, I wasn't quite black enough for that, and he asked me – the Ambassador – would I invite

the Brendels also to stay, and they accepted, so we all stayed together. That's how I came to go.

GC Now, what were the concerts?

IB He was originally invited to give four concerts in Moscow, and four in Leningrad. They cut that down to one concert in Moscow and two in Leningrad.

GC Why?

IB I don't know. Who can tell? Großkonzert[e?], that was the organisation, they were terribly inefficient.

GC I didn't know that.

IB Terribly inefficient, and they annoyed him in all kinds of ways, by not providing what they promised, and then he went to the Conservatoire, also in Moscow, and he was a great success. The students applauded him and the concert was a wild success in Moscow. I thought it was pretty successful in Leningrad also, but he thought there was a certain coolness in the front rows. The front rows were entirely occupied by commissars, so perhaps it was natural enough – I mean, by officials of various kinds, who were obviously there for official reasons.

GC He didn't play with an orchestra?

IB No, no.

GC Recitals.

IB He played recitals. And then he gave two concerts in Leningrad, to both of which I went. So it went on, and afterwards we left. That was because he was supposed to give a concert in the Yusupov Palace in Leningrad, which was a private theatre, built probably in the 1880s or 1890s [1776, reconstructed 1830s], full of gold and velvet and – exquisite private theatre, but the piano was as old as the

theatre,² 80 years old, he said, couldn't play it. They produced another piano, equally of no – bad. So then he gave an extra concert somewhere else to make up for it. That I didn't hear. So he gave three concerts in Leningrad in the end. But he was very – he was well treated otherwise. I mean he was respectfully treated, but they always failed to do this, failed to do that, and so on.

GC Did he meet other pianists on his visit?

IB He must have done. But he met other musicians, yes. When in the Conservatoire, people came up to him, players of instruments, and asked for – this and that question and tried to – there was one, it was a girl who was twelve who played the piano with her father, who seemed to me quite mad, wanted him to get her to England or America. I don't think he's done that. A kind of *illui* [young Talmudic prodigy], she was a kind of child prodigy, who played very well, in a kind of mechanical way.

GC Were there other musical events when you were there?

IB No, none.

GC Opera, ballet, no?

IB Oh, when, wait, I may be telling you an untruth. I'll try and think. Yes there were!

GC But you didn't go?

IB Yes.

GC Ah, you did.

IB I went to the Bolshoi Theatre ...

GC Ah, you did.

² Not literally, since the visit occurred from 18 to 29 March 1988.

IB ... to hear some kind of – something with the ballet school, some kind of concert in – for the benefit of some – isolated items, bits and pieces. I didn't see an opera, no. And in Leningrad we – in the hotel I made friends with an Armenian violinist. So I went to hear his particular chamber music group, and they played quite nicely.

GC What kind of repertoire?

IB Oh, a perfectly classical repertoire. Some Russian, but, I mean, Haydn, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, that kind of thing.

GC I remember some meetings that you had there, and I'll ask you about them. If I miss something of importance, you will tell me. You met a certain Likhachev, is his name?

IB Likhachev.

GC Likhachev.

IB In Oxford.

GC He's a historian of the Early Church period.

IB He's a historian of Early Russia and Late Byzantium, and Early Russia, yes.

GC You met him only in Oxford?

IB Only in Oxford.

GC Ah, I see. So everything you tell me about him ...

IB ... entirely comes from conversations here.

GC He came here to get his honorary degree?

IB No, he already had it. In Oxford, he had one. I think he just came here because he was invited. And he went to various British universities. He picked up an honorary degree in St Andrews. But

he's certainly the most eminent living Russian historian, living in Russia.

GC When did he come here?

IB He came here this year. He came here before to get his degree. Afterwards they wouldn't let him out. He went to a labour camp in the 1930s, in the 1920s, late 1920s, I think. And he was attacked by so-called bandits in Leningrad about five or six years ago and wounded. His papers were taken away. He was very badly treated in Leningrad. But now he's head of the cultural organisation which looks after cultural values in Russia, of which Gorbachev's wife is the vice president. So he's suddenly been lifted, and suddenly been rescued. That's why there was a – when I was the President of the British Academy I used to invite him practically every year, and always the same letter arrived: Professor Likhachev is unwell, Professor Likhachev is abroad, can't come. He got none of the letters. Not a single one.

GC But I think you told me that he told you a very interesting story about – he was suspected of being mentally not in order because ...

IB That's right.

GC What were the exact ...

IB I'll tell you exactly. He was invited to Moscow to a meeting.

GC He's from Leningrad?

IB He's a Professor in Leningrad.

GC Leningrad.

IB And an Academician, and so on. Retired, I think. He's eighty-three [eighty-two]. And he was summoned together with others to some meeting to be addressed by Gorbachev. He went, and arrived rather late. As a consequence he had a chair at the back of the room, near a rather narrow door. Gorbachev did his stuff, and then began to go out, followed by an entourage, and then saw him, and asked

how he was, recognised him, asked him if he was writing anything, talked to him for about five minutes or ten minutes, very very respectfully and well, said he remembered him very well, Leningrad was obviously extremely well disposed, and then left. He went back to Leningrad. Then, about two or three weeks later, he was telephoned to by the authorities, presumably by the Soviet or whatever it was, the main governing body, saying, would he mind – ‘After all, Professor Likhachev, you’re not as young as you used to be, you were born and grew up here. Would you mind having a medical examination?’ To which he said, ‘No, but I don’t think I need it, but still.’ He does suffer from diseases which come at his age, and so then the doctor came, and the doctor said to the Academician Likhachev, ‘Did anything abnormal happen? Did you have the honour of meeting the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party?’ ‘Yes I did.’ ‘Did anything abnormal happen at the time?’ ‘No, I don’t think so, no. ‘Something did. What was it?’ He then learnt from the doctor that the account he got from his authorities was that not that Gorbachev stopped Likhachev, but that Likhachev stopped Gorbachev, and kept him in front of the door for ten minutes, so that nobody else could get out, and this was so abnormal, that – would he mind having a mental examination? It was clear that he was not quite normal. Even now. Of course he was very unpopular in the Communist Party in Leningrad.

GC Hard to believe it.

IB Not a credible story, is it?

GC No. Really.

IB So, in spite of his great eminence, he presumably went. T a hey asked a few questions. I don’t think he was given shock treatment.

GC Yes. No, but still.

IB This is a fantastic story, isn’t it?

GC But you met Sakharov at the Embassy?

IB No. Sakharov wouldn't come to the Embassy. No, we went to see him in his own flat. Aline and I and a young secretary from the Embassy who was accompanying us. Have I not told you that story?

GC You told me shortly when we met at that place.

IB Oh. Well, there was a very boring Italian Ambassador, the Italian Ambassador in Cairo, who had been in Moscow, I think. He spoke Russian quite well. He asked him general questions such as a Western journalist would ask, like 'Do you feel hope in the future? Do you think Russia is making progress? Do you think things will be easier?' and so on. He answered in very general terms; he obviously liked him, knew him as a friend. I intervened once or twice, but it was terribly boring. His wife, meanwhile, was rather – didn't know who we were, looked rather cross and brought in a cup of tea, and then talked a little bit about her own past, told us she was the daughter of [Anastas?] Mikoyan's best friend – she's Armenian; half Jewish, half Armenian.

GC Her name is Bonner.

IB No, that's her second husband – her first husband's name. She is Armenian. The father was Armenian, her mother was Jewish. It was rather an unusual combination. It was clear that she was brought up in Comintern circles. The father must have been something to do with the Comintern. Of course, she lived next door to the Togliatti family, she liked Togliatti, she didn't like Kuusinen, who was the head of the Comintern, whom she thought was a terrible man. Her father was arrested in 1937, I think, and she rushed off to see Mikoyan. He said, 'I know your father is my best friend, but only Stalin or' – what's his name? – 'Ezhov can do anything. Nobody else can do anything at all. No use going to none of us. Not the slightest influence, but if you like, I'll adopt you.' But she declined. You can take my name, and you will live with me. It was a kindness; however she didn't – survived. Her father was shot in 1938, and that's – she told the story, and then, I don't know, there was a kind of silence. Then she finally got rather impatient with us and asked the young man who we were, so he wrote down my name.

