



Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 15

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Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 15

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Transcribed by: Donna Shalev (at least to start with)

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Selected topics

Science and maths at school

Incomprehension of economics

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Scientists IB knew in Oxford

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Letters stolen from All Souls

IB's attitude to anti-Semites

Eliot and the YMHA

The effect of the creation of the state of Israel on anti-Semitism

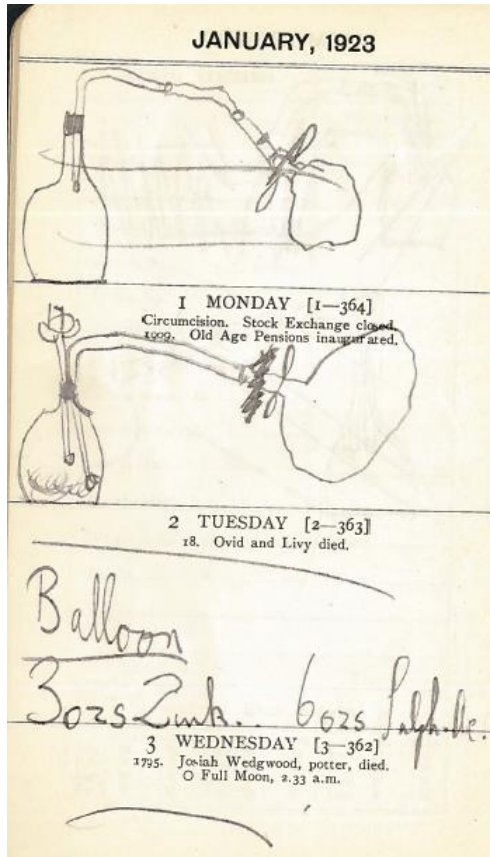
GC I want to get to some leftovers, topics we didn't do during the previous meetings. There is one question that I didn't ask you about your childhood, and the days when you were a student. And that is, what was your attitude to sciences, to biology, to mathematics, to physics?

IB When I was at school?

GC At school.

IB I didn't do anything before that. My attitude to biology, mathematics and physics was zero. It didn't exist. Ah, physics – I was made to do a certain amount of science, so called, at school. Chemistry. Heat, what is it called? Heat, heat and light and some sound, is what it was called.

GC [*laughter*]



A page from IB's St Paul's School diary
Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. Berlin 1, fol. 27v

IB And I was very bored by it. I was not much good at chemistry, and I was terribly bad at mathematics. I remember I used to get myself – scrape through. But with great difficulty. It was very badly taught, and it was very boring. The only person who ever helped me was my aunt Ida, who was a mathematician by training, curiously enough, who taught me how to prove propositions in Euclid. But unlike Einstein, who was sent off his entire career by a total fascination with Euclid, that's what excited him. When he read Euclid he suddenly became totally transformed. The same thing happened with Hobbes, who read a theory of Euclid, the end, some kind of conclusion, and said 'By god, this cannot be true.' And he traced it to its premise and realised that it was, and that gave him the idea of deductive method. But anyway, unlike these two great thinkers ...

GC [*laughter*]

IB [*laughter*] Euclid did not make a favourable impression on me. So really, I had nothing to do with it.

GC Did you develop a kind of resentment or ...

IB None.

GC Or barriers.

IB No. Not at all.

GC And when you came to Oxford?

IB I had perfect respect for science. I had no sense of an enemy subject.

GC No, that surely ...

IB Most people have it about philosophy, you see, but historians regard philosophy with real hostility. No no, I didn't look ... I thought these subjects were not to me of great interest, but they were something I knew I didn't understand. Just like economics. I did an examination in economics; I did PPE, philosophy, politics and economics, in 1932. I never understood a single word. I read easy books, Henderson on supply and demand; Robertson on money; these are well known – well of course I understood the sentences, but in the examination I simply reproduced sentences that I learned by heart, in the hope that the examiners would understand them. I suspect they didn't. I read an economics paper in All Souls which was pure rubbish. [laughter]

GC When you wrote Marx you didn't feel that ...

IB Well, I felt the economics was rather – a bit difficult for me. Yes. I read *Das Kapital*, I couldn't have done without it, but I didn't know whether the economics was sound or unsound.

GC And when you wrote *Marx*, and you came ...

IB I simply expounded the notion of surplus value, and the things which – on Marxists and Marx, without enlarging on Marx's economics. It is much the weakest part of the book.

GC Did you discuss it with friends?

IB No. I was much too frightened of what they would say. Nobody in Oxford took an interest in Marx. He was a set book; in PPE you had to read it. You had to read Adam Smith, Ricardo and Marx. Adam Smith I could understand easily.

GC Even I could.

IB Ricardo bored me terribly, but I could understand it. Marx I never really got into, and there were certainly no – Cole I suppose was a Marxist, but I didn't know him. There was nobody much I could talk to.

GC Who was in economics then in Oxford?

