Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 14

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Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 14

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IB They are probably not. A country is anti-Semitic if you assume that, unless you know the opposite, then they are. Unless you know they're not. In that sense, America is anti-Semitic less than it was.

A great deal less so than it was, curiously enough. It's not quite clear why, but certainly less so. France is, Russia is, Germany is, Austria is, Italy is not, Scandinavia up to a point. More so than you would think. Holland is not. Spain is, Portugal is not. And so on.

GC Let's come back to questions from the other meeting. How long [?].

IB I'll tell you. I probably can go on till about – I should think about 5 or quarter past. Plenty of time, yes.

GC When you look back on your friendship with Russian émigrés or children of Russian emigrants, in England, since you were a child …

IB Yes.

GC Can one speak about …?

IB Russian Jewish? Or Russian?

GC Both.

IB They are quite different.

GC I know. There are many distinctions, but generally speaking can one speak about a Russian immigration to, *ha-emigrazia ha-russit* [the Russian emigration], to England? Now, looking retrospectively?

IB No, one cannot. There's no such thing, compared to other countries. Paris, yes.

GC Ah, it was less than Paris?

IB Less than Paris, less than New York.

GC In number, or …

IB In number. The number of non-Jewish Russians that existed of course, but there was a kind of – there wasn't – there were Russians in London – they were just – they knew each other, but they were mainly, I don't know, they were just – I don't know how many, but they didn't form a coherent group. But can one speak about …

GC Yes.

IB But I never knew them. I didn't know them.

GC The non-Jewish ones.

IB The non-Jewish ones. The Jews, of course, all crowded into Hampstead. We didn't live there, we lived in Kensington, and from time to time my parents naturally visited them or were visited by them. That is, six or seven Russian Jewish families of more or less the same bourgeois origin as my parents. Of course they existed, I can give you their names, with whom my parents were on friendly terms. But because my parents didn't pl ay cards, and because my parents weren't really rich and didn't gamble, and because they didn't live in Hampstead, above all, but lived in Kensington, in order to make it possible for me to go to my school on foot, they didn't – they were outsiders in that company, no, but respected, but not felt to be the centre of the colony, as for example Max Beloff's parents were. I can tell you who they were. I can recite six or seven names. There was the family called the Schalits: they came from Riga, of course. That's how my parents knew them, from those days. The Schalits. There was a man called Zinn, with a double 'n'. Jolly fellow. His son became a master at Westminster. He was a pupil of mine at New College, became baptised, there was – they had two sisters who I knew well, and there was the

Beloff family, who of course we knew; there was, who? I'm just trying to think of names. I've forgotten their names largely. There was a charming man called Rachmilevich, who had a dominating influence on me. I think I've talked to you about him already. He lived near[?] the Schalits. But where did I meet them? There was a man called Wolf, William Wolf, who was head of the Colonial Trust, the Zionist bank. There was a man called Kagan, who was some sort of businessman in London, nothing to do with the present Lord Kagan. Kagan [*Hebrew pronunciation*]. Goodness, not all that many. My parents knew many more than I knew. And what used to happen is that there was an annual ball called the ORT Ball, of the ORT organisation, you know what ORT is?

GC Yes, sure.

IB ORT. There was a ball organised by the Beloff family, to which the entire Russian Jewish colony turned up. You saw them there *en gros*, in bulk.

GC Organised by whom?

IB The Beloff family.

GC Why?

IB Because Mrs Beloff was a very keen worker for ORT. Max's mother. She was a comparatively educated woman, who I think had been to some kind of university in Russia. His father was an extremely tough, amusing, clever, interesting man of a rather peasant type. Sem[i]on Beloff. But, well, she was one, and then, wait, there were others. There was a man called [David] Mowshowitch, who was a Bundist, who also belonged to it, who was secretary to Lucien Wolf, and a major factor of Lucien Wolf's acute anti-Zionism. And that used to – a huge ball used to occur, to which all the Russian Jews turned up, and they saw each other,

talked to each other – that was a Russian event. I never went – I didn't go to it every year, but after I was 15 or 16 I was sometimes taken to it, and I used to watch these people – that's all. I never really, I didn't know three-quarters of them.

GC Then, when you came to Oxford, did you have any friends of Russian descent?

IB One, exactly one. Not a Jew. No, that's not quite true. Well, the Schapiro family; I forgot Leonard Schapiro's family; that's Riga too.