GC This she didn't know.

IB No idea.

GC And Sakharov knew.

IB No.

GC Who you were?

IB From the British Embassy – people from the British Embassy. No idea. Then she asked for the name. As he wrote the name, and then she said, ‘Ah! You knew Akhmatova’, and then came to life, said, ‘I’m a tremendous admirer.’

GC She?

IB She. He had nothing to do with this.

GC Ah.

IB And then she began talking very freely, and he warmed up, and said, ‘What do you do?’, and I said, ‘I teach philosophy’, and he said, ‘Who are the best philosophers these days, who are the important modern philosophers?’ And I said, ‘Well, I suppose you could say Wittgenstein.’ He said, ‘What did he say?’ That was rather more difficult. I tried to convey what the *Tractatus* was about, his first work, and I said it was rather like Leibniz in certain respects, and he said, ‘Ah yes, Leibniz, I’ve heard of him’, he more or less said. But we went on. The whole atmosphere was completely transformed.

GC Interesting. The boredom – I mean, he was blasé.

IB Many people, foreigners come to see him.

GC Yes, that’s what I thought.

IB He doesn’t know who they are.

GC He didn’t know who you were.

IB Then he just totally changed.

GC Did he enquire, or did she enquire, about Akhmatova?

IB No. Not particularly about Akhmatova herself.

GC Why did Akhmatova do the trick? What did Akhmatova mean to them?

IB Because she's an icon. She is a sacred figure.

GC She is a sacred figure among these circles?

IB In the entire intelligentsia.

GC Despite the fact that she ...

IB Not those circles. It makes no difference. She was never – she got an official state funeral. She lay in state. She was not like Pasternak. She was never – she was denounced, by Zhdanov, but in the end she was – for example, the head of the Writers' Union, who was an absolute scoundrel called – I've forgotten his name [Aleksey Surkov]. I knew him quite well. He patronised her in order to annoy Pasternak, largely. But anyhow, she became, somehow – Pasternak could not be made that, because he was a Jew. And because she was a mystical figure etc. and purely Russian, she became a kind of sacred figure.

GC Since when she became a sacred figure?

IB Since the beginning of the war. People learned her poems by heart, just as they learned his poems, and the people in the army did that, . She was disapproved of, of course, in the late 1940s because of Zhdanov, and her bread card was taken away and so on, but people always knew there was a great poetess of that name. She became a sacred figure, I would say, certainly not while Stalin was alive. I suppose in the 1960s, when suddenly they felt they had this great woman amongst them. She was grand. She was severe. She was lifted above the crowd. She led a kind of very – highly isolated personal life. All that made a deep impression. She made no public

appearances at that time. Partly because of her poems, too. The poem *Requiem* began to go from hand to hand. Now it's been published officially – which is a poem about the horrors of the 1930s. Now of course it's quite fashionable. It's a very good story. What they all knew was, she was standing in a queue to send a parcel to her son, who had been exiled, because she was married, originally, to a poet called Gumilev. Oh, I forgot the name of the bad head of the Soviet Writers' Union – Surkov. Yes, he was a real sort of a tough policeman, and a bad poet. But what happened was that Gumilev of course was a [?] better poet than she was, who was accused of taking part in a monarchist plot and was shot by the Cheka quite early, and Gorky wouldn't intervene on his behalf. Gorky didn't behave nearly as well as Communists ought. Not always, at least. And then she went into total retirement, and her son, who was called Gumilev, was I think exiled in the 1930s, for being called Gumilev. It's all there was to it. And she tried to send a parcel and was standing in this long queue with all these women who had relations they didn't quite know where, in various camps, and then a woman approached her and said, 'What do you do?' 'I am a writer.' 'Will you write about this one day?' said the woman in the queue. She said, 'Yes, I will.' And that's the origin of the poem. That was known. It touched people. She somehow stood for the conscience of Russia in a way in which Pasternak also did but Pasternak was much more showy and much more brilliant and much more ambitious, while she was, as Stalin called her, a nun. She lived in retirement, was obviously religious.

GC When you – what did they know about you and Akhmatova?

IB Who is 'they'?

GC Mrs Bonner or ...

IB Nothing. Bonner, nothing. Oh no! She knew, certainly, she knew, I think she knew what was known in my book.

GC What was in your book?

IB I think so. That's how it began.

GC I see. They knew from your book.

IB And they also knew – anyone who moved in those – in dissident circles knew that she had written four poems about our meeting. That I was one of the dedicatees of her great and famous poem which was called *Poem without a Hero*. There were two Russians and me. In the Soviet Union my name was never published, but these people knew.

GC So that was a poem that was published in the early 1950s or something?

IB Oh no, it wasn't published at all.

GC Ah, it was not published?

IB No, no. In America.

GC When was it published in America?

IB I would think, I can't tell you precisely. I should think in the 1960s [1961], 1970s. By Struve [1967] in California.

GC In Russian?

IB In Russian, yes.

GC Was it translated by the way?

IB Yes, frequently.

GC Akhmatova was translated, all her work was translated into English?

IB No.

GC I want to find it.

IB Oh you'll find the poem, in England, you'll find it in the Bodleian or something. Or in the Taylorian. Certainly.

GC And so it was published in Russian in America.

IB That's right.

GC And how could they know that you were one of the heroes?

IB Well, because that went from mouth to mouth. That was a thing which was known in her circle. All these people knew each other. The whole dissident world were in contact with each other, and certainly Mme – Mrs Bonner was one of them.

GC And people abroad knew that you were one of them? Let's say, critics of Russian literature?

IB Not all. I don't think – I don't know who knew and who didn't.

GC I see. It was – nobody mentioned it in an article or something, that you were one of the ...

IB No. I don't think so. The only article that mentioned it was something which I was violently indignant about. That was Michael Straight, whom I had met in his mother's house in Dartington, which is a school that they support, and I told him the story of going to visit her and seeing a large portrait of her by Modigliani above her mantelpiece in Moscow, in Leningrad. A portrait of Akhmatova.

GC You saw it at his place?

IB In Akhmatova's flat.

GC Yes.

IB A portrait by Modigliani of her. She had a close relationship with him in 1912 [1911], I should think, in Paris.

GC She was in France.

IB She went to Paris. So I asked what he was like. Small red-haired Jew, she said.

GC [*laughter*]

IB But anyway, be that as it may – and I said to her, but did she know that he was dead and world-famous? She claimed she didn't know that. I didn't think that was quite genuine, because Ilya Ehrenberg could have told her all that. In constant touch with those circles. Still. And I told the story to Michael Straight, and then he published it in the *New Republic*,³ and that I thought might do her harm. She was then alive: this was in the 1950s. That's the only time.

GC But that's the story about Modigliani.

IB About my knowing her, at least.

GC But nothing else?

IB I can't tell you. I don't know, I don't think so. There wasn't much about her, anyway in the Western press.

GC I have to check what there was in Israel, because she was a friend[?] of a hero ...

IB My piece about her, which was just recently translated into Hebrew – into Russian – in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* of the Hebrew University.⁴

GC Yes, that was translated.

IB Into Russian.

GC And it came to Russia in Russian?

³ 'To Our Readers', signed 'M.S.', *New Republic*, 24 August 1953, 23.

⁴ 'Vstrechi s russkimi pisatelyami 1945 i 1956', trans. D. Segal, E. Tolstaya-Segal and O. Ronen, with the help of the author, in L. Fleishman, O. Ronen and D. Segal (eds), *Slavica Hierosolymitana: Slavic Studies of the Hebrew University*, vols 5–6 (Jerusalem, 1981: Magnes Press, Hebrew University), 593–641.

