Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 27

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online.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

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, No you all just for a Berber little glimpse of the sea]with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at **berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk**

Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 27

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

First posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 10 May 2025

Revised 13 May 2025

Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 27

Conversation date: 15 January 1989
Transcriber: Donna Shalev
Disk conversion: Howard Atherton, Apex Technology Ltd
Consultant Hebraist: Norman Solomon
Recording: **27A** | **27B**

Selected topics

Violence versus terrorism
Writings on pluralism
Writings on Herzen
What IB chooses to write about
Boomerang theory of Russian ideas
Stirner
IB's foisting of his own ideas on to the thinkers he describes
IB's recent visit to Russia; his fixation on Russia
The importance of reading in the original
Reasons for not visiting Russia again until after Gorbachev; reduced nostalgia
IB's pupil George Ignatieff; 'Counts are mythical figures'

Meetings with Pasternak and Akhmatova (AA)

'I am a tremendous non-self-examiner'
IB's pre-Revolutionary formation
Paddy Costello
Care in talking about Pasternak and AA
IB's hero-worship: Pasternak, AA, Toscanini, Virginia Woolf, Churchill, Edmund Wilson, Brendel, Stravinsky
First meeting with Stravinsky
Amanda Haight
AA's mythologising of life, including her meetings with IB: Dido and Aeneas
Anatoly Naiman
IB, AA and the Cold War

IB offends AA by marrying
Zhirmunsky identifies AA's poems referring to IB; *Cinque*
Alexander and Salome Halpern
Lydia Chukovskaya
IB and AA don't meet in 1956
AA and Boris Anrep
Pasternak's anti-Semitism
Ben-Gurion against publication of *Zhivago* in Israel

*

BG's dislike of Anthony Eden
BG and de Gaulle
IB's visit to BG in Sde Boker: BG's 'task in life'
Maistre and the formation of nations through violence
IBs view of BG; BG created Israel
IB's view of David Vital: breach with IB

Side A

GC 15 January, and let's see: it's all right. Last time, *en passant*, you said that one real thing that you changed your mind [about] radically was [that] until 1945, 1946, you were quite terrible to the Russian terrorists before the Revolution. The terrorism in Palestine caused you to change your mind towards terrorism. On the other hand, you described yourself as developing, having developed, since your childhood, a strong antagonism to violence. You even trace it, you believe, to the scenes of the Russian Revolution. Now, don't you see any conflict or contradiction between violence and terrorism?

IB Yes, I think I do. Oh, I think you're quite right. I can't defend it. The point is this. It's true that the sight of a policeman being dragged by a lynching bee in 1917 did give me a terrible distaste for physical violence. But when I read nineteenth-century Russian revolutionary writings, I developed such hostility to the tsarist regime, of a typically liberal kind, and to the misdeeds of the people

who governed Russia, and the officials, that the opposition to them in the 1880s, 1890s, of all these revolutionaries who tried to shoot governors, or shot the grand duke, didn't appear to me at all shocking. I thought the situation was bad enough to justify some kind of reaction. But later, you're quite right – and I used to have arguments, I remember, with George Kennan, in later years, who was always very violently opposed to the Russian revolutionaries of the 1880s and 1890s, whom he thought of as purely destructive. Well, I defended their point of view, but perhaps not their – but even so, it was really Palestine 1947, and Begin and all that, the King David Hotel 1946, and [?] various[?] events – two to[?] three sergeants, 1947 – which gave me a real sense of horror, of what that kind of terrorism could be against innocent people. After all, the people the Russian terrorists shot were not innocent. They were selected, to some extent, because they were thought to be villains. In this case it wasn't a question of selecting bad people, it just – the idea of just general disruption, and general terrorisation. And that, I admit – that reflected back on my view of the Russian terrorists, and I no longer think that they were quite as justified as perhaps I used to. That is true.

GC Yes, I think I could expect this kind of reply. Secondly, again, going back to our previous meetings, when we discussed shortly the list of articles that you might have kept, had you had to destroy all the others.

IB Sorry, what articles did I have to destroy?

GC If somebody wanted to destroy all your articles.

IB Oh yes, I see. What would I like to have kept, supposing everything was destroyed except …

GC Except … So of course you mentioned [?] those articles or publications or books, that dealt with your major lifetime idea, attachment to pluralism?

IB Yes.

GC To the keynote of the ultimate values are not compatible.

IB Yes, and the need – also the idea of the need to, not so much – yes, to the fact that that entails that final solutions are always wrong.

GC And no ideal society?

IB And no utopias.

GC Yes, exactly.

IB And that the whole idea of utopia is dangerous. And not innocent.

GC So you have it in 'Two Concepts of Liberty'. You have it even in 'Inevitability of History' [sc. 'Historical Inevitability'].

IB Yes.

GC You spelt it out in your last lecture, in the Agnelli Lecture, clearly?

IB Yes.

GC All right. Then you said that you might have added to the articles that deserve remaining, from the point of view of original ideas, original contributions, the articles on Herzen.

IB Yes.

GC Those are – in a very modest way, you try to enlist only those articles that consist of really original ideas, containing them, ideas

that one couldn't find in other places before you. I want to ask you about another category of articles. Not totally original contributions to the twentieth-century political thought, and not just what you said about your articles about Vico and Herder – you said all right, I revived them, I brought them to the public. But what people could read them?

IB Quite.

GC Just reviving them …

IB To popularise them …

GC Yes. But what about articles like – on Belinsky, on Turgenev, on populism, it's not just popularising, it *is* interpretation.

IB Certainly. But then there was plenty about them already, in Russian, of course.

GC All right.

IB It was untranslated. Not very much in the West. But that was not so much any ideas of my own. Of course I only dwelt on those ideas of these Russian forerunners of the Revolution (GC Yes) with which I sympathised. That's my tendency. My tendency, always, is to write either about people whom I regard as very important critics of the views which I accept, or about people who put the ideas which I accept in a new and vivid light. That of course applies to Belinsky, Herzen, Turgenev and so on. What I did there was simply to emphasise certain ideas on their parts which had not been appreciated in the West.

GC That's what I …

IB That is right. That's to say, I wanted to celebrate *their* originality, not mine. But originality. So I did the same thing with Herder and

Vico. People have accused me – quite rightly, from their point of view up – of not taking any notice of this or that in Vico or Herder: not being comprehensive enough. This is perfectly just. The only things I extracted from Vico or Herder are what I regarded as original, true, important and interesting. I'd left out everything else. This was not meant to be a total exposition (GC Sure) of their views. I was not writing history of philosophy, of a systematic kind. So were the Russians. There are certain things in Belinsky which nobody had ever said before me, I say with a certain boldness. For example, the fact that, as far as the West is concerned, Belinsky invented the idea of commitment, being *engagé*. This is not strictly true. For example, the Saint-Simonians in France in the 1830s already talked about the importance of ideas being socially useful, or socially important, and condemned what might be called art for art's sake. That is perfectly true, but whoever took notice in 1860 or 1870 of what Saint-Simon or Saint Simon's disciples said about literature, said about art, they said it all right, but it was part of a general field of conflicting ideas of which Paris was full in the 1830s, the 1840s; they all collided with each other and plenty of other ideas and they created a general intellectual climate of a lot of important interesting ideas criss-crossing, colliding, combining, dividing and the rest of it.

In Russia, because not many ideas came across to Russia, largely because of censorship, these ideas took root. And there is my theory of the boomerang. That I don't think anyone else ever said: that the whole – every original idea about politics or society or even public morality in Russia comes from the West. Nothing was born on Russian soil. But by coming to Russia, by being taken much more seriously than by people in the West, by being made the centre of people's lives, not just their stated opinions, but being lived, and not just thought, they acquired a certain force and a certain vitality. They changed their personality, and in this form hit the West again. That's the boomerang. It's exactly what happened to Marxism in Russia, for example. All kinds of ideas of Marx's, which might or might not have influenced various countries in the West, by coming to Russia, by planting themselves in Lenin's head,

they generated a Marxist ideology about Party, about central control – democratic centralism – about discipline, about making, about ways of making a final revolution, ways of enforcing it, which I don't think would have been born by nature in the West, even after the commune, which was universally condemned; or virtually universally condemned, by even such very progressive thinkers as Mazzini and Mill.

