



Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 24

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Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 24

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Selected topics

Aline, her relatives, and Judaism

Aline's brother, Philippe de Gunzbourg

Aline's father, Pierre de Gunzbourg

Aline's upbringing and sense of mixed French identity

The Fould-Springers

Loss of friends after marriage: Mary Fisher/Bennett

IB's lack of rapport with the French

The Mitfords; Nancy's fun name mercilessly and insult to IB

The offer of a knighthood: Harold Macmillan

Lunch with Lady Cholmondeley

Advice on the knighthood from friends

Renée Hampshire and Stuart's knighthood

Marie Berlin and IB's knighthood

IB offered peerage by Thatcher, and declines

The Order of Merit: IB escapes abroad

Aline's children

IB's relations with other children: 'up to the age of about eight or nine they're a lot like animals, automata'

IB as a godfather

IB and the Brendel children

IB's family background

Yishayahu Berlin and Chayetta Schneerson

The first three Rebbes of the Lubavitch dynasty

IB's grandmother Fruma
IB's grandfather Dov Ber Zuckerman/Berlin
Yishayahu's timber business
Andreapol'
General Zvegintsov
IB's paternal grandmother, Shifra Fradkin
Shifra's father, the Lubliner Rav
The Rogatchover
Yehudi Menuhin
Why the Lubavitcher didn't try to exploit IB's Hasidic lineage
The 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe: the Messiah?
IB's life lacks Damascene intellectual conversions

Side A

GC Now, when you met Aline, or actually when you married her and started living together and so on, or when you knew her more intimately?

IB Which?

GC Aline.

IB Which? When I knew her, or when I married her? The two are not the same.

GC I know. But the question can cover. What was her relations – her attitude to Judaism?

IB Oh ...

GC To religion? Zionism? Israel?

IB Yes, exactly. When I first came to know her, which was in

Oxford roughly in 1946, she knew very little about the Jewish religion. She knew there was Yom Kippur. She certainly had breakfast on the day of Yom Kippur, and then went to synagogue, and was very shocked when she discovered she ought to have fasted. There was no Seder. She knew 'Shema Yisrael'.¹ She knew they were Jews – they were very clearly Jews, there was absolutely no question about the identification of the family. Some relations were, I think – not hers so much, but her husbands', were baptised. Her husband's father was certainly baptised. Strauss. So were his daughters. But her husband was not – the one she married. He was not [baptised]. He was a Jew and remained one.

GC He remained a Jew?

IB Her husband? Yes.

GC And the children?

IB Also. No question. There was no baptism of any kind in the immediate whatnot, but they lived in a world where people sometimes were and sometimes weren't, it was a kind – in that sense no particular horror was felt towards baptism. It was a mixed world of partly Jews, partly not. But they were certainly Jews. The mother was always described by Aline's brother as a typical *Israélite française*, which is exactly what she was. She was very much part of the Jewish proper establishment in France, of old Jewish family.

GC That would go to synagogue in Rosh Hashanah?

IB Not Rosh Hashanah, no. Yom Kippur at most. At rue Copernic, which I think must be the Reform one. No, perhaps not.

¹ 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), a scriptural reading which plays a key role in Jewish liturgy.

GC It's not the Reform, but it's the XVIe arrondissement.²

IB XVIe arrondissement, certainly. I know, but it's perhaps orthodox officially. One of her mother's sisters became rather religious. She just died at the age of ninety-eight. She used to go to New York during and after the war. She had some rabbi who was a friend – I think he was at a Reform synagogue in America – and she went quite regularly. And that was regarded as slightly surprising, perhaps slightly ridiculous, but perfectly tolerated and understood. So, there was no problem in that sense. What she did tell me, Aline, then was that when the anti-Jewish stuff began under Vichy, she was always meeting – not always, but used to meet people who said, 'Of course, it's wasn't against people like *you*; if everyone was like you – but, you must understand, the Jews were a little too prominent.' This and that. And then she was always very stern and insulting in return, and wouldn't speak to people like that. Nor after the war, when she met them. If they behaved badly then and expelled Jews from the Morfontaine Golf Club, she cut them out of her life. And felt very Jewish, and has done ever since. I'm too Jewish for her. Certainly.

GC Still?

IB Yes. [?] She is very concerned about Israel. Deeply. Every morning she's upset by what happens. She's not left indifferent. Far from it. And she likes Israelis and so on. But properly speaking she is absolutely a hundred per cent Jewish, in that sense. No question. But, the fact that her first and third sons married non-Jewesses didn't matter to her very much. She didn't mind. She thought that was all right.

² The oldest Reform synagogue in France, showpiece of the Union Libérale Israélite de France. But French Reform and English Reform differ.

GC Now the relations toward Israel ...?

IB She was perfectly tolerant. What she knows about the Jews she has largely learnt from me. Inevitably. I was such a Jew that the infection [?] took place, but it's sometimes a bit too much for her. Still, yes. We were too much for anybody – I really go too far. And I am much more Jewish than I was in the 1930s. Much more.

GC You are much more?

IB Far more.

GC I can see from the ...

IB But I didn't know any Jews in the 1930s very much. I was a Zionist. I used to talk, let us say once or twice a year, to the Zionist Society in Oxford, and made Zionist propaganda. But I had very few Jewish friends – hardly any – Herbert Hart was about the only one.

GC Yes, and he's Jewish but he's ...

IB But he's pretty marginal ...

GC Exactly.

IB Even more so³ now than he used to be.

GC He's more Jewish now than he was.

³ More marginal or more Jewish? What follows suggests the latter, but what precedes, the former.

IB Of course. Yes. But still he was not in favour of the Jewish state or anything like that. Far from it.

GC And the attitude towards Zionism and Israel was also your impact on Aline?

IB Totally.

GC Totally?

IB Zionism – well, I'll tell you. Her brother, who is a rather curious, slightly eccentric figure, had a kind of strong pro-Jewish period.

GC Philippe?

IB Philippe. I think before the war, and was taken up by a man called, I think, Gamzu.

GC Ah, yes. An art critic who lived in Paris.

IB [?] Did a lot of Jewish stuff. It was tremendous.

GC He came from Palestine.

IB I don't know if it's the same one. It must be the same. Anyway, he met him and was influenced by him, and he worked for the Jews. Then, in 1940, and so on. And he was among the people {s} deceived by the fact that special arrangements were made [?] the Jews in Vichy; thought they were all persuaded that this was all right, it was for their good and so on.

GC [?].

IB In 1939, when he ceased to be in the army. Then, of course, he

went to the Resistance. Then, after the war, he was tremendous: I think he went to Palestine, once – became very anti-Zionist.

GC Anti-Zionist? After his visit?

IB Whether after or not – he was a French Jew. But he went about from one thing to another, he was somebody who changed his views from time to time. He was passionate, rather eccentric, honourable, but went from one thing to another. That had no influence on Aline whatever. And his children are not really – well, one daughter I think did busy herself with Jewish things. His first [sc. second] wife, Antoinette, is again *Israélite française*. Absolutely. Doesn't know much about it, but feels totally Jewish.

GC Now you met in Aline's family – the father you met only once.

IB That's right.

GC The mother more frequently.

IB Yes.

GC She was very shy.

IB Yes.

GC You met Philippe. Does Aline have other brothers and sisters?

IB No. They are dead. There were two more. One died when he was on military service, before the war, and the other fell off a horse – all this before the war, before I knew Aline.

GC So Zionism, Israel, Judaism was not a topic of conversation between you and them?

IB Oh no, not at all. Well, with Philippe a bit. But of course Philippe was very unfriendly to me when I first married Aline because he thought I was a typical Jewish intellectual. That he hated.

GC He hated Jewish intellectuals?

IB Abs[olutely]. Left-wing Jewish intellectuals, taboo. Then he met me, found I was not all that left-wing, so we made great friends. I was quite different from what he anticipated. He thought I was a clever, left-wing, rather, I don't know – slightly hysterical, typical intellectual. Turned out I was all right.

GC Wasn't he a type of man who – he was quite a figure in the Resistance?

IB Oh, absolutely.

GC I found his name as the head of the ...

IB Certainly. Yes. He was very brave.

GC Was he a type of man that liked to speak about this period?

IB Yes. Certainly. He was badly treated by the French Resistance because he belonged to the English wing of the French Resistance. He took orders from England, from SOE, and therefore was disapproved of by all the anti-English bits of the French Resistance. There were, as you know, conflicts between them, and he was regarded as a saviour of the English. But – he got an MBE, I think, from the English – some decoration he got, but from the English. Something in France too. But he was very courageous. He was very like a Russian landowner of the nineteenth century, who

read intellectual books, didn't quite know what to do with himself – what's called a 'superfluous person' of a noble kind, described by Turgenev.

GC I met him once [?].

IB Yes. Oh, rightly. He was very sympathetic. He was a nice man and eccentric.

GC And prone to changing ...