GC [*unclear*]

IB Not as much as some. But they came to the odd ball. No, she was born in Scotland, and there was an attempt – he certainly was part of it, the father. Who was there here? Nobody. No. The only people – the Trillings were a well-known Russian Jewish family. Trilling.

GC Trilling?

IB Trilling. Yes. Same as the writer.

GC The same family?

IB Well, they came from Białystok, yes. I think he was a merchant, who had two sons, one of whom still writes about music – sort of a music critic and ballet critic. The brother of whom I knew quite well. Why did I know him? Because of these Hampstead connections. He wasn't at school with me. The only one Russian that I really know, and that was a half English Russian called Ivan Bilibin. He was at St Paul's. Once a month I talked Russian with him. He was the son of a very famous Russian painter called Bilibin, who had an English [Irish Russian] wife [Mary Chambers],

who came to London and then went back to the Soviet Union, where he died he did icons, he decorated ballets, he was a kind of Slavic-style painter, greatly respected, quite famous in the history of Russian painting. The son was very right wing, he's alive [1908–93], still, my age, and he's one of the courtiers of the pretender to the Russian throne. All his life was spent entirely as a professional monarchist agitator and political activist. Rather eccentric. Him I knew.

GC You knew him.

IB He was at Oxford, and St Paul's. He was at school with me, and he came to Oxford the same year as I did.

GC And that's that.

IB That's that.

GC And among the old aristocratic families, are there …?

IB I new nobody.

GC And later on – I ask you because I noticed that you form acquaintances and friendship all along your life with many Russians.

IB Not many, no. Miss Kallin, she was a typical Russian Jewess, who organised the Third Programme.

GC What's the name?

IB Kallin.

GC Kalin.

IB Niouta Kallin, Anna Kallin. She was more responsible than anybody for the Third Programme on the wireless. She was a Moscow Jewess.

GC Moscow Jewess.

IB And I met her after the war.

GC After the war, all right.

IB I knew – I met her, I'd shaken hands with her, before the war, but I got to know her after the war.

GC And after the war, you met – and during the war and after the war …

IB During the war, I must have met some in Washington, but not many.

GC When did you meet the Pasternaks, I mean the sisters?

IB I remember when they came to live here, which was the beginning of the war.

GC Beginning of the war.

IB Yes. At least, when the father was here. Pasternak the painter. He came here. [Georgy/George] Katkov was a Russian whom of course I knew. He came here in 1938.

GC 1938.

IB And again in 1939.

GC Did he come to Oxford?

IB Certainly he came to Oxford. He came to bring the philosophical papers of the teacher of his teacher, a man named Brentano, who was a famous philosopher in Prague.

GC The Brentano?

IB That Brentano. There was a Brentano Institute, founded by Masaryk, in Prague. Masaryk was a pupil of Brentano. And [Oskar] Kraus, who was Katkov's master, was the Professor, who was a direct pupil of Brentano. And Katkov was a pupil of Kraus, who was a philosopher in Prague. He brought the material because of the Nazi danger etc., spoke very little English, and I was produced as an interpreter between him and two or three philosophers in Oxford. That's how I met him. Then he went back to Prague and he rescued Kraus, whom he brought to Oxford. Kraus was baptised, but it would not have gone well with him there, and Kraus's wife was a famous *diseuse*. She recited German poetry in theatres. And they came and lived in Park Town, and three doors away was Pasternak, and his two daughters. That's where I met them. During the war I don't think I saw them, but I saw a certain amount of them after the war. Pasternak died during the war, or at the end of it [31 May 1945].

GC Katkov brought the papers of Kraus or Brentano?

IB He brought Brentano's archive to Oxford. And then handed it over to Brentano's son or grandson in Northwestern University, somewhere in the – some kind of scientist in the Midwest. To which they ultimately went. He was more or less the keeper of the Brentano archive.

GC And then when.

IB Katkov I saw from time to time during the war when he worked – he must have been a monitor.

GC In the BBC?

IB No, in Evesham, which was where wartime – where Weidenfeld, Miss Kallin and a number of other persons – Leonard Schapiro, Madariaga's daughter [Isabel de Madariaga], they were all monitors.

GC In different languages.

IB In different languages. Leonard Schapiro was a Russian monitor.

GC But yet again, when a man like Katkov comes to Oxford did he find any other Russians?

IB He probably did, but I don't know them.

GC Probably not very many.

