Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 16

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online.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

Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 16

*For more information visit **bit.ly/GC-IB***

First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 12 March 2024
Revised 2 May 2024

Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 16

Conversation date: 18 September 1988
Transcriber: Judy Friedgott
Consultant Hebraist: Norman Solomon
Recording: **bit.ly/GC-IB-16A-tape** | **bit.ly/GC-IB-16B-tape**

Selected topics
A book for Shimon Peres
The London Library and Herzen
IB's talk on Belinsky
Noel Annan and his book on British ideas
The intelligentsia as a Russian phenomenon
No British intelligentsia
Boborykin, Turgenev, Annenkov and 'The Remarkable Decade'
Bloomsbury
Annan's introduction to *Personal Impressions*
The letters stolen from All Souls: Bernard Berenson
IB's meetings with Berenson
Berenson and Wilde
Berenson and Yiddish
IB's letter to Berenson about taking ship from Naples
Two kinds of Jews
Hasidim versus misnagdim
Wykehamists versus Etonians
Smooth Wykehamists versus shaggy Wykehamists
IB's preference for Etonians and hasidim
'The hasidim are Etonians, the mitnagdim are Wykehamists'
The Oxford Chabad and IB
Yehudi Menuhin, IB's cousin
The 1961 Tagore Conference in New Delhi
Humayun Kabir
Tagore as the Indian Ahad Ha'am
Aldous Huxley in India
Other Indians IB knew
IB on Japanese culture

Beaverbrook's offer of a job to IB and his refusal
IB's talk on America and England in *The Listener*
Reply in the *Evening Standard*
IB's other meetings with Beaverbrook

Section A[1]

GC Yesterday we were discussing T. S. Eliot. You asked me to remind you about Mark Bonham Carter.

IB Oh yes. Quite right. Now, the story about Mark Bonham Carter – and I was also going to tell you a story about T. S. Eliot and Paris. So there are just two anecdotes in that part of my autobiography. The story about Bonham Carter is this: it's typical of the situation in England. I don't know whether – I'd just like to ask – I don't think we need to keep this on. And I'll tell you the story.

GC You want me to …

IB Stop it. There's no point: you'll see.

GC I see. [*tape off*]

GC And now about Paris.

IB The story about Paris is very simple: it shows what trouble I'm in constantly with T. S. Eliot. It haunts me. When Peres came here on his state visit – Mrs Thatcher gave him dinner and all that – Prince Charles decided to give him lunch. He invited various people, no Jews; Noel Annan, people like that; and then I received

[1] The recording of this conversation occupies (1) the end of Side B of one cassette and (2, 3) Sides A and B of another cassette, and the labelling of the original transcript is confusing. For online posting (1) and (2) have been combined as 'Section A' (the transition between the two cassettes being labelled 'Next cassette), and (3) follows as 'Section B'.

a message from his private secretary – I knew him – saying 'The Prince wants to give Mr Peres a present; he'd like to give him books. We don't know quite what Mr Peres is interested in. We asked the Embassy.'
So they said poetry, history, he had always been interested in it, biography maybe. Well, I racked my – about history; I couldn't find a single book written in England or America in the last ten years which was of general interest. They are all monographs. I may be wrong, but nothing like Namier, Trevelyan, nothing of that sort: no book of a generally interesting kind. So – I don't know if you can think if one, I'm sure not. They're all about very specific things.

GC I'm trying to think.

IB Norman Stone on the invasion of Russia, or – 300 pages, no point. But books of an interesting kind, a collection of essays, nothing that I know of. Well, maybe Trevor-Roper, but I don't know. But also about the seventeenth century, I didn't think he would …. So with an excess of tact I chose the biography of Mountbatten. Because the Prince of course worships him, and Peres would know who he was, and he's been to Israel, and it has to do with modern history, India, Israel, policy, it's readable. Then poetry came up, so – that will to amuse you – I'd just read a good book on T. S. Eliot [*laughter*] by a man who writes – the chief literary editor of *The Times*, not the *Supplement*, but *The Times* itself, whose name is – he writes a leading article always, or often – I've forgotten the name. He seems to be a very respectable critic, who writes novels also. What is his name? Doesn't matter, anyway. So I recommended that. It was handed by the Prince to Peres, very well received. A week later [*laughter*] the *Jewish Chronicle* printed a piece saying it was very tactless of the Prince of Wales to give a book by a notorious anti-Semite. Really he should have known better, he must have been very badly advised. They knew nothing about me. They don't now, either. So that was all right. The *Jewish Chronicle* – well, the Prince of Wales doesn't read the *Jewish Chronicle*,

and what other people would think, it doesn't matter. Then *The Times* reprinted it in its diary, as a sort of tidbit. Then I thought, oh well, [?]. He would be very embarrassed, he had no idea about this. So I wrote him a letter, and I said, yes, I'm terribly sorry, I never thought about that, it was a good book, and I couldn't think …, and I totally forgot: yes, he was anti-Semitic, that's true, but that has nothing much to do with his life as a man and a poet, and I don't think Peres would know it, and if this gets into the Israeli press, and it embarrasses you, then I will reveal the fact that I was entirely responsible. He said, 'Well, you'd better wait a little.' He wrote me a letter saying, 'Well, let's leave things as they are, see how they develop.' Then nothing developed, and that was that. So I'm always getting into trouble with Eliot!

GC [*laughter*] Yes. I want to go back for a moment to the London Library.

IB By all means.

GC I got it confused. , this committee now, that dealt with the Fellowship and everything, it's the London Library and not the British Library?

IB Nothing to do with the British Library.

GC Ah, nothing to do – that's …

IB Nothing, entirely. The London Library is a private library.

GC Yes. That's the one in St. James's?

IB Yes.

GC Now, you praised it a lot.

IB I did.

GC And so many other friends of mine.

IB But …

GC Is it because they lend books?

IB Yes.

GC That's the main reason?

IB Two reasons: first of all, the selection of books is exceptionally good; if you want to know about a subject, you will find very good books on it. It's very well chosen. They don't – they can take what they like. They are not obliged to take other things. They choose very carefully, and they choose serious books. They choose novels as well, and it's – on the whole, it contains what one needs. If you are a reviewer, and you want to know more about the author, you will find it there.

GC But you can find everything in the British Mueum?

IB Oh yes, yes.

GC But then you have to sit there.

IB You have to sit there. Here you borrow fifteen books if you are a country member, and you keep them for a month.

GC That's what everyone was telling me.

IB Well, it's a wonderful thing.

GC Even you, from Oxford – it's worthwhile going to London to borrow the books?

IB They send them. They post them.

GC They post them. Now ...

IB It takes a little longer. They post everything.

GC And you came across Herzen in the British Library?

IB On the shelves.

GC In the London Library, on the shelves.

IB London.

GC You just carne across it.

IB I was looking for something else in Russian. I was probably looking for – I don't know what – Pushkin, Turgenev – I don't know what I was looking for. A particular book in Russian. Because I was fascinated by the fact that this Russian [*sic*] library took an exceptionally good selection of Russian books, before a certain date, before the Soviet Union, roughly. A little bit after as well, but not so good. Their books were not so good either. But still, they bought very well. I needed something probably. Maybe I needed nothing, maybe I was just looking at the shelves of Russian books, which I would be liable to do. I suddenly saw four volumes, with the word 'Gertsen' on them; that was a, some sort of German or French – it's a European, Western edition, nineteenth-century edition of his autobiography. It was printed abroad, of course, because it couldn't be printed in Russia.

GC But it's very surprising that there would be Russian books on open shelves, after all they don't have …

IB All the books are on open shelves.

GC You have to have unlimited space!

IB No no. They don't have unlimited space. They've had an annexe recently. Partly through money given by Michael Astor, and partly by Wolfson, who built them a – there is a building. They are [?], but they don't buy everything. But Russian books – how many Russian books have they got? Two hundred. And even that – three hundred – they are wonderful. As a selection, they've got the best books by the best authors.

GC Did it ever cross your mind what would have happened had you not gone to the Library and come across Herzen?

IB No. Although I am a great believer in 'would have beens', I don't accept E. H. Carr's view that history is just auostradas, big roads with little roads always ending in nothing, which is what he believes. All the side roads end in complete cul-de-sacs. No. I don't know what would have happened. No. I think I would have come at him sooner or later, I would have – reading Turgenev [*unclear*] somebody's, sooner or later I would have become interested. I read Belinsky, for example, probably as a result of reading Herzen. That made a deep impression on me also, the Russian critic, Belinsky.

GC One of the first articles you wrote was on Belinsky.[2] Am I right?

IB First article where?

[2] 'The Man Who Became a Myth', *Listener* 38 (1947), 23–5. He reviewed Ralph Parker's *How Do You Do, Tovarich?* in the same volume, 543, 545.

GC In your bibliography, I …

IB There was a talk, after the war, on the wireless, on the radio, for which I was denounced, either in *Pravda* or in *Izvestiya*, on Belinsky.

GC And that was the first time that you …

IB I wrote no article about Russian things before the war, before the end of 1945, as far as I know.[3]

GC [*unclear*]

IB I think that's right. I think I read Belinsky all through the war, in Washington.

GC Somehow, I thought that one of your first articles, I don't know whether it was …

IB No, no. It wasn't an article. It was a talk. It was a talk.