IB That I can't tell. Probably smuggled in by somebody. But now, the bit about her, as I say, is, I think, going to be included in a volume dedicated to her.

GC In Russia?

IB In Russia. I'm in correspondence with somebody.

GC I see. So until now the whole knowledge of what was published about her in the West, anyway, and your story was just hearsay.

IB Yes, largely.

GC And as you said, she knew that you, which means the intelligentsia in Russia, knew many things that were published about her in the West?

IB Obviously. Been smuggled through. Not much was published about her in the West. She has been tremendously published in the West in the last ten, fifteen years, but not before that.

GC Let's come back to your meeting with her. When you went in 1945, did you make a list of whom you wanted to meet, or did ...?

IB No!

GC How did you ...?

IB That I told in my story.

GC Ah, you did?

IB You will read that.

GC So I didn't remember that. I didn't. I see, aha, so it was not you who asked?

IB In no way.

GC Now, in your story – I’m going to – I read it, but I don’t remember whether ...

IB I told about how I came to meet her, yes.

GC And the description of the meeting is all there?

IB It’s there, yes.

GC And afterwards, that she blamed you for her sufferings ...

IB No.

GC ... and that you started the Cold War.

IB That’s there. Yes. Well, even in the poem, I’m called ‘guest from the future’.

GC So I’ll read it first.

IB What is not there is that she was terribly angry when I married.

GC Yes. That you found out when she came here.

IB Yes. No. I discovered that when I talked to her on the telephone in 1956.

GC You talked to her on the telephone from here?

IB No, from Moscow. In Moscow.

GC That was on your second trip?

IB That’s right.

GC And what was her reaction? I mean, you ...

IB I’ll tell you what happened. She gave her account of this to a lady called [Lydia] Chukovskaya, who wrote two huge volumes of memoirs about her.

GC Chukovskaya?

IB She's the daughter of Chukovsky, whom [i.e. Lydia C.] I saw in Moscow this time.

GC Now, we'll come to that.

IB Two huge volumes of reminiscences of Akhmatova in a diary.⁵ The account she gave to her is inaccurate.

GC Inaccurate?

IB Yes. It's rather more hostile to me than the truth. What happened was, we arrived in 1956 – that is more or less the year in which I married Aline. And when I went to see Pasternak, we both did, and he said, 'Look, Anna Andreevna is here, you can't talk – see her, because her son has just been returned from Siberia, after three exiles, and she's very nervous about meeting foreigners at the moment. Quite naturally. But you can talk to her on the telephone. I'll give you her number, because that's listened to, it's monitored, so she knows what she's saying, there can't be any doubt about what goes on, but to go and see her would be rather awkward.' So I said, 'All right.' And then I telephoned. He[?] struck [?] Pasternak. Now I can give you both versions; hers and mine. Her version was, to Chukovskaya, which was in her book, which has been translated into French, I'm not sure whether into English, maybe, 'A certain person telephoned to me, you know who I mean.' 'Yes, I know.' She must have talked about this to people. 'He – the first thing he said was that he was married. Think! What a thing to say to me, that he was

⁵ Lidiya Chukovskaya, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi* [Notes about Anna Akhmatova], vol. 1, 1938–1941 (Paris, 1976), reviewed by IB in 'In absentia: Some Books of the Year', TLS, 23 November 1979, 4, and translated by Milena Michalski and Sylva Rubashova (poetry trans. Peter Norman) as *The Akhmatova Journals* (London/New York, 1994). The 2nd vol., covering 1952–62, was first published in French as Lidia Tchoukovskaïa, *Entretiens avec Anne Akhmatova*, trans. Lucile Nivat and Geneviève Leibrich (Paris, 1980), and in the original Russian later the same year, by a different Paris publisher. The 3rd and last vol., covering 1963–6, was published in Russian in Moscow in 1997. Neither of the last 2 vols has yet appeared in English.

married. What a thing to say. I said to him, 'Congratulations.' He thanked me for the congratulations. We didn't talk for very long. What a thing to say,' she says. The true story is this: I telephoned to her, and she said, 'Pasternak tells me that you are married.' I said, 'It is true.' 'When were you married?' 'This year.' 'In what month were you married?' I told her. Then there was a brief silence. She said, 'I congratulate you', in a very cold voice. She then said, 'I can't see you because – for reasons which Boris has told you.' So I said, 'I quite understand.' She then said, 'A book by me has just been published of Korean poetry. A selection of Korean verse. Selection. Not selected by me. You know – you can imagine how much Korean I know.'

GC [*laughs*]

IB So I said, 'Well, could I read it?' 'I'll send it to you.' 'You needn't trouble.' 'Oh,' she said, 'it's perfectly legal now. It's out. I'll send a copy for you.' Then she talked to me quite amiably for a bit, and that was the end of that. But I realised then that she was furious, because I played a part in her mythology. It was none of my business – I should have remained – I was – we were separated by land and sea, and should have remained so. It was a great vulgarity on my part to marry. And the direct, somehow, destruction of some tremendous myth which she spun – we were both in some way transhistorical figures. This suddenly reduced me to some kind of bourgeois happiness. It was not my business. When she came here, she was extremely cold to Aline. Very very chilly. All right with me.

GC Pardon?

IB Quite all right with me. Talked in a very intimate way.

GC I'll read again the article.

IB But she told the man in Leningrad, or wherever, in Moscow, who I've just seen, a poet who knew her very well, 'He lives in a palace.'

GC He lives in a palace?

IB Yes.

GC That was her description of ...

IB Headington House.

GC She came here for dinner?

IB Yes, she did. 'He lives in a palace.' 'A golden cage.'⁶ That is not the way an intellectual should live.

GC And that you were told now?

IB Now!

GC By a poet who knew her?

IB Yes. I could see that she was upset.

GC Now did, when you ...

IB No, but I'll tell you. Her conception of me and her was quite simple, and she told people that, and I think she wrote about it, too, and that was Dido and Aeneas, if you know what I mean.

GC Dido and Aeneas.

IB Yes. She didn't burn herself, which Dido did. *Didona i Eney* in Russian. I was Aeneas. She wrote something like it.⁷ I was Aeneas, I came, we had this tremendous relationship, and then I abandoned her. I have a friend called [Alexander] Halpern, in London, who was one of the secretaries of the Provisional Government, who was a lawyer, a Jewish lawyer, in Russia, who then afterwards lived in England. And he had a niece, still living in Moscow or Leningrad, I can't remember which. His wife was a Georgian princess. After he

⁶ Anatoly Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Wendy Rosslyn (London, 1991), 5. See also Akhmatova's untitled poem 'Not to a secret pavilion / Does this flaming bridge lead: / Him to a cage of gold, / And her to a red scaffold.' *Complete Poems*, 764.

⁷ 'You weren't my Aeneas for long': *A Sweetbriar in Blossom: From a Burnt Notebook*, no. 11 (untitled).

died, he wrote her a letter about something else, mentioned my name, and the niece wrote back and said, ‘He must be a very bad man.’ And she wrote back ‘Why must he be a very bad man?’ ‘Because he abandoned Akhmatova.’ And so Salome Halpern said to me, ‘I don’t know about your own works, but there’s no doubt that you have immortality in Russia, of that there can be no doubt. Russian literature has immortalised you.’

GC In Chukovskaya’s book, how does she describe your meeting in 1945 with Akhmatova?

IB She doesn’t.

GC You appear in the book only in this part?

IB Only in this telephone conversation. I think she perhaps – the book doesn’t cover those years [1942–51 are not covered]. I’m not sure. It’s in two long halves, [34:39] and I think that’s some time in the middle, and nothing is covered then.

GC Because the dialogue is ...

IB Nothing. She doesn’t report it. It was too secret and she didn’t write it down. It’s not there. Nothing is said.

GC How incredible.

IB What they know they know from me. From my article. What the Russians know, they know entirely from my piece.

GC No, but Chukovskaya ...