IB Very few. Certainly. Hardly anybody. I can't think of who there was. There was no Professor before the war. [Sergey] Konovalov, who later became Professor, used to come from Birmingham once a week. There was a man called [Vadim] Narikin.[1] Captain Naryshkin, from the Boyar family. A noble family, but I don't know if Katkov ever knew him. Lived in Boars Hill and used to give sort of Balalaika parties to English undergraduates. I don't know of any Russians here before the war. There was no Russian teaching here, or very little.

GC Before the war, you mean?

[1] Lecturer in French at Brasenose College.

IB Oh, there was, but not by some [*unclear*].

GC But who were the teachers of Max Hayward, Harry Willetts, Obolensky?

IB After the war. Obolensky was a Russian.

GC Yes, but he studied Russian here.

IB No. Obolensky was in Cambridge. He was a Fellow of Trinity. Obolensky was educated – was a Russian from the beginning. He was a natural Russian speaker, brought up in a totally Russian atmosphere. Obolensky didn't learn Russian, never.

GC I got the wrong impression.

IB Absolutely. He was a Russian prince who didn't need to learn Russian. His parents spoke Russian to him and all his brothers and sisters. No. The English who learnt Russian learnt it here after the war. Nobody learned it here before the war. Not really. When Maurice Bowra taught himself Russian, Martin Cooper, my friend, who was a [?] musical critic, taught himself: he had no teachers. After the war, there *were* teachers of Russian.

GC Russian literature?

IB What about it? What?

GC Russian literature?

IB No. As far as I know, no. Well, Modern Languages didn't include Russian. As I say, I think Professor Konovalov used to come from Birmingham once a week, so he had some pupils. But it was very thin. It existed in a very marginal way.

GC You named some other names, but I thought that it was more than just by chance that so many Russian names crop up, but you mentioned Alexander Halpern, you mentioned …

IB No. Him I met in New York.

GC You met him in New York.

IB Yes. He was a British agent. He was in the Intelligence Service in New York, and some Zionist, who was, I think, a man called [Leo] Historic, who was the head of the Jewish Colonial Bank Trust [Jewish Colonial Trust bank/Jüdische Colonialbank], whom I must have met, I don't know, at the ORT ball, anywhere you like, introduced us, thought I might wish to meet him, so I then met him in New York. And I used to go to dinner with him in New York. He had a very interesting Georgian wife; she was a Georgian princess. And there I did meet some members of the Russian aristocracy, who lived in New York.

GC In New York?

IB Yes. But not very frequently.

GC He came from England, didn't he?

IB I think they were from London – who, Halpern?

GC Halpern.

IB London.

GC London.

IB He was, yes, because he was sent as a sort of agent to New York. And I used to go to dinner with Bill Deakin, who used to be –

because he was in his office. They worked together, same office. Bill Deakin and Freddie Ayer used to come to dinner and I used to be there too, but I talked Russian then. Naturally they didn't. He was in London throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but I had no idea he existed. I tell you, I was remote from the Russian colony. I was no part of it. The fact that I have preserved my Russian as well as I have is very peculiar.

GC That's why I …

IB It's very odd, but it's true. It's very odd, but I talked to my parents in English.

GC That's why I asked the question.

IB I'm telling you: nobody could explain it. I really talked Russian perfectly, more or less, though I say it myself. Sometimes I don't know where to stress certain words, but in Russia it's always the same with me. The question is always the same when I talk Russian. They say, 'Do you come from Moscow?' 'Do you come from Leningrad?' 'Do you come from Odessa?' Nobody says – the only person who ever made a remark about my Russian was – very funny – was in 1945. I met an American journalist called Scott who had been a Communist, but of course at this time no longer was, who was married to a Russian girl. We met in Donbas or somewhere, somewhere on the Don. He was a factory worker and a keen Communist recruit. By this time he was a correspondent of *Time* magazine; this was 1945. And she said to me, 'You know, your Russian is very good, quite all right, everything is perfectly – something funny about it, all the same.' So I said, 'What is funny?' She said, 'I don't quite know how to put it. Perhaps I ought to say – what I would like to say – I don't know, kind of Menshevik accent.' I knew exactly what she meant. But of course, it meant the intelligentsia accent. Not the broad peasant.

GC Fantastic.

IB That's all that meant. It was the nearest she could get to it. The intelligentsia wasn't a word for her. She was a peasant girl from, I don't know – she must have met some Mensheviks in her life, or at least heard people talk like that. Quite funny, I thought, my Menshevik accent.

