Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 25

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Side A

GC [?] 31 December. Well, last time the last question we discussed was – I asked whether there were any events [in] your lifetime that caused change …

IB I said 'none'.

GC … and you said 'none', and you referred mainly to events like revelations or shocks or traumas.

IB Well, no, sudden conversions.

GC Sudden conversions.

IB Or not sudden, even, but conversions.

GC But there is another aspect to this kind of changes – not a sudden …

IB No, I understand – even that not.

GC Surely a conversation like you had with Sheffer in Harvard.

IB Yes, well. No, that had an effect, certainly. It pushed me a little bit in a direction in which I was already going. I was drifting anyway, yes, quite true. I never ended up at a position which was the opposite of that from which I started, that's what I want to say, even by a gradual process.

GC Yes. On the other hand, gradually, when you look retrospectively.

IB Well, not entirely true what I say, but still, go on.

GC So, what …?

IB Well, only philosophically. Philosophically I began, after all, as a kind of dry empirical English nihilist, which I still am, and I regarded Hegel and all that sort of thing as just dark German nonsense, really – not nonsense but simply Romantic darkness – [which] obfuscates reason rather than assists it. But as a result of, I suppose, reading Marx, to some extent, and as a result of becoming interested in history of ideas, I did gradually get into a situation where, according to people like Charles Taylor, and even Stuart [Hampshire], there is a certain contradiction in my entire position – at least intellectually there is, not so much as far as actual doctrine [is concerned].

On the one hand I believe in Hume and empiricism, and I don't believe in determinism. I believe that anything may follow anything. I believe in the infinite possibility of change, flexibility. Of course some things – there are large fixed forces in the universe. But on the whole I believe that one cannot scientifically organise

or predict things, and also I believe that in the end truth can only be discovered by observation. And observation, experiment, as the scientists say – there are no intuitive truths of an eternal kind, there is no natural law which is true for all men at all times, which we obtain by the use of a special illumination which is called reason, which is what a lot of philosophers from the beginning of the world have believed, from Plato to our day, and particularly in America now; and the pupils of – what's his name? – Leo Strauss say that. That's one position, in other words empiricism, and some degree of pluralism, belief in infinite possibilities, refusal to believe there is some kind of fixed straitjacket in which at least men move – nature perhaps, inanimate nature, organisms perhaps.

But on the other hand there is also a strain which talks about the interrelations of everything with everything in a culture, about the effect of all kinds of apparently improbable factors which have an unexpected influence, and about the importance of certain emotional needs which were rigidly rejected by the Enlightenment, and rigidly rejected by anybody who believes in the monopoly of scientific truth, by the monopoly of science, namely all this Herder stuff – that people need to belong to a group, that people need to realise their potentialities in certain directions, which they cannot do individually but can only do, to some degree, in relation to other people, if not collectively, anyhow as part of a group, etc. The fact that a large part of life consists in non-rational self-expression, which is intelligible to other people, in terms of which communication occurs. Communication is not the sharing of rationally arrived at experience, and is not done by the use of – even if not scientific – clear and carefully defined language, but is obtained by all kinds of unanalysable factors of which people like Burke, whom I don't on the whole approve of, speak, all kinds of impalpable, unseizable, unanalysable fragments of experience in terms of gestures, expressions and all kinds of emotional shifts of one kind or another, which is what holds people together, in fact, and what makes communication between human beings possible.

Love and hatred, hope and fear, all these things which feed religion, which feed art, which feed the whole non-rational aspects of life.

These two things appear to my friends to be in some way in collision with each other, don't go together. Either, if you are not to be rational,[1] analyse everything in a clear and verifiable manner, or on the contrary one plunges into some kind of intuitive mist in which the truth is only obtained by feelings of the tips of one's fingers, but I can't do both. I do do both.

GC It never tormented you?

IB Never.

GC It's the pluralism that enabled you, that it's not …

IB Never. I see no conflict. In some regions reason, in others not. In some regions science, in others not. Anything that can be made clear should be made clear. Some things cannot be made clear because they can't in principle be clarified. You can't make feelings – making feelings absolutely clear is an absurd proposition.

GC Did it start with Herder, your heresy?

IB No, I don't think so. It probably started …

GC Where did it [?]?

IB Zionism, I expect.

GC Zionism.

IB I expect. I can't tell you, but that must be it. When I ask myself,

[1] The intended sense appears to be 'Either be rational, or …'.

'What are the Jews?', 'Why Israel?', 'What's this …?' – when people argue against it on rational grounds: 'Jews are like everybody else' or 'Socialism will cure all the ills of the world – these things are simply due to irrational pressures.' It's clear to me that people could only develop in certain circumstances. Yes, I think Zionism led towards Herder, not vice versa. I took to Herder because it corresponded to what I already believed. Zionism and a general sense of the difference between nations [?] society because there was a break in my life, from one form of life to another. I became peculiarly sensitive to the difference of cultures, and difference of contours of human lives.

GC When?