That's what I mean: that all I wanted to bring out was those ideas which are of permanent importance. In Herzen's case, I think I underestimated even their – the degree of influence on him of, for example, the forgotten German thinker Stirner. He mentions him, and I did make some reference to him, but I think I perhaps slightly overestimated his originality, but not his eloquence, his force and his influence. Herzen's ideas are – the ideas which I mean are that in his time, when people no longer sacrifice ae human beings to gods or idols, there are new idols, new altars upon which human beings are brought as a human sacrifice. These are certain ideologies. That of course I found most interesting and true. In other words, things like nationalism, socialism, the forces of history, Christianity, class, warfare, anything you like, and so on – in the name of these abstractions people are slaughtered on the ground that, unless this is done, the solution will not be realised. And he protests against that with great violence. Now Stirner did, I think a year or two before he wrote, not much, but about that time – he did say all -isms are forms of despotism. And that's where it springs from. Herzen does it much more eloquently, much more interestingly, and the illustrations are much more vivid and much more relevant. But the seed of the idea is in the forgotten Stirner.

GC And you discovered it after writing about Herzen?

IB What?

GC Stirner.

IB What? I wrote about Stirner, but that was much later. No I didn't. I never wrote anything … I'm sorry, no, that's false. I wrote a piece about Sorel. No, I never wrote an independent essay about Stirner. He was attacked by Marx in the, I think – what was it in? Either *The German Ideology* or the – what's it called? – that other thing, the something of Paris, remember? Oh, the unpublished manuscripts. No, that was published, I think. What was it called?

GC [?] Marx?

IB A famous book.

GC [?] *Brumaire* or …?

IB No, before that. No, written in the 1840s. It's called, not *The Prophets of Paris*, but something like that. Or *The Trinity of Paris*, or something like that. Raymond Aron afterwards wrote a kind of parody of that. A book attacking Sartre and Merlau-Ponty, and all those people. But he gave it the same title, very nearly. What was it called?

GC I'll find it.

IB It's very famous. Stirner was one of them.

GC Have you had the opportunity to refer to Stirner in a later article after Herzen?

IB Maybe refer, but not written extensively.

GC So, to give him his due as regards the origin of Herzen [?].

IB Exactly. Well, I do …

GC [?]

IB No, and others are have done it since my time. Walicki in his history of Russian ideas in the nineteenth century[1] already comments on this. But still, when Herzen says that the metaphors which Herzen uses are ten times more interesting than Stirner's, and that his famous lines about progress, 'Who is this Moloch, who stands in front of the toilers in the sea of blood and mud, trying to [?], and as they advance towards him, he is always backing, so that they never get to him. No,' says Herzen, 'the ideal must not be remote, their reward for labour must be at the end of the day, otherwise the corpses are there, but not the paradise.'[2] All that is better than Stirner: Stirner doesn't complain about the horrors which these movements inspire, he just says they are simply chains on the human mind. He doesn't go beyond that. He doesn't talk about the victims. That's real Herzen: so it's good enough. So if you ask why did I do that, because that I've never found, afterwards. It's something which ideologists and revolutionaries, socialists don't at all like to be reminded of.

GC So that's why …

IB I've just read quite an interesting piece.

GC Pardon?

IB I've just read two days ago quite an interesting piece written by Michael Howard, which he sent me, on ideologies – history and ideologies. More or less in this spirit, which in his letter to me he claims to have been inspired by me. I'd no idea that I had the slightest influence on any of the work of Michael Howard. But still, I wrote him a letter and thanked him. And made one correction: I thought something he said wasn't quite right. I think he says that nationalism is an artificial, invented ideology, foisted upon people.

[1] *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Oxford, 1980).

[2] See RT2 104–5.

I don't think that's true. I think it's – according to me, it's a spontaneous reaction to wounds and resentments, as in the case of our dear friends the Zionists.

GC Now the Palestinians.

IB And now the Palestinians. Absolutely, it's not artificial at all. Can't say that Arafat invented Palestinianism.

GC I want to go back to another small question – well, it's not that small.

IB I have to add one thing. I have been accused, with some justice, I suspect, though I cannot be expected to provide evidence of it, of always slightly describing the thinkers of the past in my own image, slightly foisting upon them ideas – my ideas – which I then profess to find in them.[3] There may be some truth in that, but if so, I don't notice it.

GC I mean, at least as regards Herzen, it's very common for people to say that.

IB I know.

GC I don't remember that I read it, but I remember discussing it with friends, that it seems as if you like in Herzen what was originally in yourself.

IB Could be.

[3] As Ernest Gellner put it later, 'Machiavelli, Vico, Herder, Tolstoy, all of whom come out looking suspiciously alike – Niccolò Berlini, Giambattista Berlino, Johann Gottfried Berliner and Lev Nicolaevich Berlinov.' 'Sauce for the Liberal Goose' (review of John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*), *Prospect*, November 1995, 56–61 at 56.

GC Yes. One can't blame people for thinking …

IB But tell me, I wonder if it is originally in myself, after all I read Herzen in the 1930s, by pure accident: I read Herzen because I found his works on the shelves of the London Library. Maybe the unconscious influence of Herzen already began to fester inside me in the mid 1930s. Belinsky, the same. I only read Belinsky because Herzen talked about him. So I began reading Belinsky. I became completely captivated by them. By the end of the 1930s. I don't think that when I was writing about Karl Marx in 1934, 1935, I gave much thought …

GC No, but apparently basically in your frame of – the combination of your intuition and thought, from the very beginning, you were inclined to talk anti determinism, for pluralism …

IB Oh, I'm sure.

GC That's for sure.

IB I don't know when that begins. Nothing I read before the war.[4]

GC It comes from yourself.

IB Yes, but I don't expound it. If I died in 1939 …

[4] The germ of pluralism (perceptible with a dash of hindsight) occurs in his letter to Elizabeth Bowen of 30 November 1933: 'I am reading the philosopher Malebranche who says that a better world than ours might exist but it would be far more complicated, & God being good, & desiring to give us a world not wholly unintelligible produced this compromise between simplicity & goodness, which are he thinks (odd interesting view!) incompatible. […] Did not Kant say "out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made?" ' F 72. For Malebranche see *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680), trans. and ed. Patrick Riley (Oxford, 1992), e.g. 116–17, 128–9. For an even earlier adumbration of pluralism in IB see his **'Some Procrustations'** (1930).

GC You wouldn't have expounded it.

IB … Nobody would have known.

GC I'm sure. Because you didn't write about it. But I think that some basic ideas are – you had to elaborate by others, but sometimes they are in yourself, before [?].

IB But that's true of almost everybody. I notice that in other people. For example, when I read Leonard Schapiro's very solid and very useful, and rather dull, book on Turgenev, I thought he did with Turgenev what I was accused of doing with Herzen. Made him out to be much more reactionary than he ever was. But nobody can dispute Herzen's pluralistic sentiments.

GC Sure.

IB When he says 'The purpose of life is life'[5] itself, this is not an idea which socialists or ideologists of any kind can begin to accept.

GC When you last visited Russia …

IB This year.

GC This year: you told me about it twice. Once when we came to see you on a Saturday or Sunday, without the machine, and you told me quite at length, and then we spoke about it shortly and I recorded it. Generally speaking, I had a feeling that you didn't come very happily or with deep impressions. There was a kind of, I don't know whether to call it disappointment, or it was not the kind of experience you were expecting.

[5] «Цель жизни – жизнь.» ('Tsel′ zhizni – zhizn′.') A. I. Gertsen [Herzen], Diary, 28 June 1942, *Sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1954–66), vol. 2, 217.

IB No. This isn't true. I wasn't expecting anything.

GC You were not expecting …?

IB No. Nor was I disappointed.

GC I am speaking now in terms of your personal relations to Russia. Not the political side of it or anything, just you and Russia.

IB What about it?

GC You have your special love affair with the Russian language. And you have your special relations with Russia. You visited Russia several times against different background. But still, there is something between you and Russia.