IB But when the great critic, at least I call him a great critic – what was his name? – Zhirmunsky, who was a famous critic, already began before the First World War, when he came to see me in Oxford – he came to the palace all right – he told me exactly which poems dealt with my visit.

GC He did?

IB Oh, he was a great friend of hers, and wrote about her. He did, yes, and I say that in that piece, when I say, "The list of poems which have relevance are the following, but I wish to say no more about that" – I say. That's what I say in the article.

GC You told me different pieces about it ...

IB Yes. In Russia, the impression, I'm sure, must be that I had some kind of affair with her. That's very far from being true. People think that.

GC I know. I have to read ...

IB I think you'd better, yes.

GC Who else did you meet there in the embassy, or ...?

IB I'll tell you. The Russians I met were Chukovskaya ...

GC Did you ask to meet her?

IB Yes. Well, I met this young poet [Anatoly Naiman] – he's not young now, he was a friend of Akhmatova's.

GC In Leningrad?

IB In Moscow.

GC In Moscow.

IB He lives in Moscow. And he gave me, I think, the telephone number of Chukovskaya, so I telephoned her, or maybe I had it already from people in London. From the USSR–Great Britain and all these people. So I went to see her and I saw her, and her daughter, Chukovsky's granddaughter, and so on. And had the evening with her, and didn't stay long enough. She was annoyed because I was only there for about two hours, she wanted me to go on and on and on. But I thought [?]. I was sorry not to go on. She was very interesting.

GC It was interesting?

IB Oh, yes. And then.

GC She was open with you?

IB Oh, talked very freely and very openly, and completely fearlessly. Oh, absolutely. Oh, she was 83. I said to her, 'Why is Herzen – why is everything called after Herzen in this country? After all, he hated Communism, and he particularly detested Karl Marx.' She said, 'Because Lenin said he was friendly to the First International. That was a lie. It was one of Lenin's many lies.'

GC That *she* said? That it was a lie.

IB Total lie, yes. Of course. A typical lie. She had written a little book on Herzen herself,⁸ which she sent me, before I ever saw her. I went to the Herzen Museum.

GC In Leningrad?

IB In Moscow.

GC In Moscow?

IB Yes. It was in Moscow. That's where he lived.

GC There is, there is a museum?

IB It's rather small and not very, not very real. But yes, there is a Herzen Museum. One or two manuscripts, not much. Photographs of paintings of his friends. All the works of Voltaire, because he read them. I mean it's a pretty thin affair. But still, I went there – I didn't tell anyone that I was going – and then the director, who was a young woman of about thirty, thirty-five, came in and said, to my surprise, 'Are you – is your name Berlin?' 'Yes.' 'Are you the person who has written about Herzen in England?' I said 'Yes.' 'How wonderful!' And then she was all over me. 'You are the first person

⁸ *Byloe i dumy* Gertsena (Moscow, 1966).

in the West really to celebrate Herzen as he should have been, in our time. We were all very pleased and delighted, excellent!’ Despite all the heretical things I said. So I said, ‘What about E. H. Carr?’ After all he wrote a thing called *The Romantic Exiles*. ‘That name may not be mentioned here.’

C Why?

IB Because it was a very ironical picture. Oh yes, it was not friendly. It made him out to be a kind of absurd Russian Romantic of a ridiculous – a bit mad, not mad but it was amusing stories about him, not serious. But I was all right. Then she took me about and gave me a present of two books. I was very well treated. The question is, how did she know my name? I didn’t tell anyone. She must have asked the chauffeur, who was of course NKVD – KGB. Large, British Embassy car stopped outside. That was reported immediately, [?] people [?] *garderobe* [?] to her. That’s why she came in to see me.

GC This lady read English, or French?

IB I don’t know. That I can’t tell you.

GC Why ...?

IB But she certainly knew ...

GC Surely.

IB None of my works had been translated.

GC Why would they really bother to have a museum on Herzen?

IB Because he’s a – Lenin said, ‘The Decembrists woke Herzen, and he woke us.’⁹ He’s in perfect order, Herzen. He’s the father of the

⁹ Herzen ‘played a great part in paving the way for the Russian Revolution. [...] The Decembrists awakened Herzen: Herzen began the work of revolutionary

Revolution. The fact that he hated Marx and hated Communism is ignored.

GC Why did Lenin say that?

IB Because he meant it. Because Herzen did publish the first, that is, illegal, anti-tsarist journal in England. He was – counter-revolutionary, counter-tsarist propaganda of a very intense kind.

GC So why did Chukovskaya say that Lenin lied?

IB Because Lenin said he was favourable to the First International. That is untrue.

GC That is a lie, yes.

IB Yes. That was a lie. Otherwise it was a statement of fact. And then he said ‘Herzen awoke us.’ Well, if he liked to say that, he could [?] false statement. That wasn’t a statement of fact so much. Because they need ancestors. Herzen was a socialist, he was a marvellous writer, and the Russian Revolutionary movement, of course, ...

GC They needed ancestors.

IB ... canonised him. He was a father of the Russian Revolution in some sense. The fact that he loathed Communism is neither here nor there. He just happened to believe in individual liberty.

GC What else did you discuss with Chukovskaya?

IB Oh, goodness, I can’t remember. I think, no, well, we talked about everything. Akhmatova, a great deal. A great deal about her. How she died, where she was staying. What the illness was, how people tried to save her, what she wrote at the time. Mainly that, and about her father.

agitation’: V. I. Lenin, ‘In Memory of Herzen’ (1912), *Collected Works*, vol. 18 (Moscow, 1968), 25–31 at 31. Cf. bit.ly/lenin-herzen.

GC Chukovsky.

IB Yes – who was a friend of mine, sort of. I knew him.

GC You knew him?

IB And then when he came – he got a degree here, too. In Oxford. He got it here.

GC Really?

IB Yes. Very amusing. Clever, amusing, rather cynical, delightful, infinitely gifted man.

GC You enjoyed meeting with him.

IB Very very much.

GC You saw him in 1935?

IB In 1945. And afterwards in 1963, I think.

GC He came here.

IB Yes. He had an honorary degree. He was a very very amusing, clever man. He was a writer of genius of children's verse. The best in our century by far. Marvellous. And an excellent literary historian. And a witty, amusing man. He came to dinner with us, with Obolensky, from here.

GC Dimitri.

IB Yes. He said to Obolensky and me, 'Love the Soviet Union! Why don't you love it? Love it!'

GC [*laughter*]

IB That's the kind of man.

GC Did she mainly speak, or did she ask you – Chukovskaya?

IB Oh, goodness, no. She mainly talked.

GC She mainly talked.

IB I let her. Certainly. No, I don't think she wanted to know much about the West. She knew what she wanted to know. No, she just chatted away, told me about the whole entourage, and how it was, and how it all was in Peredelkino, where they all lived, and so on. And then I saw another lady, called [Zoya] Tomashevskaya, in Leningrad, who also talked to me about Pasternak, Akhmatova, the pianist [Sviatoslav] Richter and the whole circle.

GC Who is Tomashevskaya?

IB She is the daughter – no, but Brodsky told me to go and see her – the poet [Brodsky].

GC Did you see him before you went?

IB Yes, I probably, I telephoned him and I saw him.

GC You meet him frequently?

IB He's in London at the moment.

GC At the moment.

IB He lives in New York, normally. He's the best living – by far the best living Russian poet. By far. He – I went to see Tomashevskaya, and she was charming. She was the daughter of a famous – or the adopted daughter of a famous Russian Shakespearean critic called Tomashevsky – he is one of the leading critics, who was dead. And she told me a very amusing story. She said that Pasternak didn't really enjoy having birthdays too much, but he was finally persuaded to have a birthday celebration. A little dinner. And so the friends were invited. Of course Akhmatova was there, and Tomashevskaya was there, and the widows of two executed Armenian poets were there. And then Pasternak rather shyly – and Richter the pianist was

there – and then he rather shyly said, “There are two men whom I would like you to ask. One is Voznesensky, the other is ...