IB I suppose it must have been towards the end of my schooldays. Not very consciously, perhaps. I knew that I was not English, I knew that I was not Russian. I knew that being a Jew is not a political sub-definition nor even a [?]. I belong to a nation, a country, a state. None of this existed. Very well then, what was I? I did not ask myself in an agonised way. I didn't seek for some kind of identity. I never had any doubts about that. I was perfectly clear about what I was. I was a Russian Jew first, last and foremost. Not much doubt, any more than there is now. But this itself made me conscious of the fact that realities had to some extent to be analysed in non-rationalist, non-Encyclopedist, non-eighteenth-century terms – that all reductionism was dangerous.

GC But you never embarked on a real study of Zionism. You wrote one or two articles.

IB No, never: systematic study, no.

GC Did you think of doing it, and were you despairing unconsciously?

IB Never. I never contemplated it. The study of Zionism as a movement?

GC As an ideology.

IB Never.

GC But after all, history of ideas …

IB Never. Because there is no such thing. Because Zionism has too many facets. There have been no first-class thinkers who formulated Zionism. There was nothing to get hold of.

GC Yes, but you could try to add to the …

IB No. By temperament I'm not a creative ideologist.

GC My suspicion is that it was a sort of consciousness that Zionism consists of so many exceptions and …

IB No, it wasn't that. It was that I never saw a single clear object for analysis there. There are too many sorts of Zionists [?] too many sources. I accepted some things but not others. My reasons for Zionism were so unlike the official reasons given by Zionists that there was no use my embarking on this.

GC That's my theory.

IB But that was true, always. What I mean is nothing deterred me. I was never tempted. I was never tempted to say our religion is the basis of our Zionism. Or – whatever else people say – that religion itself is intrinsic to our Zionism, or there is such a thing as Jewish culture, or there is such a thing as Jewish ethics. I don't believe in

Jewish ethics and I don't believe in Jewish culture. These things which people talk about quite glibly don't mean very much to me. When people say, you know, in America, 'Religiously I am not a Jew, but morally I am', I didn't understand a word – no idea what they meant, and don't now.

GC On the other hand …

IB Jewish morality means nothing whatever to me. Maybe there is such a thing. That's why I was always suspicious – more than suspicious, hostile – to the idea of study of Jewish thought, study of Jewish philosophy. I thought it was an entirely bogus subject. Jewish mysticism – yes. It's a movement, which Scholem could do. Halakha – yes, because there is such a thing as Halakha in this development. But Jewish philosophy, in the sense in which all kinds of German Jews …

GC Meaning Guttmann or …

IB Meant nothing to me, seemed to me just words, mist.

GC And when you came to the practice of Zionism …

IB Buber never meant anything to me. That is why I admired Scholem so much, because Scholem was a scholar and he knew what he was doing. And there wasn't any rot. He didn't bring in a lot of ideological stuff into what he was doing. He got on with the subject itself.

GC Yes.

IB It wasn't clear whether he believed in God or not, but it didn't seem to matter.

GC Yes, but Scholem is another subject.

IB Well, he was fascinated by Jewish mysticism. He was attracted to it.

GC Oh, yes.

IB Of course. Because he found it very sympathetic. His thoughts rolled round. He was like a poet who finds certain kinds of themes possible to write about.

GC And by the very discovery, by the very fact that he discovered something …

IB It excited him. The point of mysticism excited him in a way in which poetry would excite somebody, or art would excite somebody. And therefore that's why he became a student of it, because it fed his imagination in a very particular way. That I understand.

GC I think that evidentially[?] you might have exaggerated, and pretty soon there will be a [?]. [?].

IB Maybe. Oh, very likely.

GC [?]. Nothing wrong in it.

IB That's quite all right.

GC I know.

IB But Julius Guttmann and all these other people – that seems to me shallow stuff. Deconstructionism in America. Well, I know hardly anything that that's religion without religion. It is having

religion on the cheap. No, I always believed in Jewish Orthodoxy. If you are going to be religious – the whole thing. *Taryag mitsvot*.[2] What I don't believe in is Liberal Judaism or Reform Judaism – always repelled me, dilute it. Religion is a real thing. I don't happen to be religious, but I recognise it as a major phenomenon.

GC Your attitude to Zionism was in a way actually existential.

IB Yes.

GC You were a Zionist and that was that, and I think that you displayed a sort of permissiveness, and you allowed a *raison d'état*, and you forgave Zionist policy in many aspects that probably in another politics you wouldn't have.

IB That could well be so. I only had one reason for Zionism, as I've often told you, which was that the Jews are a distorted community, and the only way to undistort them was by giving them a piece of soil[?] – that's what Herzl[?] said.

GC A basic normalisation …

IB That is all. Not the fact that from – what is it? – is it *mi-yehuda tetse torah*?

GC Pardon?

IB *Mi-yehuda*?[3]

GC *Mi-tsion*.

[2] All 613 commandments of the Torah.
[3] 'From Judah?'

