



Letters from Solomon Rachmilevich

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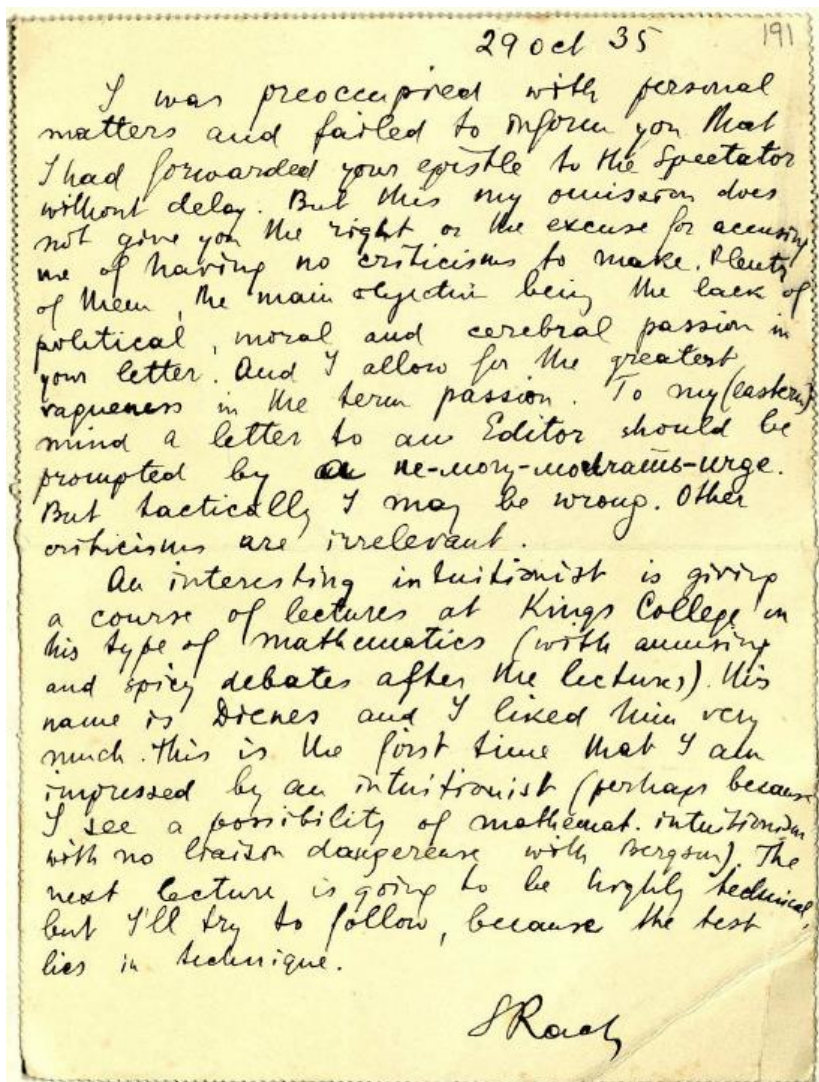
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Letters from Solomon Rachmilevich

He was the first person who gave me a taste for ideas in general, interesting ideas *telles quelles*.

IB in conversation with Michael Ignatieff, 30 November 1988



LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

In the conversation quoted in the epigraph on the previous page, Isaiah Berlin has a good deal to say about a man whom he describes as ‘a dominant influence on me’ – the Russian Jewish refugee Solomon Lipmanovich Rachmilevich (‘Rach’ or ‘Lemchen’), whom IB thanks for his help in the acknowledgements to the first edition of *Karl Marx*.

Rach was born in Riga (also IB’s birthplace) on 16 August 1891, almost eighteen years before IB. What follows is a slightly edited version of what IB told Michael Ignatieff.

He’d been to four or five German universities before the First World War. He studied Kant, and philosophy in general. He could read musical scores – he was deeply interested in music. He knew a great deal about composers, conductors and players. He was one of the most interesting people I knew. [...] He knew mathematics, he knew some physics. [...] He was a social democrat, a Menshevik, and he used to talk to workers in Riga. He wore a beard – a bearded Menshevik talking to workers on crossed logs in the outskirts of Riga about the Seventh Menshevik Congress.

When he came to London, he lodged with a cousin of his, who was a timber merchant whom my father knew – a tremendous businessman who made and lost fortunes, called Schalit (it’s a well-known Riga timber name), for whom he worked by studying the English law: gave him legal advice, used to get things up. It wasn’t really very helpful.

He was [Schalit’s] wife’s cousin, and so they gave him lodging, and he worked in his office. He wasn’t terribly interested. He was tremendously ingenious and tremendously sophisticated, and brought all these gifts to bear on the business: not very useful. Every Saturday afternoon he went to the British Museum, where he read till seven. What he read I can’t tell you, but every Saturday afternoon, one o’clock till seven, he read for six hours, steadily. He went to every concert there was in London. He sat in the gallery, leant forward to look at the conductor. You could see this figure, leaning forward prominently.

I met him in the house of these timber merchants whom my parents knew and he began talking to me about something. I was fifteen, sixteen: I was a schoolboy. And he began talking about Russian literature. I saw I had an unusual man before me, so I began talking to him. He then began telling me about Kant, and about [other] philosophers, and I only half understood. But I was fascinated, and I went on knowing him until his

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dying day.¹ He talked about physics, he talked about mathematics, he talked about everything in the world. He was a pure amateur, he'd never taught anywhere, or anything. During the war he made friends with a man, an independent Labour [MP] called Horabin, whose speeches he wrote, just like that. He did everything. The point was he was the most generalised intellectual I ever met.