IB Of course I am fixated on Russia to some extent. That's absolutely true. Partly because of being cut off from it early in life, but nevertheless reading about it. And taking an interest, because I had this unique instrument, the Russian language, which made certain things known to me, which my contemporaries weren't in a position to know, and read certain books which in their original form they couldn't read. And reading in the original is terribly important. I saw a Russian film last night, which was recorded on television. The very first Tarkovsky film, called *The Childhood of Ivan*,[6] which is about the war – about the war against the Nazis. The conversations between the soldiers were of a degree of vividness and a degree of – somehow conveyed themselves – and expressions in them which are – conveyed their experiences in so direct and so rounded and so fresh a fashion that the English translations which appeared on the screen, although not inaccurate, didn't begin to convey that. I suddenly realised that if I didn't know any Russian, and saw the film, I would have no idea

[6] Known in English as *Ivan's Childhood*.

what Tarkovsky wanted. Or very little idea. I may be wrong. But the initial, the knowledge of the original language – well, it's not an original idea, but in the case of Russian literature, particularly, is somehow irreplaceable.

GC But coming back to your visit to Russia …

IB No, all right. I only expect[ed] what I read in the papers – the newspapers. I knew about Gorbachev and all that, and I didn't go to Russia before – not because I took no interest – for two reasons. First of all, because I was never very interested in the Soviet Union. This may strike you as paradoxical.

GC No, it's not.

IB My real interest ends in about, I don't know when, 1905 or so, because after that, as Vladimir Nabokov once said, Russia was hit on the head [*laughs*] and suddenly woke up to a something quite different. And I was never a Sovietologist. I wrote one or two articles about it,[7] but they're not very central to what I feel [?], because I happened to think these things, and I was commissioned, so I did – *Foreign Affairs*, and – both cases – I think somewhere else as well. But – or therefore – I didn't follow Soviet developments with that degree of fascination with which Sovietologists, whether right-wing or left-wing, did it. I didn't go back after 1956 because – for the simple reason that I thought if I met people there – the people I met in 1945 were to some degree punished for meeting me – I thought it would be difficult to go to a country where I responded so naturally to everything which I saw and heard and was told, and yet, had to be so careful about seeing people, that I couldn't see the people I wanted, for fear of compromising them. I knew things were easier, but I didn't know how easy, and I was afraid of – I didn't want to accept the bad conscience of maybe

[7] Included in SM, where the multiple original places of publication are set out.

adding one or two black points to their fiche in the KGB. But in the end, after Gorbachev, I thought, well, maybe it's worth it: now they say it doesn't – everyone assured me that things in that respect had changed, that people weren't accused of meeting foreigners, and it wasn't quite so dangerous, even for well-known people. So then I went, simply because the opportunity was there, because of my friend Brendel, and so on. Then, when I arrived, something odd, I think I told you that. First of all, I felt no nostalgia. In 1956 I did (GC That's what I …) – 1945, acutely; 1956 I still felt it. (GC [?].) No, I felt – I wasn't disappointed, because I didn't expect it.

GC It's a better expression, you didn't feel nostalgia.

IB I did not feel *the* nostalgia which I felt in 1945 and 1956. Nothing had changed physically that much. Of course, the people I met were largely people connected in some way with people I knew before, with the old intelligentsia – writers and so on. I realised that things were changing. I talked to physicians, I talked to writers and so on. I realised that they were very excited about what was going on – that was new, that was interesting. And I recorded it as much as any other visitor to Russia now records it. But I am fundamentally sceptical about changes in the Soviet [Union]. I couldn't quite bring myself to say, 'It's all different. It's marvellous. Something totally new, a new corner has been turned, because I felt that as far as peasants and workers were concerned, nothing much had changed. And as far as the bulk, even of schoolmasters, writers, newspapermen and so on, I wondered, I just wondered, how far this could go without being stopped. And so I was a little bit suspicious all the time. I was before, too, but I felt so ashamed of the degree to which I was, that I felt maybe I shouldn't be. But in this rather ambivalent frame of mind, one is not likely to be deeply impressed by anything.

GC Since we're moving …

IB Yes.

GC … and moving to the better.

IB Yes.

GC In a rather, in a pace that is really …

IB Spectacular. Quite true.

GC Did you ever believe that in your lifetime Russia might reach such degree of openness as exists now, even if there will be a setback?

IB No I didn't.

GC Not through revolution.

IB No I didn't. No. I confess it.

GC It would be incomprehensible.

IB No, I quite agree. No, I would never had predicted it. Never. If someone said it'll happen, I would have believed that to be highly improbable. No, I agree, it was not foretellable, and nobody did foretell it, in the West.

GC I mean, if at all, so through a revolution, not …

IB Of course.

GC And now, did you discuss this [with] friends whom you respect who know Russia?

IB No, because I don't know anybody who knows Russia that well in the West. I don't talk to Sovietologists much.

GC No, but people like yourself – I mean, let's say …

IB Who are people like myself?

GC People whose mind you respect and they know Russia.

IB Well, they also are surprised by the degree of it. But I have nothing in particular to explain it.

GC It's not in the minds of the Sovietologists. The reply ought to come from those apparently who know deeper …

IB Who know Russia, yes. Well, how many are there? They're all a hundred years old.

GC I thought that I was – tell me, what was Obolensky's reaction when …?

IB He was very pleased. He went for the thousand years of the Russian Church. He thought that a great deal was happening about liberalisation of the Church. And that he played – he was very deeply involved in. And that meant a lot to him, because he is a believer, and he's fascinated, of course, he writes about the Church, both Byzantine and Orthodox, and he thought they went much further than he would have believed, but he didn't come back exactly in a state of enthusiasm.

GC You can't, because it's still [IB Exactly] – you're fascinated by the change, by …

IB He was amused, too. He was invited to the Soviet Embassy, which I don't think had happened before. When he went, he heard one of the Soviet Councillors or Ministers in the Embassy say, 'Good God, we have six princes here.' [*GC laughs.*] Six Russian princes at the reception. They were very pleased. The Soviets adore princes. They like them very much.

GC Let's come back, but only …

IB I must tell you a story. I had a pupil called Ignatieff. He was the son of the last Minister of Education under the Tsar, whom the Jews liked, because he was a sort of liberal, he used to smuggle in Jews into the universities, a little bit above the quota. But always[?] so. His son was a very nice man, a pupil of mine, brought up in Canada, and he went back to Russia even more. He was a Canadian diplomat, he became Canadian Ambassador.

GC Ah, not Ignatieff who wrote …

IB His father. He became Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations. He went back three or four times. On one occasion when he went, the chambermaid in the hotel tapped on his door. He opened it, and she said, 'Excuse me for disturbing you, but please tell me, are you a real count?' That excited her very much. So that nothing – all I wanted to say is, things haven't changed that much. [*GC laughs.*] Mythological figures, counts.

GC Pardon?

IB Counts are mythical figures.

Meetings with Pasternak and Akhmatova

GC Now, I want to come back, only for a short while, to your meetings with Pasternak and Akhmatova, because you told me about it quite at length. When I asked you if you were not surprised that they were so open, both of them, in 1945, that they opened their heart, and such a sort of mutual empathy developed, that it didn't surprise you. Your reply was a very formal one, that you were one of the two first foreigners that they met.

IB Oh, no: Pasternak met others.

GC He met others. But it can't be that simple. Did you ask yourself what …?

IB Never. I don't ask myself anything. I'm not a self-asker. I don't examine myself. I am a tremendous non-self-examiner. No, I'll tell you. It didn't surprise me in the least.

GC It didn't?

IB No. For the following reason. These were *ci-devant* – these were pre-Revolutionary persons; they belonged to the pre-1917 Russian intelligentsia. So did I, in education, in outlook, although I wasn't brought up there. The books I read and the thoughts I thought were a continuation of what happened before the Revolution. That's obvious – cultivated in a framework somewhere else. When I talked to them, they realised that they heard the voice, and they heard words, which were perfectly familiar to them. They were not talking to Soviet individuals, which was – I don't say a strain, but something which was different from their youth, and from their formation. I was as much part of their formation as others of their contemporaries from before the Revolution, to whom they could talk equally freely. They did live among people to whom they talked freely, I wasn't the only one. But I fitted into this, without effort. I don't think they particularly liked me or admired me necessarily. When they met me they didn't know who and what I was. But I was very like what they knew, and therefore there was no barrier. That's the point. So it wasn't surprising.

GC Yes, but I'm not sure that any other …

IB There weren't any.

GC But …

IB Pasternak, yes. People did come to see him. Nobody quite like that. He went to the West, of course, in 1934: he went to an anti-Fascist congress in Paris. But I don't think met Russians there. Who do you suppose he would have met? After 1934 he did see some Russian friends in [sc. from?] Lomonosov, in London. After that date, who would there have been for them to talk to, who had come from the West, filled with knowledge and information about the West, about what went on in the last, I don't know what, twenty years, which they were so anxious to know?