IB *Mi-tsion tetse torah*[4] I never believed. I didn't believe in all this illumination which was going to come, the deep Jewish wisdom which would illuminate the world, that struck me as pure cant. Just talk. Ben-Gurion's attitude towards these things was extremely unsatisfactory and fundamentally vulgar and shallow like his desire to reabsorb Spinoza because he was a success and he was a Jew, so he wanted the *herem*[5] lifted. There was a vulgar move.

GC When we are stuck now in the situation [?] … do you reflect from time to time on what went wrong, where were we wrong, who was wrong, and when?

IB No. I don't think we went wrong in the 1920s in the least. Yes, certainly certain things went wrong; we went wrong in our Arab policy, nobody can deny that. We had to have one, good or bad. The idea that we had none at all was an absolutely monstrous piece of self-blinding. So I understand why. I think I've told you once already. The whole position of Jews and Arabs derived from Eastern Europe, and from Eastern Europe alone. If Zionists had come from the West, which they would never have come, for obvious reasons, this situation would not have arisen. And the only people who had a feeling that something must be done about the Arabs were Western Jews, basically. There was Kalwarisky, maybe. But that's still …

GC He was not a Western … Russian …

IB Basically that.

GC These sort of Russian Jews were Western but.

[4] 'Let Torah go forth from Zion.'

[5] Excommunication: Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1656.

IB Exactly. The point is this. I think I've told you this already. The tragedy was this. In Russia we have the Pale of Settlement. The Pale of Settlement meant that the Jews lived adjacently to each other, so they created a continuous territory inhabited by a majority of Jews. That gave them the attributes of an artificial national minority, which they did not have anywhere else in the world. Maybe in North Africa in parts, but certainly not in the West, where they were scattered. Their relations[hip] to the Russian peasants was not hatred. Russian peasants were illiterate, they belonged to another religion, they had completely different customs, there was no social contact with them. They did not belong to the same world. Therefore relations with them were minimal. The Jews didn't hate the Russian peasants, they feared them, because they might have a pogrom, or they might do something awful to them. A certain amount of barter went on, they couldn't avoid having some kind of commercial relation with them. But broadly speaking the Jews were literate, they could read, they could write, and they had the most utter contempt for these barbarians among whom they lived, of whom they were frightened, and whom they didn't think about in any serious way except for self-protection. There was a minority of Jews in the big towns, but they didn't count. They were [?] – they were more or less people to some extent who wandered away from the mass of the Jews. I am talking about the so-called masses. This is true even about the Bundists, who still looked on peasants as alien.

When Zionism began and they decided to go to Palestine they took their – [?] they transported their national identity with them and the Arabs were the same Russian peasants, and exactly the same attitude – not people one has anything in common with at all, quite apart from the Arab hostility, which was natural, and that's why they couldn't have a relationship. Their whole idea of doing something about the Arabs is like being asked to do something for the Russian peasants, and that was the tragedy. Maybe it wasn't avoidable. But the Zionist leadership is gravely to

blame for not forcing themselves to do something. That's one mistake, that's the biggest mistake.

GC [?] Theoretically some leaders did think about it and didn't find solutions. After all, Buber thought about it, Magnes thought about it, [?] thought about it, and it was not practical. And eventually an Arab Palestinian National Movement [?] arising. In my opinion we were just lucky that in 1948 the war ended with a partition as it did, and we had to guard it – the partition. Our main mistake was after 1948 that we regarded partition as a necessity and not as a virtue.

IB Quite.

GC Had we believed that partition was a virtue, a miracle, in 1967 we would have immediately – we had the chance.

IB But even in 1937, the original partition …

GC Yes, but then Ben-Gurion was in favour of partition, Weizmann was in favour of it, but we were not given it. But in 1948 we were [?].

IB Certainly. Yes.

GC But had we believed that this was a miracle, that that's how the war finished, in 1967 we would have yet entirely the chance. (IB I agree.) In my opinion that was the major [?].

IB I agree. In other words, we looked on it as a kind of, as you say, painful necessity.

GC I remember saying the day after the Six-Day War: the tragedy is now that all the problems of Zionism are open again. All the problems that we put under the carpet before (IB They have re-

emerged) are re-emerged, and that we are now facing.

IB There's another thing which we did wrong, which is this. Well, first of all there were minor things, for example – I can give you a small thing which I used to think about. They are a problem. We could have done a great deal to solve it by perfectly practical means, without any ideological worries. For example, if we were to accumulate enough money in the early years of Zionism, which was not on; but still Weizmann could, if he'd given himself to it, could have got out of the American Jews, could have explained to them the tragedy – what would happen if one didn't do it. We could have bought them out if we had persuaded the Arab fellahin – peasants – to move fifty miles to the East; it could have been done. The arrogant[?] Jews who would have opposed it, the Mufti and his friends of course wouldn't have liked it, and all the rich Arabs wouldn't have liked it, but it was feasible, and this could be done by making arrangements with the not too unsympathetic British, they were not too bad then. It could have been done. None of these steps were taken because they were too intoxicated with the idea of Jews in Palestine – we have come home – and we never thought about step number four, step number five – always the next step. It was hand to mouth.