Side B

IB ... [?] Yevtushenko, because he was a bad poet and a general self-advertiser, and because he was rather in with the regime. And Voznesensky was a better poet. Akhmatova detested them both. However, since Pasternak asked for them to be there, they couldn't keep them away. Then they came, and they sat on either side of Akhmatova, who was a divinity in their eyes. They were terribly nervous of meeting her. By this time she was regarded as unapproachable, a marvellous, wonderful person. And out of sheer nerves, according to Tomashevskaya, they got drunk. They were drunkards anyway, and she talked to them as far as she could. Not very willingly, not very enthusiastically. And then she left to go, rather before she need have done, and they accompanied her to the top of the staircase that she had to go down, more or less as escorts. And suddenly, they were sent hurtling down the stairs, both of them, sent absolutely – thrown down the stairs, one on top of the other, by a mighty hand. Whose mighty hand? Richter, who was a very powerful ...

GC [*laughter*]

IB Yes. Exactly. That's how she told me. Pasternak didn't really mind. [*laughter*] Mighty hand. She was charming, Tomashevskaya. She also talked a great deal about Brodsky, and about herself, and about her father, about literary life in Russia. All these people, who belonged to this more or less, I don't say dissident, but non-Soviet, so to speak, group, first of all knew each other, and secondly talked perfect Russian, not the kind of Russian Soviet officials talk.

GC That's what I was going to ask, what ...

IB Their accents.

GC About their Russian.

IB Their accent is different.

GC How did you feel? The Russian spoken around you – is it the same Russian?

IB Well, of course it is, but the accent is exactly what would happen in England if everybody talked semi-cockney. Except those who don't. And then the Ambassador gave a party, to which he invited a lot of Russians, both for us and mainly for the Brendels, and for us. We had to be at the top of the staircase, to receive them in our joint honour. And then he invited six philosophers, none of whom came. But, oh, various editors. The editor of *Ogonek*, the editor of the literary ...

GC *Literaturnaya gazeta*.

IB Yes. The editor of *Novy mir* – all these people turned up. Not sufficiently, though. [Perhaps] because it was at the Embassy, and various other people came, and I talked to quite a lot of people there. It wasn't very interesting there, but it was quite all right. Just a party. But I got a refusenik to come, that man, I have forgotten his name, the chief refusenik now.

GC Yes, I ...

IB The man who met ...

GC Who met Reagan, or ...

IB He met Reagan, yes. That's right. And – what was his name? something – the Ambassador telephoned him, at my request. He said, 'I am on a hunger strike, so if I come, I may faint.' He did come, he looked very well to me. [*chuckle*]

GC Well dressed?

IB Yes he was perfectly well – a little beard, talked freely to everybody, it went quite all right. Nobody refused to speak to him. It was all perfectly all right.

GC Did he speak to you?

IB Well, very shortly. I said, What could I do for him? I said Martin Gilbert told me about him, of course. He was on the telephone to Gilbert, and said to him, Very nice to get him asked, it did nothing but good, and then, I think, Bernard Levin wrote to me, also about some Refusenik.

GC Bernard Levin is ...

IB Takes an interest, yes. Absolutely.

GC Some Jews, now, are taking interest in Soviet Jewry as a substitute for ...

IB Yes!

GC For, you know.

IB Yes. Then you needn't be a Zionist. Exactly so. What?

GC In many cases .

IB In many cases, yes. Yes. It's the alternative way of being a Jew. It's true of Martin Gilbert. He may be a Zionist, but the main thing is not that. He is a Zionist, but – Martin Gilbert, of course, but still, his main interest is this other thing.

GC Now, did you want to see anybody whom you did not, could not get in touch with?

IB No, I telephoned people. Some of the telephones just didn't answer, but anybody whose telephone answered, not many of them, were perfectly prepared. The institutions made it easier. I'll give you an account. I was travelling from Leningrad to Moscow by plane, and I sat myself next to a man who was reading *Pravda*, and the man said – I saw in the *Pravda* 'Two Carmens fight each other', which rather fascinated me. When he stopped reading, I said, 'May I borrow the copy?' 'Certainly.' The two Carmens turned out to be skaters who skated to the music of *Carmen* and had a fight. Then when I stopped reading about this we got into a conversation quite

easily. He said 'You read Russian?' No, he didn't say that. He said 'Are you amused by the story?' I said 'Yes.' 'Do you come from Leningrad?' I said 'No.' 'Do you come from Moscow?' 'No.' There was silence. 'Do you come from Odessa?' That's the usual thing. 'Where do you come from?' 'From England.' 'Where in England?' 'Oxford.' Thirty years ago this would have produced a slight shock. They would have gone on talking but ... In this case none, none at all. [...] I said 'Do you like Moscow?' 'No, no, I hate Moscow. I love Leningrad.' And then he said to me 'What is your name?' 'My name is Berlin.' 'That is a Jewish name.' I said, 'What is your name?' [*gives name*]. I said 'That is not a Jewish name.' 'No.' [...] He talked quite normally, as anyone might anywhere, any American, for example, and then finally I said, 'They say things are easier. Is that true?' 'Yes they are. For example, this is the first year in which we are officially allowed to know the name of Lenin's mother.'

GC He had quite a sense of humour, too. [*laughter*]

IB So I said. 'It's Blank, isn't it?' B-L-A-N-K. 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, there are some people in New York who say she was the daughter of a baptised Jew from Odessa.' 'No, no. That is not our version,' he said, 'we are informed he's half-German, half-Swedish.' So I said, 'There can't be that many Swedes on the Volga, really.' He said, 'No. That is the official version, that is the true version.' That I enjoyed rather.

GC [*laughter*]

IB It *has* been published. 'Well, then,' I said to him, 'what about Lenin himself? Surely he was a Russian?' 'Russian? Oh, well, call him that if you like. I call him a Kalmuck.'¹⁰ [...]

GC Before coming back to some other Russian questions, I have one or two questions that I really have to ask you now. I think that – I can't recall reading in any lecture of yours or article that I read about monism, pluralism, dogmas, against [?] anything[?], that you refer to your attitude towards constitution. Now, I tell you why I

¹⁰ 'A member of a Mongolian people living on the north-west shores of the Caspian Sea.' *OED*.

ask. I think that if we take into account that one of the reasons that somebody can be against monism, against dogma, is that it doesn't take into account developments, changes, I mean one who is monist. In some cases, you would ...

IB Go on, continue.

GC Even in your lecture in Milan ...

IB No, monists can perfectly well take account of change.

GC To what extent?

IB Well, they have to interpret it all in terms of some single system. But of course they allow change to happen. The system allows for change: why not? If it's one system, it's one system.

GC No, certainly, but the point is that you allow for a change, but you allow for a *certain* change.

IB Oh, you have to explain certain other changes. If you are a Marxist, which is a highly monist system, the changes must be accounted for. They must be explained. If it doesn't fit with your system, then presumably we modify the system. That's allowed, provided there's only one system.

GC Provided only one system.

IB Yes.

GC Now, let's take into account ...

IB It can be modified.

GC Let's modify the system.

IB Yes, but still not so much that it'll cease to be a system, but still modifies[?], certainly.

GC Yes. All right. But don't you think that in a constitution like the American ...

IB Yes.

GC ... the degree of flexibility, or the belief in the constitution ...

IB Yes.

GC ... are of the kind that they are not – that sometimes I feel [?] a sort of dogmatist attitude.

IB No, all you're really saying is: countries which have constitutions have some kind of unchanging rules.

GC Not all kinds of constitutions.

IB No, but the American Constitution.

GC The American, yes.

IB Certain – the various points in the American Constitution [?] – what are they called, these chapters of the constitution?¹¹ Not the Amendments, but ...

GC The main thing.

IB The main thing, yes. What are they called?

GC I don't remember now.

IB We're only talking about the First Amendment, Fifth Amendment, those are all amendments. But the basic items, the basic rules of the constitution are what they are. Certainly. And one can only alter them by all kinds of – either amendments, which are allowed, or legal fictions, which [?] of course – and they have done that. But of course constitutions are – can be straitjackets. They can

¹¹ Articles?

be, but they needn't be. No, I don't think I have anything to say about that.