GC I don't know. Maybe yes …

IB The only person – people like – I'll tell you who – people like – what's his name? God! I forget all names! One moment, who was the man who was always suspected of being an informer, the writer …

GC Ah, the Russian writer?

IB Yes.

GC Of course: I forget too.

IB Picasso's friend.

GC Yes.

IB Picasso's friend. What's his name? Soviet novelist and journalist. [GC [?].] All that. Anyhow, he travelled about, went to [?] and then he came back in 1940. He was in Paris in 1940, came back after that. He told them about what was going on, in a way, and he was certainly, though I think he was rather an awful man, he was flesh with our flesh. He was an intellectual, he knew them, they talked freely to him, he admired them; he was a Communist, but he was very much part of the same formation, so he could tell. But still. He was a Communist journalist. It wasn't quite the same.

GC No, it's not the same.

IB No, when I came, I was in that sense a fresh arrival who talked their language absolutely. That I don't think happened very often. I'm trying to think: who else? For example, Pasternak complained to me about somebody who I can tell you about now, because it's now been printed. The New Zealanders had a chargé d'affaires called [Paddy] Costello. He was a great friend of one of the people whom I knew in the Oxford Press, who was also a New Zealander: Davin – Dan Davin. They were both, I should think, New Zealand leftists of their day. Both were novelists, both were poets. Costello used to come to meetings of the Commonwealth diplomats once a week to compare impressions. People were a little bit careful, because he was thought of as rather left-wing. He was in fact a member of the Communist Party. Pasternak said to me – he used to go and see Pasternak. He wrote the introduction, the new introduction, to *The Oxford Book of Russian Verse*,[8] because Davin was at the Press, and Maurice Baring's introduction was thought to be out of date. They didn't remove it, but they added one, which was in fact no good. Kind of neo-Communist introduction. Pasternak said to me, 'A man called Costello keeps coming to see me. One of your people. He keeps on telling me, "You ought to get closer to the Communist Party." I don't want a man from God knows where' – that meant New Zealand – 'to tell me what my attitude to the Party ought to be.' That's what I mean by saying that, if other intellectuals came to see him, it was not the same.

GC For you of course it was a real deep experience, those meetings with Pasternak.

[8] First published in 1925, 'Chosen by the Hon. Maurice Baring', who also wrote a long introduction; second edition 1948, 'supplemented by D. P. Costello', whose shorter 'Editor's Note to the Second Edition' is dated December 1946.

IB My god – goodness, yes. Heavens, yes.

GC And for years you kept it to yourself?

IB Yes.

GC You didn't want to harm them.

IB Exactly.

GC You didn't feel the need to …

IB Exactly.

GC [?].

IB No, but I didn't. I talked about it. I talked about it to everybody. But I thought that if I wrote it down or said it in public [GC Sure], it might do her harm. In fact, I remember being very indignant with Katkov for causing *Zhivago* to be read in Russian on the Russian Service of the BBC, which was obviously a kind of anti-Soviet thing to do, because I thought it might harm him, although he wanted it. He wanted fame. He wouldn't have minded. But I thought he didn't know what was good for him. But I remember being very careful with Akhmatova when he [sc. she][9] died in – when was it? 1966, I think. After that, my [?] died.

GC But whom did you tell about it?

IB Oh, anybody who would listen.

GC Ah, you did, because …

IB I must have done.

[9] Pasternak died in 1960, Akhmatova in 1966.

GC I asked myself, how could you keep some …

IB I must have done. People certainly knew. Who did I tell? In Oxford, I don't know. I simply can't remember. There was a lady called Anna Kallin, who invented the Third Programme. She was a Russian. I could talk to her. I talked to Salome Halpern, who was a very Communist lady, who was a great friend of Mandel′shtam and of Stravinsky and all those people. I talked to her, indeed. And to Halpern himself, her husband. I must have done. I can't remember. [GC [?].] Oh no, I didn't mind. I didn't see why not. I knew they'd be discreet, or even if they were indiscreet, they didn't mind my talking, because they knew. They knew everything.

GC No, I …

IB They heard every word that was said by me to Pasternak, and by him to me. They listened to everything. They knew every word that had been exchanged. They knew.

GC Sure.

IB And therefore they didn't mind my repeating it. All they didn't know was the repercussions in public.

GC What I had in mind was not the …

IB No, I didn't keep it to myself.

GC I'm not referring to the aspect of, in telling about it, knowing about it, but I want to – I had the feeling that this ought to be one of your deepest experiences.

IB Surely.

GC Usually, you are – you had in your life so many interesting events, but you are not drawn to be – you have the experience, but with your sceptical mind you keep it in a certain frame of reaction – you know what I mean. This ought to be a deeper experience than many others.

IB Maybe. So? What follows?

GC Nothing. I just wanted to …

IB But of course it was. It was an absolutely crucial experience. Crucial. It was – it meant a great deal to me. I am by nature a hero-worshipper.

GC You are a hero-worshipper?

IB By nature, yes. And Pasternak became a hero, Akhmatova became a hero. She would have hated the word 'heroine'. She didn't like the word 'poetess'. She was a poet, not a poetess. They became heroes. I had other heroes in my life. I can tell you who my heroes were. Before the war, I don't think I had a proper hero. It would have been a philosopher, if it was anybody.

GC I was going to ask …

IB But I don't think – no, it wasn't anybody. I was greatly – I admired my contemporary Austin, but he wasn't exactly a hero in that sense, and certainly none of the other philosophers were. Now, let me think. Who did I really have these feelings towards? I think the nearest then was Toscanini, about whom I had precisely these feelings. No writers. Yes, Virginia Woolf, certainly. And not E. M. Forster, and not T. S. Eliot. Far from it. After the war, during the war, Mr Roosevelt.

GC I was going …

IB Certainly, absolutely. Before the war, nobody. Politically, nobody at all. To some degree, Churchill, of course. That's why I wrote a piece about him, because I thought that he was a hero and was being underestimated by 1949, which was when I wrote my piece. He was being done down, terribly. Lots of revisionism was going on. After that, Edmund Wilson, the American critic. He was a hero. He wrote some pretty nasty things about me in his diaries.

GC You wrote …

IB Never mind. I wrote an ironical piece about him in Oxford.

GC [?].

IB Sure.

GC But you still – you admired him?

IB Very greatly. Of all the critics I've ever read, of contemporary critics, far the most marvellous to me. Him I knew extremely well, so that's part of it. We had these enormous conversations.

GC So why this ironic article of yours?

IB Because I thought it was an amusing thing to do. I was commissioned to do something like that for the *Yale Review*. Somebody I'd known, I can't remember, I think something like 'Episode in Your Life' or 'Interesting Men You've Met'. I thought: Why not? He was dead, he can't mind. His widow is dead. Wait a moment, who else now, in America? Nobody. After Roosevelt, no.

Side B

GC Interesting that you said that you are by nature a hero-worshipper and one doesn't have this view.

IB I assure you it's true. Freud, not, although I met him. Bertrand Russell, not at all. What other men of genius have I met? Or didn't meet or read?

GC There can be another category: you meet, that you feel the charisma …

IB I have it to some extent for my friend Brendel. I tend to romanticise him. I have some hero-worship for him, although I find it quite difficult to talk to him, sometimes, because he's very locked up, and he finds it difficult to talk, and so on. But I have real admiration for his moral character, and his extraordinary artistic insight.

GC Previously you developed close relations with Nabokov …

IB Oh, Nabokov, not at all. [GC [?].] Yes, entirely. Oh, Nabokov was an amusing …

GC Stravinsky?