When he came to Oxford and looked at Maurice Bowra's translations, he pointed out certain errors, I regret to say, and Bowra said, 'I don't wish to meet him. He's a one-man demolition squad.' But David Cecil thought he was delightful, and Stuart Hampshire thought he was delightful: so he got on amongst intellectuals, easily. He was not very beautiful. He had a bad end: I think he had a brain fever; he went off his head. In the end he did go mad, began writing love letters to seven or eight ladies at the same time. [...]

I used to ask him to come and see me in Oxford. [...] First of all he turned me towards philosophy by explaining what [philosophers] were about. I only half understood, but I began to have some inkling. Secondly, he talked to me about Russian literature. Thirdly, he talked about Marx, because he was a Marxist, of sorts, and explained that Lenin betrayed the Revolution. [...] Plekhanov he made me read. Fourthly, he made me talk about music, talk about conductors, talk about different styles of conductors, talk about composers, talk about what Bach would have said if he had lived now, what he would have said about jazz. He would have said, 'Das ist eine Teufelsmusik' ['That is devil's music']. But he would have been interested.

He went to Sicily for his holidays and lectured to the Sicilians on philosophy in Italian. [...] He came to nothing. He didn't write a line, and he died poor and neglected, although his relations kept him going. I used to see him, but in the end, as I say, he began to suffer mentally, and that was the end of that. He was very amusing. [...] When you said things to him, he would say, 'Vait a moment, vait a moment, I vill answer. Vait a moment, not so fast, vait a moment. Now, Kant says ...' – we talked in Russian, of course. [...] And then he explained to me what Husserl was about, what Husserl's disciples were about. He was a tremendous polymath. He had a sharp brain and a wonderful imagination and I owe him a very great deal. That's why I thank him in the thing on Marx. [...] He was a genuine influence and partly kept my Russian going from the

¹ 30 November 1953.

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age of sixteen, seventeen. I didn't talk much Russian until then, but with him I did talk. He had a strong Yiddish accent, which he must have got from his parents.²

He was a clever boy. He went to these German universities; gave very good descriptions of Heidelberg, Freiburg – one year in each, as people did, or a term in each. He wandered about. He told me about lecturers, what Hermann Cohen was like – Windelband, all these well-known names. [...] He was an extraordinary figure, I tell you. Not many people knew him. I was the only person he could talk to like that, in the world. He was the first person who gave me a taste for ideas in general, interesting ideas *telles quelles* – as such [...] – towards the end of St Paul's, last two years. I didn't see him very much: I saw him in those days five, six times a year. But when I was at Oxford, more frequently. I used to look him up, we used to have lunch, and on Saturday afternoons I'd find him in the British Museum.

The originals are in manuscript except when otherwise stated. Rach's sometimes idiosyncratic spelling is followed in the transcripts. Thanks to John Shedden for some corrections to the transcript.

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

29 October 1935

I was preoccupied with personal matters and failed to inform you that I had forwarded your epistle³ to the Spectator without delay. But this my omission does not give you the right or the excuse for accusing me of having no criticisms to make. Plenty of them, the main objection being the lack of political, moral and cerebral passion in your letter. And I allow for the greatest vagueness in the term passion. To my (eastern) mind a letter to an Editor should be

² Lipman Girshevich Rachmilevich (1867–1914) and Musya/Muschka Ziskindovna Rachmilevich (1874–1941), née Berlin.

³ **'The German Intellectuals'**, *The Spectator* 155 (1935) no. 5601 (1 November 1935), 721–2. The letter is about the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler's stand against the Nazis.

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prompted by не-могу-молчать-urge.⁴ But tactically I may be wrong. Other criticisms are irrelevant.

An interesting intuitionist is giving a course of lectures at Kings College in his type of mathematics (with amusing and spicy debates after the lecture). His name is Dienes⁵ and I liked him very much. This is the first time that I am impressed by an intuitionist (perhaps because I see a possibility mathematical intuitionism with no liaison dangereuse with Bergson). The next lecture is going to be highly technical but I'll try to follow because the rest lies in technique.

S Rach

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

14 November 1935

Moorgate Hall, 153 Moorgate, London, EC2

With mixed feelings I find that Furt[wängler] is expected to fulfil his London engagement after all but my mixture is probably not quite identical with yours.

Regarding your letter I experienced that opposite of you when I read it in print on the pages of the Spectator it appeared to serve the purpose with tact and cunning: is it because when one reads a printed paper one reads “*en masse*”?

But for your review⁶ I have nothing but praise. I think you have struck the right tone which a critic must do, to warm, to enlighten, and to whet the appetite, a Dreiklang⁷ which *must* sound harmonious. I don't think it cost you a special effort or that you

⁴ ‘Не могу молчать’ (‘I cannot remain silent’).

⁵ Paul Dienes (1882–1952), Hungarian philosopher and mathematician.

⁶ Presumably the review published in the same issue as the letter: ‘**Musiciens d'autrefois**’, review of Bernard van Dieren, *Down Among the Dead Men, and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1935: Oxford University Press), *Spectator* 155 (1935), 1 November 1935, 732.

⁷ ‘Triad’.

meditated about the duties and methods of book reviewing: which means that I think you ought to cultivate it. I failed, by the way, to detect any traces of a contribution from me; as a matter of fact I spoke to Bessie Schalit the next day and said to her that I had the impression that you were lazy to think and to write about this book at your writing desk and that you employed me as a tentative reader; and I even added that I was sure you would go home and write down what you told me, and that that would be your review. And so it turned out to be. This is a paragraph in a long chapter entitled your laziness, and it deserves to be elaborated in detail, this is only the warning and not the enlightening.

