BORN IN RIGA

Transcript of a Mistrus Media film by Gints Grūbe

Speakers

AB	Aline Berlin, widow
IB	Isaiah Berlin
JC	Jerry [G. A.] Cohen, philosopher and friend
BD	Björn Alexander Düben, Curator of the Centenary IB Exhibition in Riga
TGA	Timothy Garton Ash, Oxford University
PH	Peter Halban, stepson
HH	Henry Hardy, Trustee, Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust
AMa	Avishai Margalit, Princeton University
AMo	Alan Montefiore, philosopher and friend

BD A person's connection to a specific location of their life is both mysterious and manifest. It cannot be denied nor can it be fully explained. Sir Isaiah Berlin was born in Riga on 6 June 1909. A historian of ideas, political philosopher, one of the greatest essayists of the twentieth century, he was a European institution of sorts, perhaps one of the last true incarnations of the European spirit. For several years now, while studying Berlin's philosophy in Oxford and Cambridge, I have been trying to find an answer to the question how best to approach Isaiah Berlin's legacy, and what exactly was that mysterious and inexplicable circumstance that shaped him into one of the greatest geniuses of his era. Any such quests I believe should start here in Riga, the place where he was born and where he spent the first few years of his life. The house on Alberta Street where he was born etched itself into Berlin's memory. It was one of the magnificent art nouveau houses designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, father of the famous Russian film director, Sergey. At that time Riga was a province of tsarist Russia,

a capital without a State, an explosively creative place with different ethnic, national and religious groups.

IB What philosophy deals with are the assumptions on which a great many normal beliefs rest – not the sort of things which people like to dig up, because people sometimes don't really want their assumptions examined over much, because people are rather uncomfortable when they're made to look into what really their beliefs rest on. But in fact the sort of assumptions on which a great many ordinary common sense beliefs rest are matters for philosophical analysis: when looked at, they turn out to be a great deal less secure and a great deal more complicated than they seem at first and philosophers, by examining these, teach people self-knowledge.

AQ Of course he wasn't a theorist. He was a describer, an analyst of other people's political thinking, and this he did wonderfully. It's a very good idea to have somebody tasting it very carefully before they judge it, and he was wonderfully good at reconstructing the basic feeling of a theorist.

TGA I absolutely believe that Berlin's philosophy is in a way more relevant to the Europe of today than it was even to the Europe of the Cold War, because so much of our European challenge now is about different peoples and cultures and religions and languages and communities living all mixed up together, hugger-mugger, and that was of course the world into which Isaiah Berlin was born a hundred years ago.

AMo If I have to place Isaiah in the history of twentieth, twenty-first [century] philosophy, it would be political philosophy, and it would be in reference to probably his views on the distinction between what he called positive and negative liberty; and I think also, very importantly, his insistence on the incommensurability of values – that's to say, you can't reduce values to one system with a kind of common currency, such as 'utility', for example, so you could measure the worth of all other values in terms of the capability of producing 'utility' or 'happiness' or something. He didn't believe in a common currency of values.

JC He had brilliant ideas, very, very original ideas. The idea of negative and positive liberty is of immense importance for illuminating the whole history of the twentieth century, because the idea of positive – OK, so I'm sure other people will speak about this, but – the idea of negative liberty is: nobody bothers you, you can do what you like, but you can fall into a ditch and kill yourself. It doesn't matter, you are free, you can starve to death; you are free as long as nobody interferes with you. The idea of positive liberty is: the energies and powers and strengths that you have in your personality get realised and developed. It's not a question of people leaving you alone; it's a question of the best in you coming out and characterising your life.

BD At the beginning of the twentieth century Riga became a recognised transit port and an industry development centre of tsarist Russia, which facilitated its development into a city and increased the number of its inhabitants. Regarding Riga's economic development and improved transportation, it started to develop into a visibly multinational city.

Isaiah's father, Mendel Berlin, had moved to Riga as an adolescent. Mendel Berlin later rose to become an honorary citizen and the head of the Riga Association of Timber Merchants. Isaiah's mother, Marie Volshonok, grew up in Riga and lived in an observant Jewish household in the outskirts of the city. A woman of great talent, she transmitted both her longing for European culture and her strong and unfulfilled artistic desires to her son, Isaiah.

In his later life Isaiah was to make few statements about his time in Riga, and never expressed explicit nostalgia for it, but some of the experiences he had here were formative ones that continued to shape his life and thought. Throughout his life he remembered and sang nursery rhymes and popular songs from his Riga childhood; and his Latvian governess would take him for a walk, passing the stone sphinxes that flanked the entrance of his house and around the quarter to promenade in the Esplanade public garden.

