



Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 26

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Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 26

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Selected topics

Spontaneous use of metaphors by IB (recap: see no. 22)

‘Thinking is to relate, to classify, to symbolise, to interpret.’ Also to analyse? Not always.

IB’s division of his life into ten-year periods: Oxford ‘a complete abandonment of Jewish life’

Transition from super-academic to socialite

Sumner and IB’s return to All Souls after the war; Kennan and IB’s Harvard lectureship

The (non-)role of intellectuals in politics: America, France, Germany, England; Woodrow Wilson, Salazar ...

The periodisation of history: the distinct character of successive centuries

Russian studies in Oxford: Shukman, Willetts, Hayward, Smith, Obolensky

Funeral arrangements for Halina Willetts and Richard Ellmann

Russianists with cultural background: Mark Elvin and his relatives

Motivation for and (lack of) reaction to ‘Does Political Theory Still Exist?’

Strong reaction to ‘Historical Inevitability’ and ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’

Lack of reaction to ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’

‘Social scientists would give me up as a bad job’

‘[T]here is no major political theorist in the twentieth century’: Mao? Popper?

‘If [Popper]’s a major thinker, then I am too. That won’t do.’

‘Which one of my articles, my books, do I think anything of?’

‘Historical Inevitability’; the Agnelli Lecture; the pieces on Herzen

Ideas of permanent value: ‘[U]ltimate values are not compatible. Therefore the idea of a perfect society is incoherent.’

Core ideas: political liberalism and pluralism

‘I’m quite a clear writer’; ‘I expound rather obscure thinkers with a certain clarity’

‘Herder is really about Zionism’

‘I don’t like influencing people’; ‘I never felt that somebody followed in my footsteps’

Influence on Rawls

‘My ideas always appear very obvious to me’; ‘Surely the idea that some values are incompatible with others is self-evident’

Claim by Popper to have anticipated IB’s pluralism; Popper’s vanity

Making mistakes about the importance of events: the Moscow trials; Hiroshima and Nagasaki – ‘Big weapon, worse than the others’

The Nuremberg trials: David Daube

Indian independence

The 1945 Labour victory

UN call for the partition of Palestine, 1947

Those who were for and against partition

Walks with Beeley on Hampstead Heath

The War of Independence: IB writes to Amery

The declaration of the state of Israel

The 1956 Sinai campaign

Suez

Relations with Macmillan; it was he who thought of bringing the Israelis in over Suez; approach to Churchill

Why Clarissa Avon hates Macmillan

Ben-Gurion: ‘Eden is no good. Treacherous, weak.’

Side A

GC [*in Hebrew*] Sunday 7 [sc. 8] January. [*in English*] When I once asked you about your lectures, the way you lecture, you gave me quite a long reply about the incredible nervousness and your attitude and everything ...

IB Yes.

GC But I asked you also whether these rich wor[l?]ds of metaphors, are they prepared in advance?

IB No.

GC All ...

IB No, this is entirely done – I just repeat myself by nature, that's how I talk.

GC But you invent the metaphor?

IB As I go along, nothing is prepared, I have no idea what the next sentence will be. I know in general what I am going to say, but in very general terms. No, I don't think I have the slightest anticipation of anything I say. On the whole I regret this about myself because I say everything three times. But maybe if one goes as fast as I do, it's the only way of doing it.

GC That's good.

IB Yes, but it's not deliberate; I am not aware of it either. You say, 'You always speak in metaphors: do you know that?' I do not know that. I am not even conscious of it, not even now. It is true, however. Much that is incredible is true.

GC By the way, of course you have this capability, incredible capability, because when *we* speak you invent metaphors ...

IB As I go along.

GC I know, and yet in your lectures sometimes one cannot believe that they were not prepared.

IB No, nothing. The only thing which is prepared are the notes.

GC There is one such sentence in one of your lectures, I can't remember what it was: 'Thinking is to relate, to classify, to symbolise, to interpret.'

IB Very good.

GC Very nice. The fact that you didn't add 'to analyse', is it just by chance (IB Who can tell?), or there is more to that?

IB No, there is no more: I should have said that.

GC You should have said it, I see.

IB Yes; no reason for not.

GC I see.

IB It's a mistake not to have done it, certainly. What do I say? 'To think is to ...'.

GC Relate, classify, symbolise, interpret: it was in a lecture.

IB Yes, I don't know whether – I don't think to think is to analyse. But there may be something in that. To analyse is to analyse. It's a particular application of thought, but not every form of thinking is analysis. Whereas every form of thinking is these four things.

GC So it's not [?].

IB No – well, since you ask me – I ask, ‘Should I have said “analyse”’, I have just said yes, but no, there is such a thing as analytical thinking, and there is pure description, which has all these four elements. You might say that to interpret is on the edge, but if I say the cat is on the mat, that's not a thought, that's a perception. Let's think of a very simple thought: I am tired. That's interpretation, yes. Evolves[?]. Well, it's the same thing as classifying, in a way.

GC You have such strong inclination toward classification, you always ...

IB Yes, I like lists, as a kind of game.

GC And when one reads you one is of course amazed by the way you do it, on topics, all kinds of topics or angles, and yet I don't think that I find very often a natural inclination to divide in time terms; there are not many cases of automatic periodisation.

IB Could be; could be true, yes.

GC I don't know, it may be just an observation.

IB It could be true, yes.

GC Let's say, and if I'd asked you – oh, during a lecture, when you come to the problem of your biography, would you immediately, automatically, divide it into periods?

IB Yes.

GC As you can classify it? You can.

IB Yes, absolutely: it's quite natural to me.

GC How would you divide it?

IB Every ten years, in decades.

GC In your case.

IB In my case.

GC Why is it?

IB Because I always changed everything. In my life I didn't do anything much longer than ten years. There was always some change. But approximately at those points there were breaks. First there is the Russian bit – that's about ten years, eleven – then there is school, and university, that's another ten years – 1930, 1931, 1932. Then there is All Souls until the war, 1932 to 1940 all right, in Oxford, eight years. Well, the war is not ten years, but the war is an exception all right – that's only five years. But after that I go to All Souls in 1950, which between 1940 and 1950 is ten years; 1950 I start a new life in All Souls which is different from my life in New College – 1950 – and I become Professor in 1957, and then – or 1956, no, 1957, I think – and then I go to Wolfson in 1965 – well, that's a break of seven and seven not ten and ten, but still, near enough. After that I am at Wolfson for nine years. I tend to change direction approximately every eight, nine, ten, eleven years.

GC Now, then, if I would try to tell you that my impression is that if we had to speak about radical changes in your life, the impression I got – I would have said, let's say, coming to England, the break of the Second World War because America had an influence on you.

IB Certainly: something totally new.

GC Then your marriage.

IB Totally new. Yes, these are breaks. Yes, certainly: absolutely, quite correct. Those are genuine crises.

GC It depends in what mood you are when you think about ...

IB Yes, exactly. But I think in terms – simply because I decided in thinking about my life, that I – it's a joke, I happened to do it at ten-year intervals. But that's not strictly true, I agree; but you are right, those – the big crises are the arrival from Russia; in a way – what did you say? – Oxford is a break too.

GC Oh, sure.

IB It's a complete abandonment of Jewish life is what it is. Oxford is a break, America is a break, marriage is a break, total break, of course. Changes my whole direction, absolutely.

GC That I realise.

IB Yes, certainly. Well, socially too. I had become a social [?]. I meet people – and before that I'm a don. I'm absolutely a don like other dons, not very different. All Souls is perhaps more connected with what's called the upper class or the wider world than other colleges would be, but still, I'm a typical Oxford don, over-typical; like a Jew, I always go too far, almost exaggeratedly. But [?] you didn't know me. But I can assure you, I am super-academic, after the war and after meeting with you in England particularly, I become – I begin to go to salons, and begin staying in country houses, and begin knowing the upper classes, which I have never completely ceased from doing. More or less, yes, because Aline doesn't like it too much, so after that it all came to an end. But still, it half goes on.