With the intuitionist I was not very happy (by the way he is a professor in Oxford!),⁸ the next lecture was much too businesslike for my dilettantic mathematics and besides I had to leave before the end. But he was in another way, a disappointment; he has not got the courage of his convictions and appears only *to try* whether intuitionism wouldn't do. And yet he despises the two other rivals Russell and Hilbert. This is a sterile attitude, because *to this extent* even Hilbert had learned from Brouwer, and even Russell in his frantic efforts to escape the paradoxes of infinite sets has paid tribute to the same difficulties and doubts which is the pride of all intuitionists. And I have more respect for and expect more profit from the critical and yet attacking and optimistic conservatism of those two than the defeatism⁹ of Brouwer. I am unable to form a balanced and expressible view in this subject, but I feel that the philosophical literature of the matter showed complete ineptitude and cowardice: Cantor has not found a Kant, as Newton did (впрочем,¹⁰ Newton had to wait a 100 years, the interval between the Prolegomena and the Kr. d. r. V. The quickening of tempo should have reduced the period to maximum a half, and Cantors

⁸ In fact Professor of Mathematics at Birkbeck College, London.

⁹ sc. 'défaitisme' ('defeatism').

¹⁰ 'Vprochem' ('by the way').

Grundlagen der Mengenlehre¹¹ are dated 1882/3, so that the Cantor–Kant is slightly overdue).

I have some hazy thoughts about an interesting analogy between Russell’s theory of types and Bohr’s first theory of electronic orbits. The morphological position with regard to the then prevailing difficulties in atomism and infinitism is almost identical and it should be instructive to investigate the various tentative solutions in both fields epistemologically. I believe it would reveal not only curiosities of parallelism, but it would show an underlying unity *in the trouble*. I’ll try to make it more articulate when we meet next time. This theme is intimately connected with another neglected treasure: the dialectical method of Hegel(–Marx) – it is still more disheartening to see how poor and empty *all* the writings on dialectics are. They (the dialec. materialists, for instance) have not even attempted to make it a live method for the modern scientific borderland-problems. The Uebergang von Quantität in Qualität¹² is bound to give a moral standing to the theory of types which is fallen so undeservedly in such discredit. The panic over the pitfalls of infinity would never have caused such a depression if a fruitful philosoph. method such as the diallectical is able to become would be available or would be attempted (is not Russell’s abandoning philosophy – the outcome of this depression?).

I apologise for these incoherent remarks – I am recouping myself and am using you as a target. Somebody with the necessary scientific and philosophic competence should begin doing something instead of preventing people from philosophising. Will the “ferocity” in Oxford develop into a true passion?

Who is Popper? I did not go to the Schonberg–Monn concert, although I don’t share the morbid fears of his London critics to be caught as they were by Kreisler and Wood. Schonberg worked for several years under Guido Adler editing volumes of a huge corpus

¹¹ ‘Foundations of set theory’.

¹² ‘Transition from quantity to quality’.

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called something like *Denkmäler der oesterr. Tonkunst*,¹³ and Monn was his subject, so it seems all straightforward; and Busoni did worse things, ranging from efforts to make the Ciacconne gaudy and the Campanella rich.

And the Mannheim school was not invented by my Riemann; your Burney already reported extensively about this school and their orchestra, as I see from the reviews of a reprint.

S. Rach.

TO ISAAH BERLIN

30 November 1936

Dear Mr Berlin,

I have not seen you for ages. I spent five dull weeks in Bucharest and am going back to this town tomorrow. I tried to master a *Revista de Filosofia* in vernacular, but the result was only that I spoiled my style in roumanian and found that roumanian philosophy is not even a bad edition of german phil.

Just to amuse you I am enclosing a copy of a review which appeared in the *Observer* yesterday. Cannot something be done about the shockingly low level of reviews which appear in the London press? I have no time and no inspiration to write a good letter to the editor of the *Observer* but I would love to see something and am giving you a very clumsy and rough suggestion.

“Sir,

Do you agree that the purpose of book-reviewing is 1) to enlighten the potential reader of the book in question about its contents, value and usefulness? and 2) to express authoritative opinions on the subject of the book so as to disseminate accurate knowledge and stimulate productive thinking?

Do you agree that this can be achieved only by entrusting reviews to persons who possess the necessary qualification?

¹³ *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich* (1894–1952).

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Do you agree that readers of *The Observer* have a right to feel safe against misleadingly profound and impertinently ignorant reviewers?

Do you agree that in cases when flagrantly inept reviews are brought to the notice of the Editor, he has to publish an apology in the next issue?

There have been many cases which called for protests from offended readers, but seldom has *The Observer* been a victim of such a gargantuan but nauseating joke as the review of the book "A short history of Music" by Alfred Einstein. The name of the reviewer may remain unmentioned.

There is no need to go into detail of his "views" on music and of his pseudo-philosophical observations about this book – their pompous stupidity may not be visible to everybody. But his obvious mistakes must be mentioned. First of all he should have known that the name of 'the greatest living scientist' is Albert Einstein and not Alfred Einstein. And if he writes a long article on a history of Music he should have known that Alfred Einstein is one of the not too many important writers on Music (he edited a *Musik-Lexikon*, was editor of one of the leading Musical periodicals, wrote books, one of which is entitled *H. Schütz*, and articles). The reviewer has the cynical frankness to confirm that he never heard the name of H. Schütz (he could find something about him even in the popular and accessible "The Musical Companion"). The general standard of knowledge of this reviewer is as high as his *connaissance* in Music: he begins his article with a very illuminating reference to other great men who created masterpieces not in their own field and his first instance is Raphael's sonnets; a case of *Duplizität der Erscheinungen*,¹⁴ because they have been written by Michelangelo. He talks eloquently about 'the profoundest lesson' he draws from this book. The whole incident should teach with a profound lesson that usually physicists, and even great physicists, do not write Histories of Music, and that reviewers would do well to imitate the physicists."

If you feel like to drop me a line about you or something, my address is: Athene Palace Hotel, Bucharest.

¹⁴ 'Misleading appearances'.

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Yours,
S Rachmilevich

PS What is this two-volume book on Kant's Kr. d. r. V.?