GC And in …

IB Printed in the *Listener*.

GC And after the war?

IB Certainly after the war. After I came back from Moscow.

GC So I see what made me confused.

[3] He wrote an editorial on Alexander Blok in *Oxford Outlook* 11 no. 55 (June 1931), 73–6, and translated Blok's 'The Collapse of Humanism' in the same issue. He reviewed E. H. Carr's *Michael Bakunin* in 1937: 'The Father of Anarchism', *Spectator* 159 (1937), 1186.

IB Because I bought enormous numbers of books in Moscow, or rather in Leningrad, not in Moscow. By that time I was thoroughly – my whole change of life is to do with that, as you know. When I gave up philosophy, and decided to write about Russian thinkers. That happened to me during the war.

GC Before the end of the war. No, no when you came back to America.

IB No, no. You know the story. I tell it. In the aeroplane.

GC Yes, in the aeroplane.

IB Going from Canada to England. So I was already deep in Herzen-cum-Belinsky. But I think Herzen was the first. I always read Russian books. I read Tolstoy, I read Turgenev. I never read Chekhov very much, curiously enough. I read Pushkin, yes. Gogol up to a point. And essays about them. And the history of the literature.

GC Again, did you see Noel Annan's article in the *New York Review of Books* in the last issue? Noel Annan reviewing Correlli Barnett?[4]

IB No. Not yet.

GC He uses the term 'British intelligentsia' nearly in every other page.[5]

IB Because he's writing a book about it. Let me explain. Noel Annan is writing a book about what might be called British ideas, climate of opinion, particularly about – probably of an intelligentsia

[4] 'Gentlemen vs Players', review of Correlli Barnett, *The Pride and the Fall: The Dream and Illusion of Britain as a Great Nation*, NYRB, 29 September 1988.

[5] He uses it twice.

type, between the wars. And after. Maybe after the war. I'm not sure when. His more sophisticated friends are extremely anxious that he shouldn't write it.

GC That he shouldn't.

IB No. They think he's not fit to do it, but the idea of trying to persuade him not to do it he would receive with quite passionate fury, because he regards himself as an authority on that subject. He's the heir of Bloomsbury, he was appointed by Keynes for the Fellowship in King's partly because he was regarded as a kind of natural continuator of that tradition. I heard him deliver four very amusing lectures in University College, on the outsiders in the inter-war years. Pre- and inter-. The four outsiders were – two outsiders and two general topics. The outsiders were Orwell and Evelyn Waugh, and one was about homosexuality as a phenomenon of the English intelligentsia, and the fourth lecture – I can't remember what that [*tape off for a second*]. Leavis, that was the third, yes, Leavis and criticism. Leavis loathed Annan, regarded him as a typical, cheap journalist who ruined – but it was a very fair lecture. Leavis was dead, and he decided he wasn't just going to avenge himself. He delivered a fair, quite decent, lecture. The lecture were very well done – he is a splendid lecturer. Very dramatic, very like an actor. And he knows how to lecture. And it was an interesting [?]. I didn't agree with [?], but that's obviously a topic to which he is dedicated. And he reviews books for the American [*New York*] *Review of Books* on those sort of things. So that's why 'intelligentsia'. He of course believes there is an intelligentsia, because he is a member of it. I do not.

GC That's it, that's it.

IB Yes, because I am a rather narrow definer. I believe 'intelligentsia' is a Russian word[6] for a Russian phenomenon. And if you want to – I define – I'm afraid I take a rather narrow definition of it. I know what *he* means. He means intellectuals. Artists and intellectuals. That is not what I mean by intelligentsia.

GC But the term 'intelligentsia' was not common in Britain in general, anyway.

IB It began in the 1920s, I would say. So the Oxford Dictionary says.[7] I've looked it up. And the Oxford Dictionary – it's obviously on purpose, it's a joke. It's an ironical term, used by the right, not by the left. And of course the intelligentsia will not agree, etc. It's not the body – nobody in England says 'I'm a member of the intelligentsia.' It's always used a little bit in inverted commas. And it's usually, even in Annan's case, with a certain irony. Because by now he's become, gone – moved to the right. And regards – just because of the student riots and the terrible time he had in University College, and even worse as the Vice Chancellor, he looks on all of this as left-wing nonsense. And that's why even in his mouth, although he still adores Bloomsbury, I think – if you ask him whether Leslie Stephen was a member of the intelligentsia, he would probably say yes. For him, Leslie Stephen, John Stuart Mill would belong; for me, not.

[6] 'Интеллигенция' ('intelligentsiya'). The Polish equivalent ('inteligencja') appears to predate the Russian word, being used by Karol Libelt in *O miłości ojczyzny* (*On the Love of the Fatherland*, 1844), chapter 8. This work was first published serially in three issues of the journal *Rok*: for this passage see *Rok 1844*, No. 1 (January), 53. Libelt writes: 'the so-called intelligentsia of the nation […] is made up of all those who have received a more careful and extensive education from universities and institutes, and who stand at the head of the nation as scientists, officials, teachers, clergy, industrialists, and, in general, are its leaders because of their higher education'. 'So-called' implies even earlier currency. (The passage is for some reason absent from some editions of the work.)

[7] The earliest example in the OED is from 1883.

GC But the very fact that you use the term caught my eye. That means that not very often I come across the term 'intelligentsia'.

IB You don't. Certainly not.

GC I know that you define it in a narrow way, all right. But even those that define it in a larger way, it's not very commonly used.

IB No. The word 'intellectual' is used. And even that not too often.

GC Not too often.

IB But it isn't used because there isn't one, according to me. They don't feel themselves … They say – look, the definition of 'intelligentsia' really comes quite a bit – the word is used for the first time nobody knows when. The usual view is, it's used by a rather forgotten writer called [Petr] Boborykin, in about 1874. Turgenev was obviously aware of it as a concept, and I think does talk about 'intelligent' or something. Poles think they invented it – maybe they did. The point is that the man who really wrote about them, about whom I have written an essay, is a man called Annenkov, who was a friend of Turgenev, a friend of Belinsky, a friend of all those people. He wrote a famous essay called 'The Remarkable Decade'. And in 'The Remarkable Decade' he gives an account of people coming to stay in Turgenev's estate, and who they were, and what they talked about. That is it. When they call them that, that is exactly – they recognise each other, and he says they were an order of Knights, they were a brotherhood. Well, they weren't; they were not a political party, and they were not that left-wing. Some more than others. But they saw each other as people dedicated to a certain kind of cause, and they all believed – they had certain common beliefs, and the common beliefs were – and some of them moved to the right afterwards, as inevitably happens in such cases – they believed in science, the West, liberal ideas,

progress, rationality, empirical tests. They did not believe in tradition, mysticism, conservatism, authority and the rest of it. That – in France you could say that the *philosophes* were an intelligentsia. They were. Because they held hands. They felt themselves to be members of a movement. In Germany less so. But in Russia it was a real thing, which only gets going in the 1830s. And finishes in 19… – somewhere in the 1920s, when it's suppressed in the Soviet Union. And there is a term called 'the Soviet intelligentsia', which the regime uses, not at all the same thing. It just means people who write, trade[?] professionals, yes. It might be that in Russia it doesn't mean writers and artists, it means doctors and stationmasters – anybody who gravitates in that direction. And you could say that about Israel, probably. Because there is probably a kind of Russian influence in Israel too.

GC It used to be more …

IB Twenty years ago. Thirty years ago …

GC In the Second Aliyah.

IB Certainly; exactly.

GC Chemists.

IB Yes, chemists. Let me tell you, give you an example of what I mean. There is a letter by Ivan Aksakov, who was a son of the man who wrote – a famous writer, who is a sort of Slavophil. He is writing to another Slavophil, Kolokoverik[?].[8] Don't actually know

[8] (Sounds like, very unclear.) The passage reads: 'And if you need an honest person who can sympathise with the maladies and misfortunes of the oppressed, an honest doctor, an honest investigator who would get involved in the fight, look in the provinces among the followers of Belinsky'. The letter is in fact to his parents, Sergey Timofeevich Aksakov and Olga Semenovna Zaplatina, and

when, somewhere like 1851, 1852. He says, 'You know, if you go to the provinces, all the doc… – you'll find doctors, dentists, all reading Belinsky. They don't read us.' So it's very clear what is meant. Doctors and dentists and agronomists and god knows what?

GC And the self-consciousness that they belong to a certain …

IB Yes.

GC That's the point.

IB Exactly in the sense in which Dostoevsky was not, Tolstoy was not, Chekhov was not. Mikhailovsky was, Chernyshevsky was.

GC And Bloomsbury wanted to be.

IB Who? Bloomsbury didn't – no, they didn't want to be anything. They were just friends, who had views, very 'intelligentsia' views. Religion was a joke, and they were against – their views were very 'intelligentsia' views. But they were rather snobbish, which the real intelligentsia was not.

GC But would …

IB They were not interested in the fact that a lot of dentists might read them, whereas in Russia, it was a social movement, against oppression, against the Church, and against the state. [?] you don't have – that's my whole thesis. You have to have a black Church, and the reactionary state, then you get an intelligentsia. If you don't – the Church of England was not that.

was written on 9 October 1856: *Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov v ego pis´makh* (Moscow, 1888–96), iii 291; the passage is quoted at RT2 170 and POI2 95.