GC I think that ...

IB I don't think there is a problem there.

GC It occurred to me when I read your lecture ...

IB Yes.

GC ... in Milan, and something there reminded me of it. I'll check it again.

IB Never mind what I said.

GC Why it bothers me – because I think that nowadays, even in Israel, there are some cases, when people are religiously in favour of a constitution, they think it is going to solve every problem, I think in some cases it is – dogmatist people who have an enlightened education, and that's how they reach ...

IB Now, look, I agree that there are certain people who only feel comfortable inside a monistic system. And a great many people are like that at all times. Constitutions suit these people particularly well. But the existence of a constitution is probably indispensable and certainly is not in itself necessarily any kind of fetter ...

GC No, that I agree.

IB ... on free development.

GC That I agree.

IB But the taste for a constitution, on the whole, according to a how people want things cut and dried. Temperamentally, I don't like things being cut and dried. But there are people who do, and they are only ever safe, if they have security in something which they can absolutely lean on, like, so to speak, a permanent constitution. That's true. But why are you saying all this?

GC I'm saying all this for two reasons: First of all, as I said, I read your lecture in Milan, I remember the question arose. I can't remember now the exact paragraph I am referring to, and I'll check it.

IB All right.

GC And secondly, reading it again, I wanted to ask you, and here I can remember references of yours, in many places, but still, an attitude, of, let's say, the thinker on the one hand, or a man of the public on the other hand, the attitude for being dogmatist or pluralist; monist or pluralist. Is it by its nature intellectual, moral or psychological?

IB All three.

GC All three?

IB Yes.

GC Including psychological?

IB Oh certainly. Some people are more disposed towards it psychologically, of course they are. Other people – moral doctrine. But I think – but of course I agree with William James: I think most philosophical doctrines are traceable to psychological dispositions. Fichte once said, 'If you want to examine the theory, you must examine the theorist.'¹² Most people believe, or they are inclined to believe, or their inclination is a psychological attribute.

GC Now, can we take ...

¹² Cf. 'Was für eine Philosophie man wähle, hängt sonach davon ab, was man für ein Mensch ist' ('What kind of philosophy you choose depends on what kind of person you are'), *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre* (1797): J. G. Fichte, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6), i 434.

IB But let's go back to the constitution for one moment. A constitution can be liberating. It need not be confining. If you are afraid of clerical tyranny, a secular constitution is a liberating force.

GC Surely.

IB In Israel particularly.

GC I know.

IB Any constitution which does not follow Halakhah is a good thing.

GC That's sure. But if we come to Israel, one shouldn't fight in favour of a constitution now, because politically now you can't [?].

IB Well – because it'll be the wrong constitution.

GC Any constitution you produce will be bad.

IB Bad, yes. That's another matter, yes. That's a pragmatic matter.

GC Surely. I'm not referring to our problem.

IB No.

GC What I had in mind was the American.

IB As such. That is [?] American Constitution, of course it is. Well, it's prevented certain things happening, and it's encouraged others. But that is true of all human arrangements.

GC Yes. Sure. But coming back to the psychological element.

IB In pluralism? Certainly. Oh, yes, of course. People are liberals or conservatives by inclination. People who like tidiness or a certain degree of untidiness by nature, and so on. I think William James is very good on all that. He tends to trace fundamental beliefs, both in philosophy and in life, to certain psychological formations. There's much to be said – it doesn't mean that what these psychological

formations lead to are necessarily valid or lead to truth, but they do lead to it. And if you find yourself in a certain state of mind, you can by pure intellectual argument sometimes be converted, but it's an uphill task.

GC But let's say there is a climate, like during the decline of the Roman Empire. The intellectual background, the moral background, the psychological background was fertile for monistic attitudes.

IB I have no idea. I know nothing about the end ...

GC You know.

IB ... of the Roman Empire. No, I don't. I don't think it particularly was. I think – certainly Christianity was a monistic religion, but Mithraism – that was not, it was a great rival, it was a rival religion.

GC No, the question is, if by chance Christianity won – or not?

IB No. I have no idea. I can't tell you. Nobody can give you a firm answer.

GC When you say that you don't know it means that you think that it's not.

IB No, I don't think that. I mean I don't know. I just don't know. I don't know what the situation was, and I don't know how many people really can claim to know. It's a vast problem. The empire was an enormous affair, and why Christianity triumphed has been explained, but never conclusively.

GC Of course. It can't be conclusive, anyway. But the idea of course being that during periods of transition.

IB Why was it a period of transition? You have to say all periods are periods of transition.

GC Yes, but there are some transitions that are more radical and people can't cope with it either intellectually or morally or ...

IB Christianity did not appear in a period of transition. It's not so. Constantine the Great was a powerful emperor. The barbarians had not broken through. There was no reason for thinking – although he moved himself to Constantinople – to say that it is a period of transition, more than Julius Caesar, or more than, I don't know, the ...

GC No. It's not the political side, I mean the position of the economic ...

IB Spiritually, economically – I don't think particularly – maybe ...

GC But there are many theories anyway.

IB Exactly. You must read Professor A. H. M. Jones. There are at least three books that deal with it.

GC I know.

IB And these people had not read them. I can't tell if what they say is plausible or not. No good asking me large historical questions.

GC I know.

IB I am very well aware of my ignorance.

GC I think it's not ignorance.

IB Oh, it is. Oh it's no good your and my talking about things we don't know much about.

GC I know, but – so let's put the question in a different way. Do you agree that there are periods in which monistic ideology is a convenient solution for a certain kind of individual?

IB Sure.

GC The psychological kind?

IB Certainly.

GC What would be the reaction of such an individual whose psychological inclinations are pluralistic, and the period is a revolutionary one, let's say, the Russian Revolution. What would be the attitude of such a man?

IB There is no answer to that question. The question is too personal. It depends on each person individually. No general answer would be of any value. It is true, this much seems to me to be true, but I am no better on this than anybody else. My subjective view would be that people are troubled by problems, and don't know quite how to conduct their lives, and may have psychological inclinations in various directions. If the problems become acute, and if the sense of being lost – such people often take refuge in a large system which gives them comfort, answers their questions, and they come to rest on a bed of dogma, simply because they are tired of walking.

GC Surely.

IB And they lie down on a bed of dogma, and they are comfortable for the rest of their lives. That happens. That is how people become Communists.

GC Certainly. But let's observe what is going on now in Russia. There is a problem there.

IB Many problems.

GC Do you consider Gorbachev to be pluralistic?

IB No, certainly not. No Communist is pluralistic. Gorbachev is certainly an intelligent man to know that rigid dogmatism stifles progress, stifles development, stifles the imagination which is needed. He knows that. But I assume that he is some kind of Communist. No Communist is a pluralist. Never has been. Not possible. The whole beauty of Communism is that it is a solution to all problems in one way or another.

GC Now ...

IB When people talk about polycentrism, which George Kennan talked about, politically it makes sense that there isn't a single authority to dictate to all the Communists in the world, because Yugoslavia and Romania and Russia are all somewhat different from each other, but ideologically Communism is the tightest system of the twentieth century. It shows not the faintest sign of developing into some kind of system of alternatives.

GC The question is, of course, how Gorbachev will be judged in a generation, in fifty years' time.

IB Neither you nor I know.

GC Whether the process of de-Communisation ...

IB We don't really ...

GC I mean, the feeling is of course that it is a tension.

IB I'll tell you. The position is – it's unanswerable, your question.

GC Yes.

IB It's unanswerable and people who speculate about it are wasting their time. For the following reasons. It seems to me that a number of persons in the Soviet Union who are convinced Marxist-Communists can probably be counted on the fingers ...

GC Yes.