GC And later on, people like Nabokov?

IB Nabokov? Oh, that's later. Nabokov I met in New York – in Washington during the war. Yes. That was in 1943 or something.

GC As early as that?

IB 1943. He was teaching all kinds of – literature, philosophy, mixed up, in a place called – funny, New York, not [?] American college, a liberal arts college called St John's Annapolis, which had eccentric principles. Never mind what that was. It would bore you if I told you. And he was there, and I was invited to meet him by some lady in Washington who knew he was a Russian, knew that I was, and thought that we would like to talk Russian to each other, which indeed took place. We became great friends, quite early, yes. On the spot. I thought he was a most attractive man. Then we used to go and dine with Charles Bohlen, who was in the State Department and talked quite good Russian and was a friend of Nabokov. Then Nabokov later became a – went to Berlin and the – American Intelligence and all that. Oh yes, him I met during the war. I met other Russians during the war. I met the Polish wife of an American diplomat – what was his name [John C. Wiley]? I completely forget. Her cousin [nephew] came to see me about six months ago. A journalist called Tad Szulc who works for the *New York Times*. His cousin [aunt], she was a sculptress from Poland, but like all Polish Jews of a certain age she talked Russian, because that's what all Jews talked in the Russian empire. He was called

Wiley, and he was a straight American, a very reactionary American diplomat. She was called Irena [Baruch Wiley] and was a sculptress. She had a kind of Russian salon to which I occasionally went, in Washington.

GC In America there was more.

IB Much more. Far more. Well, there was a Russian newspaper in America , a daily paper, which couldn't have existed in London.

GC And you said that it was a matter of numbers, and not that it's just that there were much fewer Russian émigrés in …

IB I think that is just a fact. They went to Paris, they went to Berlin, but there were not many in Italy, not many in England. Some. There were a few Russians. No doubt there were Russian noblemen who came here, there were Russian aristocrats. I used to go to parties given by the parents of – I had a friend called Ridley. His mother was the daughter of the last Tsarist ambassador to the Court of St James, Count [Alexander Philipp Konstantin Ludwig von] Benckendorff, who became a Catholic, stayed in England, and was buried in Westminster Cathedral. His daughter Nathalie was married to a man of good family called Ridley, the son of Lord [Hon. Sir Jasper Nicholas] Ridley, and his son was here at Balliol. When I was a young don he was an undergraduate, I made great friends with him, and he was killed during the war and I dedicated a book [*The Hedgehog and the Fox*] to him. His mother was pure Russian, the father was English. They used to give parties in London, to which I was invited. Her friends were Russian aristocracy, his friends were Englishmen of good family. They didn't mingle.

GC They didn't?

IB No. The Russians sat at one side of the room, the other – they did a bit, but broadly you could see which was which. The Russians spoke Russian to each other, and the English talked English, and he stood with his arm on the mantlepiece, looking with displeasure on all these awful Russians on the other side of the room.

GC That was before.

IB Oh, they talked it a lot. What? Before the war, yes. Middle 1930s. So I saw them. I saw somebody called Laurence Ovdoshkov[?], I saw somebody called, I don't know, [?] Benckendorffs, I don't know, Baroness [Moura] Budberg, the notorious one, she would be there, but I only met her after the war. [?] What kind of names did they have? Shuvalov.

GC Now, do you have now …?

IB [?]leeven[?]. All these names. Yes. I didn't talk to them. They were white Russians. I was brought up by my parents to regard them all as terrible anti-Semitic reactionaries. By that time I don't know what they were, but anyhow I didn't feel anything in common with them. For these purposes I was a Russian Jew.

GC That's what I thought. Now, Russian aristocratic names brought up in the third generation, let's say Tolstoy …

IB Oh yes.

GC …or Ignatieff.

IB Of course there are. Ignatieff doesn't talk Russian.

GC No.

IB His mother was Canadian. His father was my pupil.

GC His father was your pupil.

IB He was a Canadian Rhodes Scholar. He came to Oxford, the son of the last Minister of Education of the Tsarist regime, was – came to Oxford as a Canadian Rhodes Scholar [1936]. Was taught by me and we made great friends. I talked Russian to him. That was either just before or just after the war. I think just before [yes]. I'm not sure, it may have been just after. George Ignatieff. This man's called Michael, the son. Well, yes. But there was a man called, for example, Zinoviev, who was a Russian of good family, because the Zinovievs had a very good family. The Bolshevik Zinoviev – it wasn't his real name, of course. Him I met after the war. After the war I took an interest in Russian affairs. But all these [Harry] Willettses and [Harold] Shukmans and so on – Shukman learned Russian, presumably, in his university – what was it? He wasn't at Oxford.