IB The Professor of Economics was a man called [David Hutchinson] MacGregor, who was an old-fashioned Cambridge [Alfred] Marshall. I don't think he ever read a line of Marx. Took no interest. The Marxist people read Marx. Well, my tutor Lindley Fraser, who was a very bad tutor indeed, at Queen's, who taught me nothing, he certainly knew what Marx had said. Roy Harrod knew something about Marx. I remember a lecture by him. He believed in Marx's labour theory of value, funnily enough. But I remember a lecture in Christ Church on Marx. We all delivered lectures on Marx somewhere in the 1930s. Including me, because I was writing about it. Some aspect of Marx. His was of course about economics. He said Marx was a brilliant – a man of brilliant intelligence, but, as he said, 'Fifty years in the British Museum added that once excellent intellect and filled it with mud.' After that I didn't feel a necessity ...

GC Your friends, in Oxford, who were Marxists or Communists in the 1930s – it was very fashionable on the Continent, even in Palestine, for Marxists to try to study Marxist economy. Not in school, not in the University.

IB No. Of course.

GC Did they try, your friends?

IB I know of nobody who did.

GC No.

IB Well, who were my socialist or Marxist or ...? I'll tell you. Christopher Hill. He was here in 1934. He was elected to All Souls in 1934, and I made friends with him. I don't think he knew a thing about Marxist economics – but he should have done. No doubt he knew the doctrines. He was interested in exploitation, the class struggle. But the minutiae of Marxist economics, I would very strongly doubt it. Certainly he never, in conversation, mentioned it. I'm sure that my friend Guy Burgess [*laughter*], who certainly I never knew to be Marxist, knew nothing about it, and cared less. Who else were Communists, in Oxford, whom I knew? Philip Toynbee didn't know economics at all.

GC And socialists? Or people like ...

IB Stuart Hampshire. Nothing.

GC Nothing. Or Gerry Cohen? In my days, when we were young, it was very fashionable to study political economy because of ...

IB I know, Marx, of course.

GC You know ...

IB Because of Marx.

GC It was less so here.

IB Marx here was a political and sociological writer.

GC I see.

IB I'm trying to think, I may be wrong. Cole certainly was a kind of economist. He certainly was; he wrote a book about that [more than one]. And there were people in the Labour Party here. And Ruskin. I'm sure you'd find people – but if you ask about people

that I knew, what Communists did I know? There weren't that many for me to know. Among dons I didn't know a single Oxford don to be a Communist. Christopher Hill was, but I didn't know it.

GC No, but not the members. People who had some inclinations towards Communism.

IB No, I understand. No fellow travellers, no. No. I'm just thinking, who were the socialists? There was something called the Pink Lunch. The Pink Lunch was a luncheon club founded by Cole, who used to go to some cheap sort of a pub, The Wheatsheaf, or one of these places, where we had bread and cheese. Those who wanted drank beer. The people that went were the following. Let us take a typical year, 1936–7. The people around the table: Crossman, Gordon Walker, Pakenham (now Lord Longford), Stuart Hampshire, just elected to All Souls. Austin, Roy Harrod, James Meade (who then got a Nobel Prize later, a Professor at Cambridge), A. H. M. Jones, the Roman Historian, who was certainly a Marxist, of sorts. He was at All Souls, but his wife was even more Marxist than he was, but I hardly knew her. Richard Pears: this is the Labour Party. A. L. Rowse.

GC Rowse ...

IB Then of course Professor Rowse, in those days. Now, who else were the people who were there? People I didn't know, and people from Ruskin came, whom I just didn't know, and maybe there were other dons.

GC [*unclear*]

IB They were all dons, you see. And of them there were a few I didn't know at all.

GC No ladies.

IB None that I know of. Jenifer, for example, was in London, she wasn't a don. Herbert wasn't here. Who could have been? The female dons, no, there were no socialists, I would say, among the female dons of Oxford in the 1930s. There were in the 1940s and 1950s. But not in the 1930s, no. I'm trying to think who they could have been. There was Beryl Smalley, she may have been a Marxist. She knew about – she was a medieval historian. She certainly was one. She – I don't think she came to our lunch, but she may have done. If she was – if Cole knew them, he would invite them.

GC The Pink Lunch was for Fellows only?

IB Dons.

GC Dons.

IB They didn't need to be Fellows.

GC Clearly.

IB Dons. No undergraduates, no graduates. No, no outsiders. And we used to have people come from London. It wasn't a free discussion. [Hugh] Dalton would come, or [Lord] Passfield [Sidney Webb] would come, or German Communists who had escaped. I mean German Jewish Communists would certainly come.

GC Or socialists.

IB Or socialists who had gotten away from Hitler. Typical German Leftists would be invited.

GC That was between 1934 and ...

IB 1935 and 1939, perhaps. It went on after the war

GC In the heyday ...

IB It went on after the war. And I think I went a bit, and gradually I think it disappeared.

GC Coming back to the sciences – we are still in the sciences. In Oxford days, what was your attitude towards ...

IB I want to explain: the Pink Lunch consisted of people who in principle were prepared to pack parcels for Spain. For the Spanish Republic. That was the criterion.

GC I would have thought so. Yes.

IB This was enough. I don't think Roy Harrod did, or would have done. But still, the point was, he was a Liberal. Then. If you were a Liberal and anti-C... – anybody who was anti-Chamberlain, anti-Baldwin, anti-Conservative, anti the ruling class of that period, was probably welcome. So Roy Harrod would have been and Meade would have been – not exactly the right, yes, they were kind of the right wing of it.