IB ... at most of two hands, maybe only one. On the other hand, the number of persons who think that a radical modification is either possible or desirable is also very small. Faith in Marxism is not the same as dedication to the system which they have. I mean Marxism, to the Russians, for many years has been rather like school religion to an English school, say. They go to Chapel, that's our religion, they have to set them formulae, they feel quite cosy about it, that's the kind of school we are, that's the religion which most boys have. They're not bothered with dogma, they're not bothered

with theology. They're not bothered about arguments in favour, arguments against. So in that sense the monism does not come – well, it comes from Marxism ultimately, it comes from Lenin or Trotsky or whoever, but now it simply is a rigid, tight sort of straitjacket, which can be slightly modified, the Party can be allowed to breathe. It can be a little bit loosened. But that's something quite different from pluralism, which allows incompatible things to coexist, and that certainly is not going to be allowed in our time in the Soviet Union, at least in any important respects. Unimportant respects, maybe.

GC As you believed that the formation of the attitude of the individual is – does the psychological aspect count?

IB Oh, but of course.

GC You stressed that you never read Freud.

IB True.

GC Why didn't you?

IB Ignorance. Sheer ignorance. I didn't read Freud because I didn't think, in those days ... Why didn't I read Freud? Because I was preoccupied with other problems, and with other writings, that's all. I'm ashamed at not having read Freud. There's no reason in the world. I didn't react against it. I didn't think psychoanalysis was nonsense, or a mere theory. I thought there might be – I didn't read Freud for the same reasons that I didn't read *Principia Mathematica*. Because I thought it was too much to learn, and I am by nature intellectually indolent.

GC [*laughter*]

IB It's true, I assure you. It just seemed hard work. I always avoid that if I possibly can. For the same reason as – I wouldn't have read Marx if I didn't force myself to do it. Because I thought that the world was becoming more and more Marxist. But I had no reason for thinking that the world was becoming more and more Freudian.

GC And you never took interest in arguments among the psychoanalysts, I mean their schools?

IB No.

GC Adler.

IB No.

GC You never ...

IB No. I knew vaguely what the differences were, just as in general people with some form of education do. No, I didn't take any interest in it. I thought there was something to be said. I took a very very philistine attitude towards it – I feel there's something in it, but not quite enough to grip me. No,

I didn't read Freud because I don't think I was – I think people who read Freud, on the whole, are people who have some sense of uneasiness with themselves. I never was, I'm afraid. That's what makes my nature so exceptionally shallow. But we have shallow natures, you and I, we are not profound thinkers. Above all, we are not deeply self-critical in that sense. We don't suffer from psychological malaise, which I think is the stimulus towards reading things like Freud. An interest in the unconscious must derive from some inability to cope with the conscious.

GC Most of your friends did read Freud?

IB I do not know about most.

GC When you were ...

IB Some certainly did. But of course ...

GC ... young.

IB Yes. When I was young – how young?

GC In Oxford and the early days of New College and All Souls.

IB Yes, certainly. Oh Lord, yes. Undergraduates from my time read Freud. But it was always – I always regarded it as one theory among many. Quite interesting, quite ingenious, but I never believed that it was of central importance. But I may be wrong. I remember a young man called Goldschmidt, who was killed in the war, the brother of the wife of the late Professor [Nicholas] Kaldor, who wrote the psychoanalysis of *Alice in Wonderland* on Freudian lines.¹³ It was quite amusing. Quite well done. Stuart Hampshire, I'm sure, read Freud in those days, [?] something like it. Other people, I'm just trying to think. Who did I know? The philosophers didn't.

GC The philosophers didn't?

IB No. I think Austin dabbled in it a little bit, we knew that Wittgenstein probably did, but the philosophers, on the whole, no. No. I'm trying to think of who I knew.

GC When Freddie Ayer went to Vienna, for example.

IB He was totally untouched, completely untouched by Freud. He knew the language. In the book which he wrote afterwards he said religion was no doubt the desire for some kind of – it was due to – it was after a father figure.¹⁴ 'Father figure' is a psychoanalytic term. We all talked about inhibitions, we all talked about complexes, inhibitions, and so on – that everyone talked about. Nobody quite knew what it meant. Some were Freudian, some came from Adler. 'Inferiority complex' is not Freud, and so on.

GC You always said that you are not interested in what's going on in the Church of England, the theological arguments, that it's of no interest to you.

IB What? Church of England?

¹³ A. M. E. Goldschmidt, 'Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analysed', *New Oxford Outlook* 1 no. 1 (May 1933), 68–72; repr. in Robert Phillips (ed.), *Aspects of Alice* (New York, 1971), 279–82.

¹⁴ I cannot find this in *Language, Truth and Logic*.

GC Yes.

IB None.

GC None. I'll tell you why I ask. Nowadays, after all, it's probably the only institution in England where you find people arguing and trying to raise the argument to a level of conceptual argument. Now truly it's a theology.

IB It's no good. Look, one cannot take an interest in theology if one doesn't know what the word 'God' means. I understand the word 'God' means an old man with a beard. That I understand. But that I don't believe exists. That is a very so-called primitive idea which most children and most primitive, most ordinary believers at the back of their minds probably have. Some kind of person, not unlike a human person, but great and infinitely good, infinitely powerful, infinitely etc. Once it ceases to be an old man with a beard, and becomes something abstract, like a spiritual principle which governs the universe, or an occult power which in some way penetrates all there is, then I simply don't know what they are talking about. Consequently I've never taken an interest in any theology unless it impinges on something in which I *was* interested. Like, for example, Jewish history. In the case of the Church of England, although of course there is a lot of argument about social problems, it doesn't seem to me that it happens at the level either of enough abstraction or enough depth to engage me. I understand what they are saying, and I sympathise with one side or the other, but I don't see how their theology helps.

GC And I'll tell you why ...

IB Atheists could argue in exactly the same terms.

GC Yes, of course. That's why I ask. I can see why the theological aspect of it can deter you, but ...

IB It doesn't deter me. But it seems irrelevant to me.

GC I believe that in many cases scholasticism is a manifestation of sometimes a very high standard quality of mind, like say Thomas Aquinas.

IB Oh, of course. Yes.

GC Now, one doesn't have to believe in Catholicism to ...

IB Oh no.

GC ... to appreciate ...

IB Certainly not. No.

GC ... Thomas Aquinas.

IB I am not very interested in – if I was interested in Aristotle, I'd be interested in Aquinas. If I were interested in, I don't know, the – in Philo, I might be interested in the Rambam [Maimonides]. But I'm not. Just not.

GC Because I mean ...

IB I know. Religion I think is something of interest to me, because it certainly – religious poetry or religious phraseology certainly touches on spiritual issues, which nothing else does. But that any atheist can appreciate. I would agree this[?], because any real bone-dry atheist, and I've known such people in my life, doesn't understand what people live by. There usually is a blindness to the nature of inner life on the part of human beings in general. Religious language is something which undoubtedly opens one's eyes to inner experience of a certain kind. In that sense I'm rather pro-religion, and I think that children who are educated without religion are at a grave disadvantage. It is usually put to the effect that religion is part of our culture, civilisation. All right, we'll put it that way. It's more than that. The attitude of atheists to society in general is very like the attitude of unmusical people towards music. They know it's important, they know people like it, they know it means a great deal, but they don't know why. Bertrand Russell, Freddie Ayer, Trevor-Roper, gifted as they all are in many ways, have never really

understood what human beings are like, anywhere, at any time. And that on the whole leads to their gravest gaps in their intellectual output.

GC This reminds me of a minor question. In your days in Oxford, how did Catholic students feel? Did they have problems?

IB Catholic students at Oxford? I don't think I knew them as such. There was a Catholic chaplaincy. The Catholic chaplaincy, with some kind of Catholic priest. At times the Catholic priest was rather a snob, with the result that the lower-class Catholics, or Catholics from lower-class countries like Malta, didn't feel themselves fully accepted. That is what has always been alleged to be the trouble, that Mintoff, in Malta, who is said to have been interned as anti-British by the fact that when he was at Balliol the then Catholic Chaplain, Father De Sireta[?], never invited him to his parties. That was I think the source of resentment, but probably was irrelevant.