GC The impact of England is doubled or tripled. On the one hand the very five years that you stayed there, and ...

IB You are talking about America.

GC America, sorry.

IB This is England.

GC The job you did, and ...

IB In the New World.

GC The New World. On the other hand the social impact is very interesting, and that's just because of the – partly probably the relations you established while in there ...

IB Without doubt.

GC And mainly, probably, because of the reputation of your letters to ...

IB Well that's why I got back to All Souls. The ...

GC Not only, yes.

IB The Warden of All Souls, Sumner, was a very good Russian historian who didn't fundamentally like me, and thought I was liable to waste time, but he was – although he was a pure scholar, and apparently very austere and idealistic, he was deeply influenced by worldly considerations, and the fact that important fellows of All Souls came back from the war, including people – his greatest friend at Balliol was Macmillan, who is a contemporary – that people like that came and praised my work made a huge impact on him. It is disgraceful that that should have been a reason, but it certainly was.

GC It grew into the dimension of a myth.

IB In America, yes.

[confused talking over each other]

GC We in Israel – every one knew about it. *[laughs]*

IB But that just came from America. (GC Really?) Yes. It's absolutely true. I was a myth in America, because all the American journalists [?] and a lot of people in Washington that saw me in that light[?] – and that's how it travelled to England. In England it only came through government departments, which was not all that – that doesn't go so far. I met academics in England who knew nothing about this. In America they did. I got to Harvard in 1959 [sc. 1949] entirely because George Kennan recommended me, and I would have never got to Washington if it hadn't been for that. My American world was not academic.

GC Though you kept no contact with academic in America then I thought not ...

IB Oh yes.

GC I thought that, I usually – even spoke about it on the radio, that your main – that you were fascinat[ed] in America by the political life, by the way – you even thought that it was a good example of intellectuals serving in [?] politics ...

IB No, I wasn't particularly impressed by that. It's true, but it's of no interest to me. No. Some people are. It is a great American thesis, particularly under Kennedy, the importance of bringing academics to public life. No, I didn't pay any attention. That isn't a thing I thought about.

GC No? That it was a good example of intellectuals ...

IB ... in politics. Yes, true.

GC Because [?] to be said because ...

IB But it didn't.

GC [?] the only example [?] not revolutionary ...

IB Because I was one. It's exactly what happened to me. After all (GC [?]) – but my own case was that. My work in Washington was exactly parallel to theirs. New Deal, of course – no, I was totally fascinated by the New Deal, but not by the fact that the intellectuals were brought into it. I happened to meet them, I talked to them, I found it more natural to talk to them because they were [intellectuals], but the proposition of the union of politics and academic life in America, and it's a fact, constantly commented on by American observers, was not something which I thought about.

GC Well, you see, the fact that you were intellectuals and others, that doesn't mean anything because in the war all your friends participated.

IB In government, yes.

GC Now you can see how one can err, I was sure that as this seems the best if not the only [?] of intellectuals playing a major role in politics except in revolution times ...

IB But America is the only example.

GC Yes, that it would have appealed to you, that it would have [?].

IB No, not at all. I didn't – but the idea is a good idea. It didn't pass through my head; absolutely; it didn't go through: my head.

GC [?] I thought about [?].

IB Never mind. Can't be helped. But let me tell you, it isn't quite true. Intellectuals played an equal part in French history after the Revolution (GC [?]), after, no, not at all – 1830s, 1840s. I can assure you. The ministers of Louis Philippe are professors, to a high degree. Guizot was a professor, Thiers was a kind of academic writer, Victor Cousin, who was a minister of education, was a professor. In France they did play a part, at all times.

GC Oh, yes ...

IB In the nineteenth century.

GC And I think that you can find probably other ...

IB Well, France, becoming ministers.

GC No, shaping ideology.

IB That happened in France.

GC Only in revolution.

IB No, not at all. It happened in France right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, as it happens. Let me assure you that the whole of the ideology of Louis Philippe's reign, *enrichissez-vous*,¹ this whole business of the bourgeoisie being on top, was invented by

¹ François Guizot speaking on 1 March 1843 in the French Chamber of Deputies: *Le Moniteur Universel*, 2 March 1843, 345 col. 2. See also Jacques Allier, 'Esquisse du personnage de Guizot', *Actes du Colloque François Guizot (Paris, 22–25 octobre 1974)* [supplement to *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 122 (January–February–March 1976)] (Paris, 1976), 27–45 at 36 (and note 23, where Allier quotes Guizot inaccurately, despite claiming to provide the 'texte exact').

intellectuals, not by politicians: it really is so. Germany, no. Well, mind you, even in Germany, even though they were not ministers, German national consciousness was built by professors.

GC Oh yes, that's a shame[?].

IB As you know. Nationalist professors. Don't exclude that. The influence of Mommsen, Treitschke (GC I was going to ...) – what's his name? – Ranke, Treischke, Mommsen, Siebel[?] and all these political professors, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who is a violent nationalist: nationalistic professors with ideologies are a German speciality. In England, no, because the English are not interested in ideas. England? No. John Stuart Mill could have been a professor, but that's not the point. So he didn't interest very much.²

GC Intellectuals get the ultimate power if the – only the Robespierres and the [?]. When it comes to the ultimate power.

IB Ultimate powers, yes, but they never had in America either. Nobody gets to the top from the intellectual classes. No President? (GC Woodrow Wilson, but it's ...) Woodrow Wilson is the nearest to it. Salazar, you could say – it's not a very good example.

GC But he was a very impressive man, Salazar.

IB Of course, but he was ...

GC [?].

IB Undoubtedly. Salazar and Woodrow Wilson, I'm trying to think of professors who came to power.

GC In Italy ...

² This is what he appears to say, though it doesn't make sense.

IB Painlevé for a short time. Prime Minister of France, eminent mathematician.

GC. Léon Blum.

IB Yes; never academic.

GC [?].

IB [?].

GC Mendès France – not[?] academic but ...

IB Intellectual. (GC Intellectual.) Mendès France not very intellectual – ideologist. [?] Blum, yes – less than you might think. Mendès France was simply a socialist who probably read books.

GC [?].

IB No doubt.

GC And conceptualised ...

IB Yes; oh, he had socialist ideas.

GC And clear mind.

IB He had great[?] socialist ideas, but that you could say about Gaitskell too. You could say it about Gaitskell; you can say it about – can't say it about Attlee; but you can say it about Gaitskell, Papandreou, our friend. (GC *laughs*.)

GC When intellectuals get to power and particularly today, central power, they become less intellectual.

IB That's what happens, yes.

GC [?] At the same context of division in time, if I attack you in a question: how would you divide the twentieth century? Would you have immediate reply?

IB You mean periodisation? No.

GC That's what I was going to tell you, that you have (IB Quite true) an instinct for classification in many other ...

IB But not by periods.

GC Not by periods.

IB I think that's true.

GC We sit down five minutes and think, you will never talk ...