GC Of course, except Conservative anti-appeasers, or Conservative ...

IB No, they didn't come. There weren't any. Who were the Conservative anti-appeasers?

GC I'm sure there were ...

IB Among dons?

GC I'm sure ...

IB Well, maybe, yes. I mean, not very many dons were deeply political – of course there must have been ...

GC After all, they were cut from the same mould as the politicians – the Conservative politicians who were anti-appeasers.

IB No. So you might think. All I can tell you is, when Macmillan and, well, who else came to talk against the famous election of 1938, which was post-Munich, which was an election entirely fought on Munich, it was a by-election, and the radio is going to do something about it, I think, next week, there will be a programme on it. Yes, was it on channel 4, channel 4? Because I also was interviewed about it. Who were the dons who voted against Hogg? Or were known to have done? Maybe lots and lots, for all I know. But of course one didn't know. Austin did, certainly, he was – but he was not a Conservative. Went to Russia and rather liked it. Wait a moment, there was Heath, who was President of the Union, I think, who was certainly pro-Lindsay. Lindsay was running. Then of course Macmillan came. Maybe other Tory MPs. All the anti-appeasers.

GC Quite a group.

IB Certainly. I don't know which one came to speak, but Macmillan was an Oxford man, so he definitely came to speak. I don't know that I know of any. I didn't know who the Conservative dons were. But I would guess the dons who identified themselves as Conservatives – the Cecil family were anti-Munich to a man. David Cecil certainly was.

GC All the Cecils.

IB So you can say that. But they didn't take part in all this. And there were no conservatives. They would not have come to the

Pink Lunch, no. That's how it began. No, those are the people, no. No, they were regarded as Conservatives, maybe anti-Hitler, but that wasn't enough.

GC Now let's come back to ...

IB No, they had to have some degree of social concern, certainly. Lib-Lab.

GC And Harrod had it.

IB Who?

GC Roy Harrod.

IB Evidently. Certainly, he was certainly socially concerned, in a very eccentric way.

GC And Freddie Ayer?

IB Yes, he came. Yes, he was part of it.

GC And Stuart would come.

IB Stuart would come, both would come. Certainly. Freddie Ayer certainly. Did come. He describes it, I think, in his autobiography.

GC And the Warden of New College.

IB Yes.

GC Would he come?

IB Oh, no no. Pompous old di..., maybe a Liberal technically, but he belonged – Asquith wouldn't have come, I mean he was the

head – but still, none of those people would come. Herbert Samuel would not have come.

GC But a man like Bill Deakin, who was a Conservative surely, an anti-appeaser.

IB Wouldn't have come.

GC But he was an anti-appeaser.

IB That makes no difference.

GC That's what I thought.

IB These, this was left-of-centre ...

GC That's it.

IB Never mind about appeasement.

GC And James Joll?

IB James Joll was not here – was an undergraduate.

GC Hudson.

IB Hudson did come. You are quite right. Now that you remind me, Hudson did come. That's exactly who came. Exactly right! Hudson is, was the exact flavour. He'd make marvellously cynical sp... – not cynical, sardonic speeches. In a slow voice he would point out that everything that the League of Nations had said, everything which the Labour party had said, turned out to be entirely untrue.

GC [*laughter*]

IB He was pretty Zionist then. Hudson. A rare thing to be, then. He thought it was in the interest of the British Empire to back Zionism.

GC Which means he supported the British Empire.

IB Yes. No, he was a member of the Labour Party, but he was a patriot. And to that extent – something could have been made of the Empire.

GC But an imperialist ...

IB No, he wasn't an imperialist. But he was not anti-imperialist. He wasn't sure which way it would go, but he thought England had a good deal of good to do for these people.

GC Would A. J. P. Taylor come to such a thing?

IB Was he here? He was here. I don't remember him there. I know, he came and he was here, but by the time of the war he was in Magdalen ...

GC That was before the war.

IB Yes, but he came here about two or three years before the war; he was here. Well, he may have been there, I just don't happen to remember. I think it would be surprising if he didn't. Very surprising. He was exactly the kind of person who would have come. If he didn't it was because he was bored or something.

GC And it was Cole who was the prime mover behind it.

IB Cole created it, yes. Cole was more or less the chairman.

GC But that was a digression from ... I was asking you about scientists. When you were here as a student, and then a graduate, did you take an interest in scientific innovations and discoveries?

IB No. I knew – I read books about the philosophy of science, because I took a certain interest in the relation – in the logic of science, or what philosophers thought about science – that I couldn't avoid doing. And I took some interest in what [was] the meaning of certain types of scientific statement – but I wasn't much good at it. But that of course did occupy all the empirical philosophers automatically, because science was a centre of interest in that sense. But actual science, physics, chemistry, biology, I don't think I read a single – even popular – book about that.

GC Would you try to ask a friend to explain what the quantum theory was?

IB No. I should have done, maybe, but I didn't.

GC No!

IB I'm telling you, no.

GC Why should you?

IB I don't know who the friend would be.

GC Ah, now I come to the question.

IB I don't think I knew any.

GC I mean, did you have friends ...