HH He didn't feel a strong attachment to Riga, partly because he was here only for a few years at the beginning of his life, only till the age of six, and then moved to Russia; and partly because even

when he *was* here the culture that he was part of was a Russian culture – Russian was his first language, it was the language that his parents spoke to him at home. And although he came to Riga again for a few months in 1920 when his family was on its way to England, he didn't seem to establish a particularly strong sense of Latvian identity.

PH I think he didn't talk about Riga specifically, for a reason that I maintain is because Riga in the end became where his grandparents – the whole of his family except for those who had naturally gone to Moscow for their professional life, perhaps in the late 1930s, when some people realised what might go on. The rest of his family were all killed, they think during the winter of '41/'42, no one knows. So that might be why he didn't talk about Riga of those days. But I certainly remember him talking about – we spent a lot of time talking about music in a very amusing way, and he remembers hearing Chaliapin sing, with his mother. She took him to the Riga Opera, singing *Godunov* in about 1930.

BD After blissful early years as the only child of a wealthy merchant, in 1915 the tumult of the First World War caused Isaiah and his family to abandon Riga for Andreapol´, and later Petrograd. In 1917 Berlin's family witnessed both the February and October Revolutions, as well as the beginning of the Soviet rule in Russia. The scenes of violence that Isaiah Berlin occasionally witnessed in Petrograd left an indelible impression on him. His father decided to leave Soviet Russia, and, considering what the ideal destination could be, he ultimately settled on Riga.

PH He told me about the early days in Petrograd – why was he not allowed to go and live there before they were allowed to live there; and how they got out; how his mother nearly got herself arrested on the border of Latvia when he came back.

AQ He was after all in Petersburg at the time of the 1917 Revolution, and he had this vivid memory, which he recalls, of seeing a mob pursuing a policeman with the obvious intent of killing him. He didn't see much of what there was to be seen, but I think it gave him a horror of mass politics, which reveals itself in his writings.

AMo What he's well known for is his very deep – 'hatred' is not too strong a word – of authoritarian and totalitarian systems, which he regarded as deeply anti-human, and a kind of deeply rooted sickness, I suppose, in human affairs. And I think the other very important thing about his views is that he thought that attempts to produce a systematic account of all values, such that they could all be made to be consistent and conciliatory with each other, was simply unrealistic. So that you would find that his doctrine of the incommensurability of values was very deeply rooted.

IB If you believe there is a single answer to a single question, *the* true answer, all the other answers being false, and all these answers can be put together and harmonise with each other, and create the perfect universe, then there is a temptation, if you think you have it, to do awful things.

BD In 1941 Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany. At the time Isaiah Berlin was working in the British information agency in New York. Only after the Second World War Berlin learned that during the German occupation of Latvia, all his relatives and friends were killed. The fate of his family in Riga shocked Isaiah; nevertheless he never made the Holocaust a major topic of his work.

HH He made very little reference in writing or in conversation or in letters to the fact that so many of his immediate family had been killed; and if he was asked about it he would answer, but he never took an active step in that direction, if you like. And if you asked him to list the members of his family who'd been killed, he got it wrong. So he obviously didn't dwell on it, he didn't make an issue of it, he didn't brood on it. He just accepted that it had happened, and it was a terrible tragedy, but one must move on.

AMa He was devastated: there was nothing to say. He thought that the destruction of European Jewry – what can you say? We failed in understanding at the time, or in changing and affecting the policy. He didn't believe that there was much to be done. He didn't think – all this talk about they could have destroyed Auschwitz – OK, you could postpone it for three weeks and they

would have rebuilt – he didn't think that there was really a viable option apart from winning over Germany.

AMo I think that he had different reasons for this. Certainly one of the reasons he would give would be that there was a danger on the one hand that certain Jewish communities would exploit the memories of the Holocaust in ways which he thought not acceptable; but also, perhaps more importantly, that he thought that it would actually tend to harm the Jewish communities in the eyes of the non-Jewish world – Jews constantly harping on about the ways in which the non-Jewish world had been cruel to them. And I think there's something psychologically very true about this: people don't like to be reminded of the ways in which they have misbehaved, to put it mildly. And to constantly insist that we were the victims tends to root you even deeper in the role of being a victim, if you insist on it too much. And I think this was part of Isaiah's feeling.

HH When asked what he was in terms of nationality, [he] would always answer: 'I am a Russian Jew. I love England, I owe everything to England, I am an Anglophile, but I am a Russian Jew and will always remain so.'