IB No, I'll tell you. I have thought about – for five minutes about the twentieth century, but it's not periodised. The whole twentieth century, yes, because – why I did it? – because I had to get money for Wolfson College, and in that connection I wrote a piece³ – I can't remember, I may have sent it to Ford Foundation, or I may not, but what I said was: The two – every century has a certain colour, a certain shape, a certain pattern, from the point of view of people who look on it from a later period. The seventeenth century is a period, in England at least, of religious wars, revolution and poetry – religion and poetry. The eighteenth century is certainly everywhere the period of elegance, of shape and form in poetry, in architecture, in life. Comparatively peaceful period in which a

³ **'The Foundation of Wolfson College, Oxford'**, first published as 'Notes on the Foundation of Wolfson College', *Lycidas* [the magazine of Wolfson College] 1 (1973), 2–4 at 2: 'every age has its own peculiar shape and dominant characteristics ...'.

certain neoclassicism goes through everything. Some kind of imitation of an imaginary classical world, everywhere. The nineteenth century is an age of social problems, of the novel, and of – to some degree of explosions, social explosions. (GC Yes) Yes. The twentieth century has in it two important things which never happened before. One is the Russian Revolution and its aftermath: Fascism etc. – direct consequence. The other is science and technology, which made strides never made before. Those are the major phenomena of the twentieth century, for which not poetry, not the novel, not painting, not music – oh, it's nineteenth-century music, I did add that,⁴ certainly. It was eighteenth too, but [in] particular – eighteenth–nineteenth music, certainly. These are the two outstanding ... St Antony's looks after the Russian Revolution, Wolfson has to look after science.

GC So that's a brilliant exposé, written with a [?].

IB Yes, of course.

GC If you had to write about the twentieth century in a different ...

IB I might not have done.

GC You might have done, you might have invented ...

IB But still, when I asked myself, 'What does it stand for?', I wouldn't have asked myself the question. Having asked the question, it's the only answer I could give. But of course I had an *arrière-pensée*, but of course I had a – it was not a pure – [?] just came by itself. It was certainly intended to have practical consequences – propaganda, propagandist.

GC But you did think it's right?

⁴ Not so.

IB I think it's true. It was propaganda, but I think it's true.

GC Yes.

IB I don't think St Antony's looks after the Russian Revolution, and I don't think that Wolfson looks after science. But that's another matter.

GC [?] Yes. But let's say ...

IB Though I must tell you in connection with this, I received a visit yesterday from a very nice man who used to be ambassador in Moscow called Cartledge (GC [Sir] Bryan Cartledge), who was at St Antony's once, and (GC He is now in England) he has been put – yes, he has been made a member of a committee of three by Baker, Minister of Education, to report on Russian and Soviet Studies in England. He's quite a good man for that purpose. I don't know who the other two are, but I think he did tell me: anyway, some ... And he then said to me, 'What about Oxford?', and I said, 'Russian Studies in Oxford on the whole are dead.' St Antony's, well, there's [Harold] Shukman, there's always been Shukman, very nice man, I said, 'Yes, but there was – what's his name? – (GC Harry Willetts)⁵ [?] Harry Willetts, who was somebody; there was Katkov, who was eccentric and curious, but still, he was a personality; there was Max Hayward. These were people. Now, nothing. The Professor of Literature, Gerry Smith, is a good man. But the rest are nothing. Obolensky was the best professor of Russian history in Europe if not the world – he is retired.

⁵ At St Antony's in the late 1970s Harry Willetts observed to Tony Simpson, now editor of *The Spokesman*, that at Russian Studies meetings 'Isaiah would say something facetious.' Exchange between HH and TS on X, 11–12 January 2024.

GC Obolensky? (IB Yes.) Not Dimitri?

IB Dimitri.

GC He is Byzantine History, isn't he?

IB [?] Russian history. Professor of Russian History. He is a Byzantist, of course, but he knows the whole of early Russian history – he knows [?] Russian History inside out. Early Russian history is his specialty, up to Ivan the Terrible, but if you ask him about the nineteenth century, he knows enough.

GC He likes to [?].

IB Of course, that's another matter. [?] St Antony's. But certainly; of course he has. But I don't know who his friends are. Willetts is, or [?] of course. (GC [?].) Yes of course they are. Yes.

GC With Willetts you never know [?].

IB Oh, he liked Willetts very much. Yes, but he greatly admired Willetts. (GC I'm sure.) He did admire him.

GC Everyone [?].

IB I know. I have now discovered something about that business about funerals, Jewish funerals; I have cleared it up. I complained to Mrs [Miriam] Kochan about two scandals, one was Mrs Willetts and the other was Ellmann (GC Richard Ellmann?). Yes.⁶ I was told first of all that they would not bury Mrs Willetts because she was not a member of the Jewish community;⁷ anyway she didn't

⁶ Richard Ellmann (1918–87), biographer.

⁷ The Oxford Jewish Community is collectively non-demoninational, though groups of its members may align with specific denominations.

pay dues,⁸ which is not true. It's not true. That is not the reason. I was surprised. But that's what Pat [Utechin] told me, it's what Willetts told her, it just isn't the case. The second was Ellmann, they said, well, the reason for not burying him was again the same thing, that – not a member of the community, which is true enough, but of course his parents were Jews. So I complained. I said it's scandalous. Anybody who is a Jew is entitled to be buried in the Jewish community. Now the answer is the following. In the case of Willetts, he is [to be?] cremated.⁹ It's an Orthodox synagogue. That is under Halakha not allowed.¹⁰ They are right. If they ever – since they are members of the United Synagogue, they can't help it. Nothing wrong with that. If they insist on cremating him, all right. I have never – some liberal synagogue does it. The reform synagogue employ – I don't know. I think they do.

GC They do, I know.

IB Whereas the United Synagogue does not. You needn't be super-orthodox – they don't – but believe in resurrection of the body, in theory, T'chiat ha-mesim,¹¹ [?]. In the case of Ellmann they did not want him buried in the Jewish part of the cemetery; they wanted to have a Jewish service outside the Jewish cemetery.¹²

GC The family?

⁸ Even if the community felt obliged to bury a Jew who was not a member but happened to die in the vicinity, they might take a different attitude to someone who was in a position to pay but failed to do so.

⁹ Halina Willetts was cremated, and her **'cremated remains'** were buried in Wolvercote Cemetery on 12 March 1982. Harry Willetts did not die until 2005.

¹⁰ Officially, Orthodox Jews indeed don't permit cremations. All other Jewish denominations do.

¹¹ As elsewhere, IB mixes Israeli and Ashkenazi pronunciation, producing what is sometimes referred to as 'Ashkephardi'.

¹² This is understandable even if not officially outlawed.

IB Yes, but that they couldn't do. So they did bury him outside, but without – oh, somebody read something.

GC So why did the family want him to be buried outside?

IB Because she¹³ is a goya ...

GC No, the other [?].

IB [?] *He* wanted to appear[?] to [be?] given a Jewish funeral, but they didn't want him to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Whatever the reason, that is the answer. She enquired from a man called Wilfred Faust, who is quite a nice man, who is in charge.¹⁴ The story was different. The story was that a [?].

GC Jonathan Webber¹⁵ [?].

IB Webber, exactly. [?] but they're not true. None of this is true. I was able to dictate a letter to thank her – dictated it to Pat, who didn't protest.

GC I [?] to Russian Studies now in Oxford. [?] position.

IB Sure. The only universities which are going to be encouraged are Birmingham – apparently there's a new professor called – I have forgotten his name, from Bristol, who is rather good.¹⁶

¹³ Ellmann's wife Mary née Donoghue died in June 1989, i.e. after this conversation occurred.

¹⁴ Wilfred Faust was Honorary Treasurer of the Oxford Jewish Community, and used to take a tough line with people who were not paid-up members.

¹⁵ Jonathan Webber was in charge of the Oxford Jewish Community's Religious Affairs section, and conducted funerals in Wolvercote. He remembers reading Kaddish (unofficially) at Halina Willetts's cremation.

¹⁶ Up to this point the recording was transcribed by Edna Gill and corrected by Donna Shaley, who transcribed the remainder.

IB I don't know.

GC Birmingham has a good department, yes.

IB And there's a good department more or less in, I think, Nottingham. It has an old Russian department. It's supposed to be quite good. I don't know who the professor is.

GC A lecturer there is ...