IB Among scientists? That's a very good question, and I must try and answer it, yes. Yes, I obviously must have done. English

scientists? At All Souls there were none. There were none, none in my entourage. Right. Now then. I sat next to scientists in New College, where I dined once or twice a week; mathematicians, scientists. But I don't think I asked them any question about science. No. Certainly I knew scientists. Great friends? No. I don't think I had an intimate friend, I don't think I had a real friend among scientists. I knew some of the German scientists who were refugees; for example Szilard used to come and see me. Of course he was extremely amusing.

GC Szilard was Hungarian?

IB Szilard was Hungarian, yes. Via Germany.

GC Was he in Oxford?

IB Yes. Szilard came through Oxford. And Szilard was the man without whom there would have been no atom bomb. That's very clear, from every point of view; both the scientific tech... – and understanding what was going on, and work at it. And from the point of view of getting Einstein to write the famous letter to Roosevelt. Otherwise nothing would have happened at all. But anyway, Szilard, Leo Szilard, because he was entertaining, and knew one or two of the German Jewish refugees, certainly. Scientists.

GC Hans Fritz[?].

IB Well, I knew Solly Zuckerman, who was a scientist. But he didn't talk to me about apes, monkeys. Nor to anybody else, either.

GC Nobody was a real friend. You didn't have a real friend among the scientists.

IB No.

GC A rather curious thing, isn't it?

IB And I don't think I ever did, in after years, either. No, I don't think it is curious. There were not, it's true – there are not two cultures. C. P. Snow talks nonsense about that in my opinion. But the number of scientists who took an interest in ideas or in moral questions or in politics of a sophisticated kind – well, more or less intelligent kind – were not known to me. Jack Haldane of course, tutor at Cambridge. Julian Huxley would – well, he was a friend, but not a great friend.

GC You made friends with scientists – if you made friends with them at a young age, then you kept it.

IB But this didn't happen with him. Didn't happen.

GC That's what happens in Israel, the Army ...

IB Because ...

GC What was the reason you didn't have ...

IB Oh, at school. There were scientists at school, but I never knew them.

GC And doctors?

IB Doctors I must have known. What physicians, yes, now, in Oxford, certainly. Nobody in the medical faculty, except for Zuckerman, who had always been a friend.

GC And later, later in life?

IB No. Apart from the various doctors who have looked after me, professionally. I'm trying to think – yes, all right, I had a friend who was a doctor, who was a Zionist, who was a man called Shire, S-H-I-R-E. His father [Max Shire] was one of the early English Zionists. And his name was [Theodore Herzl Hugh] Shire. His real name was Herzl Shire, a typical name for a – like Theodore Gaster.

GC Yes.

IB All that comes from Herzl. He – well, he was a friend, yes. But ...

GC But from your age. It's not that he treated you, or ...

IB Oh no. That had nothing – no, not professionally. He was a friend – not a great friend, but somebody I knew. He was at Oxford, and I saw him a little bit afterwards, and so on. But I'm trying to think if I had genuine friends among doctors. No. That's all I can think of now. I may remember something later. For the moment I can't think of anybody. There was a young man called [Edward] Lowbury, who was a Jewish doctor. Who sends me his poetry, occasionally, even now, whom I must have known, but not very well.

GC In Israel, Sambursky is a scientist, but he's a philosopher of science, a historian of science.

IB But he was once a straight scientist.

GC I know, but the thing about him that interests you ...

IB Of course, is the other ...

GC Sure.

IB No. I've never known a great scientist or a talented scientist. We are not – Cambridge is different. Cambridge is different. I'm trying to think who I could have known. I blame myself for not knowing. After all, who was the eminent scientist of Oxford before the war? There must have been such. I think they kept themselves to themselves, yes. I don't think they mingled with the rest of Oxford. They felt pariahs, rather. They felt isolated. [Sir Cyril Norman] Hinshelwood was a scientist who knew Russian and Latin, was, well – all kinds of interesting – very cultivated. I met him, but he was not a very nice man. Brilliant, got a Nobel Prize, but I never would have been a friend of his.

GC You never discussed it with Weizmann. Or Weizmann never discussed it with you ...

IB No, never. Well, the only thing he ever said of interest about science was that it was morally very purifying, and therefore, when he was in terrible difficulties – was disgusted with Zionist intrigues and depressed – depressed, disgusted and and in some way terribly low-spirited, he would go to the laboratory. That would help. That's all, but he used to talk about cracking oil to the religious rabbi, which was his speciality. Never knew what it meant. And I knew Bergman, of course.

GC Yes, I know. Now, you don't like the theologians ...

IB No. Well, personally, some of my best friends are ...

GC That's the question. You don't like sociology, I can see and you have my sympathy.

IB It's true. No, it's true. You can't – at least think – I've never yet – the point about sociology – it should be a very important, interesting subject. My only case against sociology is that it is a failure. As a field of knowledge. Nothing wrong with it in principle.

