

Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) One of my favorite Hasidic stories. When the great Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, master of the universe, listen, I do not know how to light a fire, but I am still able to say the prayer. [00:01:00] And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Moshe Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place. And this must be sufficient. It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished. And then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. I am unable to light the fire. I do not know the prayer. I cannot

even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story. And this must be sufficient. And it was sufficient.

Well, tonight, we shall tell stories, all stories [00:02:00] written eternities ago when the storyteller before you relentlessly tried to bring from his childhood's thirst for fervor, innocence, and adventure, an ever-consuming flame to his literary imagination. Most of his novels are tales, though the reverse is not necessarily true, except that the novels are his whereas the tales are not. The tales have been handed down to him by his teachers and theirs, transcending time and geography, appealing to what confers meaning on fleeting experiences and to what keeps Jewish memory alive.

And yet, to writers, novelists, fiction is as important as nonfiction, if not more so. Unfortunately, it doesn't fare too well. If once upon a time imagination preceded reality, today it's the reverse. Scientists may [00:03:00] be greater fiction writers than novelists, who justifiably or not nevertheless believe that the creative mind refers exclusively to invented situations, fictional characters, imaginary events. I maintain that study is as creative an endeavor as the writing of novels. To learn is to engage in dialogue with scholars and disciples who lived and died centuries earlier.

To learn is to realize that there is always more to learn. To explore ancient texts, to refine their relevance to contemporary issues, to find hidden connections between cultures and traditions is as stimulating an experience, if not more so. Furthermore, isn't the art of the novel relatively a recent phenomenon whereas the passion for study is as old [00:04:00] as creation itself? Tonight then, I intend to read passages from some of my novels, occasionally accompanied or preceded by brief commentaries. Still, be it only for the sake of tradition, we shall try to indulge in some study as well, rather commentaries that are part of study.

But as always, at this moment a few preliminary remarks may seem in order. One, tonight's session is not a lecture, a traditional one, such as the ones we have shared for the last 30 years. It doesn't deal with biblical, Talmudic, or Hasidic figures. It is meant to be what the French call *une causerie*, a soliloquy, a verbal meditation on a variety of subjects. In other words, tonight's purpose is simply to meet again, [00:05:00] spend time together, and remember, not without nostalgia, the evenings we used to devote to learning.

Naturally, why, you may ask, have the four-part annual series not been renewed? Well, simply because they simply lasted too long. I always like to conclude before you. (laughter) In other words, I like to end speaking before you end listening. (laughter) But then, why am I still here? I had a friend, whom some of you may remember if you are my age. His name was Meyer Weisgal. He was called the king of Schnorrers and the Schnorrer of the kings. (laughter) He was a friend of Chaim Weizmann. He is the one, actual, who built for Chaim Weizmann, the Weizmann Institute. [00:06:00]

He had tremendous sense of humor. And he told me a marvelous story which happened to him. He attended a dinner with many speakers, too many speakers. And all of them were long, but one of them was even longer, painfully long. At one moment Meyer, who was supposed to be the next speaker, whispered to him and pulled his sleeve saying, "Reb Yid, stop." And the speaker whispered back, "I want to. I don't know how." (laughter)

Well, I also want to. I don't know how. Because some of you are kind enough not to let me. And further, the stubbornness and the persistency really of two very special people of the Y, [00:07:00] Sol Adler, who is director, and my friend Rabbi David Woznica. They came, and they insisted, and I have a weak spot.

I cannot say no to rabbis. So -- But then there's a third preliminary remark which I am sure you will appreciate, but although many things have changed this year some things haven't and obviously never will. As always, whether I give one session or four, some people do arrive late. But as always, the doors are open. (applause) [00:08:00]

Somewhere a child began to cry. In the house across the way an old woman closed the shutters. It was hot with all the heat of an autumn evening in Palestine. Standing near a window I looked out at the transparent twilight whose descent made the city seem silent, motionless, unreal, and very far away. Tomorrow, I thought for the hundredth time, I shall kill a man. And I wondered if the crying child and the woman across, they knew. I did not know the man. To my eyes he had no face. He did not even exist, for I knew nothing about him. I did not know whether he scratched his nose when he ate, whether he talked or kept quiet when he was making [00:09:00] love, whether he gloried in his hate, whether he betrayed his wife or his god or his own future. All I knew was that he was an Englishman and my enemy. The two terms were synonymous.