GC But wouldn't include that a member of the intelligentsia – that's what I wanted to ask you – feels that he has to reform his opinion on any issue. That he has …

IB Oh yes, certainly. They may not be interested. I think Bloomsbury's interest in politics was very limited. Still, they despised most politicians. Sex, of course; politicians they despised, they were shallow people.

GC Though they had Passfield and other people [?].

IB Passfield was in no way a member of Bloomsbury.

GC But …

IB Nowhere near.

GC Neither his wife?

IB Leonard Woolf was a professional socialist, and he did know these people, was a friend. But that was a side- … – Keynesian economics was again a side-affair, or his work in the Treasury. That had nothing to do with them. When they met in the evenings in Bloomsbury, that is not what they talked about. No, Lady Passfield was in no way, nor was Cripps, her cousin. None of those people.

GC The Stracheys, for example.

IB Well, yes. But only John.

GC Only John?

IB His father was the editor of *The Spectator*, but was not a politician. Only John. The other Stracheys were all interested in –

Freud was a subject, because James Strachey translated him. Of course.

GC All right.

IB But for Noel Annan Bloomsbury is exactly – is the heart of it.

GC I knew him, I met him several times. I didn't know that it went that far.

IB Oh, because it's his subject. What does he know about? Only that. One of the reasons why he was unpopular when he was Provost at University College was the professors thought he had no subject, which was correct. And he encouraged things like sociology, and anthropology, and thought that classics or Latin or Italian studies were very unimportant. And that offended them. The British Academy thought it was terrible to elect classical scholars when it could have some modern subjects, something new. It was always a little bit – fashionable …

GC Even when he got into Cambridge?

IB Certainly. Yes – fundamentally he was no scholar.

GC Now, who picked him up to write the introduction to *Personal Impressions*?

IB Mr Henry Hardy. I had no idea he was doing it. I was appalled. Appalled. I didn't want anybody to do it. I said, 'This book doesn't need an introduction. Doesn't need it.' Because it is just a collection of obituaries; there is no common theme. The other books have some – but this book can't, because it is just a collection of memoirs. But without telling me, and of course he thought it would sell, I suppose, he asked Noel, and then revealed it. And then I didn't do anything. And then Noel Annan sent me

his introduction. I thought it terrible, absolutely dreadful, the first version. So then I had to get hold of him, and I told him what was wrong, factually, wrong about my opinions. The whole thing was extremely inaccurate, and in part deeply embarrassing. That is, the Jewish bits, and everything. Then he didn't accept that. He was extremely rebarbative, didn't like these criticisms. He thought he knew more about me than I thought I did. Then I sent Stuart to talk to him. Stuart does know more about me than Noel does. So Stuart persuaded him that he got a lot of things wrong. Just plain wrong. So then, very reluctantly, and with extreme displeasure, he did alter it a bit, not enough. Then I suddenly heard from Bob Silvers that it was going to be published in the *New York Review of Books*. That gave me absolute nightmares. The last thing I wanted was a piece about me, which was what it was, published without any reason. It wasn't a review. Suddenly a kind of semi-eloge. So I wrote to Noel and said, 'Look, I may be pathological about this, but I hate personal publicity. As an introduction, all right. Even there, as you know, there are things which I find simply impossible to face, which I think quite wrong, and highly embarrassing. And certainly mistaken. Still, you've written it, it is your view, your business. I would not have – I didn't ask for any introduction, and I didn't want to choose anybody. But all right. But to have it published and read by hundreds of thousands of people is a thing which would really completely drive me mad. Please don't do it.' Bob of course said, 'If you don't want it I won't do it.' He didn't tell Noel that. Noel wrote a letter to Bob saying – Bob then wrote to Noel saying, 'I gather Isaiah ….' He wrote a furious letter saying, 'I expect a proper outlet for my ideas. I do not wish to be suppressed in this way' – and so on. Furious letter. But in the end, of course, it didn't appear. And then he wrote to me and said, 'I will think over what you've said.' He didn't say he wouldn't send it to Bob. Didn't say he wouldn't correct things. And he kept me waiting for four months before he said all right. That I found extremely surprising. Our relations remain very good, but I don't know what did it. I suppose pride, vanity. The very idea of having

to change things. This is a piece he had taken trouble over, and he wasn't going to be told what to do, even by me. He saw that I had a natural interest in the matter, but still.

GC So that means that he never discussed it with you.

IB Never. Not a word. He'd written it long before – I had no idea that he'd written it until he had written it.

GC So it consists of what his ideas of all your writings …

IB Yes.

GC And then stories.

IB That's right.

GC Now the stories are those – he didn't interview *you*?

IB No.

GC It's just, either he heard it from you, or from others …

IB Yes, whatever it was. I don't know what the sources are.

GC I see. It was [?].

IB I understand: no no. I had nothing to do with it. At any stage. And [?].

GC Well, there is a sentence there that explains what you say. When you say that …

IB No, what do you mean?

GC There is an ironic sentence in your short introduction to *Personal Impressions*; you say how much you appreciate the accommodation between (*IB takes a deep breath* [?]) …

GC You refer to Noel in a critical way, in a very very …

IB Politely critical way.

GC In a polite way. There is one sentence, I could detect that there was a story …

IB Something wrong. Something was wrong.

GC [*laughter*] I'll show you the sentence, I don't have it right now.[9]

IB OK.[10]

GC All right. Yesterday you t a +old me about the letters that were stolen. Was it just a selection of letters?

IB I have no idea what was taken.

GC You don't know?

IB I had no idea what was there.

[9] 'I wish to record my deep gratitude to my friend Noel Annan for writing the introduction to this miscellany, and to tell him, and his readers, that I am only too well aware of what reserves of sensibility, conscience, time, sheer labour, capacity for resolving the conflicting claims of truth and friendship, knowledge and moral tact such a task unavoidably draws upon; and to thank him for his great goodwill in agreeing to perform it' (PI2 xxxii–xxxiii).

[10] The story is told more fully and accurately in my *In Search of Isaiah Berlin* (London, 2018), 68–77. It is not entirely to my credit (or to the credit of IB or Noel Annan), but not entirely to my (or their) discredit either. It might have been better to ask Stuart Hampshire to do the job (as IB later said he wished I had), but that would not necessarily have produced a better piece. HH.

GC It was not the kind that you kept …

IB No. I just stuffed letters in a drawer.

GC I see. So you have no idea what was there?

IB I have no idea – they all were taken apart – I know nothing. All I saw was four letters to me, or about me, for sale in Sotheby's catalogue.

GC Yes. And one of them was from Berenson.

IB Certainly, yes.

GC Did you correspond with him?

IB Yes, a bit. Not very much. I didn't – my story about Berenson is quite simple. I knew who he was. And I was – one day when I was a young don, I suppose about 1934 – 1933, 1934 – I was running for a train in Oxford station. It had almost started moving. I got into a third-class compartment, and there was Kenneth Clark, who was then Keeper of the [Fine Art Department at the] Oxford [Ashmolean] Museum. Director. Who I knew. Clark said, 'Well, if we are going to be squeezed, it might as well be by friends.' Not the most welcoming introduction. I got in, sat down. I could have said, 'I'm so sorry, I'll find another compartment.' But I was a bit embar-rassed. Sat down, and opposite me, a little man with a little beard. I suppose I was introduced. I thought he was the most awful little man I'd ever met. I thought he was quite awful: snobbish, affected, elaborate, artificial. Terrible. I had no idea who he was until afterwards. That was that. I didn't think about him. In 1938 or thereabouts, his step-granddaughter, who is the granddaughter of his wife, who is called Barbara Strachey, married a – my schoolfriend Halpern, son of Georg Halpern.

GC He was your friend.

IB He was my friend, yes.

GC From St Paul's days.

IB St Paul's, yes. And Oxford. She was a widow,[11] and – no, she was then not quite married to him. No, she may have been, I don't know. Anyhow, she was the granddaughter of Berenson's wife. He asked me to dinner with him, in London. I refused. Then came the war, and then I went to Italy for my holidays in 1950, I would say. And I met – no, I remember, the first time was 1946, 1947, it was a very cold winter. I went with Maurice Bowra to Florence, I met somebody I knew, so, I don't know, it might have been Freya Stark of all people. She said, 'Oh, you are here. B.B.' – as he was always called – 'would be so glad to see you. I know he'd love to see you. Do ring him up. He'd be so happy.' So Maurice Bowra said, 'He met me a long time ago, took no notice of me, missed his chance. You will write a letter saying, "Dear Mr Berenson, we're only here for two weeks. We shall therefore not be able to come and see you." ' I didn't do that, but I didn't see him. Then in 1950 – I don't know how it happened, but I received a letter from him saying that he knew that I was in Italy, and it would be very kind of me if I came and stayed a night or two. In Setttignano, which was his companion's house, not his own. So I was with James Joll, and a philosopher called David Pears.

I went along,[12] I was curious, I was very well received. By this time he must have been in his eighties. And he – we were given our rooms, we came down to dinner. It was very formal – sometimes there were us three – him, and what's-her-name, Nicky Mariano, his friend who lived with him, who looked after him. And

[11] A divorcee (from Olav Hultin): F 56/6. She married Halpern in 1937.
[12] On 22 September 1950.