GC Even the humane Zionist leaders, they were not anti-Arabs, they were a-Arabs.

IB That's what I mean. Oh no, they didn't hate the Arabs. I am not complaining …

GC Somewhere [?].

IB Well, I had an uncle who hated them.

GC Even the do-gooders, they actually were a-Arabs, they seeked

the Arabs' interests.

IB That's what I mean. They were ignored. They were regarded as – somehow they would disappear, and the British, of course – what they could have done, if you ask what the mistakes are, if they had gone to the English and been quite tough with them, saying: look, what do you intend? You talk about a national home, it's a meaningless expression, what do you want us to be, a state or not? If not a state, how do you see us in terms of the Arabs? Do you see us as having home rule, do you see us as having cantons? What do you want? You keep importing Jews, not too many, have you any policy at all? The Colonial Office had no policy, but the Jews could have forced them, or forced Parliament, but they didn't do it because they thought that by not forcing them they could surreptitiously get what they wanted behind the backs of the British government.

GC Let's leave it aside. We came into it before …

IB Very good. No, all right, stop.

GC There was a [?], and we'll come to it [?] because we are now facing the basic problems of Zionism. It's for the first time actually that the Jewish national movement has to face the Arab Palestinian national movement, that's [?] (IB It's a crisis of the first order), and that's why – we'll have another discussion about it (IB Quite so), just for the purpose of time to cope with the real things, that we haven't done for many years, both of us. But not now. Let's go back. But we'll do it because it's a major issue.

Coming back to changes in your attitudes and opinions – did you change your mind, again gradually, about thinkers, philosophers, personalities, poets, writers during your lifetime? Changes in …

IB Not consciously, no. Maybe – of course one does, everyone does, but I have no awareness. (GC No awareness.) My life is – consists of drifting along. I am by nature a drifter. By nature I just take things as they come. I don't ask myself questions. I don't reach dramatic moves. They are not in my line at all.

GC And then you see that you changed; you were disappointed by people, friends disappointed you, or scholars disappointed you. It just happened, it didn't cause pain.

IB No. (GC It was uneventful.) Never. I have never been let down. I never felt that I was letting them down, or they were letting me down. (GC Not letting down, I don't mean …) No, but I mean intellectually let down. (GC Intellectually.) I arrived at certain conclusions about certain people intellectually which I didn't begin with, as a result of simply reading their books or as a result of experience – there are certain people whom I thought were much abler than they turned out to be.

GC For example.

IB Well, I'd better be discreet. You'd better not repeat this to anyone. Of course, I know. For example, my friend Freddie Ayer. The trouble about Freddie Ayer is this. He was a wunderkind. His best book, most famous book, most influential book is his worst. It's a very remarkable book to have written. *Language, Truth and Logic* was a manifesto of logical positivism. It went round the world. It had a huge impact. Very few things in it are true, as he himself, being an honest man, fully recognises. Every other book he has ever written has been far better thought out, more careful, taken more work than this book and nobody reads them. The trouble about him is I used to think of him as extremely brilliant and remarkable and original, although too extreme for me: wrong, but bold and interesting. Now I reached a conclusion which was

formulated for me for the first time, I think, by Bernard Williams, that the trouble about Freddie Ayer is he has never had an idea in his life. Everything is derivative, everything. That's unusual. It's too shallow, the whole thing. He has never been possessed by an idea, as I have. I have had ideas in my life which I am attached to. They were born gradually. I didn't wake up one morning and suddenly said, 'Eureka! I have it! I've solved it! Anyone in the world would like – I know what the solution is.' They have gradually dawned upon me. But there are certain ideas to which I am attached which really are mine in the sense that I defend them against other people, and I don't derive them directly from anybody else; they are not of vast importance, but such as they are, they belong to me, and that rather pleases me in a way. I feel at least I'm not – my brain has not been totally unused.

GC Yes. But you don't judge people only by the criterion of having ideas.

IB No, I judge them by the totality of their personalities, always, as I judge everything by totality; my general approach is very holistic. About people I have one clear idea. People are like their – I always judge people in the first place if I meet them by their faces and their voices. That is the mirror of their souls. When I say face, I don't mean the shape of their face but their expressions. The expression and the voice either antagonises me or pleases me or leaves me neutral. From that I seldom depart. I have made very few mistakes. I still believe it. I have some kind of automatic reaction, whether people are sympathetic or not sympathetic, and I always know, to some extent, and I've never yet changed my mind about somebody in some radical way. And I am therefore very different from, say, my friend Stuart Hampshire, who admires people for their attitude, politically. Those who are politically right he is prepared to be friends with. Those who have politically wrong ideas he is rather antagonistic to. That has never affected me in any

degree. Either I like people or I don't. They can have what ideas they like. There are certain absolutely odious ideas. I suppose nobody I ever knew turned [out] to be – became a Fascist [?]. [?] Communists I meet: I loathe Communism, but I don't react in a hostile way because people are Communists if in other respects there is something else.