IB From – yes. But honourable, spontaneous, and I think quite intelligent, though the late Mr Halphen thought he was not. And he was married to a – his first wife was a French prostitute,⁴ which he did entirely in order to annoy the family, I think. Very typically. And he wrote her, I think, even a short story about his terrible family. But then the second wife was Antoinette [Kahn], who was a very jolly little [?], about – who was sweet and charming and absolutely innocent. And the third wife was a Gramont, the daughter of the marquis de Gramont, whom he met during the Resistance, who was a Catholic. She survived him. They had a romantic affair during the Resistance and then he got rid of his Jewish wife and married her. He was very excited by all her – the dukes and marquises, all of whom were her cousins; a kind of Proustian excitement. They didn't get on too well. But still they stayed married. She used to complain about him to me, saying, 'These Ginzburgs are impossible.' Aline used to be offended when that was said.

GC But Aline liked him?

IB Very very much indeed.

⁴ Gaby Berteau (1906–58).

GC I saw – I could see [?] in her eyes [?] she liked him.

IB Very much indeed. They were devoted to each other; they loved each other. No doubt about it. When he died it was a crushing blow. She knew he was ill. She knew all that, but still, when he died she was very, very upset. Very! He was not too nice to his mother because he thought she was too bourgeois for him, but loved his father and loved his grandfather, his mother's father, who was a jolly, rich French Jewish industrialist. But he was exactly like the kind of Frenchmen of his time, when he described to me going travelling with his grandfather, staying in some country hotel with a lot of commercial travellers, and his father went in and saw the billiard room, and immediately took part in the game in a very enthusiastic way. He thought that was marvellous. That's how people should behave. The grandfather did not want to leave France. Everything he wanted could be obtained in France. He came to England once – absolutely hated it. He said, 'One doesn't speak ...' – 'On ne parle pas Français.' No good at all. Can't visit a country like that. But my father-in-law was a megalomaniac. He came to England once a month, ostensibly on some business, but he adored it. He bought his cigars here. He bought his suits. He adored the English.

GC Your father and your father-in-law.

IB Both.

GC Fantastic.

IB They were not dissimilar, as human beings. My father-in-law was [from] a better family than my father, but their tastes were not very different, except that my father-in-law was much more Russian. When the 1914 war started, he put his male children into

little Russian military uniforms – joke children’s uniforms. And he remained a tsarist citizen to the end, then Nansen passport – would not become French.

GC Your father-in-law?

IB No. Never became a French citizen. Then he became American, during the war. He remained a Nansen passport. He was a White Russian.

GC [*surprised*] Aline’s father?

IB Yup. Loyal to Russia. His friends came from – various colonels in Russia and Provisional Government liberals.

GC That I can see, but to the extent of not obtaining ...

IB No. I’m telling you. Very extraordinary.

GC And his brothers?

IB I don’t know about them. One brother was in Holland and the other brothers – I can’t remember – they also lived in Paris. One of them was in Shanghai. I have no idea about that. One brother supported Diaghilev from the Russian ballet.

GC A brother of Aline’s?

IB No.

GC An uncle of Aline’s.

IB Of Pierre, yes – Pierre, as he was called. And he was killed during the war in the Caucasus, as he was in the Russian army,

somewhere.

GC [*surprised*] In the First War?

IB Yes. They were officers in the Russian army because they were barons. Therefore they could become, and one or two did become, officers, I think. They were very conformist, the Ginzburgs. They believed that if the Tsar knew, there wouldn't be these pogroms. Of course there was anti-Semitism, and there were pogroms, but there were a lot of quite decent Russians round them. My father-in-law thought that Zionism was rather the way in which you and I think of Fascism. Hated it. Thought it was a monstrous thing, lunatic nationalism of the most mad and terrible kind.

GC But did he become French?

IB No.

GC That's what I had a feeling ...

IB No. He was a Russian who had lived in France for many years. A Russian baron who had lived in France for many years, was married to a French woman and had French children, but himself remained some kind of semi- – an exiled baron.

GC Did he create any tension between his children ...?

IB He preferred England to France. He never felt – he talked French perfectly, as you can imagine, to his wife and everybody, to his children – but never totally liked France.

GC Did it create any tension between him and Aline?

IB None. He was very quiet, very gentle, very sweet. They were all

devoted to him. But they did feel that he was a little too pale a character. Hardly spoke – couldn't speak to his neighbour at dinner if he didn't know what to say. Silent and shy. But everybody knew he was a tremendous gentleman, that was obvious.

GC Aline feels French?

IB Yes, to a large degree. Mixed French. She doesn't know what she is.

GC She is bilingual totally?

IB Yes. She was born in England, curiously enough, in 1915, because the family left Paris because of the bombs in the First World War. Imagine. [GC For several years?] No, she was taken back during the war. She is bilingual, yes: does not feel English.

GC But the English of somebody who acquires it at a young age. Did she go to an English school?

IB No, but she was taught. She knew English somehow. She must have had English teachers. She spoke English freely as a young woman.

GC [?]

IB [?]

GC But nowadays, does she mind – let's say reading literature, does the French literature [IB Mean more?] mean more?

IB Certainly, without a doubt. She feels there is this Russian Jewish background which makes her different. She doesn't feel a Frenchwoman. But she feels closer, more familiar, with French

customs, French food, French everything.

GC If you were not a professor in Oxford ...

IB Quite.

GC ... and if you had not felt alien in a way to the French, she would have preferred to live there?

IB Maybe. Well, of course, her second husband did go back to Paris after he left her – after they were separated. He lived in France, after that in French Switzerland.

GC Even when she met you, still most of her friends were in France?

IB Of course. She felt quite happy in England, but it wasn't her country. She was a very well received, comfortable, foreigner. Much liked, and so on. In fact she played golf, which is a very English characteristic. She's quite all right.

GC Did she keep intimate friendship with French friends?

IB Yes. Relations more than friends. Not friends very much. I don't think her family ever knew very many non-Jews. There were non-Jewish Frenchmen, but on the whole they were just part of the Jewish upper class, and such Frenchmen as associated with them, who existed. But she still likes going to dinner at the French embassy. [GC In the French embassy] Yes. And they look on her as a compatriot.⁵

GC Now, when you came to – as I said, when you met and became

⁵ Judy Fiedgott's transcription ends.

closer and closer friends, and then, when you married ...

IB What I want to say is that on the telephone she talks as much French as English, even now.

GC Even now.

IB Someone like Liliane de Rothschild, who is her best friend. She was brought up with the Fould-Springer, or Fuld-Springer [*French pronunciation*], family. These were Viennese Jews who had become completely Gallicised. One married a Rothschild, one married Alan Pryce-Jones, one married the Spanish ambassador in Norway, whose name was – whose grandfather certainly was a Jew from Czechoslovakia – called Propper, Propper [*French pronunciation*], Propper y Callejón, he was a Spanish Catholic.⁶

GC So that's the family who Pryce-Jones's wife is from? England.

IB She was the sister of Elie de Rothschild's wife. These are girls who were brought up with her in the same house, in Paris.

GC In Paris.

IB And they were the most intimate friends.

GC Ah, so the relations with Pryce-Jones are not with you ...

IB No. I'm not a good friend of his particularly.

⁶⁶ Eduardo Propper de Callejón (1895–1972), Spanish diplomat who helped thousands of Jews escape from occupied France during the Second World War, and his wife Hélène Fould-Springer (1907–97).

GC I see, so the mother of David⁷ is actually the friend of Aline.

IB Who [Thérèse] is now dead.

GC She is dead, yes. I didn't know.

IB Yes, absolutely. [GC I didn't know.] Entirely that way.

GC I thought that it was ...

IB Well, he knew the Rothschilds too, but the main thing is that he married into this set of French Jews and therefore became circulated among them.

GC I was sure that [?].

IB Nothing to do with me.

GC Now, generally speaking, when it comes to judgement of people ...

IB Yes.

GC Do you have – do you agree more with your attitudes and judgements [?] you and Aline, when you first met and you built your life together, the natural problem arises, you have friends, she has friends, you meet people ...

IB I know what you mean. Yes. On the whole. I lost some friends, she lost some friends. It always happens in marriage. Broadly our opinions coincided, yes.

⁷ Thérèse Carmen ('Poppy') Pryce-Jones (1914–53) née Fould-Springer, sister of Liliane, and close friend of Aline, who as a child had lived in the same apartment building in Paris on the avenue d'Iéna, near the Arc de Triomphe.

GC Coincided.

IB Oh, yes.

GC To this day you ...

IB To this day she doesn't like people I don't like at all, and I don't like people she doesn't like. Occasionally there are differences, but they are not acute. There's nobody whom I like whom I can't bring to see her, and there's nobody she likes who she has to avoid because I can't stand them.

GC And is there any – somebody among your friends that you were sorry or are still sorry that you lost because of her?

IB Yes, not very many. But there are a few, yes.

GC And the other way around?

IB I've not lost them completely, but I don't see them.

GC You see them less.

IB Yes.

GC For example?

IB Well, I'll tell you, the daughter of Mr Fisher, the Warden of New College, she's called Mary Fisher, an intimate friend of mine in the 1930s. She married a civil servant from the Colonial Office, who is plainly anti-Israeli, and so – they live in Oxford; she became the head of St Hilda's College, for years. She's called Mrs – what is her name? I've forgotten her husband's name [John Sloman Bennett].

Anyway. And she was a great friend. I didn't see her very much. Partly because she married a man I didn't like, so that also produced an alienation. Who else?

GC I met her in 1961. She lived in Sussex or Surrey.