I think her sister, Baroness Anrep, who looked after the library, at I Tatti [*unclear*]. Butler served food. He came out of a little side door, and it was explained to me afterwards that his watch was always warmed before it was put in his waistcoat, in case the cold penetrated to his skin. We ate ordinary dinner, and he ate some kind of softened food. And then he began talking. Sometimes he talked alone, sometimes in duets, sometimes quartets, sometimes sextets. Extremely formal. Like an opera. In very elaborate – then at some point he asked me where I'd been. I said I'd been in Israel. 'Ah, Palestine,' he said, 'Palestine. I was there in eighteen-ninety-something. It's the most beautiful cemetery I have ever seen. What have the Jews done to it? My god! What have the Jews done to it? Too terrible!' Well, I defended Israel, as you can imagine. He went on in this style. Then we managed to get the conversation off Israel. We talked about duchesses and grand ladies and that went much better. I knew them, he knew them. Snob talk. Then I went to bed. In the morning, he asked me to come for a walk. I remember very well. We went uphill, he was about eighty-five. I puffed and panted. He said, 'Can I lend you my stick?' It was very typical. He then said, 'You may be rather surprised at the vehemence with which I attacked Jews last night. Let me explain the reason. When I was a young man in America, and poor, the purse-proud German Jews' – I remember the phrase, 'purse-proud'; I'd never heard anyone say that, but there is such a phrase.

GC In English or in German?

IB In English.

GC There is one?

IB Oh, absolutely, but it's rather special. Oh, it exists. 'The purse-proud German Jews were very nasty to me. And the scars of those wounds still linger. You know, I fancy that today I would be eligible to clubs to which these people would not be eligible, even now.

Not that I would dream of wanting to join such places. But I think in some way that is the case. But that is the reason for my particular attitude towards the Jews, which you may have noticed.' I then said to him, 'But I thought that Mrs Otto Kahn was a very great friend of yours. She's certainly of German Jewish origin. I'm told you write to her at quite frequent intervals.' 'Certainly,' he said, 'Addie Kahn is one of my greatest friends. She's one of the most monstrous beings whom God has ever sent upon this earth. I adore her. I simply love her. She's a dreadful woman. She is one of my greatest friends and I am very very fond of her.' That's how he talked. All right. And that was that. Then I came to see him again, with Aline, I think, and he said, 'You know, I must explain to you. I really meant to write a great masterpiece. People said I wasted my time on social things.' I forgot to tell you; during the first visit, he gave a very good account – perhaps it is not needed for this purpose – about the difference between the snobbery of Proust and the snobbery of Oscar Wilde. Both of whom he knew. It was certainly very – extremely shrewd, very well done. And in fact I said, 'You know he' – what did I say? He said he lived at the same house as Wilde at one time, in London. I said he had a relationship to Wilde. I told Richard Ellmann this, who misunderstood it – put a footnote saying that according to Isaiah Berlin he had a homosexual relation – that's not at all true.[13] Not at all. I said 'relationship' but that doesn't mean …

[13] Nor is IB's report. Ellman writes: 'Another exceptionally handsome young man was Bernard Berenson, who came to Wilde with an introduction and was at once invited to stay in Tite Street. He found Wilde exhausted by society, whose luncheon parties he would return from in the late afternoon. "What was it like?" Berenson asked. "Oh, terrible." "Then why did you stay so long?" The people fascinated him, Wilde said. "There is something about them that is irresistibly attractive. They are more alive. They breathe a finer air. They are more free than we are." Wilde found Berenson equally irresistible, and made advances which were resisted. "You are completely without feeling, you are made of stone," he informed him.' Here a footnote reads: 'Sir Isaiah Berlin told me of hearing these remarks by Wilde from Bernard Berenson, and Professor

GC No no.

IB It was the ordinary meaning. Right. Can't be helped. They are historically embedded. Anyway, he then said, later on – explained to me that he was – the war interfered. That's why. He then said, 'You know, I'm quite interested in Yiddish.' Of course you know his first printed work was about Russian Jewish literature. Some Harvard periodical in eighteen-seventy-something.[14] 'For example, it's very interesting, "kaylenen" [sc. "koylenen"?] means "to kill". The German is "toten". So there is a connection. English and Yiddish are curious. Or what about "pen"? The Yiddish word for "pen" is "pen", not "Feder", which is the German.' He went on like this. 'You know I need this for my business', by which he meant his work on art. 'There are certain things in Yiddish which have some relationship to something I want to write about.' The mere mention of Yiddish, something he wouldn't have done for the last seventy years of his life. Then I wrote him – I went to Israel again, I wrote him a letter about being in Naples,[15] where I took the ship, and how different it was when we were waiting in a sort of – waiting to get on to the ship – between the Israelis and the Jews. The Jews were immigrants, they screamed, they shouted, they were disorderly and so on, they …

Next cassette

GC … saying about your ship from Naples to Israel.

IB That's right, when I was in Naples and waiting to get on to the boat, I wrote a letter to Berenson to say – I think probably maybe

Ernest Samuels confirmed that Berenson had noted them down.' Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1988: Vintage), 283, 607.

[14] Bernhard Berenson, 'Contemporary Jewish Fiction', *Andover Review* 10 no. 60 (December, 1888), 587–602.

[15] Letter of 11 April 1958 (E 617–21).

from Israel, even[16] – saying what a contrast there was, and how pleasing to me, between the European Jews, or East European Jews, or whatever they were, who were jostling and pushing and had no manners and screaming, some of them slightly hysterical, and old women complaining that they were going to be seasick, and God knows what, on the one hand – a general scene of what might be called, I don't know, not exactly chaos, but ordinary Petticoat-Lane-like behaviour, East End behaviour, street behaviour, on the one hand – and the Israelis, who were disciplined, quiet, perfectly collected, knew what they were doing; they were quite different from the others, already by then. We're not talking about, I don't know what, [nineteen-]fifty-something, sometime in the 1950s. And Berenson liked that very much, and kept the letter. It was reprinted then of course in some collection of his printed letters, and I was never told, as a matter of fact I was never asked. In a sense it is my copyright.[17]

And then I think he wrote me a letter saying, 'You and I are rather exceptional at being Eastern Jews, East European Jews, freely received [*laughter*] in Gentile society.' I didn't like that very much: he compared himself to me, or me to him, as being the two

[16] 'Straits of Messina *en route* to Marseilles'.

[17] Not only in a sense, in the case of verbatim quotation. But was the letter so printed? Perhaps IB is thinking of the summary in Ernest Samuel, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 586: 'Sir Isaiah Berlin, who had visited him on his way out to Israel, sent him a lengthy and moving account in which he described the striking contrast at the bungled Naples embarkation between the self-controlled behavior of the Israelis and the screaming hysteria of the American Jews. He reported how greatly impressed he was by what he saw in Israel in spite of the occasional annoying reminders of the laws of Leviticus. Lewis Namier, whom he had encountered there, was "walking on air" at the sight of the enormous improvement since his visit in 1936. Deeply stirred by Berlin's eloquent narrative, Berenson replied, "I cannot exaggerate my interest in Israel. It preoccupies me almost as much as Namier, who, by the way, is the most Jew-haunted person of my acquaintance, but I fear Israel will enjoy a very short life as a Mission state, not only that its zest will inevitably diminish, but that it will end like a smaller Lebanon, dominated by its rabbis." ' This does not breach copyright.

Jews who are socially OK [*laughter*], and more on those lines. And I can't remember what else he wrote. His letter must be – I don't know if I preserved it or not, but I never sent it to anybody. So it's not among his collected letters. But then one of the collections of letters which I think Countess Origo, Marquesa Origo, who was a friend of his, an Anglo-American friend of his, Iris Origo, published in New York, as a kind of memorial, does contain an account of an evening spent, according to him, with Béla Horovitz, who was the editor of – publisher of Phaidon art books, and with me in which we all swapped Yiddish jokes.[18] No such occasion occurred. I think he confused me with Sam Behrman, probably. I can't tell Yiddish jokes: I don't speak it. I don't know – evidently he did, but after seventy years' suppression not so much. Horovitz was a Hungarian Jew, and probably did speak some. But anyhow, I remember suddenly being included in this jolly evening, which certainly never occurred. I didn't mind, I didn't want to make a fuss about it. Actually I did complain a bit to Iris Origo. She said, 'Well, the publisher, you know, is very stiff, he doesn't want to change the proofs. Very expensive. I don't think it matters.' I agreed it didn't matter, and in fact it's a mistake, on his part.

GC Now, in general, did he …

IB Oh, one more thing. He said to me, 'You know, I became a Roman Catholic in 1892' – or 1893, or whenever it was – 'I joined the Church.' There was a brief silence, and he said, 'It hasn't taken – like an inoculation. It didn't work.' 'It hasn't taken,' he said. 'It's

[18] This may be a misremembering of a passage in Berenson's diary for 29 October 1953: 'How easy and warm the atmosphere between born Jews like Isaiah Berlin, Lewis Namier, myself, Bela Horowitz [sc. Béla Horovitz], when we drop the mask of being goyim and return to Yiddish reminiscences, and Yiddish stories and witticisms!' Bernard Berenson, *Sunset and Twilight: From the Diaries of 1947–1958*, ed. Nicky Mariano, introduction by Iris Origo (New York, 1963), 323.

like an injection: it hasn't taken.' It's exactly like vaccination. It hasn't worked.