IB Yes. Stravinsky, yes. I shouldn't have left him out. Nabokov was an amusing, agreeable, clever, frivolous man, fundamentally. Stravinsky, of course. Picasso I only met once, and we didn't get a – I said something which he didn't at all like, so that never happened again [?] in his life. I like meeting people either once – then I hear their voice; when I read them or look at them, I hear the voice – or more than four times, but not twice, because that ruins the first impression and doesn't create a sufficiently solid new one. Who else [?] Stravinsky. I think I'd better tell you a funny story about my first meeting with him. I met Stravinsky in the Savoy Hotel. Nabokov arranged it. He had no idea why he was meeting me, and I had only too good an idea why I was meeting him, but he didn't know what to say. Nabokov must have said nice things about me, but – well, there was silence. For the sake of something to say – I was petrified, as I always am before men of genius – he

said, 'You know, curious thing – what do you think? After all, the Russians have produced a very gifted people in the field of music' – I don't think he was thinking solely of himself – 'but in the field of visual arts much less. Why do you think this is?' Not long before this I had read an essay by Virginia Woolf about Russian writers, in which she said, about Turgenev I think, that his descriptions nature were never really for the sake of the descriptions themselves, but always reflected something in the mood of the hero or the conversation. Some of them were illustrations. They entered into the atmosphere of what was going on between the people in the novel. So I borrowed this without acknowledgement, and I said, 'I think the Russians really have an inner life. They don't really look at externals. What goes on inside was always much more important to them. Their view of nature is deeply tied up with psychological experience, with some kind of inner experience which in some way adds to it or reflects it. But they are not sensuous in the sense of being totally devoted to colours and tastes and smells, and the whole riches of the external world.' I thought I was doing quite well, at which point Stravinsky interrupted me and said, 'Oh, would you say that what you've just said applies to Molotov?' That stopped me all right. Extremely amusing and very typical. He made very good jokes. [*GC laughs.*] And he liked deflating. And I was deflated, and he was quite right. After that, we became great friends.

GC How old was he?

IB Oh, he must have been in his, I should think, early seventies, I think.[10] He was obviously – he died aged I think eighty-nine or ninety-one – something like that. He was born in something like ninety- – when was he born? About eighty-something. The centenary was in the 1980s. And this would have been after the

[10] Stravinsky lived from 1882–1971, dying at eighty-eight. He and IB first met in 1956, when Stravinsky was seventy-three or seventy-four..

war, I should think in the 1950s. Yes, he would have been seventy-one, -two.

GC So why was it deflating, what he said?

IB Well, because he was quite right. What's the good of general, making general propositions about the rich inner life of Molotov?

GC Yes. No, but …

IB Or nine-tenths of the Russian people.

GC Yes, but he was asking you about writ[ers] – no, he didn't ask you about writers, he asked about painters.

IB Yes. And I explained it in terms of general psychological characteristics of the Russians.

GC [?].

IB And he produced – no, I gave an example [*GC laughs*], and he quite rightly produced Molotov – undeniable Russian.

GC So it was a generalisation of Russians, not Russian writers.

IB Well, generalisation generally. He didn't much believe in general propositions.

GC And in your meetings …

IB And because he thought I was just carrying on in some pompous way. He didn't like theories.

GC When you met, who spoke more, he or you?

IB Oh, goodness me. I always talk so much, and I can't help it. No, we talked to each other.

GC He did talk [?].

IB Oh, Lord, no. He was very amusing. I told stories. Oh no. I used to stimulate him into talking. There was no point – I didn't tell *him* long stories though. And *she* talked quite a lot, because she was usually with him. Oh, and he was very easy to be with. I mean he [?] it. He told stories about his life, about other people, who he liked, who he didn't, why not. He was very – terrifically malicious. So was Wilson. But Wilson was a noble idealist, in a way, whereas Stravinsky was the exact opposite. Auden I knew very well. I did not hero-worship him. He was a great poet all right. Some [?] as a friend – but hero-worship? No. Many people did.

GC Oh yes. A whole generation, of your friends.

IB Oh certainly, my friends and after. Oh, long after, too.

GC Yes, but coming back to Anna Akhmatova for a second, there is a book by Amanda Haight [*he mispronounces the name as 'Height'*].

IB Haight [*pronounced 'Hate'*]. She's an American.

GC Now, in her book, it's very clear what you told her.

IB Yes.

GC But did she, was there anything new that she told you, that she found out.

IB I can't remember. I read it, I know her, she lives in Australia, we are on quite good terms, but no, I don't think so. I don't think anything, no. She's a very faithful devotee of Akhmatova. She's

very truthful and very honest. Not enormously perceptive, and therefore extremely given to fantasy, uncoloured.

GC So she could find that – I thought she knew new[?] from you, and the other facts from Chukovskaya.

IB Oh no, and not only from Chukovs… – from Akhmatova herself.

GC And Akhmatova.

IB Yes. She knew her extremely well. She [?].

GC There's the whole story about …

IB Leningrad – she was very close to her.

GC Yes, I know.

IB She came to England with her. But when she came to England, she accompanied her, you see.

GC I don't remember in the book if there is a description of her visit to Oxford and visit to you – that I'll check.

IB Yes, there is a reference to it.

GC [?] check there to the fact. I mean, she devotes, I think, four or five pages to the fact that a chapter in her poem is about a meeting that didn't take place, about your non-meeting in 1956. There is …

IB There are references. There are mysterious references.

GC About that?

Akhmatova photographed by Ida Moiseevna Nappel'baum, 28 September 1945, at Nappel'baum's Leningrad apartment, 7 Rubinstein Street; Akhmatova 'willingly stood by the bookshelf, and I took her picture with an old camera, with a row of books in the background';[11] *Akhmatova gave IB a print of a detail, inscribing the reverse.*

IB Not about that, no. Well, does Amanda say that?

GC I think so.

[11] Ida Nappel′baum, 'Fon k portretu', in Inna Inavovna Slobozhan (ed.), *Ob Anne Akhmatovoi: stikhi, esse, vospominaniya, pis'ma* (Leningrad, 1990), 197–213 at 206.

IB She says that.

GC Do you have the book?

IB Somewhere.

GC I have it. Do you want me to check it?

IB By all means. Quite interesting.

[*break*]

IB Now, the whole situation about Akhmatova and myself is highly complex. There is no doubt that she mythologised life, and saw life in transcendental terms. And my visit certainly must have meant something to her, because she wrote all these references to my visit, and in the most famous poem, which is *Poem without a Hero*, I occur as a guest from the future. And she says, 'He will not be a husband to me, nor will he be a dear friend, but he will bring me terrible doom.'[12] So the whole thing is highly dramatised. I don't know what I meant to her, but there's no doubt that in some way she saw our meeting in very emotional and at the same time mythical terms, and the fact that I brought a certain amount of trouble in her head – no, I don't think I was alone in that. I think the fact that – I think that could be exaggerated, and people who knew about the situation said that after all – what's his name? – Zhdanov condemned not only her but Pasternak and Zoshchenko as well, although the persecution began on the day after I left Leningrad to go back to England. I think she conceived of the whole situation – of herself as Dido, and me as Aeneas.

[12] 'He will not be a beloved husband to me […] It is death that he bears.' From the 'Third and Last' dedication to *Poem without a Hero*, written on 5 January (Epiphany Eve) 1956, the 10th anniversary of her most recent meeting with IB: The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, trans. Judith Hemshemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder, 2nd ed. (Boston/Edinburgh, 1994), 547.

GC You think so or …

IB I know it. Because her …

GC How do you know it?

IB Because her friend Naiman, who was very close to her, who was a Russian poet, who lives in Moscow, told me that. And I think all her friends seem agreed about that. I don't think that Amanda Haight says that because I don't think she ever said it to anybody. But they're convinced that that is the position, that I abandoned her. I'll tell you a story about that in a moment. She certainly believed that she and I started the Cold War, quite genuinely. That Stalin's fury at my visit to her is something which touched off something. There was nothing – I tried to persuade her that that might not be so when she came to Oxford, but she wouldn't hear of it, because her whole life was conceived on a plane where this is the kind of thing which could happen, and we were cosmic figures and what we did had world significance. Pasternak was a bit given to feeling himself to be a cosmic figure, too. Perhaps when one lives in the Soviet Union and one is subject to a suffficient degree of persecution one might perhaps conceive oneself as somehow dedicated to some terrible but higher fate. Anyway, she – but I was going to tell you a story in that connnection. First of all she was of course extremely cold to Aline when she came here. She was furious at the fact that I should have married, because it disturbed the legend. It was a vulgar act which somehow disturbed the whole position of our being divided in this remote fashion, but at the same time for ever united. I'm trying to think of the story I was about to tell you. I think that was probably her attitude to a number of people in her life, not just me alone.

GC [?] that she had such an attitude to others?