"Don't torture yourself," said my friend Gad in a low voice.

"This is war." His words were scarcely audible, and I was

tempted to tell him to speak louder because no one could possibly hear. The child's crying covered all other sounds, but I could not open my mouth. Because I was thinking of the man who was doomed to die. Tomorrow, I said to myself, we shall be bound together for all eternity by the tie that binds a victim and his executioner.

"It's getting dark," said Gad. "Shall I put on the light?" I shook my head. The darkness was not yet complete. As yet, there was no face at the window to mark the exact moment when day changed into night. A beggar had taught me a long time ago how to distinguish night from day. I met him one evening in my hometown when I was saying my prayers in the [00:10:00] overheated synagogue. A gaunt, shadowy fellow dressed in shabby black clothes with a look in his eyes that was not of this world. It was at the beginning of the war. I was 12 years old. My parents were still alive. And God still dwelt in our town.

"Are you a stranger?" I asked him. "I'm not from around here," he said in a voice that seemed to listen rather than speak. Beggars inspired me with mingled feelings of love and fear. I knew that I ought to be kind to them, for they might not be what they seemed. Hasidic literature tells us that the beggar may be the prophet Elijah in disguise come to visit the earth and the

hearts of men and to offer the reward of eternal life to those that treat him well. Nor is the prophet Elijah the only one to put on the garb of a beggar. The Angel of Death delights in frightening men in the same way. To do him wrong is more dangerous. He may take a man's life or his soul in return.

And so [00:11:00] the stranger in the synagogue inspired me with fear. I asked him if he was hungry, and he said no. I tried to find out if there was anything he wanted but without success. I had an urge to do something for him but did not know what. The synagogue was empty, and the candles had begun to burn low. We were quite alone, and I was overcome by increasing anxiety. I knew that I shouldn't be there with him at midnight, for that is the hour when the dead rise up from their graves and come to say their prayers. Anyone they find in the synagogue risks being carried away for fear he betray their secret.

"Come to my house," I said to the beggar. "There you can find food to eat and a bed in which to sleep." "I never sleep," he replied. I was quite sure then that he was not a real beggar. I told him that I had to go home, and he offered to keep me company. As we walked along the snow-covered streets, he asked me if I was ever afraid of the dark. "Yes, I am," I said. I

wanted to add that I was afraid of him too, [00:12:00] but I felt he knew that already.

"You mustn't be afraid of the dark," he said, gently grasping my arm and making me shudder. "Night is purer than day. It is better for thinking and loving and dreaming. At night everything is more intense, more true. The echo of words that have been spoken during the day takes on a new and deeper meaning. The tragedy of man is that he doesn't know how to distinguish between day and night. He says things at night that should only be said by day."

He came to a halt in front of my house. I asked him again if he didn't want to come in, but he said no, he must be on his way. That's it, I thought. He's going back to the synagogue to welcome the dead. "Listen," he said, digging his fingers into my arm. "I'm going to teach you the art of distinguishing between day and night. Always look at the window, and failing that, look into the eyes of a man. If you see a face, any face, [00:13:00] then you can be sure that night has succeeded day. For believe me, night has a face." Then, without giving me time to answer, he said goodbye and disappeared into the snow.



Every evening since then I have made a point of standing near a window to witness the arrival of night. And every evening I saw a face outside. It was not always the same face, for no one night was like another. In the beginning I saw the face of the beggar. Then after my father's death I saw his face with the eyes grown large with death and memory. Sometimes total strangers lend the night their tearful face or their forgotten smile. I knew nothing about them except that they were dead.

"Don't torture yourself in the dark," said Gad. "This is war." I thought of the man I was to kill at dawn and of the beggar. Suddenly I had an absurd thought. What if the beggar were the man I was to kill? [00:14:00] Outside the twilight faded abruptly away, as it so often does in Palestine, in the Middle East. The child was still crying, it seemed to me more plaintively than before. The city was like a ghost ship noiselessly swallowed up by the darkness. I looked out the window where a shadowy face was taking shape. Out of the deep of the night a sharp pain caught my throat. I could not take my eyes off the face. It was my own.

