



## **Cassettes**

**Aner Shalev**

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# Cassettes

Aner Shalev

*Translated by Ya'alah Cohen*

This short story, originally written in Hebrew, is taken from Aner Shalev's collection *Overtures* (Bnei Brak, 1996: Hasifria Hahadasha, Hakibutz Hameuhad). It was inspired by his wife Donna Shalev's work as one of the transcribers of thirty conversations between Gaby Cohen (1928–2001) and Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997) that took place in the UK in the late 1980s: for further details see [bit.ly/GC-IB](https://bit.ly/GC-IB). The translation is by Cohen's daughter Ya'alah Cohen.

I used to go out with a girl who had a peculiar job. She had to decipher cassettes. She would receive the cassettes from a nice professor of history, and as a part of the job she stayed at his house at the top of Mount Carmel. There was a veil of secrecy surrounding these cassettes, and the professor did not allow them to be taken out of the house. Maybe that was the reason she stayed there, or perhaps there was some other reason; I never delved into it.

In any case, whenever I visited her, coming up the stairs, I would already hear the deep bass of the mysterious man from the cassettes. Sometimes the same word would be played over and over, twenty times, until my girlfriend could be certain that she had got it right.

The professor was nice to me. Most of the time he was away. I think he knew I stayed overnight. When he was home, he would walk around wearing a heavy housecoat, even in summer. There was something wrong with his left hand.

I think he had been wounded in some war, 1948, maybe. I think he would have been a military man, and it was only because of his injury that he became a history professor. I don't remember whether somebody told me, or whether it was my own conclusion, because he had the majestic appearance of a general.

Over time, I became addicted to the voice of the man from the cassettes. He spoke perfect Hebrew, which was a delight to hear. His voice was so deep that it sometimes actually tickled me, physically. You could tell from the start that it was someone with quite a lot of knowledge.

## CASSETTES

He spoke about his friends. Everybody who was anybody was his friend. He spoke of his childhood in Russia, about how he dealt with his opponents. If I had known such a man, I think I too would have recorded him. I think I would also hire somebody to decipher the tapes for me.

The truth is, my girlfriend wouldn't let me listen to the cassettes. Perhaps those were the instructions she had received, or maybe she was just being mean. The moment I opened the door, she would immediately turn off the tape and turn away blushing, as if she had been caught red-handed.

But that didn't deter me. I would listen by the door. I would wait for her to go out to buy printer paper, and catch another twenty minutes. Sometimes, after we had sex, after she fell asleep, I would sneak to the cassette player on my way to the shower.

One day I discussed this with the professor. He listened to me patiently, even though I wasn't educated. He said that he trusted me, He gave me special permission. I was annoyed that he could trust me and my girlfriend couldn't.

Ever since I was granted permission to listen, I have been less attentive to what happens on the cassettes. Even the story about Anna Akhmatova went a little over my head. I also broke up with this typist. But I still visit the professor every once in a while. I think maybe, if he had been a general, this country would be different.

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