AMo I think he thought that the human condition was very vulnerable, but I don't think he thought it was necessarily something one should despair of. But this is why he was so insistent on underlining the dangers, and the temptations to authoritarianism, to various forms of tyranny and to various forms of restriction on the individual. After all, if you come to think of the background out of which he'd come, you could see why he would be particularly sensitive to the oppression of individuals who didn't fit in, whether these are individual communities like the Jewish communities from the parts of the world he came from, or whether it's particular individuals and his experience as a Jewish boy in an English public school at a time when there was certainly a general cultural prejudice against accepting too many Jews.

JC He believed that every Jew is an outsider in Western Society, and so, yes, he was an outsider, who was also one hundred per cent accepted and honoured. But yes, he felt something of an

outsider and continued to, and was somewhat anxious about how he would be perceived.

BD England, with its ethos of liberalism and tolerance, deeply affected Isaiah's intellectual development. He excelled at school and eventually gained admission to the heart of British learning, the University of Oxford. Oxford was to shape Isaiah's subsequent intellectual life, later bestowing its greatest privilege on him. Having finished his studies with great success, Isaiah was made a Fellow of All Souls College. Berlin was the first Jew ever to have been elected into All Souls, and his election received much attention in British society.

JC He was very much at the centre of British philosophy when he was a young man, very much. He was among the young men who were energised by a revolution in philosophy that had been brought about by Russell and Moore and Wittgenstein, and who were doing philosophy in a new way. He was absolutely at the centre of that. They used to meet in his room in All Souls. So he was very British in that sense. But as he matured and developed and got older, his interests became very un-British, because he became very interested in things that most British people aren't so interested in – this history of ideas and continental thought and strange people like de Maistre and Sorel – people who held weird views. One of the things that he did so well was to breathe life, as is often said, into the history of ideas. If he lectured about somebody, he wouldn't say, 'De Maistre said this and he also said this and he also said this.' Of course there'd be a bit of that, but mostly it would be, 'I look around me and what do I see? I see men and struggle and …'. He impersonates the thinker.

IB You want to feel free to make mistakes […] I think I object to not being reasoned with. I object to paternalism, I mean, ultimately, I think, what I object to is being treated like a schoolboy, being told for my own good that there are certain things to do, or being driven in a perfectly beneficent direction by a perfectly disinterested, pure-hearted body of – anyone you like, governments or manufacturers, it doesn't matter which […] 'Human beings are children. We must first herd them together, create certain institutions, make them obey orders, and we hope

later they will see how well we've done for them, and they will become rational in the course of …'. This is exactly what the British Empire felt towards coloured people in Africa, it's exactly what schoolmasters feel towards children, and it always leads to bad consequences in the end.

BD Abetted by his remarkable wit and talent for conversation, Isaiah was soon a popular guest in the most prestigious circles of British high society. Isaiah held the prestigious Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory at Oxford. In 1966 he was offered the Presidency of [what became] Wolfson College, a new college within the University of Oxford. Freedom and value pluralism were the key subjects of his work. Isaiah never wrote a single-volume magnum opus, but expressed his thought mainly through his brilliant essays and lectures.

HH I met him when I went to Wolfson College in Oxford to do a graduate degree in philosophy, and I immediately saw that he was a most exceptional man. One of the nice things about him was that, as President of the College, he made himself extremely available to the students. He wasn't the kind of person who only appeared briefly for formal occasions and then disappeared into an office, but he would sit in the Common Room, often after lunch, for many hours if he had nothing specific to do, and would just talk about everything and anything.

JC Well, you know, you ask Isaiah a question. You ask him a simple question like 'Did Immanuel Kant ever go to Paris?' And then he'll be off: 'No, of course Kant never went to Paris, he disparaged Paris.' And then he'd give you some quotations where Kant said he didn't like Paris or something like that; and then he'll go on to, 'And others of course liked Paris'; he'll go on to somebody else at around at the same time: 'Rousseau also hated Paris, Voltaire loved it', blah, blah, blah, blah, blah – he'll go on and on and on, fascinating theme, who'd ever thought of even asking the question, you know, 'What do great thinkers think about Paris?'? So you would get, instantly, by touching a chord, a wonderful, wonderful lecture – it's essentially a lecture. When you talk to him – I have a little – he was always wanting to lecture and not always the greatest listener, you know.

TGA To talk to Isaiah Berlin was like sitting in this room and having Immanuel Kant sitting over there and John Stuart Mill here and Alexander Herzen there. He conjured all these figures from history into the room and got them talking to each other.

PH Everyone gets the impression that he could lecture just like that. He used to go through a lot of practice and agony, with my mother, with a watch, and he wrote down everything. And then when he actually came to the lecture he'd just leave them in his pocket and it would be fine. So things weren't as natural to him as people thought.