IB Certainly.

GC And Elizabeth Monroe gave me a ride somewhere.

IB Surrey [Thursley].

GC And they were friends.

IB Surrey. Yes, they were. No doubt.

GC [?] Close friends.

IB Close friends, I didn't know.

GC Yes, they were.

IB They were. Via the Colonial Office?

GC No.

IB She was in the Colonial Office during the war, Mary Fisher. She worked ...

GC I thought that they would study together ...

IB Not at all. No.

GC So this is a kind of friendship that somehow dissolves.

IB Yes. If I see her now, we are on very good terms, but ...

GC Yes.

IB Well, there was – who else did I know in my youth who were friends? One's rather forgotten, myself. I didn't see that much of who?

GC So it means that it was not that ...

IB No, there wasn't a break.

GC Among Aline's friends?

IB No.

GC Is she sorry to have lost some friends?

IB No. I don't think so. She is rather sorry that I can't bear to go to France, because ...

GC That I discovered ... I don't know why you ...

IB It's true. It's a great sorrow to her, and my only reason is that I cannot understand a word they say.

GC Yes.

IB My French is too bad.

GC You always repeat it.

IB What?

GC You always tell me.

IB It's true. Nobody believes it, but it is true. I simply can't understand them when they talk. That creates impossibility of association.

GC But the new generation now speak English better.

IB But Aline doesn't like speaking English to the French, any more than I like speaking English to Russians.

GC I can see.

IB There are certain people to whom I talk Russian, there are certain people she speaks French to. That creates certain differences, but it's a joke. Not very serious, but still. I don't often go to Paris. No one I can talk to, nobody for me to speak to.

GC I observed it, and ...

IB It's true. I mean, of course, when they come to stay with us, they talk English.

GC Yes.

IB Her French friends. All is well.

GC And you never established a close relationship with a French scholar ...?

IB Never. I never could.

GC Did anybody try to get close to you [IB Frenchmen?]

among the Frenchmen?

IB No. There were very few Frenchmen in England in my time. Germans yes, French not.

GC Because of the Rhodes Scholarships starting.

IB Well, partly that. Partly because the natural ...

GC The French never would send their people abroad?

IB Well, first of all. They sent them to Germany, yes. But not to England.

GC Raymond Aron, Sartre ...

IB Yes. And sociology and that kind of thing. And the English went to Paris in the 1880s, 1890s [?] because the historians were there. In p[articula[r]? Ernest?] Renan – all that sort of thing. But there's a natural affinity between the English and the Germans, and there's no natural affinity between the English and the French. And Bloomsbury was Francophile, and that's exceptional. The English don't like the French, and the French don't like the English. Never have.

GC And types like Nancy Mitford, for example ...

IB Yes, she was exceptional, she went.

GC Did Aline know her?

IB No. I did, and didn't like her at all. People liked her, but I thought all of it was horrible, awful. The entire family was awful. I met Tom Mitford, her brother, before the war, thought he was

pretty awful. And there was Unity and there was Diana, whom I didn't know. And there was Nancy whom I met but didn't think nice. She once insulted me behind my back, probably didn't help. She said to somebody, Roy Harrod, that I was like a foreigner who learnt to speak like Maurice Bowra, but didn't quite know what the words meant.

GC Fantastic.

IB That I didn't much – I wasn't very pleased by that. [?] she was very nice to me. When we met, she always tried to make friends. No good. I thought she wasn't a nice person. Just not. Nor – well, there's the Duchess of Devonshire, whom I meet from time to time, but don't particularly like, who is her sister.

GC Fantastic.

IB Jessica I get on with quite well. She came to see – I don't know her – she came to see me about Philip Toynbee. I thought she was the most human.

GC One can see it on the television.

IB She was the most human. She is a bit crazy, but the most human.

GC One book I liked, *The Pursuit of Love*.

IB Oh, she's a very good writer, Nancy. And she of course was a Labour Party – married a very – her first husband was a straight socialist. He was called Rodd. Nancy Rodd, she was. You see. And then she fell in love with Mr Palewski.

GC Gaston Palewski.

IB Extraordinary. He was a pock-marked, ugly little man, described in heroic – in idealised terms in her books. He's quite jolly, quite nice, quite amiable, talkative. Of Polish Jewish origin, I would think.

GC Polish Jew?

IB [?] ultimately, yes.

GC What exactly did she say behind your back that you didn't like? The phrase was?

IB [?]. Said, 'Isaiah Berlin seems to be like somebody who's learnt to talk English like Maurice Bowra, but doesn't quite know what – doesn't quite understand what the words mean.' Not [?], not plausible. I talked – I probably did talk like that.

GC When did she say this?

IB Oh, I don't know.

GC In the 1930s?

IB Yes. Before the war. Well before the war. She denied she'd said it. Absolutely.

GC [*laughs*]

IB Passionately. Not to me, but to other people. She knew that I had repeated the story. She said, 'I never could have said that. Absolutely untrue.' I'll bet it is, but anyway, I'm telling you, that's what slightly prejudiced me in the first place.

GC [*laughs*]. Now, why did you decide to buy the house in Paraggi?

IB I can tell you.

GC Why near the sea or not the mountains?

IB Wait. I can explain all that. We were in Moscow in 1956. It was virtually – almost a honeymoon. We were married in February. We went to Sicily in the spring, and that's where I was offered my knighthood, which was a cause of great distress to me, and then – and that produced almost an – I was made ill by it.

GC What do you mean, created great distress?

IB I didn't want it. You don't know that story?

GC No.

IB I knew Macmillan.

GC That you never told me.

IB All right, I will. I knew Macmillan, because I met him in All Souls. He was a friend of the Warden of All Souls, Sumner. They were together at Balliol. So one night he dined there. I knew who he was, of course. But we spent – I sat next to him at dinner, and we got on very well. After dinner he talked to me again, and he had read my telegrams, which he thought very well of, and he kept telling me how wonderful they were. And I remember a marvellous statement he made: 'Of course you know Roger Makins,' he said. 'A great friend of mine,' he said. 'He's just as clever as Laski and he's on our side – and he's a Christian, and he's on our side.' I'll never forget that remark. But I always got on very well with Macmillan. I used to see him in after years. Macmillan was no more pro-Jewish than any other member of the upper classes. Pro-Israel,

yes, and he didn't mind Jews, but he thought of Jews as Jews. He didn't think they were English. Anyway, then I must have met him once or twice again, I don't know – I'll tell you. I met him for example at lunch with Lord Cholmondeley. Lady Cholmondeley is a Sassoon.⁸

GC Ah yes.

IB She's half Rothschild, half Sassoon. She's still alive. She must be ninety-four, I think. She's a famous society lady. She was Philip Sassoon's sister. I don't know, I met her somewhere, Aline and I knew her. She invited the Rothschilds, somehow. Anyhow, we met. I still know her. She has this marvellous country house. And we went to lunch with her, and there was Macmillan. And he always quite enjoyed talking to me. I still remember that he asked me who he ought to make Regius Professor of History. This is just when Trevor-Roper was ultimately appointed. And I said to him I thought I oughtn't give him advice about that, and that later infuriated Taylor. I said, 'Well, you ought, if you can, you ought to find a black homosexual lesbian Negress. That would be the most suitable appointment for the moment.' That kind of a joke. Black lesbian Negress. Black Communist, I'm sorry. Black Communist lesbian Negress. That would be the most suitable appointment. So I got off on that, which was rather like an anti-Semitic remark. I shouldn't have said it. The same qualities as anti-Semitism. But I see why people make such jokes. And he was quite jolly about that. Then suddenly, to my great surprise, I received a letter, offering me a knighthood. And I didn't want it, partly because I thought my colleagues wouldn't like it. They'd be jealous, they'd be displeased. I didn't do anything to deserve it. I hadn't done anything lately. I hadn't written anything, I hadn't done anything. It was just a pure

⁸ The story is also told in No. 18. Lady Cholmondeley was indeed ninety-four at the time, dying in 1989.

tip, present, thrown to me by Macmillan, just because he liked me. Just a – exactly like a tip given to some waiter, I felt, or a present suddenly given to someone one quite likes. So I wondered whether to accept it, and I – I’m always very uncertain about such things. I consulted people, as I always do. David Cecil said, ‘Oh, you must. It’s wrong not to. Why not? Perfectly all right. Enjoy it.’

GC Who else did you consult?

IB Aline; her mother, who was staying here. Aline said she didn’t mind if I took it or not. All one to her. Absolutely indifferent. Complete indifference. Didn’t care. Her mother said, ‘I can see from what you are saying that you won’t accept it.’ That was how I talked. Then – it was after I came back from Sicily. It’s exactly – it’s late April, I would think, of that year. It was to do with the, I suppose, the birthday honours, which are in June. Then – wait a minute, who else did I ask? I asked Sparrow, the Warden of All Souls, who didn’t know – he was against it. Didn’t suit me. ‘Somehow not quite right for you. Doesn’t fit.’ All right. Then I consulted – who else? I couldn’t consult many people, because I didn’t want them to know. I didn’t want to say, ‘It was offered to me; I refused.’ Then I didn’t know what to do, so ...

GC Did you ask Herbert? Did you ask Stuart?