IB Well, who can tell? You see, she was married to Gumilev, of course, who was executed. She was married to a man called Garshin, who abandoned her, also, after the war. She had obviously had some kind of relationship with him before she went to Tashkent. When she came back from Tashkent, he met her at the railway station, and said to her, in effect, it was all over, 'I have someone else.' That was a terrible blow [GC [?]], yes. Exactly. But with us, nothing happened. I simply sat in a room with her and talked. We talked. I may have kissed her hand on parting in Leningrad in January, but otherwise nothing more intimate happened, and couldn't. The whole thing was on a plane of intense emotional tension. We didn't allow the slightest descent into anything which could be regarded as any degree of affection. Nor was she affectionate. She was a severe lady. Stern by nature. Unforgiving. I'm trying to think of something which I was going to tell you in connection with her attitude to other people in that way. I certainly didn't know which poems referred to me and which didn't. I was told by the critic Zhirmunsky, who was a very eminent Soviet critic, who called on me here in Headington, on a visit to England, after her death, I think – or maybe before, I can't remember – which poems, in his opinion, according to her, related to me, because he talked to her. He'd written an essay about her – he was an intimate friend. And that I gave as a bibliography at the end of my article.[13]

GC Zhirmunsky was actually the first one to tell you what part of the poem was …

IB No, I knew that the poem called *Cinque*, which was a cycle of five poems – that [that] referred to my conversation with her was clear, because she describes minutely my sitting – our sitting in the room, our talking together about the sound of the ice breaking outside, my smoking a cigar with a thin blue smoke. All that's

[13] IB refers to the Appendix entitled 'The Guest from the Future', which lists the poems in question. See PI3 428–32.

actually literal, and I think she even wrote that poem in January of 1946.[14] Otherwise I think I have no more to say than what I said in that piece, except that – I'll tell you a story in that connection. I had this friend called, as I told you – what was the name? – Alexander Halpern, who was – died in London. He was an international lawyer who was a Russian Jew, married to this famous lady who was – all the boys loved, called Salome: Salome Andronikov, who was a Georgian princess. She wrote a letter to his niece, who lived – after he died – who was living in Leningrad, and somehow came to mention me. And the niece wrote back to her, saying he must be a very bad man, and she wrote back to her, I think, saying 'Why do you think that he's a very bad man?' 'Because he abandoned Akhmatova.' So that was the *on dit*, that was known, to people like that who were not friends of Akhmatova, they were just people who knew about – read her poetry, or moved in circles which were connected with her. So my reputation is that of someone who had a passionate affair and then abandoned her, neither of which is true. But nevertheless, that was obviously what – and Naiman confirmed this. Certainly those who know her, or knew her, realise that I played no such part. I knew her well enough to know that everything in her life was romanticised. When I went to Moscow this time, I talked to Chukovskaya, whom I had never met before, and of course she talked a great deal about Akhmatova, and gave me a very full description of the way she died – and that's exactly what happened, and so on – of her last days. And she certainly didn't imply in any way that I had done anything that could be regarded as capable of criticism. But that was known to be her, generally her …

GC Did she relate to the parts of the poem that are …?

[14] There seems to be no relevant mention of ice in any of Akhmatova's poems. As for the cigar, IB is presumably thinking of 'The blue smoke of a cigar', a line which appears not in *Cinque* but both in the 2nd poem (1946) of *A Sweetbriar in Blossom* and in *Poem without a Hero* 1. 1, 'The White Hall', which is about the 'guest from the future'. For IB's belief that this image was a reference to him see e.g. Anatoly Naiman, 'Sir', BI 76, and L3 460.

IB Who, Chukovskaya? No. She said nothing. No, Naiman did that a bit, and I didn't know about the one which Amanda mentions.[15] Yet I must have read her book, so I must have known, but I don't know if I put it in my little bibliography or not. That I can't tell you. But there's no doubt that I played a perfectly accidental part in her life. I was simply magnified into a myth in her life after simply one visit and a quarter, which was all that happened. By the time she came to Oxford – I did see her London, when she came, and I saw her in Oxford – we didn't talk about this at all. We talked about Stalin and what happened to her, all her misfortunes, she had described that. And that I described, but that was all …

GC But when you spoke with Chukovskaya, generally speaking, about Akhmatova, did you have the same ideas, did you agree with each other?

IB Oh, entirely. No, she didn't say anything about her which was something I didn't know or didn't understand. We were in complete harmony. But I must say, when she came to Oxford – perhaps I ought to have said – the attitude towards me was somewhat more restrained. Because I was married. It was clear that to some extent I'd been expelled from the mythology. Our non-meeting, yes, and of course her account of what I said to her and what she said to me on the telephone – we didn't meet but we spoke on the telephone – in 1956 is inaccurate.[16]

GC Inaccurate.

IB Yes, and Chukovskaya's account of it, which is what she told her, is not accurate.

GC And that you learned from Chukovskaya only now?

[15] Namely?
[16] How?

IB No, by reading her book.

GC By reading her book.

IB I read her book in, I think, either French or Russian, I don't know which – she gave an account of what happened, and I did correct that, I think, in – somewhere – in, perhaps it was in my own account. Or possibly I think I did put in a footnote to that effect. I also told – what's his name? – Max Hayward, who was writing something. Well, he translated Mandel′shtam, so – what's her name?

GC Nadezhda.

IB What?

GC Nadezhda.

IB Nadezhda Mandel′shtam's book. She has an account of [?] which is also inaccurate, again from Akhmatova. It's not very grave, but there it is. He put in a footnote to that effect. She was a slight mythmaker, there's no doubt.

GC But surely you triggered something?

IB No doubt. Well, I opened the world to her. The fact that I came from abroad and I could talk to her about her old friends. The real disaster was when she met a man called – well, I don't know any [?] but it's not part of my life – she met a man called Anrep.

GC Who?

IB A man called Boris Anrep, von Anrep. He was a Russian. He made mosaics, particularly on the floor of the National Gallery in London. Very remarkable. All of which – or at least many mosaics

are people whom he knew in London – Bloomsbury. But Akhmatova is among them. And she is called Compassion, on the mosaic. It's on the floor of the National Gallery, as you go up the steps. He must have had some intimate relation with her before the war – before the Revolution. He was [?] a naval engineer or something, and [?] was in England. He came – went to England in 1917 or 1918, and didn't see her. She went to Paris from here, it's not quite clear why. I think probably [?] to see him. He came to see her. It was a dead failure.

GC When?

IB 1965. [?] she went to Paris. And then he came to see her, she telephoned, someone telephoned, and he described it in a memoir he sent to a man called Struve, who was one of the editors of the three volumes of Akhmatova's verse which he edited in America. And he said: She was thin, she was elegant when I last saw her. Who did I see before me? Catherine the Great. Large, plump, imposing lady, completely different from the thin, elegant lady of 1917. A diet of potatoes and a lot of bad food. This produced a terrible distension of her figure. And then they talked, and it was a disaster. And he went to a cafe and sat there according to himself for four hours without moving. He was so terribly depressed. The effect on her we don't know; [?] at least I don't know.

GC But did Chukovskaya write to enquire you a lot about …?

IB No.

GC No?

IB No. Asked no questions. She knew all she wanted to know. She had just produced the third volume, which was not quite out, which will doubtless be published now. No, she didn't ask me questions. She just related [?]. No, she just talked about her father, whom I knew, and about Akhmatova, whom I knew. No, she

didn't make any enquiries about Oxford, anything of that sort: didn't have to, she thought she knew quite enough, and she certainly did.

GC She knew to distinguish between reality and …?

IB Oh yes. Everybody did.

GC Everybody?

IB I think so. I mean Naiman was so close to her, or – what's the name? – her friend in New York, Brodsky, who knew her even more intimately, knows perfectly well what was what. He has never accused me of …

GC No, I was thinking not about this …

IB … lack of sensibility.

GC … general quality of …

IB Oh, yes. They knew what it all was. She brought them all up by hand. They were devoted to her.

GC [?].

IB The people she most hated were the young Communist poets, Yevtushenko and Voznesensky. She described them – I didn't mention in my article – when Voznesensky was in England, congratulated her on her honorary degree, sent her a telegram, she crumpled it into a little ball [?], threw it into the wastepaper basket, and said 'I hate these little bandits.' She loathed them. Pasternak was rather flattered by them, and received them, because he was rather vain, and they were very – they made up to him, and he was rather open to that. She was unsurrendering. She was absolutely – one couldn't approach her by sheer means of admiration. She knew

what was what. She knew who to talk to. She once said to a [?] – no, to a lady in Leningrad, whom I also met, who knew her very well, who became – told me stories. She said [?] he: About men I know everything.