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

[n.d. 1927–40] [*telegram*]

WANT AND CAN STAND IT COULD COME SATURDAY IN
VIEW OF ABOVE PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE LEAVE THIS
WITHOUT ANSWER SHALL STILL THANK YOU FOR
OFFERED HOSPITALITY

RACH

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

[Between 7 April and 12 July] 1943 [*telegram*]

London

ALEXANDER GOLDBERG GOING USA WITH LIGHT ALLOY
MISSION BEING NATURALISED BRITISH SUBJECT HIS VISA
REFERRED WASHINGTON HAS MENTIONED PERSONALLY
KNOWN TO YOU GREETINGS

SOLOMON RACHNILEWITSCH [*sic*].

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

10 August 1943 [*typescript*]

17 Sussex Lodge, Sussex Place, W2

Dear Isaiah,

On two or three occasions I had an itch to write to you but I wisely resisted the temptation, wisely, if for no other reasons, than because my letters are unusually long and I know how overworked you are.

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Mr T. L. Horabin, MP, a very good friend of mine, is going to visit you in Washington, he is spending part of the parliamentary vacation in the States and you will not only oblige him and please me, but also do the right thing from a transpersonal point of view if you would assist him, both by selective and by directive advice, in short-cutting the tedious process of establishing contacts which a British MP in these days ought to make with people on your side of the water.

I do not think that my request should be completely invalidated by the fact that on very many questions I find myself in complete agreement with Mr Horabin.

With best regards,

Yours,

S Rachmilewitz

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

18 October 1946

Dear Shaya,

I have a bone to pick with you. Don Pasquale is the bone. I think you have no business to swell the ranks of the chorus of enraptured aesthetes. This is not a matter of taste alone, if intelligentsia, alias highbrows, are sick (causes – general & plenty) and tired of all the efforts of post-Wagnerian musicians to make music into something more and something less than the B's have been able successfully to do. Hence the efforts of reviving this that or other's oeuvre which has not been uninterruptedly on the repertoire. Don Pasquale, frankly speaking, is an exceedingly perfect but not less exceedingly minor masterpiece, and it is just bad luck that Barbieri could not oblige, being devoid of any trace of novelty. I went and listened very sympathetically, but with a growing sense of disappointment and anger. If sculpture would have occupied the metaphysical rank of music and it would have been found that contemporary sculptors had been cheating their patrons of their expectations, the analogy would have been – a

revival of Benvenuto Cellini. I have nothing derogatory to say about Cellini and I don't mind his being a bit of a swindler – his statuettes are lovely and masterpieces. But escaping from disappointment in Epstein (the Bloch of sculpture) to these goldsmiths & silversmiths of the 16th century is not much different from swopping Donizetti and Milhaud.

I am not going to waste time on developing this thesis, which I have only roughly headlined – you could do it much better yourself. In fact I would have very much liked to read, let us say, in Polemic, an essay by I. Berlin (why is he not writing essays?) on the psychology & sociology of the vagaries of aesthetic taste in the last 30–40 years. Instead of this he is humming the lovely nothings from Don Pasquale and is happy that they are not motives of death, of infinite love, Transfiguration or even *seid umschlungen, Millionen!*¹⁵ or 12-tone scale configurations. No, Sir, I insist that you are due for a Purge; and a liquidation of at least some of your hedonistic *уклоны*.¹⁶ So, you see, we have a serious quarrel.

If things will go according to plan, and there won't be a last minute cancellation, you will be able to read in Hansard of the coming week reflexions of what I called my political Kindergarten – a full scale attack on the foreign policy of E. Bevin. I am only afraid that the process of watering down the salient points and introducing irrelevant and distracting matters will disfigure and make unrecognisable the main outline. Here it is:

1. The intentions of E. Bevin 15 months ago may have been unexceptionable. Nobody is interested, since intentions have been superseded by
2. 15 months of reality, resulting in a) a triumph of reaction everywhere and b) a falsification of the issue by substituting a West v. East conflict for a well balanced (?) triangular contest – Moscow, Washington and the Third Way. The reality is bad enough, but with

¹⁵ 'Be embraced, you millions!', a line from Schiller's *Ode to Joy* used by Johann Strauss II as the title of a waltz.

¹⁶ 'Uklony' ('deviations').

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reality one can make compromises, modify it, reality is plastic. This has also, however, become obsolete and impossible, because

3. E. Bevin and his Policy have ceased to be a mere reality, he and it have become a symbol, and one cannot compromise or modify a symbol. Therefore ...

You can see how the framework is unsophisticated and straightforward. The fillings are also kept (by me) on clearcut, but sober, lines, the individual illustrative cases of aims mistook are just enumerated, only Russia and Greece are somewhat elaborated, not Palestine, which is above the Kindergarten standard. If this speech will miscarry (as a speech, because I do not expect an immediate palace revolution) then I shall completely withdraw into the manufacture of Cigarette Boxes and Lighters which in any case robs me of all my time and energy and joie de vivre and which is so far a failure.

S. Rach

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

12 November 1946

Dear Shaya,

Last week I tried to get you on the phone to exchange impressions about the absenteeism of Иосиф Виссарионович,¹⁷ but you were out.

I hope I did not irritate you by my criticism of your 'Don Pasquale' (after all, what will remain of me if I shall have to curb my criticisms, justified or unjustified; I am essentially a practising existentialist, *le Néant qui néantise*; and that is why I am through with Existentialism as a philosophy!)

As you have seen, my efforts in AntiBevinism have misfired, unless the thing is resuscitated during the debate on the King's

¹⁷ 'Iosif Vissarionovich' Stalin.

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speech, in which case it will amount to a castrated, expurgated, shortened and otherwise mutilated version of the original – not that I ever expected anything, the one thing which I am completely immune against is – exaggerating the effectiveness of my efforts. I only know that something which ought to be said and done *now* is not being said and done, and that depresses me and brings out the Cassandra in me.