I don't say that it couldn't become wonderful. It might. There's no reason why sociology shouldn't become a brilliant success. If I read the great nineteenth-century sociologists, I gain a great deal from them, because the ideas are very interesting. Max Weber, Durkheim, Karl Marx, even a few others in the twentieth century. I suppose people like [Lucien] Lévy-Bruhl. But that's just like reading – all these people did something before they became sociologists. Marx was a lawyer, Durkheim was a philosopher and Weber was a historian. So when they write, I become interested, their ideas seem interesting to me. As one would be when one read a very gifted publicist, essayist. I just didn't feel there was something scientific, or something which – to me science was – I have a very narrow view of science. My view is that nothing is a science unless there are general propositions, which have a great deal of evidence for them, and not much evidence against them, and from which it is possible to predict. That I did not find in sociology. So if you don't call it a science, I have less against it. There can be insights. There have been. I mean who shall deny that Karl Marx or Max Weber had very remarkable insights? And therefore my view about sociology is this: it is a subject which, added to other subjects, does good. The sociological approach to history, to geography, to anthropology, to anything else, it is like salt or mustard. But in its pure state, it is indigestible. And they know it, or half know it, and that's why the gobbledegook, the appalling obscurity, and the phraseology is a desperate attempt to make themselves feel like scientists. But the ones who are intelligent and honest among them – they don't believe in it themselves. Too late to change. Mrs [Jean] Floud, my friend, was accused by [A. H.] Halsey in Nuffield, who is a very simple soul [*chuckle*], of betraying the subject. Was undermined by [Herbert] Hart and and [J. P.] Plamenatz, my great friend. I don't think that [Edward] Shils, whom I don't deeply respect, really believes in it either. He writes essays, he's interested in learning. Raymond Aron is a Professor of Sociology. He's thought [*unclear*] the subject, obviously, but nothing in his writings seems to me to be strictly

sociological in character. He's just a highly intelligent man, writing very interesting things. But I think without the benefit of sociology, it would be exactly the same. That's my point.

GC That means, of course, that sociologists who really adhere to their opinions, that it is a science ...

IB Social thought is a real thing. The history of social thought is a perfectly genuine subject. Analysis of society, thoughts about the nature of past and contemporary societies, is a perfectly good historical subject, which may need a certain injection of psychology, but that's all it is. If sociologists only called themselves contemporary history or history with a social slant, social history is absolutely authentic. Nothing wrong with it. History of social ideas, quite all right. Social ideas themselves, quite all right.

GC Yes. But I get the feeling that you have become suspicious and critical, almost automatically, of sociologists who define themselves as sociologists in the way that you don't like.

IB Yes. Scientists. People who believe they are pursuing this science.

GC And I think you criticise them, sometimes much more strongly than you would criticise others. I mean, people dealing with other fields

IB Well, only because social anthropology is a genuine subject. If you go to the Trobriand Islands, or Java, and try and describe what the dances of the Javanese mean to them, in what sense they are bound up with some kind of outlook, what the inner life of – that I understand. I don't believe it can be done by applying questionnaires, which is what sociologists appear to believe in. I think that's done partly intuitively, by living among them, by learning their language, by identifying – by some ordinary means of sensibility to

the society in which we live. Which any gifted observer could achieve. Sociologists don't do that. They believe in some kind of formulation of hypotheses, which they then try and prove. The proofs are too weak. But I'll tell you something much worse about sociology, which really will explain the reason for my distaste for it. Let me make a strongly paradoxical proposition, which has exceptions, no doubt. I don't believe that, let us say, since the end of the First World War any sociologist has made a sociological generalisation or hypothesis which is worth examining. Either it's common sense wrapped up in unnecessarily complicated language, or it is twaddle, simply what the French call *cliquetis de formules*, just the clicking of formulae, one after the other. Someone like Danny Bell, who is a perfectly intelligent man, writes quite good books on American society, post-industrial society: there's nothing wrong with that, but I don't think this is done by applying scientific models.

GC Yes. It's mainly the new American sociology that is really distasteful. I mean, in the Continent you didn't have ...

IB Well, because I didn't read it very much. I mean, who are the others?

GC The others are more ...

IB Mannheim was a sociologist of some importance.

GC Really.

IB He did have some important ideas. I wouldn't deny that. Semi-Marxist, semi-Frankfurt sociologist. Oh, I entirely disagreed with him, but he had something to say. I mean the idea of – I don't know if it's a sociological idea even, the idea of – what is it? – of the sociology of knowledge is simply the proposition that knowledge – the state of knowledge, or the state of people who

assert that they know, depends very largely on the social influences which influence them. Yes? That's the idea.

GC And Ortega y Gasset?

IB That I thought was – I tried to read it, and I thought that was absolutely awful.

GC General living or ...?

IB No. Reactionary nonsense.

GC Nonsense.

IB Reactionary nonsense. It's against – hatred of the French Revolution, liberalism, socialism, it's just a piece of – rather like Oakeshott. It's just extreme reaction. Against modernism of every kind. You could just as well say Toynbee. They were exactly the same. Or just say T. S. Eliot. By the way I got into trouble with him, as you know.

GC I am going to ask you about that.

IB Certainly.

GC [*laughter*]

IB Certainly. Delighted.

GC I didn't ask you before.

IB Why not?

GC You maybe had a ...

IB I'll tell you. There's nothing much to tell, but I have something to say.

GC If you want to discuss it now ...