IB No. I knew that they would be against – not the sort of thing they want anyway. They would say ‘Well, do it if you like.’ But they wouldn’t [?]. Herbert refused it, you see – his knighthood. Stuart accepted his, but wasn’t very happy to. That was done by me. I did it to embarrass him [*GC laughs*], but I succeeded. Absolutely. Purely malicious act. I got it for Stephen Spender, who adores it, and I got it for Stuart, who hates it.

GC But he didn’t refuse.

IB His wife told him it was very bad manners to refuse. His wife made him do it – first wife, Renée.

GC [?].

IB Yes.

GC That radical woman?

IB She was very snobbish.

GC With – a contradiction ...

IB I'm telling you. Of course. Fantastic. She was rather pro-Communist, left-wing, but she regarded herself as being born of a very good family, and having very good manners. Stuart was always saying how aristocratic she was, which was not entirely true.

GC When Stuart accepted it she was still alive?

IB Oh yes.

GC And she was in favour of it?

IB Lady Hampshire. I'm telling you. He might have refused. She said 'You obviously can't. Very bad manners. Dreadful thing to refuse. Terribly snobbish and awful to refuse.'

GC Not unlike [?].

IB No, not at all. Oh, no. She always talked about people's manners. Always talked about people having good and bad manners. She may have been pro-proletarian, but she was very

anti-middle-class. She regarded herself as well born. Her father was a kind of Irish adventurer; on her mother's side she was I think related to some Lord somewhere. Stuart used to explain very carefully that she was of real aristocracy. A little dowdy, living in the country, not smooth, shiny London society. That was the vulgar part of the aristocracy. The real aristocracy were quiet people living in country houses, and that's the real world she belonged to. It wasn't true, but he believed it. [?]

GC And [?] it was quite natural ...

IB Oh, absolutely. Couldn't think why not. Well, then I went to London, and I saw my mother. And I said to my mother – this is a true story nobody quite believes – I said to my mother, 'They've offered me a knighthood.' And she said – she was very pleased – and I said, 'I'm going to refuse it.' [GC You ...] I said to her, yes. 'I can't bear it.' She looked very sad, and said, 'Well, you must do what you think right. You must accept what you want. I have nothing to say [?]: not going to give you advice.' But I could see that if I accepted it, it would give her pleasure every hour of every day of her life. That was obvious. And it did. She was a Russian Jewess who knew what 'Sir' meant. OM, she had no idea what that was. Not the faintest idea. She was told afterwards. People were saying, 'You know, it's quite important.' But that surprised her, it meant nothing at all. Never heard of the Order of Merit. 'Sir', yes, certainly: something in her life.

GC And that ...

IB [?] That did it. I thought it was too selfish.

GC I see.

IB Too selfish. Nobody quite believes it, but it's the true reason.

GC I do believe it.

IB Of course you do. A Jewish mother living alone, a widow. Unhappy on the whole, and lonely. But a thought – and all her thoughts were concentrated on me, inevitably. And the thought of my being a knight gave her the most enormous pleasure. And people congratulated her, told her how wonderful it was, and this was a source of *nachas*, of an enormous kind.

GC I can understand it.

IB What is the Hebrew word, is it *nachas*? Or *nachat*?

GC *Nachat ruach*.⁹

IB *Nachat ruach*. But the Yiddish is *nachas*?

GC *Nachas* [?].

IB The Yiddish is *nachas*. *Nachat ruach*. It gave her *nachat ruach* of a major kind. I thought well, I didn't mind all that much, it didn't come ... – but I thought: I'll tell you what I thought of the knighthood. I thought it was like a paper hat which people wear at Christmas. It's not wrong, but it's ridiculous. I was in favour of titles in general, for people. I'm in favour of honours, as such, but not for me. It embarrasses me still. I can't say Sir Isaiah with any comfort.

GC But in 1956 when you told [?].

⁹ *Nachat/nachas ruach* is Hebrew for 'comfort', 'solace'; Yiddish *nachas ruach* is often pride in one's children's accomplishments.

IB There weren't that many knights, either: 1956 is comparatively – the number of dons who received knighthoods wasn't that great. And there were no peers among the dons. Peerages, knighthoods – but I have to tell you that when I was offered a peerage, I refused it. That's not known.

GC When and why?

IB By Mrs Thatcher.

GC Nobody knows.

IB No, nobody knows that. I tell you because – for the sake of this diary. But don't tell anyone.

GC I won't tell anyone.

IB The only person I told was Teddy, for some reason, in Israel.

GC I hope he did not gossip it.

IB No. Oh no, he doesn't, no.

GC By the way, when you say nobody knows, that doesn't [?] [Aline] [?] my part.

IB Oh, of course, that's quite right.

GC I think that Aline told Jenifer, but I'm not ...

IB Maybe, yes. And I'll tell – I shall tell Ignatieff. And I've told you about him.

GC Yes, all right.

IB And that's all. But wait, I'll tell you. No, he doesn't ask me questions like that. Anyhow, I refused the peerage. When did she become Prime Minister? How many years ago? Eight?

GC Nine years already.

IB Nine years ago. Therefore 1979. Yes. Well, in her third month, second or third month of her Prime Ministership, she wrote me a letter, offering me a peerage. I was sitting in the library upstairs, and Pat opened the letter, she does all my letters, and said, 'Oh, you've been offered a peerage.' I said, 'I won't accept it. No question of it.' Pat looked rather surprised. I said, 'I don't have to think, and I don't have to ask Aline, and I don't have to ask anybody. Out of question,' I said: 'Certainly not.' Why not? Well, the reasons are not too good. Two reasons, really. One was: the company, I thought, was [*laughs*] a little bit too vulgar. Wilson had given all these peerages to all these Jews: Lord Weidenfeld, Lord Kagan. It was quite recent after all. Just four months ago.¹⁰ I was offered it, I'm sure, because politically I was OK. I was respectable, I was a Jew, and I wasn't like them. It was a kind of reaction against the Wilson peers. She needed somebody. My peerage went to Beloff in the end, so to speak. Somebody of the right kind. One of those right [?] who she still knows – anti-Communist – I was in order, from her point of view. And I was thoroughly reputable, from her point of view. And this would show that she was in favour of – the right kind of Jews, yes. The wrong kind of Jews, not. I'm sure. Consciously or not, this is the kind of reasoning, I think. She doesn't give it to many. Jews aren't principal recipients of this, unless she needs them, politically, which is another matter. So, the second – that's one reason. The second reason was, I

¹⁰ Both Weidenfeld and Kagan were ennobled in 1976, the year in which Wilson's premiership ended.

thought it would drive me mad. Because every time Palestine, Israel came up in the House of Lords, I would always feel I must do something. I would have to make a speech, I must say something. People would start writing to me, saying, 'You must speak. There's a debate coming, and a lot of nasty things will be said. You really must. You have some influence over these people,' they would say. That would give me sleepless nights. And the last thing I wanted was to speak in public, about anything, because I really feel – I absolutely hate doing it. That was a reason all right. Actually, there are so many Jewish peers now, but still, I was the most Zionist at that period. Of anybody.

GC And there weren't so many then.

IB There weren't, before Sieff got his peerage, for anybody. Under Wilson I think Weidenfeld was about the only one. But anyway, I [?], I just felt: another Jewish peer. It was vulgarity, somehow. It had become vulgarised by the people who got it. It's a purely snobbish reaction. Part of it was snobbish, and the other was the fact that I didn't want to have to burn with guilt every time I didn't do anything. Jewish peers obviously don't take it to heart as much as I would. When there *is* a debate, not many of them speak. But I was very glad not to; even today, I'm very happy not to be. Lord Berlin would not have suited me at all.

GC Who suggested it to her?

IB No idea. I don't know who suggested – Macmillan thought of it for himself. In her case, she hardly knew me. 'What a good Jew!' She said, 'I'd like to give it to a Jew', probably.

GC What reason did you give her?

IB I said that I wasn't very interested in politics, that I would feel,

if I was in the House of Lords, that I ought to be; I would feel that I wasn't pulling my weight, that there was no point just accepting an honour for honour's sake. And she wrote me a long letter [?] – she was terribly sorry, she thought I would be a very valuable addition to the House of Lords, that she would – people would be very interested in what I had to say, would I reconsider it? So I wrote back and said no, I'd rather not.

GC And the OM came later?

IB Yes.

GC But shortly.

IB The OM – wait; no, I [?]. No. Wait a bit, I can tell you. The OM came earlier.¹¹ Yes. I was already OM. That was enough. Anyhow, the number of Jewish OMs was – Zuckerman was already a peer, probably. I was about the only one.

GC Who suggested you for the OM?

IB I'm sure – I don't know, but I'm absolutely convinced it was Wheeler-Bennett, who moved in Palace circles. He was a historiographer, he was about the Palace, he was very [?] with royalty. He liked them, they liked him. He was a natural courtier, and I'm sure he did it. When I accused him of it, he didn't deny it. Didn't say yes, but I'm sure that's how it [?]. Nobody would have thought of it. Jenifer thought it was very surprising.

GC That you got the OM?

IB Yes.

¹¹ 1971.

GC Why?

IB Probably she didn't think I deserved it.

GC No!

IB She said, 'Have you been seeing royalty lately?', she said to me, in her typical way.