This is from a novel that I have written called *Dawn*, my first novel, my second book and first novel. I wrote it in 1960. And of course it's about pre-Israel. It's about Palestine. I wrote

it because I always somehow regretted that I was not part of that extraordinary adventure. [00:15:00] It was an adventure in historical terms, in metaphysical terms, of young people in Palestine who decided to take on their shoulders the Jewish history's course trajectory, and bring a new state into existence and bring back David's kingdom into our fantasy.

If I had been then in Palestine I hope that I would have had the courage to join one of the three undergrounds, but from far away -- since I use fiction to correct my own injustice. But those were romantic days in 1946, '47, '48, the *Aliyah Bet*, *Exodus*, illegal ships, and the mobilization of Jewish energies all over the world. For that experiment in history was extraordinary. Hostage-taking wasn't an everyday phenomenon yet, and yet the story of *Dawn* is a hostage taking [00:16:00] because the underground took an English officer hostage. Palestine meant Jewish Palestine.

Officers and soldiers of the Jewish Brigade of Palestine, that was their name, were busy preparing the Haganah, Irgun, and Lehi for clandestine combat against the British occupation army. Today you say Palestinians and of course the impression is, today it is, Palestinians means Arabs. At that time Palestinians meant Jews. Are analogies possible? Someone

defined Zionism as history's only revolution that succeeded. Perhaps its success is due not only to its goal but also to its methods. The Haganah inflicted damage to government buildings. The Irgun attacked military installations. The Lehi group went farther and did not hesitate to assassinate British officers and officials. But all three clandestine organizations, imbued with romanticism, showed [00:17:00] extraordinary care in not shedding the blood of children, women, and in general unarmed, defenseless, and innocent civilians.

When in 1946 the decision has been made by the Irgun with the consent of the Haganah and Ben-Gurion to destroy the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, an hour before, or half hour before, a telephone call was received, and in Palestine the *Palestine Post*, which was the predecessor of the *Jerusalem Post*, I think some consulates, and the high command in the hotel saying there is a bomb. Evacuate the hotel. Now, can you imagine any terrorist organization today alerting, warning people to say get out because there is a bomb there? It's just the opposite. Today things have changed.

Today terrorists aim at indiscriminately killing and maiming innocent people [00:18:00] old and young, peaceful citizens, beautiful children. Youngsters are being conditioned and

trained to become suicide bombers, living vehicles of death. This is not only in the Middle East but also in a place that we don't even talk about, in Algeria. Algeria where civilian villagers are being assassinated daily or nightly with blood chilling brutality and savagery. I hesitate even to give you descriptions because they are so horrible. And the lack of response, the complacency of the world's political or moral leaders is, to say the least, baffling, shocking.

What about our own land? Take China. The Chinese [00:19:00] president now is here. And gratefully we acknowledge, of course, the attitude of President Clinton who said certain things in the press conference yesterday that bring honor to our nation. But the fact is, China, because it is so big and so strong and commercially so strong, gets away with everything. Tibet is still an occupied province, and I cannot tell you enough how I feel about it because the Dalai Lama, whom I know well, is a tragic figure. And what about the political prisoners who are still in prison there?

What do they know about our protests? Because since we know that the protests don't really do much. They don't change the attitude of the government of this president who is here. So what should we do? Should we say that human rights come first

and business second or third? What should we do then? What about [00:20:00] Israel? For so long concerned more with time than space, obsessed more with impossible than the possible, Israel today elicits both hope, the noblest of hopes, which is peace, but also apprehension. Will its future be longer than its past? Will there ever be harmony in that land, filled with memory and longing? Does hope have a future in that part of the world?

Inside our own ranks there seems to be room for worry. Too many tensions, divisions, conflictual relations dominate the situation. Political extremism and religious fanaticism have grown everywhere in the world but in Israel too. The split within the Jewish people has always been fraught with peril. There can be, there must be no justification whatsoever for Jews to be humiliated [00:21:00] by other Jews, neither here in the diaspora nor in Israel itself. What must happen, for God's sake? What must happen for our leaders to recognize the absolute necessity of unity and mutual respect?