GC No, he studied in London.

IB No, he studied in another university. Somewhere like Nottingham [yes]. Somewhere provincial, yes. Not London, no. I don't know where Willetts was. Where did he learn Russian [Oxford]? Max Hayward, he learnt Russian in Leeds [Oxford]. There may have been people who taught this sort of thing. For example, Beloff's[?][2] father-in-law, who was in ORT, in Arcos [All-Russian Co-operative Society], and didn't go back. You know what Arcos was, the Russian trade mission. He was one of the people who didn't go back. He became Professor of Russian of some sort in Manchester, which is where Beloffman[?] must have met his daughter. There were these isolated posts for lecturers and so on. London had Sir Bernard Pares, who was a famous Russian historian. Where did [Hugh] Seton-Watson learn Russian? I don't know. Not in Oxford, I don't think.

[2] Max Beloff was unmarried.

[28:30] GC Let's move to Aline and her Russian connections.

IB Yes.

GC She's a Ginzburg.

IB Sure.

GC Ginzburg is a Russian family.

IB Entirely.

GC How did Aline feel before she met you? Did she have any friends or feelings that she was connected?

IB Oh, absolutely. Her father was 100 per cent Russian.

GC Her father.

IB 100 per cent. Her father was called Baron Ginzburg.[3] One of the thirteen [eleven] children of the Baron Gorazy, Horace [French pronunciation], the famous one.

GC The famous one from Petersburg.

IB Yes. Exactly. And he had lots of children. Her father left Petersburg, I think, in 1898 and either went to work for the Warburg bank ….

[3] On the many forms of this surname see Lorraine de Meaux, *The Gunzburgs: A Family Biography*, trans. Steven Rendall (London, 2019: Halban), xiii. This work is an invaluable source of information on many members of the family, which takes its name from the Bavarian town of Günzburg. The spellings used in the transcript attempt to reflect what IB and GC say even if it differs from normal usage. Thanks to Peter Halban for help with the details of his mother's family.

GC Warburg bank.

IB In Hamburg. But these were all grand Jewish families – were all interconnected; intermarried, too. There were Ginzburgs married to Warburgs. But they were never married to Rothschilds, though everybody thought they were. That has always been taken – my wife.

GC I know.

IB That's a mistake. She's the first cousin of the Baron Guy, who is the head of the family, but through the mother. He [i.e. Pierre] was a straight, well-born Russian Jew. And he supported ORT,[4] which was a typical organisation to make Russians economically productive. Rather than just be commercial agents. Very good. He came to Paris, he knew White Russians in Paris, some of whom he supported, financially. Russians, not Jews. Jews and Russians. But he was very much a member of the White Russian colony in Paris. Before the war – before the First World War and after. He was. He refused to become a French citizen.

GC He refused to become a French citizen?

IB Yes. He remained a Russian citizen, and after that, stateless. And continued to be so until the war.

GC Because of [*unclear*]?[5].

IB Yes. And his little children, little sons, I'm sure, went about in 1914 in little Russian military costumes. That kind of thing. He was

[4] More than that, his father Horace was one of the founders of ORT. The family remain involved to this day.

[5] He could be referring to Pierre's reluctance to become French, showing his loyalty to pre-Bolshevik Russia.

a real Russian. Of course he was a Jew. His father had a Seder, the Baron, so[?] he knew that – of course, he didn't like anti-Semites, but broadly speaking the people he knew were kind of right-wing liberal Russians. The sort of Kerenskyite Russians, like Katkov, people like that. And musicians, singers – he played the violin himself. His wife had nothing to do with it.

GC His wife?

IB Aline's mother.[6]

GC An old Jewish French family.

IB From Alsace, but not very old. Her father was called Deutsch, who in France was pronounced 'Dœtsch', in French. You and I call it 'Deutsch'. He was called Deutsch de la Meurthe. Meurthe is the river. His father came to Paris from Alsace at the time of the Franco-Prussian War,[7] because he was such a French patriot. And his son – I don't know what the grandfather was …[8] – just an Alsatian Jewish family. Like all these Alsatians, the main body of French Jews came from Alsace. They were all French Jews with German names. All these rabbis and everybody. They all came from there, yes. And so on, all these Gottliebs and, I don't know ….