IB He was anti- – clearly. He was anti-Semitic all right. In the ordinary Jewish sense.

GC Now what – had he had a Litvak kopf?[19] Was he rational …?

IB Oh, absolutely. Very clear-headed. Extremely intelligent and very amusing. Very agreeable to talk to. Full of reminiscences of interesting and important people. Not important so much: interesting and fascinating people whom he knew quite well, and summed up very well, and talked to – he was a marvellous talker. That he was.

GC [*unclear*] Berenson doesn't interest me much. He is interesting, but …

IB No. Not for [?] purposes.

GC I was going to ask you – no, Berenson reminded me of it, because he came from Lithuania, he was a Litvak.

IB Yes, and he described himself – I remember he said to somebody [that he came from? *unclear*] the Lithuanian Jewish aristocracy. It's very much as if he were to say 'The Golders Green aristocracy'. It had about as much meaning as that.

[19] 'Lithuanian head'. The rivalry between Lithuanian Jews/Litvaks (from northern Baltic areas) and Polish Jews (from other parts of Eastern Europe) ran deep. Litvaks (according to Poles) were cold, intellectual, unemotional. Hasidism, a movement that appealed to the emotions, swept through Ukraine and Poland but was strongly opposed in Lithuania. (The nationalities are confusing, since they correspond neither to current political boundaries nor to Jewish or local self-understanding.) A 'Litvak kopf' approaches problems with arcane arguments rather than deep human understanding.

GC No.

IB None.

GC In Lithuanian Jewish there was more aristocracy than in Golders Green because …

IB Not aristocracy.

GC No, not aristocracy, but there was something more than in Golders Green. Learning.

IB Yes, but he didn't come of any notoriously learned family. I'll tell you about Berenson. He – just one thing: he really was pagan.

GC Pagan?

IB Like the ancient Gr… – like the Greeks. He really liked nature and he liked colours.

GC That was genuine

IB That was genuine. And that's why he hated learning, yeshivot, the cheder, and he thought that art history – that Jewish art historians were that. He hated scholarship, and he hated Jewish scholarship. To him it was an extension of Lithuanian learning, which he loathed with a deep loathing. People sitting in dark rooms with candles, bent over the volumes of medrash, was to him odious. Odious.

GC Which means it was a rebellion against Lithuanian Jew….

IB Absolutely. Certainly. No. He had nothing to do with hasidim. He was a misnaged.

GC Yes. But – aha.

IB The whole idea of – he hated the Warburg Institute, which to him was simply [an] extension of a yeshiva. He called it the Walpurgis[20] Institute, and he called Bloomsbury 'Gloomsbury'.

GC And that was genuine?

IB I thought so. I thought he had a real sense of pagan values. Nature, food, drink, a certain kind of very non-Christian, non-Jewish attitude to life.

GC Now, as you …

IB Why is he non-Jewish? He was terribly Jewish, but …

GC [*unclear*]

IB Of course. Well, exactly. But he really hated his origins. He couldn't deny them. And of course he lived among Wasps in Boston and so on; he must have been very careful about – he lived in the world of people all of whom were socially deeply anti-Semitic.

GC Now, Isaiah, as you so often in writing and speaking like to classify.

IB True.

GC It's a way of thinking, a way of expressing. I was wondering if – let's take two groups of people. On the one hand hasidic and

[20] In German folklore Walpurgis night was a feast of the powers of darkness.

misnagdim, or let's say, in English life, Wykehamists, Wyckhamites …

IB Wykehamists.

GC Wykehamists and Etonians.

IB Very good.

GC Well, let's start with Wykehamists and Etonians. When you come to think of it now, if you try to generalise, do you think that you prefer one group to another? Not group, but the …

IB It's quite an interesting question. I've often thought about Wykehamists and Etonians.

GC Did you?

IB Funnily enough, I *can* tell you what I think, because I have a formula. I have piece about that, which may not be true, but …

GC A piece that you thought about?

IB I've thought about it and I have a kind of formulation, which may not be exact, but which I believe in. Wykehamists are people who believe that there is objective truth. That it can be discovered by instruments provided by Winchester, and later by those colleges in Oxford or Cambridge which …

GC [*unclear*]

IB Well, New College in particular – which continue the same kind of tradition of rational thought, founded on reading of the best literature, the classical literature, the best English literature, and so on. They believe that people can be converted: those who do not

see the truth can and should be converted, if possible by persuasion. But if persuasion doesn't work, then stronger methods have to be used. Therefore, they believe in human equality. They are not – I'm talking about people in College, not commoners, commoners of all types, but I am talking about the people who get scholarships, and therefore are brought up together as a kind of elite in Winchester. Now, since they believe all men are equal, and that people should be converted to their own point of view, they are preachers, fundamentally.

There are two types of Wyckhamists – it's well known, it's not my formulation; 'smooth' Wykehamists and 'shaggy' Wykehamists. Smooth Wykehamists are Sir William Hayter, John Sparrow – how shall we say? – our Foreign Secretary, Howe. What other Wykehamists can one think of? Mr Fisher of New College. Shaggy Wykehamists are Crossman, Oswald Mosley, Cripps. But what they have in common is this belief that they know the truth, and that they must somehow impart it. They are fundamentally missionaries and preachers, and that's why they are very inconvenient, and that's why they don't get on all that well, because they irritate people. They produce excellent civil servants, very good judges. But not very – the number of politicians is not excessive. Managing people is not their thing.

Etonians believe that the world was a park which belonged to them. But of course with time and change, historical change, other people had to be admitted to it. So now it belongs to everybody, and they pretend that it's much gayer that way, more amusing [?]. But they are superior, they feel a certain degree of – they have a deep sense of their superiority; they don't want to convert anybody, they don't want to preach to anybody. They don't want to change anybody's life. Their attitude, fundamentally, is independent, amused and ironical, and a great sense of being an elite. Most people in England say 'When I was at school'. Most Etonians say 'When I was at Eton'. It gives you a certain sense.

GC And as a human type, whom do you prefer?

IB Etonians are infinitely easier to live with. Wykehamists will go to heaven more easily, they are more virtuous. They take trouble, they are capable of social and moral indignation. Etonians are not terribly capable of that; they know what is good and bad, but they are not easily stirred in that way. But on the whole, they take the world as they find it, they are not opportunists necessarily, but they are sardonic, rather, they are ironical, they are like Montaigne. But they are much more amusing, amiable, agreeable. My Etonian friends are much better company, certainly, than the Wykehamists. Yes, far. You may say, from the point of view of virtue, they yield to the Wykehamists, but they are absolutely fish and flesh. There are natural – there are Etonians who become Wykehamised at New College, and there are Wykehamists who become Etonianised. There can be a certain cross.

GC Now, among your Jewish friends who went to public school, there are some who went to Eton.

IB Certainly.

GC Were there Jews that went to Winchester in the early days?

IB There are such.

GC But less?

IB Not in the early days. There is a man called – yes, I've known one or two, it's not a school which welcomed Jews.

GC No.

IB Nor was Eton, but Eton did have some. Someone like Lionel Cohen, the judge, was a Fellow of Eton. He was made one no

doubt for this purpose. But there was still difficulty about Jews getting in, after the war. There was a serious scandal about it.

GC In Eton?

IB Yes. They didn't take – well, there's a story of no importance for this about Winchester. There was a man called David Shapiro, who is now I think a lecturer in probably politics, in Brunel University. He went to Winchester. And his father was a costermonger who became an authority on seventeenth-century literature, was Profes-sor of English Literature in Birmingham and called by his friends 'Shap'.[21] David Shapiro bore a certain amount of persecution. Never mind. Who else do I know of Jews who went to Winchester? Perhaps he's the only one. They are very rare. Etonians, upper class ones, yes. There's Jacob Rothschild, there's Francis Haskell, the Professor of the History of Art. David Pryce-Jones is only half-Jewish. But they've all had a rather bad time at Eton. They did suffer some persec… – Freddie Ayer was only half-Jewish – suffered some degree of minor persecution.

GC If you had to send your child to either Eton or Winchester, what would you prefer?

IB Eton.

GC Eton.

IB It's a better school. They are better taught. They have wider horizons. They read books much [?] – they are left to themselves, they have rooms of their own, and don't come out as a type. The

[21] Isaac Avi Shapiro (1904–2004), lecturer, then senior lecturer, in English, Birmingham. He was 'Ship' to his family, 'Shap' to his students: see [Peter Beal], 'I. A. Shapiro' (obituary), *The Times*, 23 March 2004, 29b–f. His OUP edition of Donne's letters, begun in 1929, has still to appear at the time of writing (January 2024).

variety is enormous. Winchester, they come out shaped like Wykehamists. You can tell them five miles off.

GC And then in Eton they prefer them to be happier people?

IB Yes. They are more confident. The point is confidence. They have enormous confidence. They think they can do anything. If they set themselves to it – so do Wykehamists, up to a point. But someone like – but they usually have some fanatical streak. They know what is right, and therefore they can't bear it when things are wrong. And in a way it's very estimable.