IB Glasgow used to have a Soviet department. It's collapsed. It's very sad that the English should have – London, the Professor of Russian History is not good, Professor of Russian Literature is worthless: that's – what's his name? – Freeborn. [?] he was at Oxford. No good. But there are one or two people there who probably know something. Cambridge no good at all.

GC I told Dahrendorf, whenever he chose people now, it's true that he has no choice but to take International Relations people and so on, but let him try still to find people with some cultural background, because the people with a cultural background, like Harry Willetts, like others, are disappearing and it will change the culture of the College.

IB He knows, I'm sure he sympathises. He understands that.

GC Oh, yes.

IB Archie Brown, I expect, will be kept, in the end. Not much cultural background.

GC He has no background, culturally.

IB No. Nice man. Intelligent.

GC Mark Elvin – he's an example.

IB Elvin, yes.

GC You know him personally?

IB Oh yes, I know Elvin, I knew his father, I knew his uncle. The father did not have it. Their grandfather was a trade union leader.¹⁷

GC Grandson of?

IB Trade union leader. Old Elvin was a straight working man. Like Carr and [?]. He had two sons.¹⁸ One was a rather crazy, minor cinema expert, who was in Moscow in my day. He was a doorkeeper at the British Embassy, because he wanted to be in Moscow, because he was very left wing. He turned into a ferocious anti-Soviet, of course. But when I was in Moscow, when Cripps was there, Cripps would say, 'Well, Elvin, what are your Russian friends saying?' He said, 'I wouldn't repeat a word they say to a class enemy' – he would say to Cripps. But in the end of course he became ferociously – and married a ballerina called Violetta, who came to England and immediately divorced him, a very pretty girl. The brother was the man who was head of ...

GC Brother of Mark?

IB He was – yes – he was head of, surely of the place here, of the Working Man's College.

GC Ah, really? Ruskin?

IB Ruskin. It's exactly ... He was a Labour figure.

¹⁷ Herbert Elvin (1874–1949).

¹⁸ Lionel Elvin (1905–2005), father of Mark (1938–2023) and Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford, 1944–50; and George Elvin (1907–84), m. Violetta Prokhorova 1945, divorced 1952.

GC Labour figure being his education.

IB That's right.

GC Then he had another appointment. He had an appointment ...

IB In London.

GC In London.

IB Could very well be.

GC And now, Mark tells me by the way that Trinity Hall in Cambridge treats him very nicely. His father, I mean.

IB What is his father now? Is he alive?

GC Yes, but very old,¹⁹ and was given a party ...

IB Why was he at Trinity Hall? As an undergraduate?

GC Uh-huh.

IB Very likely, yes, all right. Very nice man, the father. I know the father. Sincere, honest, high-minded man. Very decent.

GC And Mark is a combination of a good contemporary[?] [?].

IB He's a proletarian, the father.

GC He's a proletarian.

¹⁹ Lionel was eighty-three at this time, and died in Cambridge at the age of ninety-nine.

IB Fundamentally proletarian. I mean he's not middle class. He's lower middle class.

GC I think that Mark is more conservative[?].

IB Oh yes.

GC But then he's pro-Israel ...

IB Definitely, anyway – is he? I had no idea.

GC In Oxford ...

IB The father would be too. (GC [?].) The father, by nature, would be.

GC He admired Israel. He told me the other night that if people say that St Antony's SCR is an interesting place, it's at least 50 per cent due to the influence[?] of ...

IB You can't ask for more.

GC Ideally ...

IB You can't ask for more. Very good.

GC Because it's true that we have people who deal with contemporary studies, but with classic education – we still maintain ...

IB A high standard. Tell me, this man we talked about, Bartov.²⁰ He was a Wolfson Fellow.

²⁰ Presumably Omer Bartov (b. 1952), whose 1983 PhD from St Antony's was on the Nazi indoctrination of the German army and its crimes on the Eastern front in the Second World War. He was a Rothschild Fellow 1981–2.

GC He was not.

IB He was not?

GC [?] he came to write his thesis.

IB But still ...

GC No, he came here to write a thesis, and he got your help from [?].

IB Oh I see, because it says something about Wolfson in his testimonial.

GC Yes, you helped him.

IB I see, all right, yes.

GC But in this way, because a Wolfson fellow can't be ...

IB No, exactly [?], of course not. They were very good.

GC Your ...

IB He can be. Theoretically he can be a PhD student. Nobody – in theory you can take a BA.

GC In the terms of reference of the College?

IB The College? No. [?]

GC What do you mean? So maybe we have in mind different things. What is a Wolfson fellow?

IB Oh no, I'm sorry, I'm talking about the Rothschild Fellows. I apologise. (GC [?].) Oh yes, exactly, I'm talking about Rothschild Fellows in Wolfson.

GC Ah, yes. That I know. But he was not a Rothschild Fellow.²¹

IB All right.

GC Your ...

IB Continue.

GC Why did you write the article 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in French?²²

IB Because I was commissioned. I was asked, I was – I had a letter from that particular journal. What is it called? Where it originally ...

GC [?] something.

IB Something or other, who said, there is a particular – this is devoted to this particular topic: does political theory still exist? Would you make a contribution? I think Raymond Aron or somebody must have written to me.

GC And it was a thesis that you willingly wrote about?

IB I can't remember. Yes, I did.

²¹ He was: see previous note.

²² 'La théorie politique existe-t-elle?', *Revue française de science politique* 11 (1961), 309–37; repr. in English as 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2nd Series (Oxford, 1962: Blackwell), CC and PSM.

GC I'm sure.

IB Yes, I'm sure I did.

GC Because of your attitudes towards the ...

IB Well, I was a professor probably, by that time. When was it written?

GC 1961.

IB Well, I was a professor of a subject I didn't intend to let it be thought was dead.

GC But on the other hand, your criticism – it was a good opportunity to criticise the negative role of the [?] studies on political ...

IB Of course.

GC That's the main reason.

IB Of course.

GC Did it prompt reaction?

IB None. To my knowledge.

GC What about all the political scientists?

IB Not a word.

GC They are all natives there.

IB Not a word. I don't think anybody read it. In France I'm sure they didn't. And in England it appeared in this anthology, edited

by Runciman and Lively [sc. Laslett]. I think it was Lively and Runciman. I think those two. There were four volumes of essays on political topics, political theory. It appeared as one of them, and nobody took the faintest interest.

GC It's an article that is mentioned and referred to and people speak of, I can tell you, but I was expecting it up to ...

IB No storm.

GC The whole gallery of political scientists.

IB No storm. No reaction whatever. Don't think they read it.

GC No, they read it.

IB I don't think so.

GC The whole young generation of political scientists.

IB I doubt it. Maybe now, because it's reprinted in that little volume of mine.

GC In the political ... (IB Yes) – *Concepts and Categories*.

IB Exactly.

GC Yes, you know, but people knew about the article.

IB I never heard it referred to.

GC I was astonished that I didn't come across [?].

IB I've never heard it referred to, for good or ill.

GC Referred to, I'll show you, but [?].

IB All right, never – no reaction. The other pieces had a violent reaction, ‘Historical Inevitability’.

GC All right.

IB A storm. ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, a storm.

GC That’s why I ask about ...

IB ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’, no reaction. About Stalin and so on.

GC [?] *Foreign Affairs*.

IB Yes. Nothing. Not in *Foreign Affairs*, no.

GC [?].

IB Yes, it was *Foreign Affairs*, quite right.

GC How interesting. Because I would expect a counter ...

IB Nothing whatever. I was simply written off. Not one of the – not part of their subject.

GC How interesting, because it is ... Well, I’ll try to discuss it with friends here – what they ...

IB What do they say?

GC Those who are political scientists.

IB Who are they? For example.