GC But individual Catholics ...

IB They were a bit different. I knew Catholics. Yes. Certainly I knew Catholics. And I liked some of them. I didn't know very many, because there weren't very many.

GC There were not many.

IB No. I knew people, and I knew people at Campion Hall, I knew the Jesuits quite well. Quite well. I used to go to dinner there once a term.

GC When? When you were ...

IB From 1932 onwards.

GC I see.

IB Even a little earlier. My last year. I knew Father D'Arcy, who was the head of it, who was a charming and extremely sensitive and emotionally very interesting man. He had the reputation of being an important philosopher. That's what he taught. That I think was not

founded on anything very solid. He knew Aristotle, he knew Oxford philosophy. But when Lord Hailsham in his intellectual autobiography explains what an influence he had on him, because he made religion intellectually respectable – he didn't make it intellectually respectable for me, although we used to talk about it. He was like a very sensitive and charming woman, with whom it was delightful to talk, Father D'Arcy. But some of the Jesuits in his college were very intellectually tough, and quite interesting to talk to.

GC And you could talk philosophy with them?

IB Oh, certainly. Yes, I could.

GC They .

IB Well, I had Jesuit pupils.

GC You had.

IB Yes, I taught them Plato and Aristotle. And they were very able, and expounded very well. Sometimes I taught them about philosophical realism. They were quite good. They knew perfectly well what they had to believe. I didn't talk about the foundations of Christianity, and so far as I know they never lapsed, so I obviously didn't have a proper disintegrating influence on them.

GC No. But those are the Jesuits and others who were in the houses. Let's say Campion Hall, or others.

IB Other Catholic houses.

GC And other students.

IB And ...?

GC Other students. In your college.

IB Catholics, you mean?

GC Ordinary Catholics. Were they different?

IB Yes, they were. They felt themselves to be different.

GC That's what I thought.

IB They were not different to talk to for me. But they themselves felt a minority. Just as the Jews did.

GC Did any of them discuss it with you?

IB No. They never – no one brought it up. I don't think I ever brought it up. I don't think any of the Gentiles ever discussed the problem of being a Jew with me. Never. Never ever talked to me about that.

GC Never?

IB Never. I don't – at least not as an undergraduate. But when I became a don.

GC Even if they became intimate friends?

IB Yes, well, of course I talked about Zionism with them.

GC No. About ...

IB About the position of Jews? I used to lecture them on the subject, but I don't think they ever asked. They brought it up – never, no. I brought it up, I'm sure, much more than they did. I'm sure I did.

GC And girlfriends, just curiosity.

IB No. Nobody said 'What do you do? What is your religion? Why don't you eat pig?' No, nobody said that.

GC But at a later age, when you had friends who knew about Judaism, but not enough, did they try to find out more?

IB I don't believe I ever had such friends.

GC People like Herbert. No, not Herbert, sorry. Like Stuart, like ...

IB No, I don't think so, no. Stuart has never in his life – Zionism, Palestine, yes – Israel. But to talk to me about Judaism or – he used to ask me a little bit about Spinoza, because he wrote a book about him, but mainly he got information from the Professor of Jewish Studies at University College, whose name I can't remember – at that time. No, that was never an issue. I'm just trying to think. Policy[?] of anti-Semitism I don't think I ever discussed with anybody at Oxford before the war.

GC Before the war?

IB Yes, after the war.

GC Before the war, I mean, when Marxism rose.

IB No.

GC Anti-Semitism was not ...

IB No. I never met anybody who was pro-Nazi. In Oxford. They may have existed. Of course they existed, but I don't think I knew them.

GC People who came back from Germany?

IB The only time I remember when the issue of Jews came up was [when] Quintin Hogg, now Lord Hailsham, in 1938 said to me – 1939 – said to me, 'You want the war because you're a Jew. That's why you want to fight against the Nazis. Well, we don't want a war here.' He just wanted – he didn't say 'bloody Jew', but that's what it meant. Then, nine months later, he said: 'I want to kill Germans. I want to kill a great many Germans. I want to kill them with my own hands.' So his opinion changed within two or three months.

GC You have friends who went to Germany to study German, or to ...

IB No, I don't think I did. I don't think I ever did. I don't think anybody from Oxford, to my knowledge – I had a pupil called Monty Woodhouse, who was afterwards a politician. He went to Munich, in 1938 or so. And he used to tell me how delightful the Hofbräuhaus was in Munich. He liked Germany, didn't like France. But we didn't talk about politics.

GC No, but friends who went to study there.

IB Philosophy, no.

GC German or philosophy.

IB No, nobody did.

GC They used to go.

IB Not in my time. John – Michael Foster, before my time, studied philosophy in Kiel, before the Nazis.

GC Crossman went.

IB Crossman did go, yes. That's quite right. He talked about Germans non-stop. I never had an argument about the Nazis with him because there was no point. Crossman professed to be anti-Nazi, and up to a point he was. But basically he was a left-wing Nazi. He was anti-capitalist, but he believed in marches and flags, and he was absolutely fascinated by them. And they used to come and visit him here. And he used to tell them how terrible they were, and they were very very – they were delighted. The tone was right, his appearance was right, his interests were right. They didn't mind being denounced, provided it was done in the fashion which they understood, and which was cosy for them. He loved the Germans. And he denounced the Nazis, but they felt [he was] a brother. The bullying aspect, and the passion, and the interest, the [?] interest in what they were, what they believed, moved them very much. The little Nazi groups, who sometimes came.

GC But Nazism was an issue.

IB No. Not in Oxford it wasn't. No. Of course, yes, but I don't remember any sharp arguments, say, in All Souls, for and against. I remember Hubert Henderson denouncing the Foreign Office to Roger Makins because we allowed Hitler to reoccupy the Rhineland. That kind of thing.

GC That's pure politics.

IB Yes. But ideologically, there was nobody here who was professing – who appeared to be pro-Nazi.

GC No, but the anti-Nazi movement ...

IB Nobody would argue against it. We knew perfectly well there were appeasers, of course. But there never was a collision. People just knew who the people were. It never came to what might be called a sharp argument. Not in my presence, at least. Someone like Rowse, who was left-wing, would say 'bloody Germans, bloody Huns, bloody Nazis', but people who – on the other side just listened, and probably shrugged their shoulders and went to the other end of the room.

GC But he was anti-Nazi because he was left-wing.

IB Yes.

GC Anti-Semitism had nothing to do with it.

IB He was rather anti-Semitic himself.

GC Others among your friends who were leftists and anti-Nazis and so on, anti-Semitism didn't come into it.

IB No.

GC Only after the war?

IB If at all, yes. Certainly. After the war, certain of them were anti-Zionists, but anti-Semitism was never a – I never came across anti-Semitism in an overt sense. Far less than anybody else you know.

GC That's unusual.

IB It is so. Nobody, somehow, I don't know why, I've never been present where people had unsuitable anti-Semitic sentiments.

GC Less than many others.

IB Well, probably. I daresay in Oxford these things were rather muted. Of course there – someone like Lionel Curtis, who was a great British imperialist, and a racist, fundamentally, didn't like Jews. But he never said so in my presence. The word was never uttered. When I was elected to All Souls, the Bishop of Gloucester, during the meeting at which I was elected, made a speech saying, 'After all, we are a Christian foundation, perhaps it isn't right.' I was certainly the first Jew to be elected to an ordinary fellowship of the College. But I don't know what – it probably brought five votes to my side.

GC Was he a Fellow of the College?

IB Yes. He was.

GC And he was.

IB Certainly. We became great friends. Oh, we were great friends. He talked very amiably.

GC It doesn't ...

IB Well, I think he perhaps was a little bit. He might have been. He was very reactionary, and I daresay, he could have been called – but he wasn't interested in Jews. It wasn't a subject. Let me explain to you. In general England is not an anti-Semitic country in this sense: the country is not anti-Semitic if you assume about it [*cut off*].