GC You know, Isaiah, that you use the expression 'decent' very often. (IB Oh I'm sure.) Decency means a lot for you.

IB A great deal, yes. Oh, it does indeed.

GC I don't know whether you are aware of speaking – that you use the word [?] (IB 'Decent', yes, I'm sure I do) to say something good about somebody. 'Decent' is very high …

IB Central word, certainly, quite right.

GC So what are you meaning?

IB I can't analyse it. It means …

GC I was taken by it, were you aware?

IB I use the word 'decent', yes. It is very difficult to analyse the word 'decent'. It just means being in favour of, being sympathetic to, being naturally – a natural affinity for the kind of form of life which is decent, [?] do it in a circular way, a form of life which is acceptable as opposed to unacceptable. That's all it really means. A certain degree of honesty …

GC Only a certain degree?

IB Not total, no. People can cheat and lie in my world. (GC

Decent?) Yes, to some degree, so that they can be in general decent, occasionally tell lies, occasionally cheat. I don't demand total integrity.

GC Yes, that I saw, that you don't demand [?] …

IB I prefer it, I prefer people not to tell lies, I prefer people not to cheat, but if you say so-and-so was telling a lie, it doesn't immediately mean so I can't speak to him, that's the end of our [?]. No, some degree, high degree, if you like, of honesty, high degree of justice, and a high degree of kindness: that I think they need, and a certain degree of love of life, a certain degree of intellectual gaiety which I need; if they are too gloomy …

GC That I know that you liked, but I didn't know that you included it in decency.

IB Yes [?], I don't.

GC I [?] that you like such people, but I didn't [?] …

IB I don't. People can be very boring and utterly decent. The late Leon Simon was a totally decent man, boring to a degree. So was Bentwich, entirely decent man but boring to a degree, and a lot of people like that whom I have met in my life. And you feel they are good people: they are utterly decent, they are totally reliable, completely morally OK, and dreadfully uninteresting.

GC When you go to New York, not now, ten years ago, and you have a certain amount of time, and you have to decide whom to meet, usually you are very liberal. I can see when you come to Jerusalem, whoever wants to see you can see you.

IB Yes, absolutely.

GC But if you had to choose, whom would you prefer, categorically, and if you have examples.

IB [?] examples, I can't produce them.

GC Because it's not only – you don't always prefer – you will always like to see Scholem, I know, because he …

IB No, not always. (GC Not always?) No, Scholem was not a nice man.

GC I know. That's why I was going to ask [?] …

IB He was not a nice man (GC It's not the intellectual …) and he was not particularly decent. (GC Not at all.) No, exactly. I knew that. Therefore I didn't always … I was rather dazzled by him. I was fascinated by talking to him. I didn't like him terribly. I never did. I admired him and I was pleased to be in his company. And I was rather flattered by the degree of attention which he was prepared to pay to me in certain cases, but I didn't like him very much, and I don't know of anyone who did all that much. People who did really didn't take him too seriously – did it because they wanted to, not because they did. Someone like Arthur Herzberg, who claims to be a intimate friend – that's just a form of vanity, it wasn't genuine. No, certainly not. German Jews are the people I find least sympathetic.

GC That's what I [?] didn't like.

IB Absolutely true. Yes, other people told me that – absolutely. There *are* German Jews whom I get on with quite well. I'm trying to think. I get on quite well with Claus Moser, for example, nice man, (GC Sambursky) or Sambursky, exactly. Of course. But

broadly speaking – I was once denounced for that by the late James de Rothschild, who said, 'Now, now, no criticism of German Jews.' And he came from them himself – in the end it's all Frankfurt. He saw that I was liable to make disparaging remarks. I don't like German Jews, no, because there is some kind of curious combination of – well, Weizmann's famous remark, which was so funny. Weizmann disliked them for exactly the reasons which I disliked them, because of a certain absence of human soul, a certain soullessness. They are intelligent, they are civilised, they can be clever, they can be gifted, they can be lively, but there's deep, deep absence of humanity among a great many of them.

GC Yup, but coming back, again, to go to New York or to [?], what type of people … [?]?

IB I like a combination of cosiness and gaiety. They are the qualities which fetch me. They are qualities which socially I like best. There are people who have it. People with whom I'm comfortable. Lack of pomposity, lack of stiffness.

GC Take your visits to Israel since the 1950s until now, or to Washington. Can you see more people that you keep in touch with them all along the way, and that you would meet on every visit?

IB Yes.

GC All? There are [?] all these new [?] friends.

IB No, there isn't a new crop. When I make friends they stay. It's absolutely true about New York. I have friends there – I've got very few new friends. In Israel, well, Avishai is a new friend, for example, comparatively. When did I meet him? Not so very long ago. People like that, I'm trying to think who else in Israel; someone like Michael Walzer, who is not a great friend of mine but

I like him (GC [?]) – no, I know, but I like him when I meet him. He is quite cosy, not very gay. I'm trying to think. But on the whole, old friends, yes. Either I take to them or I don't. When I take to them, they stay. I see the same people over and over again. No, not many new people come in. When I meet them I like them or don't like them, but I seldom make firm friends. [?] stopped at the age of sixty, not very many.