GC I speak to these students, people like Avner de-Shalit and others. What's the ...? David Miller, you know, these kind of people.

IB I shouldn't think David Miller read it.

GC They haven't – ah, I'm sure they read it.

IB David Miller, most unlikely. Quite a nice man. Not very bright. All right.

GC [?] Barry – what's his name?

IB No. You mean Barry in London?

GC Yes, but the thing is there was a meeting with it. He lectured on [?].

IB May be in London now. He would have read it, yes. But he would agree.

GC He would agree, yes, surely.

IB You mean – what's his first name? – Brian Barry? Brian Barry, yes. You can ask Brian Knei-Paz what they say in Jerusalem.

GC Well, Brian is not an example of what the Jerusalem department [?].

IB No.

GC [?].

IB All right.

GC Whenever somebody comes from the department, I ask Brian what he ...

IB All right, who teaches Politics in Oxford? Max Beloff would not have read it. His successor Sammy Finer might have done.

GC But let's say [?] philosophers. Even philosophers, let's say Jerry Cohen.

IB He might have read it. He was a pupil of mine.

GC All of them read it. (IB Mmm ...) But I'll make a go.

IB You can ask Pulzer, yes.

GC I don't [?] him personally. I'll ask Jerry.

IB OK.

GC All right. But anyway, you still – there is nothing in the attitude that you would change your mind about?

IB I can't remember what I say, but I don't think so.

GC I'm sure you wouldn't.

IB All I'm really saying is there are permanent questions – is what it's about, isn't it? It's not dead, because the questions it asks are ...

GC Yes; no, but it's more than that. Time and time again you distinguish between the attitude of the social sciences and the [?].

IB As always.

GC I was expecting the attack from this direction, you see.

IB Social scientists would give me up as a bad job.

GC [?] they actually say that it's really bad, but that's the essence of their ...

IB It was nearly dead, and it is nearly dead.

GC [?].

IB And it is nearly dead. Look, the difficulty (GC I know) about it is simple. No, I'll tell you what I mean. The difficulty about political theory: there is no major political theorist in the twentieth century. It's a very dangerous thing to say. When I said that to Crossman, he said, 'What about Mao?' After all, something read by five million – five hundred million people, you can't rule out. Then who else is there? Popper. Bernard Levin said, 'Why not Popper?'²³ Not a major political thinker, no. A decent [?]. If he's a major thinker, then I am too. That won't do. Who is there? People of the size and reputation of Burke, Mill, I don't know, Mar[x] ...

GC The Conservatives will say Oakeshott.

IB They would say Oakeshott, you are quite right. They would, yes. Who I have no – not much respect for. Really not. The anti-intellectualism is tremendous. Fundamentally, he's an enemy of the subject.

GC Would you be cross if I'll ask you ...

IB No.

GC What among your articles and books [?] you had to ...

²³ 'May I not put in a word for Karl Popper?' *The Levin Interview*, BBC2 Television, 23 May 1981.

IB No answer.

GC What is the question?

IB Which one of my articles, my books, do I think anything of?

GC If you had to list three, four, five ...

IB If they all had to be destroyed, if they were all destroyed, I'm allowed to preserve ...

GC Yes.

IB Well, not the book on Karl Marx. That's before the war, finished. Not the articles on philosophy.

GC None of them?

IB None. They're all fundamentally minor. None of them make[s] a difference of a radical kind. I'm trying to think: what else have I written? Not the one on History: 'History and Theory'.

GC Inevitability in History?

IB Well, I wonder about that. That a little more. A little more. Wait a moment. Not – the only ideas of mine which I think have any permanent value at all, if at all, are the idea that values – ultimate values are not compatible. Therefore the idea of a perfect society is incoherent.

GC I understand.

IB That is, I don't know where I say that. I say it in my last lecture, to Agnelli, where it's spelt out in full, and it's spelt out in full

elsewhere too, I think in the Inevitability one. It is. And, let me see, what else? Certainly that.

GC ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’?

IB Oh, no, it’s amusing, it’s – I enjoyed doing it, but it’s – it’s more widely read than anything I’ve ever written, by far, in every country, including Russia, now. Not translated, but read.

GC And the articles on Vico, Herder?

IB All right. But nobody – who is into Vico or Herder? I’ve revived them. It’s true that I’ve had some part in their story. Herzen is better than Vico or Herder. Maybe the articles I’ve written, the two or three articles I’ve written on Herzen, I would like to live. And I suppose ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’. I stand by that.

GC Which means that your criterion is mainly, or only ...

IB Is really political liberalism.

GC Pardon?

IB Pluralism. That’s what it’s all about.

GC I know, but you are looking for those articles that have in them original (IB Yes) thought that will stand the test of time.

IB Of time. I think so.

GC But a good elaboration of a concept that is not so ...

IB Original.

GC Original. But still, by the sheer fact that you have your typical ability to address ...

IB To expound, yes. To describe, yes. To make clear. I'm quite a clear writer. I did that for Marx in a way, but Herder and Vico, certainly. That's a case of pure exposition. Still, if I didn't write it, you could still read them, and get it from themselves.

GC That's it. I had in mind this kind of ...

IB I expound rather obscure thinkers with a certain clarity. I do clarify, yes. But that's clarificatory.

GC Yes, I know. But Herzen is ...

IB And also it relates them to contemporary problems, these two thinkers. It's not purely historical. It's not just scholarship.

GC And then I think 'Two Concepts of Liberty' ...

IB Herder is really about Zionism.

GC Yes, [?], but consciously?

IB Yes, I think I liked Herder, I must have done, because the ideas about nationhood is exactly what I'd believed for a long time. If I hadn't been a Zionist, I wouldn't be so attracted. It's really a kind of a disguise for Zionism, that article.

GC You told me more than once that you were and you are inhibited to dominate the minds of people who ...

IB But I don't like influencing people.

GC Pardon?

IB I do not want to influence people.

GC And once you said it even in the context of responsibility.

IB Absolutely. That's the point, yes.

GC And when did you discover this in yourself?

IB When people said about other people, 'I see he's greatly influenced by you', I always withdrew, that was a shock to me.

Side B

GC ... put it in yourself, actually when you were already [?].

IB I didn't discover it myself. I only discovered it because other people said that this was the case.

GC Not as a young teacher or ...

IB No. Nobody ever, I never felt that somebody followed in my footsteps.

GC That you told me, but ...

IB I didn't feel it. Not only did I disapprove of that, but I didn't actually notice that somebody was returning my own stuff to me.

GC And nowadays you don't regret this attitude?

IB No. I'm rather pleased to have some ... When my friend Rawls said to me that my stuff on 'Two Concepts, and partly Historical Inevitability, had a very considerable influence in American ...

GC So you like [?]?

IB I was terribly surprised, but not, but rather gratified.

GC [?] Really?

IB Yes. But astonished. My ideas always appear very obvious to me, and the fact that I've said it seems to mean surely everyone must have thought it already. I'll tell you a little funny story. I said to Magee, to whom I expounded this in one of those interviews which he had with me. 'I can't think – one of my ideas which I am most attached to is the idea of the incompatibility of ultimate values. Inside people, inside groups, between civilisations, everywhere. Surely the idea that some values are incompatible with others is self-evident. Somebody must have thought of that before me. I know it's in Austin,²⁴ but Austin got it from me, I know that. Because I – that I'm aware of. I taught, I taught him that.

GC Would you reformulate it again? The idea of the incompatibility ...

IB Of ultimate values. That equality and liberty, or spontaneity and planning, or with anything you like. Mercy and justice, anything you like.

GC Are they only incompatible, or are they also conflicting? Or contradicting?