GC They suffer a lot.

IB They suffer more, and they – someone like Douglas Jay knows it's wrong to enter Europe. No Etonian minds enough. Someone like Cripps, someone like Mosley, wanted to transform the state. No Etonian has ever wanted to change society in any direction – known to me.

GC Now let's go to the other group, hasidim and mitnagdim.[22] You formulated – surely you thought about Etonians and Wykehamists and you talk about it, and that is why you come out with a …

IB Yes. There are exceptions. Someone in Parliament, there is a maverick – now, what's his name? – Tam Dalyell.

GC Tam Dalyell.

IB He's an Etonian.

GC Well, there should be …

[22] The spelling with 't' is Sephardi, that with 's' Askkenazi. IB fluctuates.

IB Yes, quite. He certainly wants to change things. Shelley to change things. He went to Eton.

GC I know. When we move to groups like hasidim and mitnagdim …

IB Yes.

GC If you try to think – you knew both: whom do you prefer as a human type?

IB Oh, the hasidim. I think they are behaving abominably *now*. I've just received a present of a pot of honey for the New Year from the Oxford …

GC Chabad.

IB … branch of Chabad. Oxford branch. Some Rabbi there is. Never saw his name before. He gave me a very precise little book of instructions, what to do during the month …

GC Of the chagim.[23]

IB Of the chagim, yes, exactly; about how one has to make blessings over bsamim and things like that. Certainly. Because the hasidim have more temperament, which is what I like; they have more generous natures. They have a certain love of life. They are not particularly learned, they are not in favour of law and order, there is a certain kind of romantic freedom about them which appeals to me.

[23] 'Festival'.

GC It appeals to you as a group, or – after all, if you have to prefer a friend, or [?], you want somebody with whom you will be able to converse, to speak with …

IB Well, I can't – I've known very few, as you might say, 'practicing' hasidim or 'practicing' misnagdim, mitnagdim.

GC No, I think about the type who came from Lita [Lithuania], who was not particularly misnaged.

IB Oh yes they were. Lithuania produced mitnagdim.

GC Yes.

IB Vilna [Vilnius] was mitnagdic.

GC Yes, but their descendants, those who went to Berlin, and studied, and became professors – they still maintained a certain tradition of Judaism, of learning, of rationality, and the descendants of the hasidim maintained an entirely different type; I thought mainly about those people, not the practicing ones, but the types.

IB It worked like Eton and Winchester again.

GC Yes.

IB The hasidim are Etonians, the mitnagdim are Wykehamists. Of course mitnagdim, which were a vast majority, produced first-rate scholars, first-rate, probably, mathematicians and scientists and all that.

GC I thought that Lithuanian Jews with German education produced probably sometimes the best …

IB Very possibly. Nevertheless, I could talk to Shazar more easily than, let us say – well, I can't say Scholem because he was not East European. But what mitnaged would you offer me, who became a scholar in the West?

GC A Lithuanian [?]?

IB Yes. Somebody in America, perhaps. I don't know.

GC I just don't really know, but there are many whom you wouldn't think about in those categories.

IB I could talk to Shazar more easily.

GC Did you know [Saul] Lieberman, for example?

IB Yes I did. I could talk to Shazar more easily. Lieberman was a real misnaged.

GC That's the type.

IB I admire him, I admired him, certainly, I admired him, of course.

GC He was a real …

IB Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure that – what's his name? – that there was a Jewish scholar in America, too – [Louis] Ginzberg!

GC Yes.

IB He must have been a mitnagid.

GC He was not hasidic.

IB What?

GC He was not a hasid.

IB He was the man who wrote about *The Legends of the Jews*. Very learned figure. [Louis] Finkelstein is surely mitnagid. [?] but no, I [feel] more at home with hasidim. Maybe because I am descended from them.

GC I don't know. Now here I come to – I repeat a question that I asked you. It's still a puzzle to me that the Chabad didn't try more strongly to get in touch with you.

IB Oh, they did try.

GC Yes, but they are [anti-?]assimilators.

IB I know, I know.

GC And they – your name for them could be heaven-sent.

IB It's no good. They know it's no good. They must know it's no good.

GC They know it, that's true, but they don't give in that easily.

IB Well they have. I have received this particular thing not because of Chabad – because probably everybody in the Oxford Community received a pot of honey, but Chabad does not communicate with me. They tried. Yes, they asked me to come to deliver a lecture on any subject I wanted.

GC For them it wouldn't[?] Be very difficult that the Rabbi would ask Shazar to advise you to go.

IB No. No close approach.

GC I know, you told me. And I must tell you I don't know – I'm not sure that you appreciate enough how exceptional it is. They don't give up.

IB Oh, I know they don't. They've destroyed the community in Rome, they've destroyed the community in Milan. They've done a lot of harm.

GC Every man is important for them, and a man like yourself …

IB I can assure you …

GC They have the best intelligence.

IB Well, they don't do it with Yehudi Menuhin either.

GC Well, that's because of …

IB Well, he's a Jew, he's not baptised. He's directly descended …

GC I didn't know that.

IB … from Moshe Mnuchin,[24] who was a …

GC Was Chabad.

IB Oh absolutely, a descendent of Shneur Zalman. We're sixth cousins, he and I. We call each other 'cousin'.

GC Really?

IB Yes.

[24] Alternative spelling of 'Menuhin'.

GC Yehudi Menuhin took interest in some sorts of mysticism. Does he take interest in Hasidism at all?

IB I don't think so. No, no, never. I think he has his own brand of …

GC You know, by the way, that the Lubavitcher khatzer[25] is in a bad shape now. There are [?] wars …

IB About the succession?

GC About the succession.

IB How old is he?

GC He's very old. I think he's well in the eighties, and no successor, no obvious successor.

IB No children? He has no children?

GC No children. Problems that remind one of medieval …

IB Of course.

GC Now, but there are rumours, and there are some signs, that they are preparing for a declaration that the incumbent Lubavitcher is the Messiah.

IB Oh, I'm sure. Well …

GC And that's why he doesn't bother about a successor.

[25] Court of the Hasidic Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

IB People say that about him; he has never said …

GC No. He never said yet, but people are saying that it's def… – it's in the press, it's even in the national press in America.

IB I understand.

GC And the stories are really …

IB The successor is going to be the Dalai Lama.

GC [*laughter*] All right, [?]. In your article about Aldous Huxley, I believe, you said that you went to a conference in New Delhi.

IB Correct.

GC In 1961 or …

IB Thereabouts, yes.

GC What conference was it?

IB It's a ridiculous story. In – when I was an undergraduate at Oxford, I knew an Indian called Humayun Zahiruddin Amir-[i-]Kabir – from Calcutta, I think. Anyway, Bengal. Certainly Bengali. And he was a – he studied philosophy here, was a poet in Bengali; used to – he'd get me to check his English translations of his Bengali poems. I don't know how we met, probably because we went to the same lectures in philosophy. And then he became a, I think, in the long run, professor of philosophy in Calcutta. I lost touch with him after 1932, 1933. And then I met him in America suddenly, when he came on a Ford Foundation grant to Harvard, and he saw my name on some list, and we embraced each other and became great friends again. Then he wrote me and said he was editing the prose works of – what's his name?

GC Tagore?

IB Tagore. Correct. Would I look through some of the essays to tell him which I thought was the best. The only other two people he'd asked to do it in Europe were his other two friends in Oxford, Quintin Hogg and the Canadian Ambassador to Bonn, a man called Escott Reid. All right. Well, you can't refuse Indians, and you couldn't then, certainly, so I thought, well, all right, I'll do my best. Bales of jute began to arrive containing the prose works of Tagore. Tagore must have written something – if you take every lecture, every speech, 20 million words – anything you like. Well, I wasn't going to read these endless bales of paper, so I wrote that I thought essay 102, essay 247, essay 5 didn't seem too bad. This was all printed on the back of the book, our tributes to Tagore.[26] At a certain point, there was going to be a Tagore centenary conference. That'll give you the year. And I received a letter from the – I think the Indian High Commissioner saying that – could I please come to this conference as a Tagore specialist? In the month of November, in New Delhi, there would be a conference in honour of Tagore. I had to write a paper. So I replied very politely saying unfortunately I was a professor, and I couldn't leave in the middle of term. I then received a letter from the British High

[26] On the back flap and back panel of the jacket of Rabindranath Tagore, *Towards Universal Man* (London, 1961), published to mark the centenary of Tagore's birth on 7 May 1861. The comment by IB (described as 'Chichele Professor of Social and Political History [sc. Theory], Oxford') reads: 'I now have a vivid picture of the person of Tagore as a social reformer and intellectual leader, for whom I feel sympathy and admiration. The theme which runs through all the essays is of course the deeply morbid relationship of England and India; his attacks on England and his generosity towards her, the sane and astonishingly sympathetic understanding of Western values, together with an even acuter perception of the evils of mechanical adaptation to them, and the donning of foreign clothes and the damage done to spontaneity and native gifts by attempting to force them into the mould of an alien culture – all this seems to me most wonderfully stated.'