GC No. She would think about peerage, but not about royalty.

IB Oh, certainly. Oh, she thought it was all right, but no – well, I myself – the OM I also accepted with considerable difficulty for the following reasons. My conception of the OM didn't suit me. I thought it only went to real geniuses. For example, Henry Moore, Bertrand Russell – these might be considered for an OM.

GC Frederick Ashton.

IB No, he was – he got it well after me.

GC Ah.

IB Wait a moment. No, at that time. And in the past. It was offered to Kipling, who I don't think accepted it. That I understand. It was offered to Shaw, who said, 'Nothing less than a dukedom.' [*laughs*] Wait a moment, who else do I think should have had it? The philosopher called G. E. Moore, who certainly – in which I took some part. He deserved it. Herbert Samuel not quite, but I understood it. I thought those were the kind of people who really should have it. Not people like me. I didn't see myself as an equal to any of these people.

Side B

IB [...] Veronica Wedgwood and Solly Zuckermann had it. I thought I was as good as them, you see. I didn't mind quite so much. But I knew the person who wanted it most in my environment was Maurice Bowra, who I think by that time – I don't know if he was still Warden of Wadham or not, but he terribly wanted it, and I knew that he would be indignant if I got it. Jealousy, envy. So I left Oxford for three days, and went to Italy, in order not to have telephone calls, in order not to answer letters. But I must say not many people rang up over it, not so terribly as I feared. People did write, of course, and people telephoned, but not – I didn't want journalists to telephone, and I wrote a letter to Maurice Bowra and apologised for accepting it. 'Of course, you deserve it far more than I do. Everyone knows that, but ...'. And he was what's called 'quite nice about it' and said 'OM is the rich man's CH.' Typical joke.

GC And did you feel the same for somebody else that might be jealous and [?].

IB Nobody, no. The only other person who wanted it was Freddie Ayer, who was quite open about it. And Victor Rothschild, who I'm sure would like it. I know people want it, but I don't think I've ever, so many years after – I don't think I cut them out. And at that time I was ten years younger, and Maurice Bowra, he longed for honours, longed for them. He did become a Companion of Honour, but that was done for him by – oh, a lot of people know it. Mainly by the Secretary to the Cabinet of that period. By – what was his name? William Armstrong, who had been at Wadham.¹² Sir William, not the present, not Robert, William: William Armstrong.

¹² He was an undergraduate at Exeter College, not Wadham.

GC I know. Armstrong.

IB William Armstrong.

GC I thought it was [?].

IB They both were. One was – no, that’s not right. He was the head of the Civil Service.¹³ One was the head of the Civil Service, and the other was Cabinet Secretary. Now it’s amalgamated. It wasn’t then. William Armstrong was a pupil of his, and got him a knighthood and the CH. But I was embarrassed by that too, and I had to write to the Queen’s Secretary, saying that I thought I would not be in England when it was announced.

GC Then you, when you, the ceremony took place, or ...?

IB No. I had to go and visit the Queen for the ceremony.

GC So what embarrassed you?

IB When I accepted it, he rang – I’ll tell you exactly what happened, and Aline will confirm it to you. He telephoned to me to – no, he wrote to me to Wolfson College and said the Queen wished to give me the OM. I telephoned to Aline and said, ‘Disaster has happened.’ She said, ‘What do you mean, disaster? Somebody died?’ I said ‘No.’ ‘Oh dear, what has happened? You’ve been offered another honour,’ she said. I said, ‘Yes, exactly. I’m coming home at once.’ That’s exactly what happened. She’ll confirm it to you. So I came home and said, ‘It’s too awful.’ Then I telephoned the Queen’s Secretary, whom I knew, to whom I said, ‘Well, I

¹³ Sir William Armstrong, later Baron Armstrong of Sanderstead, was Head of the Home Civil Service 1968–74. Sir Robert Armstrong, later Baron Armstrong of Ilminster, was Cabinet Secretary 1979–87, and Head of the Home Civil Service 1981–87.

wonder what the Queen – I don't think I deserve it. Still, I would say yes. But when will it – when will the ceremony occur? I think I'd like to go away while it happens. I don't want journalists.' 'I see. You are going to take evasive tactics,' he said. I said, 'Precisely.' He was quite amused. I've forgotten his name.

GC Charteris?

IB No, before Charteris.

GC Michael Adeane.

IB Exactly. That's when it happened. So it happened in about 1973, 2 or 3, then.

GC I can tell you. You are quite right. It's '72. In '73 Charteris was already the Secretary.

IB [?]. '72, that sort of date.¹⁴

GC Yes, exactly. Now, when you married, were there children of Aline?

IB There were three children. Michel, Peter and Philip.

GC Michel was grown up already?

IB No. Michel was born in forty – in thirty-six or -seven.¹⁵ And this happened in 1956, so he was nineteen, yes. He was, I think – what was he? He was about to go to Harvard. He was at Oxford, I think, rather unhappy. He was an undergraduate student here. And

¹⁴ 20 May 1971.

¹⁵ 23 September 1936.

then there was Peter, who was ten,¹⁶ and there was Philip, who was six. Well, Michel of course knew exactly what was happening. He was terribly bullied by Hans in America, originally. Part of his character, part of his difficulties and his growing up by [*sic*] appalling treatment of him. Hans quite probably liked him, but was a German bully, a disciplinarian. Aline can – have you ever read *David Copperfield*?

GC Surely.

IB Well, Aline can't read it or see it on films, because of Mr Murdstone's attitude to David Copperfield. You remember, he was the husband of his mother, his stepfather, who bullied him. She bursts into tears when that happens. But in the end they got on very well. By the time I married [?] was rather impassive, took no – and came to our wedding.

GC With a hat, you told me.

IB With a hat. I'll tell you. Peter didn't quite understand what it meant, but was perplexed, rather worried. His father didn't like him, which made it a bit easier. There was a governess, called Miss Lee. They were both totally attached to her. She fortunately took to me in a big way, and didn't like Hans, and that's what made all the difference.

GC All the difference.

IB Absolutely. Determined the whole thing. It was very fortunate. Philip had no idea, and said to Aline, 'Have a good marry.' At the stage when we married, he didn't know what that meant. Later, I think – Philip was his father's favourite, but it never made

¹⁶ Not quite: born 1 June 1946.

difficulties in our relation. I kept very tactfully aside. I didn't try and bully them and so on, but our relations are very very good, always have been.

GC Did you have relations with other children in your family, on your family side?

IB You mean contemporaries? People of my age?

GC Yes – no. Children of your relatives, or of your friends. Did you develop any ...?

IB No. I never liked children particularly. No. Just like Princess – the Princess Royal. I don't like children, no. I'm notorious. I kept on telling Aline, I think up to the age of about eight or nine they're a lot like animals, automata. They are quite nice animals, but if you can't talk to them, no good. I'm not going to pretend to be their age, or make baby talk. I can't do that. No, I was notoriously not a child-lover.

GC When you say notorious, it's in the family?

IB Only among my friends and Aline. As a joke.

GC There is no one child{ren} among your – a son or daughter of your friends that you developed a sort of `?

IB Personal relation?

GC Apart from ...

IB Well, [?] try and think.

GC Were you a godfather of somebody?

IB Yes. I was a godfather, so called, to a child of the late Goronwy Rees, but, notoriously, I never saw them. I'm no good as a godfather. I was made to at the birth – at the christening. And I was a godfather to somebody else of the same kind. Aline is a godmother to Stuart's second daughter. Wait a [?], I'm trying to think who else I'm a godfather to. Yes, one of Richard Wolheim's sons. But I didn't behave like a godfather. I gave them no presents. I never saw them.

GC I am a better godfather than that.

IB I'm sure you are.

GC I remember Alexander[?] [?].

IB Exactly. And I'm no good, I'm an absolutely useless godfather. I don't even remember that I am one. Hopeless.

GC And yet I'm coming back to the question, if you developed any relations ...

IB Yes, I'll tell you. The only children I'm on positively good terms with are the Brendel children.

GC Brendel.

IB Yes, their children.

GC How old are they?

IB There are three of them. One must be about eleven or twelve, then eight or something, and six, and – that kind of ages.

GC That young?

IB Yes, she had a child fairly recently.

GC But Alfred Brendel is not so young?

IB Irene – I don't know what her age is.

GC [?].

IB Forties. But I think the last child was born, I don't know, six or seven years ago. Maybe more, I don't know. And anyhow, when I go there, which I do from time to time, they are very affectionate, and in Italy they come and stay with us. I have a very good relation with them. Aline always complains that I am fonder of them than I am of her grandchildren.

GC Well, it happens very often.

IB Of course.

GC Fine. Are you tired?

IB Go on.

GC [?] something then.

IB No, go on.

GC Now, I want to make clear your family background, though we discussed it.

IB Go on.

GC The name is Berlin, but it comes not from the – I mean, who was the Berlin?

IB My grandfather.¹⁷ My father's father. He was adopted by the man who married his mother's sister.

GC By the man who married ...

IB ... his mother's sister. Uncle by marriage.

GC The gentleman who adopted your grandfather married ...

IB Married my grandfather's aunt.

GC Yes, I see.

IB The sister of my grandfather's mother. My grandmother's name was Fruma.