GC The majority, anyway.

[6] Baroness Yvonne Fanny de Gunzbourg (1882–1969) née Deutsch de la Meurthe, widow of Baron Pierre de Gunzbourg, and daughter of Émile Michel Deutsch de la Meurthe (1847–1924), industrialist.

[7] In fact it was well before the Franco-Prussian War, and he strongly identified with France when the Germans occupied Alsace-Lorraine in 1871. Hence the addition of 'de la Meurthe' to his surname.

[8] Alexandre Deutsch de la Meurthe (1815–89), founder of an oil business that later became the Jupiter Petroleum Co., which merged with Shell.

IB Certainly. No: some came from Bordeaux and some came from Provence.

GC Bordeaux.

IB Quite a lot from Bordeaux. She, Aline, had relations that came from Bordeaux. But her great-grandfather came to Paris and was probably something to do with money. I don't know what he did, but his son became the Rockefeller agent in Paris, and became a multi-millionaire, and had a huge shareholding in Royal Dutch in the end.

GC That's Aline's grandfather?

IB Grandfather.

GC On the mother's side?

IB On the mother's side. And he gave money to the Sorbonne. There is a street called rue [Émile] Deutsch de la Meurthe [in Paris 14e], which I think has now been divided or even suppressed,[9] I'm not sure. There was a little street called after him, and he was a typical French Jew, who hated leaving France. He never went abroad if he could help it. Thought that – he used to shoot, had a shoot to which he invited eminent persons, was rich and quite well established. Straight Frenchman, who happened to be a Jew. There was no question of – some of the members of – no members of his direct family were baptised, but certainly people who married his cousins and so on all became – were quite easily and quite often baptised. He had four daughters. One daughter [Yvonne] married Pierre de Ginzburg [Gunzbourg], that's my father-in-law, who was always called Pierre. Petr [pronounced 'Pyotr'] officially, but Pierre, that's how he was known even in Russia.

[9] Not suppressed. Did it originally include what is now rue Nantsouty?

GC It was in Russian Pierre or Petr?

IB His official name was Petr.

GC Petr.

IB But he was known as Pierre.

GC By his Russian friends?

IB By his Russian friends. Then he had a brother who … No. That's one daughter. The second daughter [Marie] married a man called Goldschmidt, who changed his name to Goldet in the First World War, because people were persecuted for having German names. He was also quite a rich man, whatever he did. The third daughter [Valentine] married a man called [Edward] Ezra, from Bombay or Calcutta [the latter], who changed his name to Esmond.

GC Esmond.

IB Esmond. He was a rich Indian Jew, perfectly Jewish. His entire family was baptised – all of his children were baptised. He had a brother [Sir David Elias Ezra] who had a zoo in England [no: in Calcutta], and his brother-in-law was Philip [no: David] Sassoon. And that was the third daughter. And they were very snobbish and very grand. And when he changed his name to Esmond, King Edward VII met him in some club, and said, 'You've changed your name! Ezra is a perfectly good Jewish – good Biblical name. Can't think why you did that!' – and walked on.

GC Who said that?

IB King Edward VII. But he mingled with the British aristocracy up to a point. Played polo, that kind of thing. In 1900. That's the third daughter. The fourth daughter [Lucie] married [a] de

Ginzburg [Baron Robert Joseph de Gunzburg], again, who was a cousin of ….

GC Of Pierre.

IB Of Pierre. And they all had children, whom I could describe to you. Aline could describe them better. But they all became more or less Gallicised. And then there were my father-in-law's brothers. I only met my father-in-law once.

GC That's why I ask.

IB In my life.

GC You know all the stories from Aline.

IB Yes.

GC From her mother.

IB He came to see me in Oxford once. He came to Oxford to see his daughter. She brought him to see me, just as a friend, and to talk Russian.

GC In the 1950s.

IB No, earlier. In the – he was dead by the 1950s. About 1946.

GC Already.

IB He died in 1947 [1948].

GC And you talked.

IB Certainly. I had a very good time. He looked exactly like Marechal Pétain. He didn't look like a Jew in any degree. Not at all. Her mother was L'israélite française, that meant typically, genuinely assimilated French Jews.

GC I met her.

IB Well then, you know.

GC And you spoke Russian with ….

IB With pleasure. He enjoyed it.

GC And he enjoyed it.