GC Generally speaking, you became more tolerant of people or less tolerant? Because in some cases you became more tolerant?

IB Less..

GC Because in some cases you became more tolerant.

IB I wonder.

GC You wonder.

IB I have never been very tolerant.

GC So you try to hide it – (IB Could be) you manage to hide it.

IB Maybe. I am not very tolerant, no. No, I am highly critical and …

GC [?] But in your behaviour …

IB Well, I behave perfectly politely because of course I have a deep anxiety to please, which I'm sure is one of my most profound characteristics. I always said that. And that's why I always[?] – my [?] people. I always like to – good relations with them. I am intolerant, fundamentally. When I talk to people I am very critical of them, I don't accept anybody at all, a full valuation. I object to

this or that, but in general, either I like them or I don't. Either I respect them or I don't. Either I admire them or I don't. And if I admire them, they can be quite nasty. And if I like them, they can probably be quite dishonest. So I don't demand everything.

GC [?] tolerance [?].

IB No, that's not tolerance. I know they are dishonest and I complain.

GC So how would you define it if not tolerance?

IB Tolerance means that you accept these qualities without minding them. I do mind them, but I swallow them.

GC I see.

IB I mind them. I don't want to let them off.

GC Because I was very often rather puzzled by your patience with people when I couldn't see …

IB I am patient by nature. I was too patient in some ways. I am exactly the opposite of my wife, who is impatient. I am patient [?].

GC You *are* patient, yes, it's very clear.

IB I am patient by nature, certainly. Yes, I am. I am like a Chinese coolie. I can sit in the same place for hours and not move.

GC And speak with …

IB Anybody; and even people – but if you asked me afterwards whether I liked them, I said no, actually I don't, but they are quite

interesting to talk to or whatever it is. I don't blow up. Sometimes if people say something against me, I mind that, and regard them as enemies for the rest of my life. People can offend me quite easily. Yes.

GC And that you take seriously.

IB Suddenly[?] enough, there are people I regard as enemies.

GC There *are* people …?

IB Certainly. Not people I know well, obviously. People who have said things about me in print which I regard as personal and unfair and wrong and offensive.

GC That brings me a point that I didn't want to [?] it now, but the majority of those who criticised you came from the left.

IB Yes.

GC And I think there was probably one main period in which you were criticised by [?].

IB When I wrote all those provocative essays.

GC Yes, and mainly by people who then became New Left or …

IB Yes.

GC But as I said, generally speaking, I claim that you were nearly immune of criticism, and you claim that you were criticised (IB Right and left) right and left. Of course I am right. Apparently for you the amount of criticism…

IB Well I obviously don't like *any* criticism. Of course I accept it, and I usually think it's true. I don't reject it and I don't think it's totally false; [?] usually – there's always an element of truth in every criticism that's ever made, but if these are personally offensive, no. I don't mind respectful[?] criticism which disagrees with me.

GC You mind the motive.

IB I mind the tone. If I can see they are personally hostile, there's a certain – if they are offensive, if they are vituperative, there is some element of personal dislike.

GC [?] yes, Carr or …

IB No, I don't, funnily enough. He was very harsh about me, but I never minded that nearly so much as other people. He was never an enemy. Never, even if I disliked everything he thought.

GC You would be friends [?]. (IB No.) I am sure that there are others that are not enemies and you define them as …

IB Very likely. Carr, no. Carr was a very good example, because my personal relations with Carr remained perfectly friendly until the end, although I disapproved of everything, and I thought he was dishonest, and I thought he was wrong, and I thought he was – there was something positively – he perverted the truth. All this I thought.

GC And it was clear.

IB Oh, yes, I know. Yes, I thought all that.

GC [?].

IB We had real clashes, you see, but I never felt that he was – I felt that the polemics were entirely – they were political or intellectual, but not personal. That's what I mean, that's why I never minded him. There are other people in that position too. I am trying to think who else criticised me in that way. Well, for example, I can't remember, there were very minor – Sen, for example, *The Economist*, once wrote an article in Cambridge complaining about my views about anti-determinism.[6] I never minded that. Let me try and think. Leo Strauss was hostile to what I thought. I never had the faintest antipathy to him as a person.

GC Popper.

IB The same. Popper never criticised me publicly.

GC Except that he thought that you ought to …

IB Acknowledge him more. [?] That was amusing. But we remained friends, more or less, distant friends. But friends. No. But no, Popper never criticised me in public at all. Never said a word against me. No. He regarded me as a sort of follower. But I didn't mind that. I am trying to think who else was like that – people who criticised me [?] thought was all right, because it [was] simply disagreement of a rational kind.

GC Well, I think we discussed it once.

IB Richard Wollheim was a friend of mine. Disagrees with everything, I think, and has done so. There is a book, there's a Festschrift to me, in which a lot of people of course are respectful, because it was done out of friendship. Nevertheless they're highly

[6] A. K. Sen, 'Determinism and Historical Predictions', *Enquiry* (Delhi) 2 (1959), 99–115. See L 7.

critical of my views. Charles Taylor is, Wollheim is.