IB They can be both, but certainly incompatible. You can't have both, you have to choose. It doesn't mean you – [?] must be contradictory because if they are not compatible, if you have one you can't have the other. But surely it's self-evident. So Magee said, 'I'll ask Popper.' So he asked Karl Popper, who said, 'Yes, someone did have it before him.' 'Who?' 'I did,' he said.

²⁴ J. L. Austin, 'A Plea For Excuses': *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1979), 203 note 1: 'why *must* there be a conceivable amalgam, the Good Life for Man?'

GC [*laughs*]

IB But it's not in print²⁵ is all I can tell you. Well it was, later, but long after I'd written my piece. That was very typical. He is the most con[ceited?], one of the vainest people I've ever met in the world.

GC [*laughs*] Now, I don't want to embark on a big topic, so I'll ask some small ones. And it is connected partly with Washington, but it's more of a general nature. Your attitude – when you look retrospectively upon your reaction towards events, surely we all experience events that we think are of great importance, and then it proves to be a farce or a non-event. On the other hand, surely sometimes we face very important events and we don't realise.

IB All right. We can make mistakes, yes.

GC We are bound to make mistakes.

IB We don't notice it at the time, later we try [?].

GC In both ways: sometimes ...

IB And sometimes we pay [?] they turn out to be trivial.

GC I'll give you one example: Algeria. The conference of the Palestinians, now, in Algeria.

IB Yes.

²⁵ A case can be made for saying that the opposite is in print. For example, in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (London, 1962), 397 (in an appendix written in 1961), we read 'it is a fact that people with the most divergent cultural backgrounds can enter into fruitful discussion, provided they are interested in getting nearer to the truth'.

GC It might be ...

IB A turning point.

GC A turning point, and it might not. And people there were feeling, at least many felt like in Basel. Now, can you think of events that you didn't realise their importance you didn't realise at the time?

IB You mean – yes, and vice versa.

GC And vice versa. I thought about it – I started thinking about it even during the Second World War.

IB Well, the Russian Revolution. But I was too young, so you can't say that I thought it ...

GC [?] your memory ...

IB I was aware that something big had happened.

GC Your memory [?].

IB I didn't think historically thinking.

GC Your memory is incredible.

IB But I didn't think historically (GC Oh, sure), this is more important than this or ... In England, in my lifetime, Second World War, that was obviously a major event, so – and nobody doubts that.

GC But let's say the trials of Moscow.

IB No, I didn't pay attention, no. And yet they were something.

GC That's because you were not a Communist. Had you been a Communist ...

IB Oh, yes, of course. Crucial. But if I'd been a Communist, it would not have been crucial, because most Communists thought they were perfectly justified. Only if I'd ceased – later, if I'd ceased to be Communist: Christopher Hill believed every word. I never met a Communist who was horrified by it at the time. I didn't know many Communists, but I didn't know any left-wing persons who was [sc. were] outraged at the time. Dewey had a kind of trial with the – there were Trotskyites had a trial in Mexico, with Trotsky [?] – that's far away. I know nobody in England who reacted. I knew they were no good, the trials. Of course I knew, even though I was at school. No, I wasn't at school. Certainly not, I was at Oxford.

GC No, you were at Oxford. You were already ...

IB I thought they were – I knew they were monsters. I knew really.

GC Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What do you remember?

IB Nothing. No effect.

GC You were in Washington?

IB No.

GC Already in Moscow?

IB In London. I was in London. When was it, in, was it August?

GC Yes, it was August.

IB During Potsdam.²⁶ because Truman told Stalin, or was it Churchill? He didn't react. Wait a moment. (GC But it was ...) Look, the war came – the German war came to an end before.

GC Yes. VE ...

IB VE comes before. Now when is VE? VE is when? VE is in May?²⁷ May. Late May. All right. The election was in July.²⁸ The bomb had not fallen then. The bomb had fallen during Potsdam.

GC But the elections also were during Potsdam.

IB Oh yes.

GC After the Labour came to power? I don't remember.

IB I mean, if after Labour, then Attlee must have been consulted.

GC No, I think was it was Churchill's time ...

IB I would think so.

GC The interim government.

IB But, but Truman approved of it. That certainly.

GC But you don't remember ...

²⁶ The Potsdam Conference ended on 2 August 1945.

²⁷ 8 May 1945.

²⁸ 5 July 1945; the results were delayed until 26 July.

IB Ah. Think this is a terrible moment. A turning point in history, which it was.²⁹

GC Or discussing with friends, or ...

IB I wonder where I learnt about it? Did I know anything about it before, the concept of the atom bomb?

GC Ah, the concept of the atom bomb, possibly, but I don't [?].

IB Yes. I think I must have done. I think in Washington, in 1945 – well, 1946, of course.

GC [?].

IB No, of course. Nor did I. It's not that. I'm just trying to think (GC But the concept, of course), the idea – I simply can't answer. But I have to say, it didn't change my life. I didn't feel the world had changed. Big weapon, worse than the others. Just [?].

GC Did you follow the Nuremberg trials?

IB Yes, but not very attentively.

GC You were in London, or in Moscow?

IB I was in – when was Nuremberg?³⁰ 1946?

GC I think in 1945 [?] 1946.

²⁹ On 11 August 1945 IB wrote a despatch from Washington about the atomic bomb beginning 'It has been a tumultuous week of earth-shattering events.' H. G. Nicholas (ed.), *Washington Despatches 1941–45: Weekly Political Reports from the British Embassy* (London/Chicago, 1981), **598–600**.

³⁰ 20 November 1945 to 1 October 1946.

IB No, it can't – 1945 is too soon. Can't 1945.

GC Early 1946.

IB I was in Oxford. First in America. I think Nuremberg occurred in the summer of 1946. They must have taken a year to collect the material.

GC Now, after all, the Nuremberg Trials – there were conceptual problems there. Herbert was already in Oxford.

IB Yes.

GC I mean, do you remember any discussion, anything [?]?

IB None. The only person who was violently against it was [David] Daube.

GC Daube. What was wrong?

IB Illegal. Unconstitutional. No such thing in international law. Simply revenge. The victors do it – no moral justification.

GC [?].

IB Oh, he's a super-German. Nobody is more German than Daube. I never liked him very much. He is not happy at Oxford: not happy at All Souls, particularly. He was terribly disliked. Yes.

GC And other such events, let's say the decision to evacuate India.

IB Nothing. I took it all in my stride. Why not? India of course – it's quite normal. I didn't react strongly. The only thing that pleased me was the Labour victory, that was something.

GC That was [?].

IB Yes. That was the summer, I was in England. I hadn't voted because I was in America when the voting occurred, because the result was in July.³¹ That excited me. I was entirely in favour of it.

GC In the Israeli side: 29 November, the Resolution of the United ...³²

IB I was anti-Conservative right through the war.

GC It now appears, by the way, that the Labour victory was less of a surprise to ...

IB To whom?

GC Jock Colville, in his diaries, writes in 1943 or 1944, after sailing from London to South Africa, I can't remember, and being in a boat with soldiers and sailors and so on, he predicts that the Labour victory is ...

IB Why?

GC Because he saw the mood of the people, of the soldiers.

IB Why were they in favour of Labour?

GC He doesn't go into details. But it's interesting. On the other hand, we all had the feeling that it *was* a shock.

IB To me, certainly. And to Stalin. And to Churchill. And to Eden.

³¹ IB must have returned to England between the vote (5 July) and the result (26 July).

³² UN Resolution 181, 29 November 1947, called for the partition of Palestine.

GC Eliyahu Golomb comes back from London in 1944 and reports in Mapai that the atmosphere now is more optimistic that the Labour might win.

IB So. Already in 1944. The disappointment in Israel about the Labour government was unbelievable.

GC People can't [?].

IB They can't ...

GC Bentwich[?] never realised ...

IB [?]. Particularly the man here – what's his name?

GC Berl Locker?