GC Yes.

IB Typical Jewish name, Fruma. Her sister was called Chayette – partly Chaya, and partly – a suddenly[?] Frenchified form of Chaya. They were the daughters of the son,¹⁸ whoever he was, of the Tsemach Tsedek,¹⁹ who was the third Rebbe of the Lubavitch dynasty. Third Rebbe. First comes the ha-Rav ha-Zaken,²⁰ then comes ha-Rav ha-Emtzai,²¹ then comes Tsemach Tsedek, from the

¹⁷ Ber Berlin né Zuckerman (1865–1941), adopted son of Isaiah Berlin senior (1841–1908), who married Chayette Scheerson, sister of Ber's mother Frum(m)a Schneerson.

¹⁸ Actually the daughter, Radah Friede Schneerson.

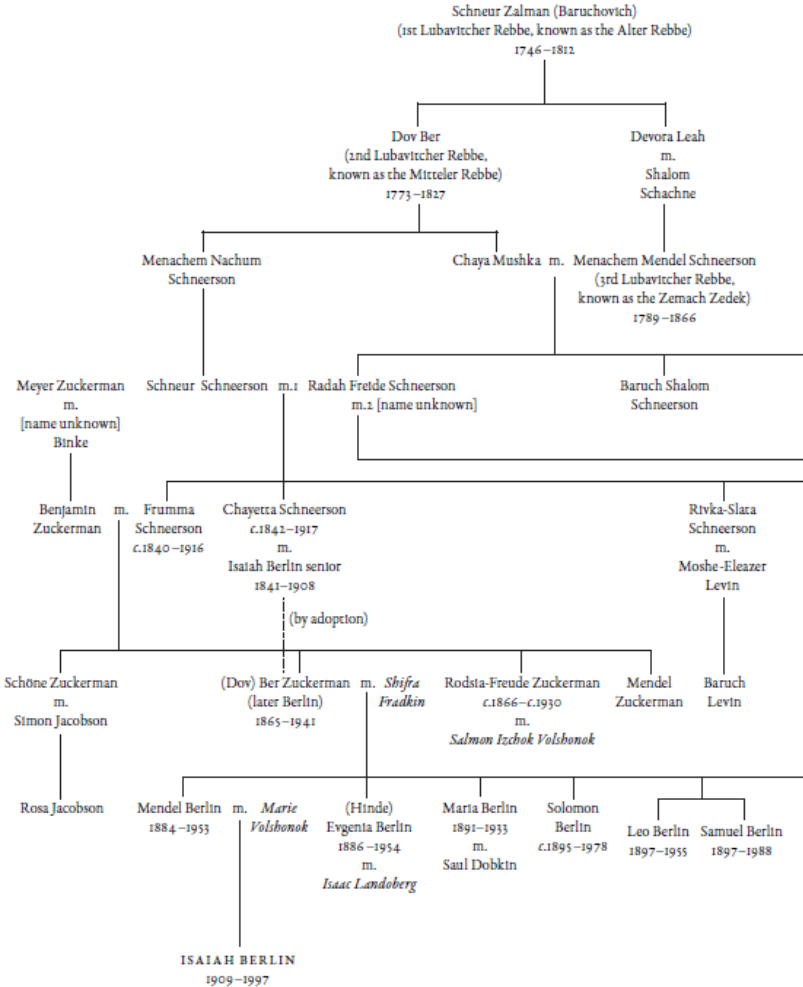
¹⁹ 'Righteous Scion', so called after his compendium of Jewish law.

²⁰ 'The rabbi and teacher', Schneur Zalman.

²¹ 'The Middle Rabbi', Dov Ber Shneur.

name of his book. He was like the present Rebbe, he was the son-in-law, and nephew, of the middle Rebbe.

THE BERLIN FAMILY



From The Book of Isaiah, ed. Henry Hardy (Woodbridge, 2009), 316: it would have helped GC and IB to have drawn a tree

GC Then Hayuta and ...

IB Menachem Mendel, he was.

GC Sure.

IB Chayette not Hayuta.

GC Chayette and Fruma ...

IB ... are sisters.

GC Sisters of the Tsemach Tsedek.

IB No, they are granddaughters.

GC They were the granddaughters of the ...

IB ... Tsemach Tsedek, yes. Schneerson was their name.

GC Granddaughters through the father or through the mother?

IB That I can't – must have been through the father, because they were called Schneerson.

GC That's right.

IB Their name. Maybe their grandmother was also a Schneerson.²²
Probably the father.

GC Then the two were the granddaughters of the Tsemach

²² She was a Rivlin.

Tsedek, who was the third ...

IB Rebbe.

GC The third [?].

IB Third Rebbe of the Lubavitch dynasty, yes.

GC Tsemach Tsedek, and [?].

IB His son,²³ I don't know his name. The son's name I don't know, but who the following Rebbes were I don't know.²⁴

GC Now, so who ...?

IB These girls were brought up in Lubavitch, at the Court, at the Court of the great saint.

GC Now, who married your grandfather, the adopter of your grandfather?

IB The man who adopted my grandfather was called Yishayahu [Isaiah] Berlin.

GC And he married ...?

IB He married the granddaughter of the Tsemach Tsedek. Chayette [*last syllable sounded*].

GC Chayette.

²³ Samuel Schneerson was the 4th Lubavitcher Rebbe

²⁴ 5th Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson; 6th Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson; 7th Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), who did not name a successor.

IB Chayette [*last syllable silent*]. You keep saying Hayuta.

GC All right, because in Hebrew we say Hayuta.

IB Chayette is Russian. She was called Tante Chayette. I had to know her as Tante Chayette. In German. Тѣтя Шайетте in Russian. And they had no children. So he adopted his sister-in-law's son.

GC Yishayahu Berlin, who was the son of ...?

IB Somebody.

GC Fruma.

IB No. Yishayahu Berlin was the brother-in-law of Fruma. He married Fruma's sister. Who his father was, I have no idea.²⁵ But Fruma was called Zuckerman, because she married a man called Zuckerman. So her son, who changed his name to Berlin, was born Dov Ber Zuckerman.

GC Again?

IB My grandfather.

GC You grandfather was born Dov Ber ...

IB Zuckerman.

GC Before he was adopted.

IB Yes.

²⁵ Berko Simonovich Berlin of Veliz (1799–1860).

GC Aha.

IB Naturally.

GC Aha. Dov Ber Zuckerman.

IB He was adopted when he was very young.

GC When he was adopted he was Dov Ber Zuckerman.

IB Yes.

GC And given the – yes. So when he was adopted he was Dov Ber Zuckermann. Was he given another name when he was adopted?

IB [?] no. He was called Dov Ber Berlin. His last name was Zuckerman. Simply changed his name. Changed his name from Zuckerman ...

GC To Berlin.

IB He then became the heir and the adopted son of this millionaire.

GC The millionaire whose name was Yishayahu Berlin.

IB Yes. And he was a Lubavitch Hasid, and a very rich man, and he lived – came from, I think, Surazh or some town like that,²⁶ but lived in Riga. Lived in Riga from the 1870s.

GC And he was a businessman?

²⁶ Mendel says he ‘originated from Vielish – near Vitebsk’ (BI 268).

IB He was an owner of forests. He owned vast tracts of land and forests – he was a timber merchant, yes. He was the head of a firm called – I can't remember what the firm was called: Berlin & Co. And he – the timber was cut in a Western province of Russia, was floated down the Dvina, or Dūna, river to Riga, whence – where it was sawn into logs or sleepers for railways, or whatever it may be, and boards, and then shipped to Europe.

GC Now, do you remember him?

IB He died before I was born.

GC Was he involved in the Lubavitch ...?

IB That's why I was called Yishayahu, which I couldn't have been if he was alive.

GC In the Sephardic you can.

IB You can, but not – Ashkenazi you can't.

GC Was he involved in the Lubavitcher affairs?

IB Who?

GC Yishayahu Berlin.

IB He used to go and visit the Rebbe, of course. From time to time he paid visits, probably paid him money, probably gave him gifts. I don't know what the Rebbe was called in those days, but I think he was called ha-Rav Shmuel.

GC What kind of life did he – did he live in a modern house?

IB Who?

GC Yishayahu Berlin

IB Certainly. He lived in a large house in Riga.

GC Large house.

IB Large rich house. Large house which he owned. In Riga. And employed about two hundred people.

GC And what kind of wear [?].

IB I've no idea. I never saw him.

GC Never saw him.

IB I'm sure he wore a kind of Jewish frock coat. He had a beard. I know what he looked like. Looked very neat, short white beard, and European clothes.

GC European clothes.

IB Yes. He was very good-looking. My great-grandmother I knew.

GC His wife.

IB His widow, yes. I was taken to see her when I was three years old, and I stood in the doorway, and was told to go up to her armchair – she was then very old – and to kiss her hand, but I refused. So I never did, so that was very badly received, and I was more or less made to leave the room. My parents were not pleased.

GC Sure. She was your grand-grandmother.

IB Yes.

GC What ...?

IB No. Not [great-]grandmother.²⁷ Great aunt.

GC Great aunt.