GC That's the one Alan Ryan edited?

IB Yes. I've not the faintest bubble of – I don't feel, like Popper, that anyone who criticised me must be wrong, must be something wrong with them, something morally wrong. No. I know perfectly well whom I regard as enemies, people who wish to cause some sort of pain, in some way insulting. I better tell you a story about that. Three nights ago I went to dinner with Sir Nicholas Henderson, my old friend. Present were David Pryce-Jones and his wife, old friends; Lord Gowrie, who is now the head of Christie's and used to be a cabinet minister [?] government, and his wife – German – friends; a man called Alan [sc. Nigel] Ryan, who's a media man from television – neither a friend nor anything else – and Lady Falkender. I found myself sitting on my hostess's right and next to me was Lady Falkender. I said to Mary Henderson, who is deaf, 'You know, I'm afraid I shan't be able to address a single word to my neighbour.' She said, 'You want to change?' I said, 'It would be more comfortable.' So I got up and changed seats with Lord Gowrie. Everyone was very surprised. What was my motive? Not abstract disapproval of [?] Wilson – what do I care? But the following story will give you exactly what I mean. It's a real weakness on my part, I can't deny it. There was a Persian – an Iranian Ambassador called Parviz, who was the Shah's last ambassador in London. He had an affair with Stephen Spender's daughter. Stephen Spender is a very old friend of mine. So the Spenders somehow persuaded Aline and me to go dinner with this Persian, with the girl.[7] We were all going on to a party of John Gross afterwards. So we dined and [?].

[7] On Friday 17 June 1988. Parviz C. Radji, *In the Service of the Peacock Throne: The Diaries of the Shah's Last Ambassador to London* (London, 1983), 86.

Side B

… a book of memoirs,[8] the Persian, in the course of which – which were serialised, I think by *The Times* – in the course of which he describes a visit by Lady Falkender.[9] She came and she said, 'Oh, I am told you are a very dangerous man, perhaps I shouldn't have come here at all – perhaps…' – some sort of flirtation of this kind went on. Then she saw a book by me[10] on his table which he must have acquired simply in order to brief himself about who I was before having me to dinner. She said, 'Oh, Isaiah Berlin, I think he is rather a phoney, don't you?'[11] That was all. I don't know what he answered. [?] This was put in a box by *The Times*, square box, which is where I read it and everybody else read it. Since then I regard Lady Falkender as an enemy. Yes. I would refuse – what I could have done at this dinner party would have been to say, 'Lady Falkender, why do you think I am phoney?' – and [?] along those lines. She would have denied it and we would have got on very well. I was not prepared to do it. I rather like to think: if people do that, I don't – unforgiving I am. Nicko Henderson said, 'You should have forgiven her, you shouldn't have – after all, you are not phoney.' 'I am not so sure,' I said. (*GC laughs out loud.*) If anyone says something nasty about me I always think there is a grain of truth. That's what I mean. There's a man called Marshall Cohen, made a very violent attack on me.[12] Oh, he tried to make peace, he sent me gramophone records, he came to visit me – no good. (GC [?]. There was in a conference something ….) Personally nasty [?]. I can tell you other things of that sort. There was a totally unknown

[8] Previous note.

[9] On Friday 17 February 1978.

[10] *Four Essays on Liberty*: Radji, 145.

[11] She said that IB 'is brilliant but a phoney', and (four days later) that 'The phoniness lies only in his lack of original thinking': Radji, 152, 154.

[12] 'Berlin and the Liberal Tradition', *Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1960), 216–27.

American Marxist of the name of – I've forgotten his name, he was some sort of minor Jewish Marxist, who wrote an article, a review of something I had written in something called *Salmagundi*, which is a periodical produced in (GC One of the university …) one of those minor liberal arts colleges.[13]

GC Yes, I remember. We spoke about it.

IB And I couldn't remember the word 'Salmagundi' last time. That is the word. And he made a personal attack of a certain kind again, but I never met him. I think some name like, I don't know, Marshall Mayer, something like that, I don't know anything about him, some kind of American left-winger [?]. There are people like that. There was a man called Arblaster, who is a lecturer in politics in, I don't know, one of these English provincial universities – I can't quite remember which now. Sheffield, I think. He wrote a violent piece about [?].[14]

GC He is a leftist?

IB Very strongly leftist.

GC He was here in Queens,[15] I think.

IB He was at Oxford, yes. Oh, I met him then. He wanted to say that I had changed certain things in my – second edition of my

[13] Russell Jacoby, 'Isaiah Berlin: With the Current' (review of *Selected Writings*), *Salmagundi* 55 (Winter 1982), 232–41. See also Jonathan Lieberson, 'Isaiah Berlin and the Limits of Liberal Theory: A Response to Russell Jacoby', and Russell Jacoby, 'A Reply to Lieberson', *Salmagundi* 57 (Summer 1982), 185–90, 191–2. Salmagundi is published by Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York. See also GC nos 20 and 21.