IB Berl Locker. Couldn't – I'm sure he couldn't begin, he couldn't swallow it at all, he couldn't, it's an absolute a blow over the head.

GC You know that when the results of the elections were known (IB Triumph), I was in a kibbutz, young boy, seventeen years old, in a *makhane avoda*,³³ in a kibbutz, and all the kibbutzim [?].

IB Cheered.

GC Not cheered. They were alight ...

IB Oh, the beacons.

GC Beacons [?].

IB Of course. We've won. New world.

³³ A (Zionist) work camp, to prepare immigrants for agricultural work.

GC But Ben-Gurion was more realistic.

IB Even then?

GC Yes. Ben-Gurion was a realistic politician.

IB Mind you, how could they know about – who was the Labour government? About Attlee they couldn't know. Attlee never showed his hand. He was anti.

GC He was anti [?].

IB From the beginning. From – he was against the Balfour Declaration.

GC [?].

IB No, he didn't say anything. Didn't speak.

GC There were some who deceived[?].

IB All right. He didn't speak. Right. Now (GC Bevin), Morrison was ambivalent. He didn't become an enemy. (GC [?]) Quite. He didn't become an enemy, exactly, but he wobbled. But he was not hostile.

GC He didn't harm[?], because ...

IB No, I know.

GC As it was Bevin's domain ...

IB Yes, I know. But he was the chairman of that committee, of the cabinet committee which – partition. And he was in favour. Against the Foreign Office. Bevin used to appear on Zionist platforms.

GC Bevin was until a certain moment [?].

IB Exactly.

GC Spoke openly.

IB I know. So he betrayed. All right.

GC I don't know how far [?].

IB Now, Dalton was pro.

GC I'll tell you why. His junior minister was Keith Jones.

IB Who was pro.

GC Who was pro.

IB Definitely pro, and remained so.

GC [?] tell us. We spoke with him and he thought it was Bevin's idea. At the beginning of the war Bevin was ...

IB Well, maybe they were. Keith Jones remained quite loyal.

GC Yes, but he was [?].

IB Very.

GC Arthur Greenwood was a friend.

IB Yes.

GC Noel-Baker was a friend.

IB Exactly. Quite a bit more. Dalton was a friend.

GC Dalton was a friend.

IB Almost too much. Yes, so it was all just Bevin, and the Foreign Office. (GC Well, Bevin ...) And Attlee.

GC [?]. Alexander was the Minister of Defence.

IB He was against, yes, because of – yes, he was anti.

GC [?].

IB Yes. Alexander certainly was against. Not clear why, but he was.

GC But then – let's not discuss the Labour Party.

IB No, who else were they? Wait a moment.

GC At the beginning, those are the major figures. You had there Lord Jowitt as the Chancellor.

IB He was pro.

GC He was pro.

IB Or neutral. Yes, I know: Jimmy Rothschild etc. Well, now, who *were* they?

GC [?] Stafford Cripps.

IB Against. Absolutely against. Like with the Webbs. He was a cousin of Mrs Webb, on pure socialist natives. Harold's a black man.

GC But it doesn't show in the Cabinet Ministry[?].

IB No, but I'm telling you.

GC I know.

IB Those who knew him. Maybe he was careful. He was straight 100 per cent against. Like Sidney Webb. Same reasons.

GC And then you had Nye Bevan, who was a friend?

IB Yes. So you see – so why ...? – the surprise is natural.

GC Sure. Now, where were you in 29 November?

IB So it's Cripps, Bevin and Attlee.

GC And the reformulation of British interests in the Middle East.

IB Of course. All right. It's not arbitrary. Not just anti-Semitism.

GC Not at all. On the contrary. Had it been only the problem of the Jews and Arabs in Palestine, all of them would have turned on our side. The problems were Egypt, Iraq. Where were you in 29 November, when the resolution of the United Nations ... London?

IB I was – nineteen-fifty-...

GC 1947.

IB 1947. The date is?

GC 29 November. The resolution on partition.

IB On 29 November 1947 I was in Oxford. It did not make a tremendous impression on me, I am astonished to tell you. (GC

No, don't be [?].) Pour[?] on you. Of course I knew the preliminaries. I mean, I knew what was happening. And I knew that efforts were being made, and I knew there were debates in the United Nations, and I knew who was who, and I went for walks with Beeley on Hampstead Heath.

GC In 1947?

IB Just before this.

GC Yes, when you anticipated that there is no chance for a [?].

IB Exactly. He told me that. So I was involved. It wasn't that I didn't take an interest.

GC Surely.

IB And I used to try and persuade him that he might be wrong. He said to me, 'It's ...'

GC He counted [?].

IB They all counted. Everybody counted. And Beeley certainly – and I used to say to him, 'You know, this may not be so.' And I remember Webster used to say to me, then – he lived in the same house with – somewhere near Beeley, I think, in London – would say, 'Ah well, all these anti-Semites are against, of course. The American anti-Semites always get together with the British anti-Semites. That's the trouble.' That was Webster's verdict. But he was counting, yes. He thought that the majority were against, the Mandate would go back to England, and then they would ...

GC [?] free hand [?].

IB Free hand. And they'd create some kind of ...

GC They had their plans [?].

IB They had their plans, yes. In fact a long pencil-like settlement of Jews from Tel Aviv along the sea, or something.

GC When you speak about the War of Independence, what do you have in mind? The whole period since December 1947, I mean the last six months of the Mandate, in which there was a war between us and the Arabs?

IB What, forty-... – you're talking about 1948?

GC 1948. Or only from May 1948, when the state was ...

IB Declared ...

GC Declared, and the regular army ...

IB So what are you asking me?

GC What is the War of Independence for you?

IB The War of Independence for me – wait a moment, when was – when did the seige of Jerusalem begin?

GC Before [?].

IB In that case, nothing to do with the state. Because I wrote a letter, the people[?] – the Jews of England of course [were] very upset. The assumption was: the Arabs might win. Who did not think that? Everybody in England, including the Jews, thought it might happen. I wrote a letter to Amery.³⁴

³⁴ See IB's letter to Amery of 27 May 1948, E 49–50. This is a reply to a letter from Amery, which may itself be a reply to an earlier letter from IB which has not been found.

GC [*faint and unclear*] I said that Beeley didn't think that the Arabs would win.

IB He didn't.

GC But they believed that they would gain more territory. That the result of the war will be a much smaller Jewish state.

IB But still a state. But even before the state was declared? You mean after the resolution?

GC Not immediately after the resolution, but during the process of the guerilla wars between us and the Arabs and our victory.

IB In 1948?

GC In 1948. He evaluated the situation in a very clear way. He thought that the Arab armies would do better, but the outcome would be a smaller Jewish state.

IB All I can tell you is that I wrote a letter to Amery, saying he must – he was then a minister, I think; well he was not a minister, Labour government, that's quite right. He was influential anyway. I said to him, 'Look', he must, in Parliament or wherever – he wasn't a Lord, was he? He was still in the House of Commons.³⁵ Yes. Never became a Lord.³⁶

GC And he was not elected in 1948?

IB So what was he doing?

GC Why did you write to him [?]?

³⁵ He lost his seat in the 1945 election.

³⁶ He was offered a peerage but declined it.

IB Why did I write to him? Because I knew him. But why did I write to him? Just because he was an important person, I think. I simply said something must be done to save the Jews in Jerusalem. There mustn't be a massacre. You really must take steps to prevent this. The British must do something – I mean the mandatory administration. When did the attack on Jerusalem begin? The siege.

GC You can't distinct[?] ...

IB No, can't pinpoint it.

GC You can't. But in late April there was a dangerous situation. But what you describe would fit more the situation here after [?].

IB I remember having to go to a meeting of the Anglo-Jewish Association, of all things, to bring pressure on Members of Parliament etc. This rather non-Zionist body.