I also wanted to have another evening in Oxford, but this must be postponed indefinitely for personal reasons which I can briefly explain to you, off the record.

You have a good memory therefore you will probably recollect that about a dozen years ago I had a fit of despondency, officially on purely business grounds, but essentially it went much deeper. Now, it has returned with a vengeance and I am in a chaos (my microcosm resembles very much the macrocosm only it is, if possible, a little more helpless) and am not fit for human consumption. I am trying to extricate myself, but not very hard.

For some inexplicable reasons I am not ashamed of revealing my disorder to you. I don't know even whether it is a compliment to you or whether I think that you cannot understand it, or both.

S Rach

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

20 November 1946

Dear Shaya,

I meant to telephone you soon after I left my sanatorium (this was quite a job). I did not intend to bore you with my gloomy affairs and troubles which supply me with a daily variety of pangs and scorpions and are of uninspiring monotony and *бесцветность*¹⁸ to others, even to friends. But I was afraid I would not be able to eliminate that subject.

¹⁸ sc. 'бесцветность' – 'bestsvetnost' ('insipidity').

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What I wanted to tell you is very simple and lends itself better to written words. You know it, but perhaps you are not giving it full scope. And I understand your reluctance.

It is about David Cecil. Your relations, warm as they were, have always been on a donnish, objective level. But I discovered in him a sincere, devoted, a very deeply concerned with your life and work and contentment friend. May be *he* found it very easy to show it to me. He is extremely sensitive and tactful (don't betray me to him) and loyal and afraid to disconcert you by talking to you freely about you. He is probably the only person who can understand fully all the snags, implications but he probably knows better than anyone the technical simplicity, comparative of course, of the ways out.

You must help him to assist you to clear your own doubts and hesitations for you while they are still *technical doubts and hesitations*. By the image of my, essentially quite different, cause I know one thing – you must not drift and allow a technicality to become more than that; I am of course not minimalising the difficulty, but as long as it is that, it can be solved without major lessons.

I found in him such a warmth and concern about you which I can understand but which surprised me. You can easily break the ring of impersonality with him, and also the crust of the irresponsible, high and intellectual level on which you usually commune. I can understand that this seems difficult to you, but it only seems so. Because of him.

As I said, I don't think I told you something which you did not know, but there was something in our dinner last Sunday which prompts me to write about this to you. He is extremely anxious to be able to talk to you freely without rousing in you the censor of the talk. He did not say so to me, but the hints were unmistakeable.

Don't let your difficulties leave the region of technicalities, this means – don't put off the reorientation of your College activities.

S Rach

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

24 August 1947

London

Dear Shaya,

For the last 3–4 weeks I have made considerable “progress” – I fell into the hands of doctors. At first they prescribed severe electric shock treatment, with very definite processes and very deplorable results. Then the psychiatrist of Guy’s hospital took me in examination and his verdict was that I was not a medical case at all (a psychological – yes), that the shock treatment was nonsense etc. The only thing on which he was definite was negative; and that was very emphatic, unless I discontinue my business and every association with it immediately, he guarantees calamity. And since remaining in London and having nothing to do with my immediate past is impossible, I have to go away, preferably far away.

I don’t know whether I believe in any future, in *any* future, for me, but I want to give it a chance. It occurred to me that Italy might do, for a couple of weeks or so. But as frankly speaking I cannot visualise my being alone I have to address to you a question with the request to give me a ruthlessly frank answer: is it at all convenient for me to go to the same place as you? I can see various reasons why it should not be. For instance, if you go to Italy to “do” it, to be very active, to enjoy it mostly, then I shall be nothing but a drag, because I shall have to spend my days more or less in an armchair with half interesting books, with very little activity, and half interested in what I am doing. And one thing is beyond doubt: I am of no entertainment value to anybody, worse than I have been for the last 2 years, and therefore alone may be completely unsuitable for you and still more for your travelling companions.

The doctors tell me there is nothing essentially wrong with me and that they are not the right people to deal with me. I have no opinion whatsoever. I am completely befogged but I am prepared to give them the benefit of all my doubts, if it can be done. I have

abandoned my business на произвол судьбы,¹⁹ what this means you can hardly imagine, but it is a measure of my desperate state.

I would be very grateful for letting me know, quite candidly, whether you think I should go at least for a few days, to Amalfi, and if yes, when do you expect to be there (I am not afraid of importuning anybody with claims for attention, but I am of being a dissonance).

I shall go on Monday and shall start preparing the Italian visas на всякий случай.²⁰

I hope you will quickly extricate yourself from the job of helping to edit the proposals(?) to America, I think the position has become so clear (nebulous) that style, method of approach, american susceptibilities have become irrelevant. Nowadays problems have a chance to be solved only by way of actual *reductio ad absurdum*. When the absurdum is ready ways and means become possible which are closed in rational circumstances and under rational assumptions. For instance I believe that the Palestinian problem has never been nearer a constructive solution than now. What considerations will dictate the solution and how the solution will look is another matter, the main thing is that it will not be what the actors (Bevin) intended. This is essential. I don't think I made my idea clear. It may be merely an expression of pessimism (as regards humanity) and optimism (as regards объективные условия)²¹ but I defy anybody to offer workable direct methods of solving any post war problem – the method of setting oneself an aim and seeing what has to be done to achieve this aim is obsolete. It is a peculiar kind of dialectic, to achieve (in intra state relations) the exact opposite of what is directly aimed, and I doubt whether this [is] a task congenial for a teacher of logic.

But may be I don't see straight and am only venting my personal despair

¹⁹ 'Na proizvol sud'by' ('to the mercy of fate').

²⁰ 'Na vsyakii sluchai' ('just in case').

²¹ sc. объективные условия, 'Ob"ektivnye uslovitsya' ('objective conditions').