GC And you really think that she – her personality was very incisive, very strong and incisive?

IB Strong, yes; not incisive, no. No, that's wrong, no. You were [?] in the presence of a poet. She was melancholy, she was serious, she was unhappy, and she slightly exaggerated her [?] – she lived on it and by it. She was self-romanticising. She would talk to one, and then close her eyes and say, 'Yes … Yes … Yes … Yes … Yes … Yes … Yes' for a long time and then fall into a kind of sadness, a kind of melancholy silence. She was silent, and she wanted one to be silent. In some way, she demanded a certain kind of, I wouldn't call it worship, but what's called special relationship, some sort of …

GC [?].

IB She saw herself as a tragic queen. Tragic queen. Dido. That's correct. Tragic queen. Great sufferer. A person upon whom great misfortunes …, and who understood them, and who had deep wisdom, and understood life and God and nature and love and men and women and Holy[?] Russia and Petrograd –Petersburg and everything, and Dante and Beethoven: all that she knew.

GC And she needed somebody to blame for it?

IB She was severe, she didn't – no, she just was severe about people. She made very sharp judgements. I mean people were black or white. Nothing much in between. But Pasternak she loved.

GC And forgave him?

IB Worse than that. In a way, she was rather friendly with Aleksey Tolstoy, the writer, who was one of the causes of Mandel′shtam's doom. So that was in a way not entirely consistent. She liked him, though. She saw him in Tashkent and so on, and he flirted with her and loved her. And Pasternak, she was very funny about him. She said, she came to Leningrad from Moscow – from London, after he went to Paris, this conference. He was rather ill, rather tired, and suddenly [said] that he wanted to stay with her, and then his wife came and fetched him away. And she said he always said, whenever he felt ill and depressed, 'I want to be with Akhmatova', but not on other occasions.

GC Who said it?

IB Pasternak. She said it about him. But they were great friends. They greatly admired each other. Her other friends were of course Chukovskaya – she didn't like Chukovsky much, the father, nor did Pasternak – and Richter, the pianist, who was a great friend of both. And there were these other friends with whom she was living who'd lived in [?] and so on, whom she mentions, and so on. A man called [?] and others.

GC And Naiman, where did you meet him first?

IB In Moscow this year. Yes. He wrote me letters before that. He's – makes – lives by translating French Provençal poetry. Medieval verse. He's a poet. He's highly intelligent. He's a Jew, of course. So's his wife. And I went to see him. And then I invited them to the British Embassy to a party which was given to various Russian writers, and he said he would come but in the end didn't. Then he came to London. Unfortunately I was in America. Then he talked to Peter, who will probably publish his book about Akhmatova.

GC How old is he?

IB In his forties. Late forties.

GC [?] Akhmatova [?].

IB Intimately. He was pupil, disciple. And like Brodsky. They were the two Jewish boys whom she absolutely adored. And when she was told about – now, what was it? – I remember, about people making a pogrom or something during the war [?], she said, 'People like that ought to be shot!' I asked her whether she noticed that Pasternak was anti-Semitic. She said, 'Yes, on the whole he probably was.' She hadn't really noticed it, but now I came to say it … But of course Mandel′shtam didn't like synagogues and Jews and religion and rich Jews, of course not. He was against all that, but didn't mind about being a Jew. Boris Pasternak did. And his sister Josephine, here, said to me, 'Alexander and Lydia' (who were brother and sister) 'didn't mind being Jews at all. Didn't in the least. But Boris and I didn't like it. We were ashamed.'

GC [?].

IB Yes. He's very candid.

GC And did you say something [?]?

IB Oh, yes. I think I reported it in that article, yes. Certainly. Every time – I found that when I mentioned words like 'Jew' or 'Palestine' in 1945, an extreme retreat occurred. He ran away, he changed the subject, he looked at the wall, he looked at the ceiling, he didn't want – and in *Zhivago* you get that. That's why Ben-Gurion didn't want it published in Israel.

GC [?].

IB Well he didn't.

GC Really?

IB He said so to me. It's that sort of anti-Semitic book. Certainly. Said it was an anti-Semitic work, not to be published. Probably by now it has been.

GC Has been published in Ben-Gurion's life?

IB Well, maybe, but he was against it. He didn't forbid it, but he was against it. No, very violently, about it, to me.

GC About *Zhivago*?

IB Yes.

GC But I'm sure that when he discussed it with you it was after reading it in Hebrew.

IB I don't know when he read it. I don't know how he knew about it. I didn't ask him. Maybe.

GC Because, I mean, I don't think he would have read it in English.

IB No. Unlikely. But people probably quoted passages.

GC Very interesting.

IB Select passages.

GC How interesting.

IB Oh, no, he had an attitude towards it.

GC How interesting.

IB The only man I ever met who really wanted it not published for that reason – bad for Jews.

GC Ben-Gurion – it doesn't suit him.

IB Why?

GC Because he had still the self-confidence of – Ben-Gurion.

IB He was offended by it. Straightforwardly offended. He didn't think it would have a bad effect or anything. He was offended by it; he thought, written by an anti-Semite. He just felt it, and reacted quite spontaneously.

GC How interesting. You remember hearing it?

IB Oh absolutely, I wouldn't …

GC No, I mean that he would condemn it I cannot see [?].

IB No, for that reason.

GC But not to the extent that he would say that it shouldn't be published.

IB He did tell me. Shouldn't be published, he said. He didn't say translated. No, shouldn't appear at all. It was already. 'I'm against it being published.' It happened, but he was hostile to it. Didn't like its appearing. Didn't like that it existed.

GC Strange, [?] about it …

IB I have no idea.

GC And in what manner.

IB I defended it a bit, but unsuccessfully. He had a very strong line about Jews, for and against. [?] and so on. Actually. The only other

person I remember he talked to me about that at that time, saying how much he disliked him, was Eden [?].

*

GC Yes, you told me. Even after Suez?

IB Very much after Suez. Because of Suez. [?], he wasn't honest, he – she went up and down, lied, he tried to deceive Wani[?], he was, didn't want to admit things [?], he was no good. That's his line. De Gaulle was all right. In spite of the quarrel. Not a quarrel, but in spite of what de Gaulle said.

GC [?].

IB He was terribly disappointed, he was shocked by de Gaulle.

GC Yes, but I think your conversation with him was before the shock of de Gaulle.

IB His was after.

GC After?

IB Yes.

GC After 1967?

IB Yes. Must have been.

GC I thought after 1967 you hardly saw Ben-Gurion.

IB I'm not sure. He certainly – well, he talked about de Gaulle very favourably. When I saw him in – where was it? – the village.

GC Sde Boker.

IB In Sde Boker, yes. GC [?]. He said – yes – not exactly: he said he had a task in life, which he fulfilled, and all that. In Russian, he said it to me, funnily enough: *zadacha v zhizni*[17] – task. But then afterwards – perhaps he didn't talk to me about that, I may be wrong. But he was certainly shocked. How long did he live after 1967?

IB talking to David Ben-Gurion, Sde Boker, April 1962; Frances ('Frankie') and John ('Jack') Donaldson on the left, Aline Berlin on the right

GC Ben-Gurion died immediately after the Yom Kippur War.

IB In 197- …

GC Four.[18]

[17] 'A task in life'.

[18] He died on 1 December 1973. The Yom Kippur War had ended on 25 October.

IB Four. Oh well. Did he make any remarks about de Gaulle?

GC In the early – not many.

IB No, after.

GC Yes, I mean not that frequently, but I'll have to check.

IB But he must have been shocked.

GC But he retired.

IB Who, de Gaulle?

GC No, Ben-Gurion.

IB And de Gaulle did too, a year later.

GC Yes, but Ben-Gurion, after 196-, even in 1967 the very fact that he was outside of the events – he created a process of disappearing from public life, and one hardly heard from him.

IB Was he …?

GC Maybe there is something in his diary.

IB When we visited him at Sde Boker, was he Prime Minister then?

GC Who?

IB Ben-Gurion.

GC When we visited him?

IB Yes.

GC He wasn't in that time.