IB Sister of my great-grandmother. My grandmother Fruma I met, in the village of Andreapol', where we were in 1915. She came and stayed there, with, I suppose, her son, I suppose, who was my grandfather, and she lived in a large house, and I remember she spent two nights in the house which we were given in that village. It was a large house, and for some reason I wandered into her bedroom and she took off her wig and I saw that she was bald. I was very shocked. She was in her late eighties.²⁸

GC Now, what kind of languages did they speak?

IB Yiddish. She spoke Yiddish.

GC But she knew Russian.

IB My great-grandmother? Certainly not. Enough to do her – she kept a shop, whatever it was. She could talk enough Russian to communicate. Her language was Yiddish. So it was with Shaya Berlin too, Yishayahu. Yiddish.

GC Now, but what about business?

²⁷ Except by adoption, because she was married to IB's adoptive great-grandfather.

²⁸ In fact about seventy-five.

IB He had people who spoke Russian, German. He employed such people. My father knew languages.

GC Yes, that I know.

IB He was his favourite grandson and became a sort of factotum. Became his principal agent, for everything.

GC Now the grandfather ran a business, quite a successful one?

IB Great-grandfather.

GC Great-grandfather?

IB Adopted great-grandfather.

GC Yes. Adopted ... and ...

IB Without – he knew a little German because it was closer to Yiddish. Russian I don't think.

GC But he had to rely on correspondents[?]?

IB Absolutely. Certainly. He employed a vast number of people, for those days. I think I told you about him.

GC Yes.

IB Because of his villas in Venthône[?] and Bad Homburg.

GC Yes, we'll come back to – you told me about it, but ...

IB Yes.

GC I have to check the tape, whether it's clear, because ...

IB All right.

GC That I have to check.

IB He lived like a maharaja.

GC He lived like a maharaja?

IB He had all these people around him who were complete slaves. They were all Jews. He employed no gentiles.

GC We are talking now about whom?

IB About Yishayahu Berlin.

GC About Yishayahu Berlin.

IB He lived in a huge house with every kind of servant and employee, and bookkeepers, and cashiers, and jesters, and Hasidim of various kinds knocking about, whom he supported.

GC Yes, but that you were told about?

IB Yes, certainly, no, of course, yes.

GC This building you speak about is the one in Riga, or in the village?

IB No, nothing happened in the village.

GC I see.

IB All that happened in the village was that my great-grandmother stayed there for about six months.

GC I see.

IB No, Riga. And I told you, he was a very rich man. He owned all these forests. He sold a lot of timber to Germany, England, France etc. My father was the principal traveller for the firm, who made the contracts. He learned English, he learned French, he spoke German perfectly, my father. He was bilingual. And Yiddish, too. Otherwise he couldn't have talked to this man. And he was very fond of him. He was the favourite.

GC Your father was the favourite ...

IB ... of the old man. Every morning, as I told you, he would send a messenger to the Governor General of – what was it called in those days? – Livlandia, Livland: that's what became after[wards] Latvia. Courland and Livland were called Livlandia. Courland ...

GC Was it Estonia?

IB No, no. Estonia is something quite different.

GC Courland and Livland were Latvia?

IB Yup. And the Governor was called General Zvegintsov,²⁹ and he enquired after his health. Every afternoon an official of Zvegintsov used to come to this rich man to enquire after his health. Every day.

GC To inquire after?

²⁹ Nikolay Aleksandrovich Zvegintsov (1848–1920).

IB His health. It was a formal ...

GC Of your ...?

IB Of [?] Yishayahu. It was a formal relation between him and the Governor General. He was the richest Jew in Riga, and he was made a hereditary honorary citizen, which was done for rich merchants. You did not want to make them members of the gentry, but it gave him certain hereditary rights. He could live anywhere, no disabilities and so on. This was given to rich men, rich Russian merchants, and Jews as well. It was a bourgeois honour. He was not promoted to the ranks of gentry. Nor could he be, because he spoke no Russian. Right. That was a formal to and fro visit [?].

GC Those are stories that were told ...

IB Told to me, exactly. Quite early on. I heard those stories while I was still in Russia.

GC By your mother, by your father?

IB Yes.

GC They were telling it in a way just to ...

IB Amusement.

GC Not ...?

IB Not to aggrandise.

GC Not intending[?] that you are from a very wealthy ...?

IB No. Not at all.

GC Surely.

IB Not at all. No. Funnily enough, they weren't[?] themselves: they knew this was just an act of adoption. That made a difference.

GC Really?

IB Yes. If he'd been a real grandfather to them, I think it might have been different. But they never boasted about origins. The only thing they were was Hasidim of the Lubavitch dynasty. But my father's mother was called Shifra.

GC Your father's mother was Shifra.

IB Yes. She married my father's father, who was a first cousin of my mother's mother.³⁰ And Shifra was the daughter of the Lubliner.³¹ The Lubliner was Hasid, he couldn't be otherwise, who was both a Rebbe and a Rav, which was unusual, but it occasionally happened. He was the Rav of the community, quite officially. And then because he was a Hasid. And he wrote a book called *Torat Chaim*,³² by which he was known, so it's a dynastic marriage. The only other – I never met him, because he was dead before I was born – the only Rebbe I ever met in my life was a man called the Rogatchover,³³ whom I met in Riga. He was somewhere in Latvia, and this happened after the war, when we came back. And I was

³⁰ No, IB's father's father, Dov Behr Zuckerman, was the *brother* of IB's mother's mother, Rodsia-Freude Volshonok née Zuckerman. It was IB's father and mother, Mendel and Marie, who were first cousins.

³¹ Schneur Zalman Fradkin (1830–1902), also known by the surname Ladier.

³² This work is by Dovber Shneuri: Fradkin's work is *Torat Chesed*.

³³ Joseph Rosen (1858–1936).

then ten years of age, exact[ly?] – even younger, nine.³⁴ And there was a minyan, a Hasidic minyan, which was called – it was called Shaya Berlin synagogue. He had his own synagogue, my so-called grandfather, to which all these people came, had to come, all these clerks, everybody.

GC They had to go.

IB They had to go. Private chapel. And this man went to it, because he was a ...

GC [?].

IB This man was a Hasid, and the question was whether I could form part of a minyan under the age of thirteen. So he talked to me, and cross-examined me about my knowledge, and said, 'Yes.'

GC Because of your knowledge.

IB Because I was adequate.

GC Which means his interpretation was ...

IB ... was holy. What he said went. He was not the Rabbi, but he was a saint.

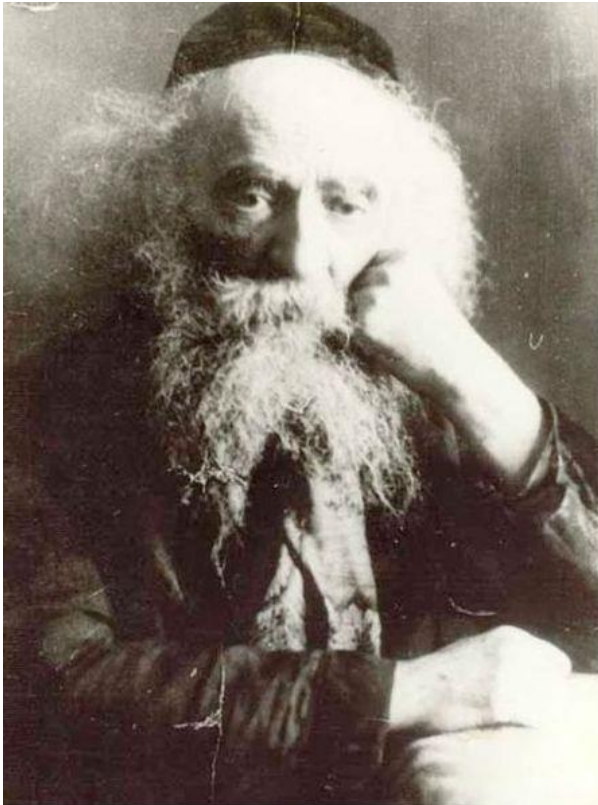
GC The Rebbe?

IB Rogatchover. He declared that I was a perfectly possible tenth man, so I became the tenth man. I don't think I was aware of it. I don't think it was fully explained. I didn't glow with pride.

³⁴ Eleven: the family moved back in October 1920.

GC Yes.

IB He looked marvellous. He had an extraordinary appearance. Extraordinary. Really, he had a – what's called a spiritual appearance. Wonderful long flowing white hair, a beard, but he looked like somebody. He looked very very impressive. Like a – some kind of a prophet.



Joseph Rosen, the Rogatchover

GC And yet your parents didn't really feel that they belonged to a

sort of Jewish aristocracy?

IB Yes, up to a point. Many of them are Hasidim because they were descended from the ha-Rav ha-Zaken, der alte Rebbe, as he was known. Ladier.³⁵

GC Yes.

IB Called Ladier.

GC Yes.

IB The original Schneerson.

GC Shneur Zalman.

IB Shneur Zalman, yes. Because of that they had a certain *yichus*.

GC [?] 'a certain'? It *is* a *yichus*.

IB Among Hasidim?

GC Among Hasidim.

IB Yes, certainly.

GC And it meant to them something.

IB Well, certainly it means something to Menuhin. Yehudi, Yehudi Menuhin, who is also descended from Shneur Zalman.