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

Please let me know your answer as quickly as you can.

Yours

S Rach

TO ISAAIAH BERLIN

30 March 1950

Haifa

Dear Isaiah,

In case something will prevent you in the last moment from coming to Haifa here is roughly what I want to say.

I was so angry with you when I heard about your article abt Churchill, that it was unimaginable that reading the article itself could add something to my anger. The unimaginable happened – I got a few days ago the Cornhill. It is now 3–4 days after the reading and I am already comparatively calm about the matter, so you will hear any views only after я “пропустил через Saier [sc. Seiher]” как говорила моя бабушка когда давала мне молоко, чтобы по крайней мере пенку удалить из этого невкусного напитка.²²

But before I go in medias res I want to tell you why I am altogether bothered so much with what you write about a subject which anyhow dont interest me. I need not go in any detail and can write this part in telegraphic style.

Be the prehistory of the relations between USA and USSR and UK what they are & the deadlock to which the world arrived, the ice must be broken and will be broken, in time or too late – is another question. This can be done, of course, by Truman or his successor seeing Stalin and talking with him, but then no doubt, Britain (your hero or anyone else) is out of the picture, i.e. Europe is out of the picture, i.e. socialism, as still understood by somebody,

²² I “have put it through a strainer”, as my grandmother used to say when she gave me milk, so that at least the skin could be removed from this unpleasant beverage.’ RS’s phonetic spelling of the German word ‘Seiher’ suggests he had not seen it in written form.

is out of the picture. The same applies to Foreign Secretaries. Or there will be a small group of not highly official individuals in USA and Europe who will have managed the almost impossible trick of remaining uncontaminated and likely to receive the agreement from all sides. And to that group I counted you, and I was silly enough to think that you yourself kept a strict watch over your innocence. What that group has to do you understand.

That you destroyed by this article. Now you know why I think it important, and why I said to you over the phone that the *головомойка*²³ that you will receive from me is sharper than what Harold Laski could give you. A propos Laski; he should not open his mouth, at the end of 1943 he still wrote *институтские*²⁴ articles about the PM. *He* should have known by then what historians will discover in the next decade about everything done by Churchill and why the war was a six-years affair and what he did to Stalin (almost the same degree of help as Churchill managed to give Lenin in the early 20-ies by the intervention).

I think this big future which you left behind you, according to my plan, allows me full license to vent my ire.

First of all it is your brilliance which throws dust in the eyes of the reader and convinces him or makes him think that he is convinced.

Secondly it is your hedonism, which you share with both subjects of the article, which has given you the gusto to write in this style.

Thirdly, you have interspersed a lot of correct observations into your spider's web, a few even first class, which deserve to be detached from the hagiography of yours and developed.

Fourthly, I go so far as to argue against you from the point of view of the Party Line of 1949/50: even if there was a soupçon of correctness in your article, and maybe there was, it is not the business of a member of the Labour Party to write an "objective" account about the role of Churchill, it is after all not an obituary, it

²³ 'Golovomoika' ('dressing-down').

²⁴ 'Institutskie' ('institutional').

is a heroization of the still alive and acting Churchill, appearing 2 months before the elections.

Fifthly, if you say ‘far from changing his opinions too often Mr Church. has scarcely during a long and stormy career allowed them at all etc’, you became a victim of your own romanticism and you had better read something, which was no doubt quoted during the preelection time, about the innumerable contradictions in Ch. pronouncements. I too was, for a very short time after Dunkerque, enamoured with Ch. and I had only to go to the Br. Museum and look up his past to get disillusioned about this hero.

Sixthly, I think that anyone who has an itch to romanticise Churchill would not be allowed to do it without having read the book on India by him, it came out abt 1932–33. He will see what this “larger than life” lover of freedom etc really thinks about a bagatelle of (then) 400.000.000 and 1 men, the 1 being Gandhi.

Seventhly, ‘heroic and genuine’ (epithets on p. 220), may be, are not contradictories, although I doubt it. But in this case it is true, and also not absolutely true, only for specific moments and no more. You yourself said he was the last great actor, which means literally that if he is heroic he is not genuine; this idea is semantically wrong. The semblance of being not entirely wrong is not sufficient to justify this glorification.

Eighthly there are many passages in which you stress that he was haunted by one idea and one idea alone, his idea of the past and quasi hinted that he doesn’t even attempt to understand that facts and tendencies i.e. the present and the future. Why not condescend to the market place and call it a reactionary. You know very well that all great reactionaries were men with an idea and a wellordered moral system (it is so easy to be consistent & systematic, with one all embracing idea – about the past[]). It is easier to write “A la recherche du temps perdu” than “the shape of things to come”. And it is easier to glorify such a pre-digested career (his own writings) while it is lasting than a revolutionary who is not yet. If you wrote about the paradox of a man who hates anything but his

vision of the past and raises his people to unheard of heights by interpreting this people to itself in its fight with the пришедший хам²⁵ then you would have come to write about the immense tragedy of Britain having to be saved by a Churchill. That theme would give you an angle on our time (and Ch.) which is infinitely more worthy of your talents and more interesting. You have a phrase which I shudder when I see this: “he saved the future by interpreting the present in terms of a vision of the past”, without even a hint of the dangers involved in such a synthetic sentence.

Ninthly, “to ignore this (the large scale phenomenon Churchill) would be blind ...” This reminds me of Kant. Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind, Begriffe ohne Anschauungen sind leer.²⁶ Sapienti sat.

Tenthly. To be a slave of facts is probably as inadequate for a historian as to be a mythologist. This is only a bare theme and should be followed by many variations, amplifying and restricting; but these are rather obvious.