Commissioner in India, who was a friend of mine called Gore-Booth, who afterwards became Head of the Foreign Office, saying 'Professor Kabir is very anxious that you should come', so I sent him a copy of my letter. I then received a letter from Sir Samuel Garner[?] of the Colonial Office, then called the Commonwealth, I think, Relations, he was the Undersecretary, saying would I please come? Professor Kabir was then Minister of – he was one of the few Moslems in Nehru's government. He was a Congress Moslem. He was not all that – first he was Minister of, I think Defence even, I think Education by this time. Anyway, he was a cabinet minister in Nehru's government, that's why – and he was also patron of this conference. Would I please come? So I sent copies of the other letters. I then received a letter from somebody else still, I remember; I think that must have been all, about the two High Commissioners, from I can't remember who, I think – from Kabir, to a personal letter, to which I replied saying, 'Terribly sorry.' Then there was a gap. Then I had a letter from Garner saying, if I couldn't go myself, could I nominate another person? So I said I was sure that Miss Veronica Wedgwood, Mr Stephen Spender would be only too glad to go. So they offered it to Veronica, who accepted.

GC Does she know something about it?

IB I shouldn't think. But I thought they were just, they would like UNESCO-like journeys. She then fell ill at the last moment, couldn't go, so then I received a letter from the Vice Chancellor, a man called Norrington, saying would I go and represent the British Academy and Oxford University? Well, if I was being sent by the Vice Chancellor I was only too pleased. So I abandoned my lectures with great relief, and went straight to New Delhi, with Aline – maybe she came afterwards – and took part in the conference. I wrote a paper on Tagore, which says that Tagore was, I didn't quite say it – behaved exactly like a Zionist. It's that sort of thing. Telling Indians to be Indian, not – anti-assimilation.

Europe, yes, Western culture, yes, anti-assimilation. He was a typical Indian Zionist. Sort of Ahad Ha'am of India.

GC In many other respects [?] Ahad Ha'am. His attitude to the revival of the national culture.

IB Yes, exactly that. That's what I mean by anti-assimilation. Indian Ahad Ha'am. That was the fashion then. Zeitgeist works in interesting ways.

GC I think he took some interest in us.

IB Could be.

GC There is a street with his name in Tel Aviv.

IB That I didn't …

GC Of Tagore.

IB Of Tagore?

GC Yes.

IB I had no idea. How fascinating.

GC A very …

IB Quite a decent street?

GC Very well-to-do.

IB Why, because he was – he was a patron of Zionism.

GC Yes.

IB In some way.

GC Yes.

IB Must have been.

GC I think that he even corresponded with – I can't remember who.

IB Well, who could he have corresponded with?

GC I can't remember now to whom it could be, but I'll check it for you.

IB How amusing, yes. Anyhow, I went; it was wonderfully anti-British. And the representatives of English-speaking countries – that's how it was done – were Aldous Huxley, a man called [Louis] Untermeyer, who was an American poet, and me. I remember very well – oh, it was comical, the whole thing. We went and visited the Taj Mahal: Aldous Huxley and I became friends on that occasion.

GC I said that – when I read this, I thought before that you said that 'I was a delegate.'

IB I was, yes.

GC I thought you didn't like this kind of UNESCO …

IB I don't, no. But I was delighted to leave Oxford in the middle of term. I'd never been in India, so I thought it might be amusing. It was.

GC And how did you like your visit to India?

IB I liked India very much. I actually did. I liked the Indians, I liked their nonsense even. I liked my student from here. There was a graduate student I had, who is by this time of course a Professor of Philosophy in New Delhi, who introduced me to another Indian, who said, 'Professor Berlin, I have a very important problem to which I want a solution. It has been with me for many years. I have found no solution. I would like to ask whether you have one. If you do not think you know the answer, I would rather not ask, because it would be very painful to me to tell you what my problem is if you don't have a solution.' So I said, 'I don't know. I don't have the solution to many questions. Could you indicate the kind of territory, province, in which your question lies?' He said, 'No, there is no need for me to do it now. We could do it in two hours' time. We could do it at eleven this evening. We could do it at half-past three tomorrow afternoon, or any time.' I never discovered what the problem was. They have a certain charm – childish kind.

GC And yet, do you feel that you can communicate with them, even on philosophy?

IB Not really. I can talk to them, yes. Of course I can talk to them, particularly to the – there are a few serious ones you can talk to. For example, I can certainly communicate with a great economist like Sen. Of course I can. But there must be other people of that order.

GC Yes, well, I don't know Sen. I know …

IB He's now gone to Harvard.

GC I know. I'm sure that when it comes to the economy and to …

IB No, but there must be …

GC The frame of mind.

IB [Subrahmanyan?] Chandrasekhar, scientists and so on, of course there are people one can talk to – but in fact not. There is a wall.

GC Have you ever been enraptured by the mystique of India like – it was so involved?

IB No. Never. Never in any way. I don't like Hindu art. I prefer Moslem art.

GC I was going to say that …

IB Moslem art in India yes. I don't like those divinities with nineteen arms.

GC And again, when coming to classification, in the good old days when you had many Indians here, you had Moslems and you had Hindus.

IB Yes, before the war.

GC Whom did you get on with …?

IB I don't think I knew many of them. At Corpus, where I was, we had one Indian only. He was called [Mangalore Purushotham] Pai, and I didn't know which he was. In those days we didn't ask. There was no Pakistan. There was an Indian called Chittoor[?], who must have been, I think, a Moslem – maybe, I don't know – in University College, and there was my friend Kabir. I may have known four or five Indians. I don't think I discriminated. They were all exotic characters.

GC When I came in 1959 to Oxford, I guess I managed better with the Pakistanis than …

IB Than with the Hindus.

GC By far. There was no barrier of way of thinking between us.

IB You and the Pakistanis. I think the same thing would be true of me.

GC And in All Souls, did you have some?

IB We had [Sir Sarvepalli] Radhakrishnan, with whom I got on beautifully. We never talked about anything serious. But we became great friends. And there's now a very – extremely nice Indian Professor, his successor.

GC [Bimal Krishna] Matilal.

IB Matilal. A very nice man.

GC I met him. He visited us in Israel.

IB Very nice man, but I can't really talk to him about anything in particular.

GC That's what I thought [?], that there is still, that there was a barrier.

IB But there's a worse barrier with the Japanese. Even more. Chinese, I never knew.

GC But you had more opportunities to come across Indians than Japanese probably.

IB Yes, well – no, well, I went to Japan. There I did meet Japanese. It's very extraordinary. I was fascinated. I thought it wonderful. Some people – most people hate it. I did not.

GC You know that we have here now an Israeli Fellow in St Antony's who wrote a book on medieval Spain, the mutual image of Christians and Moslems about each other in the twelfth century.

IB Very interesting.

GC It's been translated now into Japanese.

IB Fantastic. Who is your man?

GC The man is Ron Barkai, and he is a Visiting Fellow in St Antony's.

IB I understand. Extraordinary.

GC Unbelievable.

IB Incredible.

GC We don't know why.

IB Exactly. Maybe because there's a parallel between other inter-culture …

GC That's what I thought. [?] The man who translated – the book was published in Spain – reads Spanish fluently.

IB What, the Japanese?

GC Yes [?] Spanish [?]. When you go now in Europe to the museums, the Japanese are replacing the German tourists.

IB Absolutely. They are everywhere.

GC They are interested.

IB In everything.

GC In Greece, the art …

IB Everything. Thousands of them.

GC And not just tourists.

IB No no. Absolutely.

GC Now, a vignette that I found I think in Noel Annan, that Beaverbrook offered you to write …

IB Correct. Yes.

GC What was it?

IB I'll tell you what happened. I was quite well known to the British correspondents in Washington, and they knew about these dispatches that … I met Beaverbrook twice. First occasion was not – hardly worth describing, it was dinner or some …. I worked for the Ministry of Information, and the Foreign Office simultaneously, but Brendan Bracken, who was the Minister of Information, told Beaverbrook that I could tell him something about America that he wanted to know, and so I was asked to some dinner for a rather famous anti-Semitic American statesman called Adolf Berle, and that was simply – I sat next to Beaverbrook and he asked me, 'Who was your father? What do you do? Are you a Jew? Do you propose to remain one?' – a lot of typical questions. It was of no interest. Then suddenly I received an invitation to go

and see him in 1945, about a week before I went to Russia. September 1945, beginning of September. I had just been innoculated and I had a temperature and I was in bed, so I said I was very sorry, I couldn't come. His nephew, who I knew, no was a man called Bill Aitken, who is dead, telephoned me and said, 'Look, the old man is hopping mad' – as he would put it – 'you must go and see him. He's very very annoyed. He really does want to talk to you very seriously.' So, tottering and doddering I got up after about two days and I went to see him. And he then offered me a job to write for the *Evening Standard*, twice a week, political analysis – anything I liked. Of course I should have said, 'Lord Beaverbrook, this is a marvellous offer, I really must be alone to think it over.' Instead of which, I behaved like a Swiss governess whose virtue was being attempted, and I said, 'No no no no. I'm afraid I can't do that sort of thing. Really I'm no good. I'm not a very good writer, not fluent, I'm not really a very good journalist. I don't think I could possibly do it.' He was tremendously offended. But he kept me there, and began telling me amusing stories about Halifax, Churchill – I was there two hours. But he remained extremely hostile, and in due course he said, 'Ah, I can't understand this. You sit there in a back room in the British Embassy, just a minor official, First Secretary or whatever you are. I can put you up in Claridge's Hotel. You can have all the drink and all the women you want. That is a privilege I reserve for very few.' Even that did not prevail. I didn't say that it wasn't a very attractive offer to me, but still. So he became very annoyed, because he liked catching intellectuals and corrupting them, really.