³⁵ Here IB confuses the 1st Lubavitcher Rebbe, Schneur Zalman, with Schneur Zalman Fradkin/Ladier.

GC And does he ...?

IB He knows it.

GC And does it mean anything to him?

IB It does, yes.

GC And to you?

IB Certainly. I was brought up – that was the only thing which made my family in any way different from any other. It doesn't mean much, but it means something.

GC Now, and again I'm repeating ...

IB Shazar, for example, was always visiting me and talking to me, for that reason, sole reason. It doesn't mean very much, no.

GC Isaiah, I ask you and I repeat the question. It is a riddle, it is a puzzle, that the Lubavitcher of those days don't try to exploit your reputation, your name ...

IB In no way.

GC It's so unlike them.

IB I'm telling you. Because I had no contact with them.

GC No, that they have not tried, they are so ...

IB They tried to – in London they did try. They asked me to deliver a lecture, they sent me their literature, but no serious attempt. I'm telling you, no. It's a case.

GC It's a case, because they usually stick to anybody ...

IB No.

GC ... and they don't ...

IB No, no effort. It was obviously – they're clever enough to know.

GC Don't send you *matza shmura* before Pesach?

IB I have received it.

GC Once, but not every year?

IB No. Certainly not.

GC Something is really incredible here, because it's so much unlike them, they are so active.

IB I know, but I'm telling you.

GC I know.

IB I'm telling you. I think the people who manage their affairs in London are clever enough not to. I think somebody else might have done it. I've had no trouble from them.

GC They've established now a centre in Oxford.

IB I know.

GC And they didn't approach you?

IB No.

GC No, there is something more than that.

IB Oh, what is it?

GC My guess is that they consulted the Rabbi.

IB The Rebbe in ...?

GC Yes.

IB And he said no good.

GC Made enquiries.

IB And decided that it was no good.

GC And decided [?] – otherwise I can't understand it.

IB Could well be.

GC Because for them even Shlonsky, everybody ...

IB Could well be.

GC I mean otherwise ...

IB He discovered there I was in the British Embassy, Oxford, nothing to do with Jews.

GC No. Apparently he knew that you are respected or that you are – no ...

IB Simply that I was not ...

GC Their intelligence net is the best in the world.

IB Well, they knew I was not *frum*,³⁶ they knew I didn't go to synagogue.

GC That's not enough.

IB Then what could it be? I've never denounced ...

GC That you would be of no use.

IB In some way.

GC You are useless. Their intelligence network is in ...

IB Amazing, I'm sure.

GC In all – from all points of view.

IB Zionism was all right – that would not have – would Zionism be an obstacle?

GC No. They are now trying to make ...

IB Now, but in the past?

GC In the past ...

IB I was a notorious Zionist.

³⁶ 'Pious'.

GC No, but ...

IB Notorious.

GC Yes. No, that's true. You see Shazar.

IB But he's a follower – Shneur Zalman.

GC No, it was the other Schneersons. No, it is something that really is very very interesting.

IB Well, you might find out. They'll probably give me trouble if you do. Let me tell you. There's a rather peculiar man called Berel Rodal.

GC Yes, I know him [?].

IB You know him. OK. He is a Hasid. His father is a pious ...

GC Lubavitch?

IB No. I don't think so. Maybe he is. Anyway his father – maybe he is – his father was a pious Hasid. I had to go to the *brit mila*³⁷ of his son. It was an appalling ceremony, from my point of view. First of all, I forgot that I'd been invited. They wouldn't start without me. I was rung up somewhere in Banbury Road, where the Wolfson office was, and I had to go to the house, it was called Ho Chi Minh House, where he lived.

GC Where, here in Oxford?

IB Yes. He was at Balliol.

³⁷ Circumcision.

GC I remember Berel Rodal.

IB He was at Balliol. His son was born. He's called Yishayahu, after me. His father was there with long *pe'ot*,³⁸ and of course there was a *mohel*,³⁹ and the Master of Balliol, Christopher Hill, and the Chaplain of Balliol, and [?] wearing bright little blue caps, and other Jews. It was a purely Hasidic ceremony, and there were a lot of Hasidim from London. So they knew who I was.

GC They certainly knew.

IB Even though – there was no – no, but on that occasion – it was a Hasidic ceremony which I attended. Still, nothing.

GC I must tell you, it is a riddle.

IB All right. I'm very glad it happened. But you might – how can you find out?

GC I don't know. One ought really to – well, one can find out.

IB How?

GC One can try.

IB Who do you know in that world?

GC Usually people know, people who are in the inner circle of the Rabbi.

³⁸ Sidelocks.

³⁹ Jewish man trained to circumcise.

IB Well, of course they do.

GC They may be ready to reply, and maybe not.

IB Who do you know in the inner circle?

GC I know somebody who ...

IB In New York?

GC In Israel, who is related to somebody in the inner circle.

IB Don't enquire too busily. Otherwise I may get persecuted.

GC No. If there is a real reply, they will not get ...

IB Look. They know who I am for a simple reason, quite apart from intelligence.

GC Certainly they know!

IB No. Quite apart from their intelligence. Nothing to do with intelligence. In the book called *Beit Rebbe* I occur, in the genealogy. That's enough.

GC No, they know [?]. You

IB I'm on the genealogical tree. I'm called Berlin-Zuckerman.

GC No, I mean ...

IB Or Shazar knew very well. I presented Shazar with the *batim* of

the *tefillin* of the ha-Rav ha-Emtzai, silver *batim*.⁴⁰ Oh, certainly.



Tefillin in silver cases

GC So ...

IB I used to know about Hasidim. I rather approved of them until the last twenty years or so.

GC The last twenty years, yes. I can see.

IB It's gone wrong.

GC Some Hasidim didn't go wrong. I mean, it's the Lubavitcher that became so ...

IB Fanatical.

GC Fanatical.

⁴⁰ He means the protective silver cases in which the *tefillin* – leather boxes (*batim*) containing biblical texts – were kept when not in use. See illustration.

IB I wonder why. His predecessor was a perfectly respectable man called Yosef Yitzchak. Quite all right.

GC He's a learned man and everything, but the movement now is really – and they managed to charm people of all classes in Israeli society, it's – but there is a crisis going on there, because there is now no *yoresb*,⁴¹ and there is apparently going to be ...

IB Dynastic trouble. Successor trouble.

GC The alternative is, there are – so some sufficient step is going to be claiming[?] for the Messiah.

IB Before he dies?

GC Yes. There is [?].

IB But then in that case, the next world has to begin.

GC Yes, well ...

IB In that case Meshiach ben David or Meshiach ben Joseph.⁴²

GC [*laughs*]

IB Which? There are two *meshiachim*.

GC I don't know.

IB Two *meshiachim*. You know that?

⁴¹ 'Heir'.

⁴² The Messiah of the House of Joseph will fall in battle, and the Messiah of the House of David will succeed him.

GC Surely. All right. Now, as we have to move to another ...

IB The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.

GC Yes.

IB I don't think he will.

GC I don't think either.

IB Because otherwise the last trump, the resurrection has to begin immediately. If it doesn't, there's something wrong.

GC Yup. That's right.

IB I don't think they'll let him take the risk.

GC [?].

IB I know.

GC In the *New York Times*.

IB *Mamash*.⁴³

GC A long article about it.

IB Was? Yes.

GC Fine, now, when you look back on your intellectual life, academic ...

⁴³ Hebrew: 'Truly.'

IB I don't think he'll declare himself *mashiach*. What he'll say is 'yemei hamashiach hitchilu'.⁴⁴

GC Well, that, yes ... Except he nearly said ...

IB Not quite. He could say that.

GC He came close to saying it.

IB He could say that. 'Bau yemei hamashiach.'⁴⁵ Soon, soon the revelation will occur.

GC Through your intellectual life, political life, academic life, do you remember any radical changes of attitude to topics, to subjects, that were a sort of a personal experience?

IB I understand what you mean. No. I regret to say not. I know exactly what you mean. I've changed my views, but never by some catastrophic change. I've never had a revelation from one day an x, the next day, no. I have changed. By nature I'm pacific and somewhat gradual. And I change my philosophical views, of course, but it did not happen as a sudden conversion. No conversion.

GC But the change of philosophical views is a gradual process.

IB Yes, certainly. New[?] [?] interests kind of things I like doing, no *coup de foudre*, as the French call it. No thunderclap.

GC That I'm not surprised.

⁴⁴ 'The days of the Messiah have begun.'

⁴⁵ 'The days of the Messiah have arrived.'

IB No thunderclap. No voice of God speaking from the ...

GC Surely.

IB No burning bush.

GC No, but there is another sort. Not through voice of God, but through torment.

IB Some shock. Some shock or torment.

GC Let's say a process like [IB Or shock] John[?] Strachey went through [?].

IB He, certainly. Of course. He immediately became a disciple of Toynbee.

GC Yes.

IB Because he needed a system.

GC So you didn't have this kind of ...?

IB No. The nearest to it is the present.

GC Pardon?

IB The nearest to it is the present moment.

GC You mean ...?

IB Yes. That's the nearest to it. Look, when I consider that I may have difficulty in going to that country, to Israel, that's the first

time in my life that I have felt quite so appalled. I was asked by Gaby whether in my life [*tape ends*].