Eleventhly. I think it is enough, one could go on like that for another 10 remarks to say this relevant thing and another, but really without advancing the argument. Therefore I would only like to say that had you chosen the theme “Churchill & Stalin” you would have written a necessary article, an article for which you are eminently that man to do it, and you would not have needed to cull your instincts about Churchill, and you would be able, without damage, to clarify by this juxtaposition much more than by Ch. v Roosev., very big problems and all-important ones. Can you rewrite it and replace by the new theme. You said you wrote it in America. In that case it looks almost impolite to Roosevelt the man (a remarkable man) against this superman

²⁵ ‘Prishedshii kham’ (‘the oaf who had appeared’).

²⁶ ‘Intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts without intuitions are empty.’

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

The possibilities are endless: Churchill – the colourful (in Technicolour): Stalin – the monochromatic (black or red). Churchill – the man whose strategy is governed, but more often than is visible in the old articles misgoverned by his famous vision of the past; Stalin who has no historic vision at all, only a fixed point – the future. The ruthlessness of both, the differences of the character of the ruthlessness. Perhaps an imaginative dramatisation of a meeting between the two, a delightful angle for you. Churchill – the European but not of this century and therefore not yet tired of the inheritance, but full of beans, and contagious beans at that; Stalin – the taciturn Eurasian. Churchill – the representative of the English, and what that means; Stalin – of the Russians (a Georgian), and what that means; neither of them being a typical representative, Etc. etc. etc. Many surprising similarities(?) and many incompatibilities between them. I see I have not exhausted the catalogue by half.

I shall be, however, sorry if something will prevent our meeting.

yours

S Rachmilewitch

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

2 April 1950

EN GEV²⁷

Dear Shayah,

I sent you a letter to Rehovoth, a concise and hurried version of what I have to say about IB and WSCh in case you would find your programme too big to squeeze in a day of Haifa. But afterwards I found that *conte que conte* we must meet and for more weighty reasons than this unfortunate(?) article, partly it is my curiosity and, perhaps I wanted to make a sort of confession, but about that I am hesitant; but partly I want seriously to talk to you about yourself, this is probably the last opportunity and I think I

²⁷ Ein Gev kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee.

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

am about right in my ideas (of course it may well be that you have the same ideas).

So please let nothing stand between your crowded time-table and our meeting. We must have a few evenings or at least an afternoon from 2 till 6–7. Any day this Passover Week will do because we are working till 1-30. Unfortunately I have missed so much through illness, that I can't neglect even one day, otherwise I would gladly adjust myself to your convenience.

Please drop me a telegram which day you are coming and I will book a room.

My address: Rachmilewitch c/o Aleinikof, 12 Jerusalem stralt
your
S Rach

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

10 May 1950

Haifa

Dear Shaya,

Since the evening in En Gev I am ill. Yesterday I have been allowed to be transferred from hospital to a resthouse. I have been completely incapacitated, I did not see straight (only literally) and had to lie motionless, a living contradiction to Heracleitos' (alas, I cannot read one of the books you sent me) *παντα ρει*.²⁸ Today I am allowed to move, but I don't know where to. I see now from the back numbers of London newspapers that the fault is that I am not in a country where skyscrapers abound. Enough of that.

For the last two days I can read papers and your Eliot. Good verses, but the plot reads like a bad imitation of Eliot, a cheap edition of his esoteric stuff. Sartre popularised his *L'être et le Néant* in much better plays.

²⁸ 'Panta rei' ('Everything is in a state of flux').

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

I confess that in one way our meeting was a failure: I started a confession but it did not go far ... (there was nothing, or almost nothing, personal, it was like Zola's definition of realism)

I was sorry that I did not develop more alluringly my suggestion that you should expand your oeuvre in Russian backwards, till the tartars, and thus get an angle on the later developments (which is also История русской интеллигенции,²⁹ a sort of price payed for the luxury of Radistchev–Plechanov; but not merely that). Your book would become more controversial (not more one sided) but it would gain in depth and be more revealing. It is difficult to write for me and against the rules given by the doctors, but you must understand what I mean, or have a suspicion of a glimpse. Think of it: the two projectors, one from Битва при Калке,³⁰ 1224, the other – 25/10/1917, thrown on your theme. It gives 3rd dimension, or Technicolour

Lemchen

TO ISAAH BERLIN

26 May 1950

Haifa

Dear Shaya,

I am out of hospital, but still out of bounds for human society, in a word I am not yet fit for human consumption, and I cannot concentrate, so this will be a rambling letter. I had a mysterious(?) inflammation of the brains, and still feel terribly giddy and cannot see straight, with my eyes; with my minds eyes I can see clearly so my illness does not invalidate the following. The doctors don't know when it happened, they say I walked with it several weeks. Everything fits the cards.

But that is neither here nor there. What I want to pester you about is your book. The History of Intelligentsia limited to the XIX

²⁹ 'Istoriya russkoi intelligentsii' ('history of the Russian intelligentsia').

³⁰ 'Bitva pri Kalke' ('Battle of the Kalka [River]'), fought in 1223.

c. is too light and irresponsible, even from a new angle. That same angle could apply to a History of the Russian Revolution. It will be extremely interesting but that is all. But it will not be the important work which you are predestined to write. It is a symbiosis of the 1) Russian quintessence with 2) German Philosophy and Anglo French utopian Socialism and with 3) the 'tartar' (let us call it so for short). This is Carr's failing that it is not written from this triangle. Don't repeat his mistake. The same as you felt that the Western angle lights up the whole scene with a new light (mainly in the sense of debunking). If you take in the скифа³¹ then you have the picture altered and obtain a wide all-embracing synthesis, and then the debunking will turn to be a 'rich' explanation and a deep probing into that which is called "the slav soul" without the sentimental nonsense (a side issue is the demystification of Dostoevsky, conserving all the depth or even intensifying it).

And it is not too sophisticated. F.i. the община,³² and all its strange repercussions up to the sov- and col-chozes³³ obtains thus an "elegant" solution.