IB He didn't talk Russian that often. He loved England. He hated living in France. He lived in France all his life because he married a Frenchwoman and all that. But he loved England, as all Russian Jews – my father loved England for the same reason. Great liberal country.

GC Did Aline have any memories of a Russian heritage?

IB Oh, she knew who she was. She knew what her father was, she remembers Russians coming to the house.

GC She remembers.

IB Friends of her father. Of course. Friends of her father came. They all talked French, naturally, in Paris. She knew her father was a Russian, and she knew he had these Russian friends. That's all it came to.

GC To what extent did they lead a Jewish life?

IB Well, not entirely. On Yom Kippur she went to Synagogue. She was given breakfast, but she was disgusted when she discovered they had to fast. She was very – she was deeply disgusted by the fact that she was given eggs and bacon, probably, on the morning of Yom Kippur. Once they went to the rue de la Victoire, I think it was – rue de la Victoire Synagogue, or maybe to the rue Copernic,[10] I don't know which they went to. But once ….

GC Rue de la Victoire.

IB I think so. Once a year. I think nothing else happened. They knew that they were Jews, and the brother, her two brothers, I don't know if they did a Bar Mitzvah. I doubt it. But they knew they were Jews, in the full sense.

GC Now, would the father be aware of his father's activities in Jewish cultural life?

IB Certainly. Yes. He wasn't very interested, but of course he knew. And his brother was the man who created the famous scholarships which Shazar had.

GC So it was ….

IB The brother.

GC It was his father.

IB Uncle to Aline.

GC Uncle to Aline. It was not the grandfather.

[10] It was the rue de la Victoire Synagogue: they would never have gone to the Reform synagogue in rue Copernic at that time.

IB No. The grandfather had nothing to do with it. Aline's uncle was called David.

GC There is one ….

IB David Ginzburg [Günzburg/de Gunzburg] was Aline's uncle. Direct uncle.

GC Who lived in Petersburg.

IB Absolutely. And he knew forty oriental languages.

GC Yes, I see.

IB That is the man.

GC His collection of Jewish manuscripts.

IB Of course.

GC That was David, not the grandfather.

IB No.

GC Aha.

IB The grandfather was a kind of Jewish Maecenas, and benefactor, and if you had to have a delegation to go and see the tsar, he headed it. He was the number one Russian Jew. But he didn't partake in any – he knew Turgenev, he knew George [?], he had a house in Paris. And so on.

GC Now the uncle David was safe.

IB He died before the war.

GC Before the war?

IB Died about 1912, or 1913 [1910].

GC Now did some Ginzburgs remain in Russia after …?

IB One [Baron Dimitri de Gunzburg] was killed in the Russian army in the Caucasus. Nobody knows how. He was the man who supported Diaghilev. Went to – paid for the Russian ballet and travelled with them. The rest got out. Those who survived, brothers and sisters. One went to Holland, one – two went to Paris. Aline knew them all.

GC There were many.

IB The sister, his sisters, one went to Geneva, one [Sonia] went to Israel.

GC One went to Israel?

IB Absolutely. That was the wife of Hillel Latosols, yes.

GC She was in Israel.

IB Yes. She was his second wife, I think. Yes. Certainly. And remained in Israel. I've forgotten what she was called. One [Olga] lived in Haifa. That was the wife of a man called Ignacio Bauer, who
who was the chief Jew of Spain.

GC Ignacio Bauer.

IB Ignacio Bauer. Mme Boyère, as they called her in France. Olga Boyère. I don't quite know why, but she emigrated to Israel.

Certainly there was a – I'll tell you about something much funnier. There was a – wait a bit, no. That's something else again. They're not related. There was a man called Propper [de Callejon], who was the Spanish Ambassador in Morocco – in Norway. His father was a Jew from Poland or from Slovakia.

GC Propper from Czechoslovakia.

IB Jewish name. Normal Jewish. Baptised, married a Spaniard, and his son was a Franco diplomat.

GC And his son was married to ….

IB He was married to one of the daughters of – what's his name? Ach, I'll tell you in a moment.

GC Never mind.

IB No. [Achille] Fould.

GC Ah yes.

IB Fould is a French Jewish family. Baron Fould. He was the Minister of Finance for Napoleon the Third, but they were baptised.

GC Now, Natalia Ginzburg has nothing to do with this?

IB Fould-Springer, they were called.

GC How?

IB Fould-Springer [*French pronunciation*].

GC Fould?