GC A. J. P. Taylor.

IB Well, that's the most notorious case. But he tried with Driberg, who bit him in the end. Ruined his life. There were one or two others. Blake worked for him for a long time. Lord Blake.

GC Well all right. But Blake, yes …

IB Well …

GC Since when? I tell you why I ask …

IB I don't know. He wrote a book on Bonar Law, for example, entirely with papers supplied by Beaverbrook. He certainly worked for the *Daily Express*. I don't know when or how long. I don't think maybe it made much difference to him, but still. Anyway, he liked tame intellectuals, just for show. I remember a story. One of my colleagues at All Souls, a man called Dermot Morrah, who was a journalist for *The Times*, was sent for by Beaverbrook, who offered him a job, which he accepted. He said , 'Now you are going to write stories about the great Greek authors, great philosophers, for example, Aristophanes.' And Morrow said, 'But Lord Beaverbrook, Aristophanes was not a philosopher, he was a writer of comedies.' 'You seem to have made a study of the subject,' said Beaverbrook, furiously.

Anyway, then there appeared an article in the *Evening Standard*. I'll tell you what happened. I wrote – I was asked by *The Observer* to write a piece on America and England, which I was quite prepared to do at that time, years ago, it must have been in the late 1940s, early 1950s. Then *The Observer* wrote to me saying they didn't want it, after I had written it, because somehow a correspondent of theirs had already done it. So I was rather annoyed, and – David Astor didn't really apologise much, I received a very very dry letter from him indeed.

GC You were friends?

IB No, but his view – I knew him quite well – his view of me was not too high because of my insufficient worship of von Trott. That's another story: I can tell you all about him too – we'll get to that. And then I offered it – Miss Kallin was then in charge of the Third Programme, a great friend of mine, so I said 'Would the BBC

like it?' And they said yes, indeed they would. So I broadcast it, and it appeared in *The Listener*.[27] And in the course of it I said that England and America were like – were contracted in marriage. It might not be a happy marriage, it might be terrible, it might be mis…, but there would never be a divorce. Married was married, and this was a permanent relationship. I believed in the special [relationship] and I still do. They all deny it, both sides deny it, but they are wrong. It exists. Then a leading article appeared in the *Evening Standard* called 'Mr Berlin',[28] written by the editor, whose name I can't remember, on the instruction from Beaverbrook, which said, 'Mr Berlin is a bachelor aged forty' – this must have been 1949, the date of this – 'that is why his thoughts no doubt tend towards marriage. He wishes – speaks of England and America as married, he does not mention the Empire. What does he know of its agonies and glories?' That was faintly anti-Semitic. Then went on to denounce me. Well, nothing happened. I thought: all right. But that's my relation with Lord Beaverbrook. He never forgave, I got on to a blacklist.

GC And you never met him later.

IB Never. Well, I stayed a weekend with him. I forgot to tell you that. Towards the end of the war. In fact I met him three times. In 1944 he invited me to stay a weekend, with – I found him terribly

[27] 'The Anglo-American Predicament', *Listener* 42 (1949), 518–19 and 538 (letters, 681, 813, 815); repr. at E 743–8 (letters 130–1, 137–8).

[28] 5 October 1949, 4. The editor at the time was Bert Gunn. The article begins, 'Mr Isaiah Berlin is a 40-year-old Oxford don', and, after summarising his BBC talk, asks, 'Now why does Mr Berlin take such an interest in this marriage?' The writer answers, 'He is a bachelor. Perhaps that is why his mind dwells on marriage.' While agreeing with IB's dismissal of 'Western union' and 'an Eastern orientation', the article deplores that IB 'did not even mention the third alternative: that Britain should ride out the storm alone, placing her faith in the strength and the resources of the Empire. Why is Mr Berlin so blind to the attractions of this simple creed? The answer is as simple. He is not an Empire man. His disdain for the Empire is as extensive as his ignorance of its glory.'

– everyone found him irresistibly charming: I failed to be charmed. Staying with me were Dalton and Fulbright.

GC Dalton? Hugh Dalton?

IB Yes. Dalton was President of the Board of Trade, at that time.

GC And in charge of SOE.

IB No. In charge of SOE when he was in the Ministry of Economic Warfare.

GC During the war he was Economic Warfare. Department of Trade is after the war.

IB This happened …

GC In 1948, it was after he …

IB Could be. Was after. Maybe it wasn't after. After the war …

GC It was after 1948, because until 1948 he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and then he had to resign …

IB He was President of the Board of Trade when I met him. Look it up. I don't think so. He didn't remain …

Section B

IB … 1944. This happened in 1944. Beaverbrook of course, and then there was Fulbright; there was a man called Sir Philip something, who was in the Dalton ministry; he was – owned Hay's Wharf, famous [?], obviously a rich man, head of something enormous, business enterprise. But he was in the ministry, then called – Sir somebody somebody – Sir Philip something – Warner

or something. Some name. And Beaverbrook, of course, teased – always called Dalton 'President': 'Now, President'; '[?]'; 'The President has a lot of ideas, you know'; 'The President is not shy'; 'The President is very fond of giving opinions.' A lot of that went on. The only thing which I ever – first we saw a film, of course, during which I fell asleep. I was very bored. I was the only person in the world who was bored by Lord Beaverbrook, but bored I was. Nobody ever understood it. They thought he was the Devil, he was wicked, but irresistible charm, and terribly amusing. Still, there was one amusing moment when Fulbright said to him, 'Lord Beaverbrook, what do you think of Mr Law?', who was then number two in the Foreign Office, and supposedly rather progressive. He said, 'He's a traitor. His father was the greatest man who ever lived. He's my hero' – Bonar Law. Well, he was created by Bonar Law. Adored him. It's amazing. 'He's crossed over to the other side. He'll do no good. He'll fail. He's a man who hasn't kept faith, with him, with me' – and so on. Then Fulbright said, 'What is your view of Lord Cranbourne?' 'Ah. He's a member of the Cecil family. It's one of the most marvelous families – greatest families in England. Brave, noble, distinguished – we all look up to them. Of course they wouldn't look talk to people like you and me. They look down on us with the utmost contempt, they are the grandest family we have, we are very proud of them, we worship them.' It really was a furious speech. Well, he couldn't make them, he couldn't penetrate that circle. Couldn't. He couldn't. Then Fulbright said: 'What is your attitude to Munich' – no, 'Appeasement' – no, sorry: 'Who is responsible for Appeasement?' 'Everybody knows that. Chamber-lain, no. Halifax, Dawson, Hoare and the dead Chamberlain.' It was a very brutal statement. What is your attitude on Beaverbrook? Well, of course, Beaverbrook was an arch-Appeaser. Everyone knows. A famous film called [*In*] *Which we Serve*, [in] which we have a copy of the *Daily Express* floating on the water, saying 'There will be no war'. Beaverbrook said, 'I'm a man of peace, I'm not a man of war', and

he drew a fine distinction – Appeasement terrible and peace which is fine. That's about all. That I enjoyed. It was a real outbreak.

GC And the reaction on the [?].

IB Oh, he couldn't make them. He penetrated other circles. The Cecils kept him at arm's length.

GC Was it because he was what he was?

IB Yes.

GC Otherwise they were not against …

IB No.

GC You were against …

IB I was cetrtainly, yes. They didn't mind me. No. Oh no, they had quite wide acquaintance. Oh, yes, or – they knew people like Michael Berry, that sort of thing – anybody they liked. Beaverbrook was regarded as a monster, horrible man. And he – of course, but his point is that it infuriated him, not to be able to – the one family which – the Devonshires too, probably. The real aristocrats had nothing to do with him.

GC Now, you refused instantly because it was not done in those days …

IB To write? No. It was no good, it was pure instinct, like a chemical reaction. I just knew I'd be no good as a journalist. And I didn't want to be, I was a don at Oxford, I was perfectly happy, why should I? The last thing I wanted.

GC No, not to be a journalist. It was to be a professional.

IB Oh, I think so.

GC I see.

IB I didn't think I would sit in Oxford …

GC I wonder whether the attitude changed. Later, respectable people would write in the …

IB It didn't occur to me to say, 'Can I go on being a don at Oxford and write for you twice a week?', which I could have done. People do it now.

GC That's what I thought.

IB They do it now.

GC Now they do it. Since the 1950s.

IB Well, they could do it then, I don't think it would have been terrible.

GC [?] The *Daily Express* was not respectable among …

IB No.

GC But did you know who …

IB The *Evening Standard*. It wasn't the *Express*. I could write two articles a week without losing my job, I think, particularly when I was in All Souls.

GC Now such a story is [?] again in Noel Annan's introduction. He didn't hear it from you.

IB Entirely from me. Years ago. Here.

GC Now …

IB We'll soon have to stop.

GC You're tired?

IB I am rather.

GC I have some …

IB All right.