IB […] not by searching for a definition, but by searching for the use. No, no, it's not definitions that I am concerned with. If people say, 'Liberty is one of the noblest goals of man' or 'Give me liberty or give me death' and someone comes along and says, 'What kind of liberty do you mean? Do you mean physical liberty, of movement? Do you men freedom of the will? Do you mean political liberty? And if political liberty, do you think that this is equally possible in various social conditions? Don't you think that it'll vary, this conception of political liberty, in accordance with the kind of society in which it is sought? This may not be true or it may be true. But I think those questions are askable.

HH He had a very distinctive voice; it was very deep and he spoke very rapidly and tended to run syllables together so that sometimes people found it difficult to follow what he was saying. He was described once by somebody as the only man who pronounced 'epistemological' as one syllable. But he didn't have an accent, and he didn't have an accent in Russian either, except that it was somewhat old-fashioned. He had a pre-revolutionary accent, but it wasn't the accent of a foreigner, it was just the accent of a previous era.

AQ The human element of him was so important, the wonderful readiness to talk to anyone at any time at any length: the extremely entertaining character of his utterances – they elated you, they raised you up, champagne they were, not dull, dry effusions of exploratory prose but great musical symphonic sweepings and

whirlings. And so that was something of an institution. And everybody realised that there was something unique and magical about him. And so they were always trying to get him to explain himself, and there's a whole mass of radio talks which eventually turned into books, and they preserve something of the quality of the original flow of talk. But it was the talk that was the great thing that lasted. He was very good – as I say, he had this large community of people he kept in touch with, particularly people from Eastern Europe, Russians and other[s], and would discuss with them. I used to go and call on him in the early days of our acquaintance, and I'd knock at the door, he'd say 'Come in', I'd open the door and he'd say 'A moment' because he was on the telephone, and he was on the telephone to somebody in Russian. So I would sit there – I know no Russian – and this flood would pour over me, of conversation, very much unlike an English telephone conversation, which goes: 'Uh? You there? Uh? Oh. Oh, all right. Uh, six o'clock. Yes, fine.' No, not like that: (*imitates IB speaking Russian*) and so on. I don't know if that sounds at all like Russian, but that's vaguely what I remember it as being.

JC I have a kind of parody of how a conversation goes. I meet him and he says to me, 'So tell me, Jerry, what have you been doing? I want to know what you've been doing, what you've been thinking.' And then I say, 'Well, the …'. 'But the Babylonians didn't have the word "the"' – you know – and then goes on and on and on and on. He was a fantastic talker and full of life and that was incredibly impressive, and of course in his writings – much of his writing was simply him talking and then the secretary turned it into prose.

AQ His philosophy wasn't particularly conveyed in the spoken word, except that everything that's printed originated in print [sc. speech?]. I think the only philosophical work he ever actually wrote out was his book on Karl Marx, and there's a joke about that made by the great Oxford figure Maurice Bowra, who said, 'It's a pity Isaiah's book on Karl Marx wasn't written in English.' It was written in a rather curious style. Perhaps he took that to heart, and so he decided that in future he'd record his conversations and that someone would type them out, and that produced his very characteristic fluid style.

IB Perhaps I ought to say something about this body of men. Its enemies talked about it as a body of feckless young men who talked too much, had no fixed employment, and were generally parasites upon society.

ANNOUNCER This is BBC television.

AMa I was sitting in a lobby in Jerusalem, and a woman just came and said 'Are you Sir Isaiah?' So he stood up and said 'I can't deny that I am he.'

AMo I think he was constantly surprised at having become an institution, and he enjoyed it very much, I think. He was an institution in the sense that he was very recognisable intellectually; if you turned on the radio and Berlin was talking, you could know he was talking just by the way in which he talked and the timbre of his voice. He knew all sorts of important people who enjoyed meeting him and enjoyed his company. In that sense, yes, he *was* an institution.

AB I remember meeting so many interesting people with him, particularly all the musicians. I liked Stravinsky, who came to our house quite often. I became quite a friend of his. He wanted to meet him because he was so interested in his music.

JC When he died I felt awful. I felt it was like there had been this lovely luxuriant garden, because he was like an oral garden, you know, flowers coming out of his mouth and wonderful things, you know, saying – from so much cultural stuff, and then all of a sudden (*mimics storm-blast*) there was this storm and it took it all away.

BD So at the end of Isaiah's life, Churchill's biographer Martin Gilbert rightfully observed that he had reason to be vastly proud of all that he had achieved on his long road from Riga. The story of Isaiah Berlin may begin in Riga or St Petersburg, in London or in Oxford. It is still possible to find many different answers to the question how an East European outsider, stranded in traditional London, went on to become one of the most renowned intellectuals of the modern age. Some of his friends say that Isaiah

Berlin's real biography has yet to be written. He himself claimed that this story has many different versions, all true.

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