IB Why not? It's quite an amusing story. I've got to look at my watch. Yes. I have twenty minutes at least. Let me explain. It's perfectly ... [*tape turned off and then on again*]

GC So now we come back to Eliot.

IB Let me go back a little bit. You see. He sent me these books for review. And I reviewed them, I was quite pleased to be approached by *The Criterion*, which I regarded as a very distinguished periodical. It was clear it was very reactionary in some ways, because people like Maurras, who was a French – *Action française* man, and other people wrote for it. And there was no doubt that Eliot had – he said it about himself: 'In politics I am a monarchist, in religion I am' – whatever it was – 'an anglo-catholic. In art or literature I am a classicist. But saying 'monarchist' was, in England, enough. It didn't mean much in English terms, after all, the number of anti-monarchists was not very great. But in French terms, it certainly meant something, and that's what he meant. So there was no doubt about his political views. Nobody thought Eliot was a liberal at any time. But anyway, the first letter I ever wrote to him I wrote when I was an undergraduate, when I sent him a copy of the *Oxford Outlook*, which was a highbrow periodical of which I was the editor. He replied very nicely saying, 'Thank you very much for sending me – I like keeping an eye on these undergraduate periodicals. If there is something else, then do send it to me.' Something like that. And I met him here, in Oxford; he came to talk to an undergraduate society called the Florentine Club, which consisted of people like Stuart Hampshire and his friends. And he delivered a lecture to the University. A very gloomy lecture. He read his poetry, and then afterwards he was given supper, you see, by these

undergraduates. And he and I had a very agreeable, long conversation about what is translatable and what is not, and he particularly took interest in Wilhelm Busch, the German writer of children's rhymes. Comic verse. Nobody else in the room knew anything about him. Only he and I did, so we had a dialogue, which lasted about half-an-hour, while everyone else was terribly frustrated, which we both enjoyed very much. And so my relations with him were quite friendly, and I was quite pleased – I greatly admired him, even read his prose essays, with which I didn't agree, but he's what's called a genuinely eminent critic. Of that there's no doubt. An interesting critic. Then at some point after the war, I think it was, maybe even during the war, I read this famous essay by him called – the book called *After Strange Gods*. *After Strange Gods* is a book delivered as lectures at the University of Virginia, in the course of which he congratulates Virginians for being, so to speak, monoethnic, of being not mixed – good Anglo-Saxon Anglicans, having Anglo-Saxon origin and in the course of which he says something, I can't remember the exact sentence,¹ a famous sentence, notorious sentence, in which he says no society can flourish in this sense if it has in it too many free-thinking Jews. Though he was attacked on it by other people. But I simply read it as a sentence, and wondered – this is about 1935, in the middle of Hitler, before the Holocaust; nevertheless, Hitler was going – he never reprinted the book. It was never republished. That was, in effect, because I think he knew that this caused complaints by Jewish liberals and others. Very good. In 1951 I wrote a piece for the Hebrew University, which was called 'Jewish Liberty'; no, 'Jewish Freedom [no: Slavery] and Emancipation'.

GC I know it.

¹ '[R]easons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.' T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London, 1934), 20.

IB You read it.

GC In the *Garland*.

IB In the [*Hebrew University*] *Garland*. In the course of the second part [part V] of that – I never had that reprinted, because I thought the Jews would hate it too much. At the time, I remember Keith Joseph saying, ‘You were saying the Jews are like hunchbacks. You can say that – but write it?’²

GC [*unclear*] You are right.

IB Quite right. I know you. I didn’t think you would disagree.

GC [*laughter*]

IB Right, now. In the course of which I said: Yes, Jews can be very tiresome, difficult, they can be trouble-giving, but no liberal society has a right to remove them or persecute them without reason. Ordinary liberal sentiment called pluralism. The only three writers who want to have a completely uniform society, are – of course they aren’t the only ones; the only ones I can think of – are Plato, Eliot and Koestler. Now. I didn’t – Eliot because of this sentence. Koestler because ...

GC Because it was a reply to him. [*unclear*] Your article was a reply to Koestler.

IB No. I had a correspondence with Koestler about that, but his article itself wasn’t. I think his thing came afterwards. He wrote a very amusing article in which he said – no, in the time of 1951 he was a Revisionist.

² ‘[T]he analogy used is more for talk than print.’ Keith Joseph to IB, 21 October 1952.

GC No. He wrote this article where he said that after the state was born, I'm free to think ...

IB Oh, I'm free then. I thought it ...

GC And afterwards you referred in the article – anyway.

IB I certainly did. I don't know whether I referred to the article. Maybe a footnote, but it certainly wasn't about it. What he said was very entertaining. What he said was: Three times a day Jews pray to be returned unto Zion. For \$372 they could [go on] TWA, go there. [*laughter*] In the autumn, they pray for rain; outside it is raining cats and dogs because some obscure agricultural people happen to need rain at that season. This must stop. Jews must stop driving the rest of the world mad. Either they go to Israel, or they intermarry. Stop being a nuisance. That was what he pointed out. So I naturally put [?], for that reason. Because I said they have a right to be a nuisance. That was the point of disagreement – I replied to him, at length.

GC You replied to him in an article.