IB I think not.

GC No, he was not.

IB And then he became one again.

GC Yes.

IB And he was in that [?] – the gap.

GC Yes. You went together, you went to Eilat.

IB I remember. That's right.

GC Had lunch together.

IB I didn't go to Eilat. I've never seen Eilat.

GC You were and you forgot.

IB So you told me. I don't remember Eilat.

GC Yes. We were together, you and Aline and Peter.

IB I remember the Negev, I remember journeys from the Negev.

GC And I remember perfectly well …

IB We stayed in a hotel, or what?

GC Yes, for one night, and …

IB I remember staying in Be'er-Sheva (GC No: in Eilat), but not in Eilat. I must ask Aline.

GC And I remember you were fascinated by the beauty of the Moroccan Jewish girls there and …

IB Funny, I don't remember this at all. Extraordinary what one forgets. The visit to Ben-Gurion I remember very well. Was Walter Eytan there or not? In Sde Boker?

GC No.

IB Not then.

GC And you discussed with Ben-Gurion, I remember, whether history was a science or not.

IB All right, yes, that kind of thing.

GC And Paula Ben-Gurion was there.

IB I once said something to Ben-Gurion which I shouldn't have said, but did. I don't mean, shouldn't have said to him, shouldn't really have said to anybody. We were talking about – I don't know – I said I took an interest in a man called de Maistre, who he'd never heard of, naturally.

GC He took interest?

IB No, I took interest. And I told Ben-Gurion that, I told him that in Tel Aviv. He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Well, he made a number of very sharp remarks. For example, he said that unless nations are made by violence, by a violence which – by some kind of battles, by wars, by the shedding of blood …' – I said America would not have been America today without the Civil War. Because American history was really made by this war. Before that, there was not much American history. It went on. But after the Civil War, there became a great consciousness of history, because Civil War in

some way was a major event, more so than the War of Independence. Ben-Gurion was very impressed by that.

GC He was?

IB Very. Because of the shedding of blood. It encouraged him in the wrong direction as far as I'm concerned.

GC But in what context de Maistre said it?

IB Oh, in connection with the fact that history is made by violence. That – we are told to study nature. Nature is a slaughterhouse. Everybody kills every…; animals kill – plants kill plants, animals kill animals, and the only animal which kills all other animals is man. And so on. The world and so on, that sort of thing. That nature is a spectacle of violence, and that's when nations are made. Who implied it anyhow.

GC I think that you are too critical of Ben-Gurion, because of [?].

IB Maybe. Could be.

GC He was more realistic than people …

IB I didn't – I never thought he was not.

GC And he was, from 1947 on …

IB I admired him very much.

GC … he was moderate in his policies.

IB Nor do I regard him as – I don't regard him as extreme.

GC He was not.

IB The desire to invade the Lebanon perhaps was not quite right, which Sharett reports.

GC Yes, but he …

IB Still, it showed which way his thoughts were tending.

GC You could find such Churchill suggestions …

IB Oh, absolutely. Churchill [?] wasn't very nice either.

GC In this [?] every great leader has 80 per cent of wrong ideas and 20 per cent …

IB Weizmann didn't want conquest.

GC Yes, well, all right, but …

IB His thoughts didn't wend in that direction. But I'll tell you about Ben-Gurion. No, I don't think I'm too critical. I just thought he was a great leader. He created Israel, certainly. He was extremely shrewd, and I'm sure that if he were alive today, we would have peace with the Arabs, some sort, something, [?] botched up.

GC After all, the first man to say immediately after the Six Day War …

IB I know.

GC That's [?].

IB Yes, exactly. No, he was brave, and he was sensible. Both these things. Just wasn't a very nice man.

GC Ah, that's another story.

IB That's all. A bit too cruel.

GC That's another …

IB Bit too harsh. That's all I have against him. I have nothing against him politically. Weizmann didn't like him, yes. I never disliked Ben Gurion – I was deeply impressed by him, but he wasn't a hero. Weizmann was a hero. Again, hero-worship. Weizmann, again, was exactly what I mean by a 'hero'.

GC I know.

IB Ben-Gurion not.

GC You see, Ben Gurion in 1937 had the courage to join Weizmann to be in favour of partition.

IB I know.

GC And he risked his [?].

IB I know. No, he was very fearless. Fearless and intelligent. [?] but he was jealous of Weizmann.

GC He was jealous of Weizmann.

IB Yes, and rightly so.

GC He admired him.

IB Well, who could fail to? Some people didn't. Jabotinsky even admired him to some extent.

GC And tried to learn from him, and did learn from him.

IB The only person I know who doesn't admire Weizmann is the historian of Zionism.

GC David Vital.[19]

IB Yes.

GC [?].

IB I know.

GC To an extent that he [?].

IB Oh, it's monstrous. Oh, absolutely, and it comes from his father [Meir Grossman]. No doubt.

GC Jabotinsky …

IB Jabotinsky never hated Weizmann. They disagreed, but the friendship was so great before … Vital's book is very distorted by it. Distorted.

GC [I couldn't believe] my ears when I first argued with David Vital about it.

IB I know.

GC [?] the *extent* to which – he elaborates around it even a whole theory.

IB A doctrine, yes. Quite. I can't remember what he says, but …

[19] Author of a three-volume history of Zionism: *The Origins of Zionism* (Oxford, 1975), *Zionism: The Formative Years* (Oxford, 1982) and *Zionism: The Crucial Phase* (Oxford, 1987).

GC He would support Ben-Gurion, but he hates Weizmann.

IB Well, but Begin supports Ben-Gurion.

GC Yes, all right, but …

IB He admired him, Begin.

GC Yes, but I mean in – David Vital from scholarly point of view.

IB That comes from his father, it comes from Jabotinsky. Herzl is the hero. The hero is Herzl. And after Herzl, nobody in that book.

GC But you know that David Vital's father was far more balanced man [?].

IB Oh, I know. I never knew him.

GC I'm sure that [?]rated Weizmann the way that [?].

IB But my friend Halpern used to play bridge with him. He was quite an amiable person, and quite civilised.

GC Very civilised …

IB You knew him, did you?

GC No, but by all accounts …

IB Quite.

GC … and very balanced man.

IB No, but David Vital is a very disturbed character. Well, now it was – we are not on speaking terms any more.

GC That I didn't know.

IB I'll tell you. It's quite simple. He – I got him to buy the book, I financed [?]. And he felt he wasn't reviewed properly, I hadn't done enough for it probably. And then one day he said he wanted to see me. So we organised a meeting in Oxford. And then I was late. It was in All Souls he had to see me, at 3 o'clock. I came at twenty past 3. And the porter said, 'A gentleman called Mr Vital came to see you, and he left.' I said, 'Was there a message?' 'Yes.' On a little piece of paper, saying, 'I'm sorry you are not there. I'm going back to Israel. D. Vital', or something like that. I wrote him a letter saying, 'I'm terribly sorry for being late. I realise that you must be very offended', and so on. No answer. After that, break of relations.

GC It happens to him very often, with most of his friends.[20]

IB An outburst of temper of some sort. He suffers from some kind of insecurity, of a deep kind. He's not a very nice man. I've never thought that. His wife, mmm, all right. His sister is nicer than he is. She's quite nice, what's her name?

GC Rina.

IB Rina. Not much of a person, but quite nice. No, he is able, he's clever, he's a good writer. (GC [?].) No, and also he gets hold of the facts, he works. But I thought, he's the only person who's likely to write a proper history of Zionism. All right, a little biased, but he'll tell the story. Which he has done.[21]

[20] And with the editor of these conversations.

[21] To Mary-Kay Wilmers, 30 March 1984, IB wrote, 'he looks on me as a hopeless dove: I see him as a rigid, committed hawk. He is an able man – his history of Zionism is a serious & very solid book [two of the three volumes had been published by 1984], the best on its subject – but he is too nationalistic for me: and too hawkish and too touchy and too contemptuous of the liberal, the "soft", those lacking in national pride & resolution'.

GC Oh, yes. And the fact that he's a good writer means a lot in this case.

IB Of course. There's no other, there's only – what's his name? – Laqueur.[22]

GC Very inaccurate.

IB It's thin. All right for gentiles who have no time. Good.

GC All right.

IB Let's stop there.

[22] Walter Laqueur, author of *A History of Zionism* (New York, 1972).