[14] Anthony Arblaster, 'Vision and Revision: A Note on the Text of Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty*', *Political Studies* 19 no. 1 (1971), 81–6.

[15] Balliol.

essays because opinion had changed and I wanted to suck up to – because originally I was writing during the Cold War period, but then the Cold War was over, so I decided to modify opinions, to adjust myself to new times. That I didn't like very much. He is an enemy. These are very minor people. They are all people of third-rate kind. Funnily enough there are no major figures. Carr *was* a major figure, but he is about the only one.

GC But, then, coming back to …

IB I remember minding very much a violent criticism, not – by – of my book on Karl Marx, in the *New Statesman*, by a man called Postgate, Raymond Postgate.[16] Yes, I remember. He must be an enemy.

GC He was?

IB I never met him.

GC But let's come back to people – as you mentioned Ayer – you re-read their writings, either philosophical or even in literature, that caused you to change your mind, to be disappointed, or [?].

IB No. It's no good [?] along these lines. I won't be able to answer these questions, it doesn't happen to me very much. If you ask me a specific question, I can tell you. (GC [?] it's all right.) But in general I don't feel that something's come over and I no longer believe what I believed then. When I was young, I thought this and that; well, to some extent of course, like most people of my sort, I have moved to the right. In the 1930s I packed parcels for Spain with great enthusiasm, but my views about Franco never changed,

[16] 'Karl Marx', *New Statesman and Nation* 18 no. 456 (18 November 1939), 732, 734.

never. I couldn't go to Spain while he was there. And I wonder – there is one case where I can tell you a change has occurred, and that is about the Russian revolutionary terrorists of the 1880s – 1870s, '80s, '90s. There were these socialist – social-revolutionary terrorists who used to shoot wicked governors, or threw bombs at people, or killed Stolypin, or killed some wicked governor of Moscow, or killed some Minister of the Interior – Plehve, [?]. On the whole I was on their side. As a result of my views about terrorism, I can't help saying, and no longer am, on the whole, 'Lo ze ha-derekh'.[17] I *have* changed my view about revolution and terrorism. I would not be sympathetic today if I wrote about these people.

GC And you *were* sympathetic (IB Certainly), romantically, as a child, or [?]?

IB No, politically. [?] Not at all romantically as a child. But when someone like Lavrov, who was a famous Russian socialist living abroad, was asked whether he approved of these acts of terror, he said, 'No, I am against them, but I am not going to attack them. [?] I will not rise against them. In the end I'll [?] others. I may be wrong. [?].' Since Begin, in 1947, I realised what was happening. That created a break, that in particular: the Irgun, created a retrospective break. I no longer thought of the Russian revolutionaries in the same way. That is true.

GC What was your attitude towards the Irish terrorists in the early 1920s?

IB When George Kennan in 1945 used to tell me how much he disapproved of the Russian terrorists of the 1880s, I didn't agree

[17] 'This is not the way', the title of Ahad Haʿam's first essay.

with him. After that I am rather closer to his position. What? (GC But Collins …) Irish? (GC The Irish.) I don't think I thought about them very much. They were not very present to me. But my attitude to the IRA, of course, and therefore to Sinn Fein in those days – much more hostile than it would have been.

GC Now, I have to ask you about a whole group of people: 1968 – are you tired?

IB Yes. But continue.

GC If you are tired – so let's …

IB Well, let's go on for another quarter of an hour.

GC No, because I don't want to tire you.

IB Well, but another quarter of an hour won't make any difference. Continue. I'll stop you in about ten minutes' time.

GC All right. I think that if you are tired …

IB You want to embark on a new subject?

GC Yes.

IB All right then [?].

GC I can ask some small questions and not important ones, but otherwise – I'll tell you what I wanted to embark on and we will discuss it next time. The whole generation of 1968, not the students, but the professors: twenty years passed, we can speak about it; that's a topic that bothers me a lot. It took different shapes here in Europe, in the States. We spoke a little bit about Oxford

days. All right. I can see [?] explaining the background to what happened in Germany in sociological terms like Dahrendorf likes to do. What bothers me is one thing. In my opinion, particularly in America, the behaviour of the professors, the faculty members, and to a certain extent the intellectuals, in these days – in those days, is in some – in my opinion, a test to their intellectual, sometimes, integrity, sometimes [?].

IB Yes. Who were you thinking of?

GC And I am thinking about two different [?]: (*a*) professors that actually gave in to the [?].

IB Yes. All right. [?] I know what you mean. Yes, all right.

GC And secondly and more important [?], including possibly even Bob Silvers and others, who tried to join the movement of creating a new philosophy. Now everyone knows now that it's nonsense, this new philosophy.

IB Yes, of course.

GC People ought to know it then. But (*a*) I want to know who among your friends …

IB How they reacted and how I reacted to them?

GC Yes. And whether nowadays, twenty years after, they still – they are able to criticise themselves, because they include some of the most important minds.

IB Let's stop here.

GC All right.—¦