IB Oh yes. In an article.

GC You said that there was room for Zionism even after the state was born. [*unclear*]

IB No, all kinds of things.

GC I remember that by heart.

IB But that wasn't, I think, part of this, at least I don't think so, I may be wrong. Some busybody sent Eliot – probably the *Jewish Chronicle* – the issue in which this was reprinted. I was at Bryn

Mawr, in America, in Pennsylvania, lecturing, in the spring of 1952, this is what we are talking about. I received a letter from Eliot in which he was very very – extremely courteous. He said he hoped I was enjoying Bryn Mawr, he had been there himself. [He asked] what happened to the bronze bed which the founder Miss Thomas had presented from India. Did I have to sleep in it as he did? The central heating system was apt to make one first very hot and then very cold; did I suffer from it? A lot of perfectly polite chit-chat. He then came to the point and said, ‘I think you have got me wrong.’ I can’t remember exactly what he said. It will all appear in Mrs Eliot’s edition of his letters. But he said, ‘Look I’m not against the Jews in any way.’ More or less ‘I’m not anti-Semitic. The point is, I don’t at all – my attitude towards Jews is entirely religious.’ That was his thesis. All I have against them is that they did not become converted in, let us say, the year 30 AD or something like that. That’s all I have against them. I’m simply opposed to them on religious grounds, as a religion. I am not an anthropologist, I have nothing to do with – I don’t think of them as a community, or as a race or as a nation. This is all beside the point. The only [?] I think about them in terms of is their religion.’ To which I replied – and other things like it. I replied – and I don’t know why he bothered to write to me, just because we were once in some way friends, he respected me; his widow says he had a high opinion of me, so much the better. He then replied, and I replied and I said this couldn’t be quite right. I fully accepted what he said, and of course I didn’t think he was an anti-Semite, all kinds of polite things; I don’t think I’d read about the Jews as – even then. But [*laughter*] I said you talk about free-thinking Jews, you can’t say ‘free-thinking Baptists’ [*laughter*] and you can’t say ‘free-thinking Catholics’; ‘free-thinking Negroes’, perhaps yes; so you must be thinking about Jews as something other than simply a community of believers. Maybe I said other things, I don’t know. He then replied to that, and said, ‘Well, you know, I’m not an anthropologist. I have nothing against Jews going to Palestine. I don’t think they can all get in, so I think it is not a final solution to

the problem', and so on and so on; 'anyway, another day, when we both have time, you and I must continue this interesting correspondence', after which our relations became distinctly cooler. Oh no, there was no quarrel, but I somehow felt a certain froideur occurred, and he made one ironic – he wrote me a fan postcard about a lecture which I delivered on Rousseau. He did, he said it was marvellous, wonderful, and he agreed with it, he thought very well of it.

GC Was he present, or did he ...?

IB No. It was on the wireless. Nobody was present. It was entirely done on the radio. It was called 'Freedom and Its Betrayal'. And one of the lectures was about Rousseau, and he found that what I said about that was absolutely excellent, and a sort of fan postcard reached me. Very very complimentary. Then he published something for the Conservative Centre,³ in which he talked about –referred to me again, more ironically. I can't – something like 'the cataract of Mr Berlin's words', or something like that, or 'the unceasing flow', something like that. It was not entirely polite. It wasn't hostile, but I thought it was a little bit ironic. And that was that. I don't think I met him again. If I had done, we would have talked, chatted quite politely, I'm sure. Yes, I think I did. I met him in the train.

Side B

GC The correspondence between you and Eliot was not published.

IB No.

³ *The Literature of Politics: A Lecture Delivered at a C[onservative] P[olitical] C[entre] Literary Luncheon* (London, 1955). On p. 11 Eliot refers to 'the learning, profundity and torrential eloquence of such a philosopher as Mr Isaiah Berlin'.

GC So how did I know this?

IB I told you.

GC You told me.

IB Yes. Nobody else knows anything about it. Nobody knows anything about it.

GC And now they are published in the ...

IB Not yet.

GC Not yet.

IB Because the first volume doesn't go that far.

GC I see. Because I knew it for many years.

IB I told you. Nobody else could have done. Only Mrs Eliot and I knew it.

GC Really?

IB And he. He never referred to it to anyone. She told me that Eliot had a high regard for me – could I please allow it to be published? Eliot's letter to me on the subject was stolen, and I then found it advertised in a Sotheby's catalogue. And I managed to get it back.

GC When was this?

IB About a three years ago.

GC I learned about it earlier.

IB Nobody knew

GC Nobody knew?

IB Well, nobody knew what it contained. But that has nothing to do with it. I told you.

GC Only those letters were stolen, or other letters as well?

IB Other letters too. There's a letter by – you see, I never had a lock and key. I stuffed letters in a drawer like this. Somebody took 200 letters, even though it was signed 'Jack' or 'John', and nobody knew who it was from. They were probably destroyed – it was taken to some receiver of stolen letters, stolen autographs, who could then sell them. They were found in the library of a perfectly honest, honourable collector of autographs and letters. The man was dead and his heir sold it. That's how it came to these catalogues. There was a letter about me, for example, from Einstein to Frankfurter, which was signed 'Albert Einstein', so they knew who it was by. Eliot was then 'T. S. Eliot', he was not 'Tom' to me. Bertrand Russell was signed 'Bertrand Russell', and I think there was one other – Berenson, who signed 'Bernard Berenson' – these were known names. Letters from real friends, which were signed by Christian names, they wouldn't know.