This is all apart from the world-political aspects. I will stop here, I cannot think systematically, I want only to entice you on the road. Little imagination is needed for seeing how a book for a few интеллиге[н]т's³⁴ becomes a capital historical book. Don't be lazy to spend a few months to see whether you cannot write this book.

I am unfortunately unable to make it more alluring to you, I am too dull and dulled by the last years.

And another thing. Don't you think that there is no place reserved for you as an unofficial Lee, somewhere and sometime? For that I warmly recommend to you to acquaint yourself with the position in the atomic question, I don't mean the political and social aspects that you know no doubt, but at least a certain all round familiarity with the scientific and technical side. In Oxford,

³¹ 'Skifa' ('Scythian').

³² 'Obshchina' ('commune').

³³ sc. 'sovkhozy and kolkhozy' ('state farms and collective farms').

³⁴ 'Intelligent's' ('intellectuals').

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

I feel sure, you will find ample facilities to do it en passant. And if you will have, let us say, to suspend your interest in music for a year or so, it is worth while.

You see, you did not bargain for that, when you suggested I should write to you. I am not paying you compliments, I just see in you the data for fulfilling an important task in either of these two directions. I have thought a lot about these themes, and I know and understand you sufficiently. It is worth trying.

yours

Lemchen

P.S. When I was allowed in hospital to read a little, I asked to be given a Shakespeare. I had not read in Hamlet for a couple of years, an unheard of fact for at least 25 years.

I have never developed before you my reading of Hamlet, I found you singularly calm abt Shak. It so much contrasted with my other obsession, that I was dumb; Hamlet was one of my вечные спутники.³⁵

King Lear, the other play which awed me with its inexhaustible depths, I was afraid of, and probably because of that I never touched except the surface. I noticed it in 1943 when Michoels[i.e. Solomon Mikhoels] was in London and we talked at great length about his production of K.L. I decided then that I shall read it in my death bed, when I have not to fear of any revelation and left it at the awe and shudder I felt for the trio on the Heath and other bits.

As it happens I forgot about my decision. Maybe, after all, I was not serious! But in hospital when I went through Hamlet, my version seemed to me more satisfactory and plausible than ever (and less satisfactory as a complete theory). But I certainly won't go into it now. But one small crux, which always worried me (which I was unable and had no cause to try to integrate in my theory), irritated me more than ever.

³⁵ 'Vechnye sputniky' ('eternal companions').

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

You see I found Hamlet always to be a perfect closed microcosmos, full of inner reverberations and echoes, whenever I met a personage, be it of the least importance, it fit in the whole scheme, in fact, it always was either a foil to Hamlet either directly or by contrast or by comparison or by some words or by complementarity; or it was an antifoil, whatever that may mean. And gradually I learned the rule, that when ever a scene or a turn of phrase was repeated it meant by Sh. that it should not be missed by his audience. It was like a stage direction: look! And it should not be treated casually. F.i. the Play in the Play, in its two versions, whatever the theory about it was, at least that is definite. Sh meant it should not be missed. The interpretation of Dover Wilson for which I have great admiration and interest, does not completely satisfy me, it is too ingenuous (for your information Dov. Wil. was learning Russian during the First W. war. But later, I think, he lost all interest).

Now to my crux. There is an underlining of a strange relativity of the sense of duration and time between Horatio and the rivals of his watch

1. *Hor.* "While one with moderate haste might tell a hundred
Marc. Bernardo. Longer, longer." 1.2.237

2. *Hamlet.* "What hour now?
Horatio I think it lacks of twelve.
Marcellus. No. It is struck". 1.4.3–5

As for me I am aware nobody was bothered by this before!! Of course it could be said that it was a realistic psychological finesse to heighten the nervousness, at night, of the business with the ghost or something on such lines, but that does not satisfy me; repetitions have a more weighty meaning.

I never knew a live Shakespeareologist. I can't understand myself why I never tried to meet Dov Wilson, undoubtedly the most fascinating, because fascinated, of the lot. But this is another question, my private crux.

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

Perhaps if you meet him by chance, or any other one, put this question to him. Tell him that I am not a competitor and not an author. I am only worried that I cannot understand why Sh. needed this nervous discrepancy.

S.R.

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

14 June 1951 [*telegram*]

SORRY PREVENTED GOING TOMORROW MORNING TO
HOSPITAL

RACH

TO ISAIAH BERLIN

[n.d. 1945–53] [*manuscript*]

Dear Isayah

It is quite natural for you to think that I am exaggerating and seeing things. There was a break of continuity between our last conversation and now, and the jump is rather a big one, and in the last few days it goes crescendo. I am now in the hands of doctors, they are experimenting with the mysterious electric shock treatment. Apparently it is not very successful and it is suggested that I should be seen by another man, a Dr Slater (brother in Law of Pasternak) and put into hospital.

The field of commercial activities I abandoned from one day to the other, this is in a state of complicated (including personal) bankruptcy and I have not the slightest inkling what will happen with me except that I will be locked up in a hospital.

The basic fact of my existence is that I cannot see even the outlines of the future. I am afraid I stop being a subject and am becoming an object. People around me are trying their best, but they are bewildered. The secret is that I have been left for too long my own boss and now it is beyond anybody's capacity to set anything right. May be something will happen but I cannot see it.

LETTERS FROM SOLOMON RACHMILEVICH

May be it is precisely fear of dramatisation which has prevented any radical action before. Today it is too late for any palliatives, and for anything thorough. I am much too tired and worn out. I rang you yesterday not because I expected something from the conversation; I meant to ask you about Dr Slater.

Microcosms are very often mirroring Macrocosms. This is not in the least a consolation, it only robs me of any remnant of energy and vitality, as it has robbed me of the rudiments of balance.

Yours

S Rach

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