IB The man called Fould married the daughter of the richest Jew in Vienna, who was called the Baron Springer.

GC Ah, Springer.

IB Who was richer than the Rothschilds. Vast landowner, in Austro-Hungary.

GC Pardon?

IB Vast landowner. One daughter married Elie de Rothschild. I can go on like that, but it has no bearing on my life.

GC Not at all. No. I see. Well, we have to finish.

IB Right. Not my world.

GC No, know it's not. Now, we started it because of the Russian ….

IB I always read – I read Russian books steadily, and I bought them from Russian booksellers in London. There was a Russian bookshop. There was that bookshop in Paris to which I went in the 1930s, called Povolotsky. There was the Russian book department in Blackwells. That I did.

GC It's fantastic, I must say.

IB That was entirely private. There was nobody I could talk to about that much.

GC Your parents, did they want you to speak Russian, did they want you …?

IB No, I could talk Russian to them if I wanted to, not normal.

GC That's the interesting thing.

IB Not normal.

GC From your childhood.

IB Exactly. Well, they talked Russian to me when I was a little boy, of course. There was nothing …

GC Yes, of course.

IB But not in England. They normally talked English to themselves and to each other and to other people. Of course when these Russian Jews came they talked Russian. And I understood it when I talked to them, but only very casually. It wasn't continuous in any way.

GC And yet you say that that's the language in which you feel at home.

IB Russian, yes.

GC More than German or French.

IB Oh, by far. I talk Russian absolutely – I am bilingual. I'm literally bilingual. French – I don't know French and German well, I really don't. Other people think I do. I read German with difficulty.

GC Yes, you always claim it.

IB It's true. I wouldn't claim it if it wasn't true.

GC [*laughter*]

IB I have no motive except the truth. Hebrew I don't read at all, I mean word by word.

GC But can you communicate more easily in German or with Germans, or with French?

IB With Germans.

GC Because of the command of the English, or …?

IB Because of Riga. Yes. It's got something to do with Riga. That I once – until the age of three I heard German spoken. My parents were bilingual. They spoke German perfectly. And when Germans appeared, although it was not very often, they could – and so on. Somehow I felt I understood German better. My mother sang German songs. I had no – really my whole cultural direction was east of the Rhine, not west.

GC You know that I had the feeling, and you're coming back to it, not today, that you have some barrier's or inhibitions with your attitude towards the French.

IB That's what Aline thinks.

GC And I think so too.

IB I don't like them very much. Only for one reason. I have nothing against France or the French. I don't understand a word they say. When they speak, I cannot understand them.

GC That's the reason?

IB I read – yes. That is the reason.

GC Because, you see, I asked you the question, I think it was …

IB Culturally also. I must say, yes. There is a certain kind of dryness, and a kind of lack of any kind of romantic sensibility in the French, which makes them somewhat alien to me. The same is true of the Italians.

GC The same.

IB I like them very much, but culturally I don't feel close to them.

GC Aha. I see.

IB I have Italian friends. When I talk to Momigliano, or Franco Venturi …

GC No.

IB Different culture.

GC I think it's deeper than that in a way. Aline being, having her roots in France, going to Paris quite often, you don't go, you don't go to Paris.

IB Exactly for that reason. I can't talk to them. It's a great source of anguish to Aline.

GC This.

IB Of course it is. Absolutely.

GC You were not well, so we decided that I come back later.

IB Great source of …

GC I think that I can talk to you about that.

IB Indeed, if she can.

GC And she was surprised that I noticed it.

IB Quite so. It's quite true. And the point is that our French friends – I cannot communicate with them in French properly. It really is – what is it? A lack of knowledge of French. Idleness about not learning it enough. I can read it. But I can't write and I can't talk it.

GC And that you think is the main …

IB Well, it's a barrier, because the French only talk French. Because the English, after all there's no point going to England, and not knowing English. Partly that, and partly therefore, perhaps, I feel that France and Italy, the Latin countries, are further away from me, funnily enough, than German countries. I think I would find more in common with the Danes than with the Italians.

GC I think we ought to come back to it, because it's still interesting, I must say. And it's interesting that you can – you think that you feel easier in German because of your Riga days.

IB Because I understand it better, when people talk German.

GC Or you think that you understand it better.

IB I understand it better.

GC You understand it better.

IB Yes. What people think German is quite an – I don't really understand, but I know roughly what happens, and I rather enjoy talking about [*recording cut off*].