GC The one who stole the letters.

IB No idea.

GC Only the letters were stolen?

IB No, maybe books, too.

GC Ah, but not burglary of jewellery or ...

IB No. I had no jewellery.

GC In Headington?

IB No. In All Souls. Books certainly were stolen, from a great many in my life, a great many. [?] just put his hand in the drawer – gramophone records were stolen. It was some boy, some servant, or some poor undergraduate. It wasn't stolen by an expert. Stolen by somebody to whom this man said, 'Look, if you know, people at All Souls kept quite a lot of letters from very important people. You can find some.' It must have taken that form. Now about the London [lecture?]. I feel no remorse, because Eliot's anti-Semitism was not a prominent aspect of his public personality. If it had been called the Chesterton Fund, or the Belloc Fund, or the Wagner Fund, they would have been right. He happened to be an anti-Semite, as quite a lot of people are. If it had been called the Harold Nicolson Fund – although Nicolson says he's anti-Semitic, and he says Jews shouldn't be employed by the Foreign Office, because their roots are not in the country, all that – I still wouldn't have minded, because that degree of anti-Semitism, you may regret it, you may be against it, you can reproach people for it, it isn't – they are not professional anti-Semites. You can't take their anti-Semitism to be something which has to be publicly denounced. You can simply complain. You can cut them in the street. You could write them disagreeable letters, you can not invite them to dinner, you can say – you can write reviews in which you point this out, but there is a difference. Someone like Belloc, who was a professional anti-Semite, Ezra Pound, who was a professional anti-Semite, Maurras was a professional anti-Semite. Now the man from Navarre[?] said all this to me, saying, 'Were you not embarrassed? Did you not hesitate?' I said no. Never had it in my head, it is true. I never thought of it, I must admit. When I think of Eliot, it is not a thing which impinges on me particularly. Particularly our correspondence. Then afterwards a friend who

wants to remain anonymous, from an American university, sent me an extract from a book, of which I've forgotten the title,⁴ but I can discover, in which there is a letter printed by Eliot. The YMCA, the Young Men's – no, YMHA – the Young Men's Hebrew Association asked him to come for a series of some lectures they were holding by various people. And this was done deliberately, because – just to see – he realised he was being smoked out. So he wrote a letter in which he condemned in strong language the persecution of Jews in Russia and in Germany. Saying Germany was worse, because they were persecuted as Jews, whereas in Russia they were persecuted technically on other grounds. So that's on record. That letter has been printed by somebody in a book [*laughter*], so this man sent it to me, saying, 'If you need ammunition ...?'

GC [*laughter*]

IB I don't think I need ammunition. But that's my story, simply, about that.

GC You once told me that you might have been more sensitive to anti-Semitism before 1948. Once the state of Israel exists, one can be less sensitive about it.

IB I agree.

GC I think that's quite right.

IB Funnily enough I have that feeling. What I mean is this: before the state of Israel existed, to be an anti-Semite was to be against a people who had no defence against it.

⁴ John Malcolm Brinnin, *Sextet: T. S. Eliot and Truman Capote and Others* (New York, 1981), 269–71.

GC They had no defence.

IB No defence. Anti-French – they were in France, they were all right. Anti-Armenian – they had Armenia. If you were Anti-Semitic, what could they do? The persecution of the Jews was persecuting helpless people, in that sense. Quite apart from the injustice, which applies to all anti- things maybe. They were helpless. Once they had the state of Israel, the point was that they should grow thicker skins. If people could be allowed to be anti-French or anti-Armenian or anti-Polish, as many Jews are, then why the hell shouldn't people be anti-Semitic? You may dislike them for it, but it can't be regarded as something uniquely terrible. It was certainly uniquely terrible until then. The Dreyfus case is the Dreyfus case. But now there is no – if Jews are accused of blood libel, it's very bad, but there is an entire state to denounce it and to make a fuss. There is a change in the Jewish situation, and therefore this painful sensibility, which means that if the word 'Jew' is used by Gentiles, they have to be careful how to use the word 'Jew', ought to be eliminated. The word 'Jew' is a word which very careful liberals don't like to say in front of Jews. Well, that's wrong. I'll tell you a story now.

GC Don't you have to go?

IB Oh god, I'm late. What is it, twenty to?

GC It's twenty to five and you have a meeting at five.

IB I had a meeting at half past four. A man comes here at five. My next visitor. I'm late for – look, I must tell you this story. Mark Bonham Carter.

GC Tomorrow.

IB Remind me.

GC I will.

IB Mark Bonham Carter.

GC Yes.

IB Chairman of ...

GC I know, Mark Bonham Carter.

IB Will you also remind me about Paris?

GC Yes.

IB And T. S. Eliot?

GC All right, I will.

IB They are two stories worth telling.

GC All right, I will.

IB I'm always getting into trouble about T. S. Eliot with the Jews.

GC I see.