GC It was probably after [?].

IB The worry was very great.

GC It was the most difficult month. Now, where were you when the state was declared? In Oxford, too?

IB This is when, this is ...

GC 15 May 1948.

IB No, certainly not. I was at Harvard.

GC Do you remember the event then?

IB Wait, was I in Harvard in 1947 or 1948? No. I was in Oxford. Harvard in 1949.

GC Do you remember the ...?

IB You just asked me. No. Not very much.

GC Not 29 November, but the declaration of the state in 15 May.

IB I'm telling you, yes. No, I wasn't deeply disturbed. I knew it would happen. It was clear to me that something like that would happen. Weizmann was against it, I remember. I wasn't sure ...

GC [?].

IB Oh yes he was. Deep... Look. At a certain point it was *ein brera*,³⁷ he became for it. It was *ein brera*.

GC Ah, yes. You're right. But when [?].

IB By 1947 he was in favour.

GC But the chips were down at the eve of the decision, which was in a narrow majority he sent Weisgal to Ben-Gurion and said to declare (IB The state?): it was now or never.

IB The war?

GC No, the state. (IB The state.) Now or never.

IB Oh, no. By 1947 he was in favour. Like[?] Bevin. Once the Anglo-Jewish war started, no question. Once the English were not going to behave nicely, that was the end. Oh, you are quite right about that. Who was not in favour? Shertok was not – Sharett.

GC [?].

³⁷ 'There is no alternative.'

IB Who voted against?

GC The major vote was not in the agency, but in Mapai [?].

IB All right.

GC Against were the traditional Hapoel Hatzair: Kaplan, Remez ...

IB Why?

GC Because – they didn't vote against, but they voted in favour of the American suggestion to postpone it for a month.

IB Why?

GC To enable armistice negotiations to materialise. There were initiatives [?].

IB Why would it be easier to bring an armistice without the state?

GC Ah, because the Arabs, that was the stipulation of the Arabs. They wouldn't agree to the negotiations on armistice if we had declared a state.

IB Whereas otherwise they might.

GC [?].

IB I see.

GC Now, the Sinai campaign in 1956. All your friends were against the British move of course.

IB 1956.

GC [?], the collusion.

IB Certainly. I was – I can tell you exactly what my position was. I had ...

GC Were you embarrassed?

IB No. I was rung up on the telephone by my friend Raimund Hofmannsthal, who said, 'The Jews have marched into Egypt.' Or 'They're marching into Suez.' And I said, 'My God, I'm not sure they should. Great powers can allow themselves these things. Small powers are usually disciplined in such cases.' By 19... – by the next day I was entirely in favour. I was not sceptical at all. I wanted them to go forward, and I wanted them to win. And when the American intervention occurred, I was extremely disappointed. And very sorry. I thought it was a terrible mistake on the part of Israel, but of course I wanted them to march, and I asked myself – I was in favour of the English, too.

GC Ah, you were in favour.

IB Yes. In favour of collusion.

GC So you were not – in favour of collusion.

IB Pro-Suez. Straightforwardly pro-Suez. In Oxford there was a terrible explosion. In St Antony's there was a meeting – had to protest. So during the march – [?] and the people who were there who protested were – the vast majority of the dons in Oxford were anti, against. James Joll was beside himself, my friend Tony Andrewes, the Harts – Cole thought it the worst crime committed by the government. Who was in favour of Suez? David Cecil.

GC David Cecil?

IB Of course.

GC Deakin probably.

IB Deakin certainly. Maurice Bowra.

GC John [?].

IB Who?

GC [?].

IB Oh, I don't know.

GC Because everything [?].

IB I have no idea. John Sparrow, of course. I did not sign a pro-Suez letter, and I did not sign an anti-Suez letter. Because I thought in the end, if it was pro-Suez, I thought it would be a failure. My position is clear. I was pro because if they lost, it would go against Israel. Simply for straight Israeli patriotism, and no other reason. But I didn't see how it could succeed, for the following reason. I thought, supposing they won: all right, Nasser has gone – then what happens? They install Naguib. Then what happens? They can't sit on bayonets. Sooner or later it was bound to be independent. The whole idea seemed to me lunatic.

GC Now, you then were in quite friendly terms with Harold Macmillan.

IB No.

GC In the 1950s, no?

IB Not in the – oh, not in 1956. Wait a moment. Yes, I was. I didn't see him at all.

GC So you never – have you ever discussed with him Israel?

IB No, he was entirely pro- – well, it came up: he was 100 per cent pro-Israel every time I met him. But he always said, ‘You mustn’t give in. You.’ When he talked to Jews, he assumed they were not English. ‘Oh, you must stand up!’ Later, in the 1970s, ‘Oh no, don’t yield’ – about the Six Day War, and later Yom Kippur. 100 pro-Israel, never anti. (GC Do you know that ...?) In talking to me.

GC He was.

IB He was, yes. I’m sure it’s true.

GC Now in the background to Sinai, to the collusion (IB I know), the idea of bringing the Israelis in [?].

IB Was his. How wonderful. (GC And he ...) Very clever.

GC One sentence, I’m finished. He knew that he couldn’t persuade Eden, so he went to Churchill ...

IB Because he was anti-Semitic, of course.

GC ... [?] persuade Churchill, and Churchill ...

IB Persuaded Eden. (GC [?] Eden was infuriated[?].) No, 1because he hated the Jews.

GC [?] Nasser[?] with Macmillan in Egypt[?].

Aline comes in.

IB [*to Aline*] It was very interesting this, what Gaby told me. The idea of involving the Jews in Suez – Israelis, in Suez – was Macmillan’s idea.

AB The idea [?].

IB Yes.

GC Of bringing us into the collusion ...

AB It was already some time after ...

IB With the French.

GC They were discussing it with the French, and he thought ...

IB But today it was something different. Today was ...

AB [?].

IB But he stopped the war too early.

GC Ah yes, that's another story.

IB It wasn't quite so bad. Because Eden always believed that that's true. He did it entirely to get Eden out. That's why Clarissa hates him. But the idea of a combination of Jews and French and English – of course Eden was violently anti-Israel, and on the whole anti-Semitic.

GC But he was consistent in the Suez affair.

IB For once: he was persuaded it was necessary, for strategic reasons. He didn't want to do it.

GC Oh, no.

IB He did it with the greatest – he held his nose. He did it, but *à contre-cœur*.

GC You see, Ben-Gurion was so loyal to Eden. When the agreement was signed in Sèvres between the British, the French and us, Ben-Gurion insisted that there would be an agreement with Macmillan. When the two British delegates came back to London, one was I think Pierson Dixon, I can't remember who was [?], they got the hell from [?] that they left the document, so they went back, begging the Israelis ...

IB To destroy it. To give it back.

GC Ben-Gurion didn't [?], [?] kept it, but promised Eden that never ...

IB He would never reveal it. Never did. I know. Ben-Gurion told me all this. I know it. But he said to me that Eden was a dreadful man.

GC That's not [?].

IB He did say that. He said, 'Eden is no good. Treacherous, weak.'

GC [?].

IB I don't see why I shouldn't say what Ben-Gurion said.

GC Nothing will be published without you.

IB Of course. Eden was anti-Semitic, I was perfectly aware. I'm saying that.

AB [?] Clarissa [?].

IB No, of course not. Not that I care. Clarissa knows it perfectly well. Right.

[tape now distorted and speed variable: unsuccessful attempt to switch off?]

GC [?] I think [?].

AB No, it's not so bad.

GC No, it's not so bad.

[confused simultaneous talking]

GC Ah, all right. Because usually the problem with taxis is on Saturday night.

AB [?] another day.

IB [?] dining [?].

AB And he has time to take you because [?].

GC All right.

[confused simultaneous talking]