Don't they know that whenever tragedy struck our people it was always accompanied by internal hatred? The expression is *sinat chinam*, which is translated as gratuitous hatred. I prefer another translation. *Sinat chinam* means hatred over gratuitous

things, or better yet, hatred that reduces important issues to frivolous and gratuitous matters. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed not by the hatred of the outside enemy coming from Babylon or Rome but by the hatred that was nourished inside its houses, inside our hearts. When hatred appears, [00:22:00] morality vanishes.

Our people's concern with moral issues since Abraham and Moses is well known. Does it mean that we always have been morally motivated everywhere and on all issues? Of course not. Read the Bible and the prophets and you will be shocked at the behavior of our ancestors. But morality played a role in our collective consciousness. It happened then. It happened all the time. And it happened even recently. Russian Jewry, with whose valiant struggle I had the true privilege of being involved since the very beginning, until now was more an attempt to invoke morality than to deal with political change.

Dictatorship is immoral. Oppression is immoral. Suppression of free speech is immoral. Anti-Semitism is immoral. Racism is immoral. [00:23:00] What then is moral? Hillel the Elder formulated it brilliantly. "lo ta'aveid" do not do unto others what you don't want others to do to you. In other words, we never said that because we suffered, others must suffer too.

Quite the contrary. We Jews said because we suffered, we must teach others neither to inflict nor to endure suffering. Seneca understood that the decline of the Roman Empire was near when he realized with amazement and fear that the morality of the vanquished was higher than that of the victors.

Morality is what preoccupies us, although it is not the only one. Survival is also a moral issue. And then fraternity and friendship and learning [00:24:00] are as important because they contribute to our perception of morality. So today the national debate in Israel is or ought to be not around politics but about ethics. And that goes for diaspora as well. If some of us are worried it is because of the rise in our own ranks of violence and fanaticism which negate the very concept of debate.

Fanaticism means hatred. And hatred must never be an option for it is a glorification of all that is vile and demeaning in the human condition.

Fanaticism in religion destroys religion. Religion and politics should be incompatible. When politics becomes religion, it's bad for both religion and politics. (applause) How does one fight fanaticism? Whatever the answer, education is its major component. [00:25:00] Our enemies understood the importance of education to our people. That is why they tried to suppress it

without real success. The line stretching from Hadrian to Stalin and their decrees is clearly traced, as is the line from Rabbi Akiva to the refuseniks in Moscow, Tashkent, and Kiev. We never stopped learning.

Even in the ghettos there were schools. Whether in Vilna or in Shavli or in Bialystok, Warsaw, in the ghettoes in the cellars, in the attics there were schools for *tinoket shel churban*, for children, as long as they were alive. That was the fascination with learning. That was part of our Jewish psyche that one hour before a person dies that person still wants to learn about life, about the meaning of life about the goals in life. One minute before death, [00:26:00] a person still can encompass all that death negates. One minute before death a person is still victorious over death.

Learning is what makes our people so special. Our passion for learning is what makes it so unique. A very great philosopher of history in New York, Louis Finkelstein, z"l, who was the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, once said something which moved me very deeply. He said the Jewish people, unlike others, actually never had aristocracy. Who are our aristocrats? The scholars. The true aristocrats are those who have acquired learning, who share their learning, and who



are devoted to learning. Well, things change. Things have changed in many areas. If in [00:27:00] *Dawn* the death of one person, one British officer is the topic of an entire book, what could be the topic today of novels about killing or enduring suffering in the world of today?

Today we see so many changes that no novelist actually would dare. We'd need a Tolstoy to write a new *War and Peace* for things have changed in our own lifetime. Even those of you who are so young, who still go to high school or to college, even for you the change that you have witnessed and perhaps observed and perhaps been part of, are extraordinary. Empires vanished. Ideologies collapsed. Systems disintegrated. New nations were born. Ancient concepts found new applications in 50 years since 1945. [00:28:00] Rarely in recorded history have so many changes taken place so rapidly.

Now, I described something similar in another novel. I'll read from it, but what we must know is times have changed with regard to Jewish memory as well. Little has been written and published about the tragedy of our people during and even after the Holocaust. But now there isn't a day without major newspapers reporting on the subject. If it is not a gathering of survivors it is about the Swiss gold. When the subject of Swiss gold is a

little bit overdone, they go to Sweden or Portugal, other nations, about the problems in France. If it's not about that it's about commemoration or a trial of war criminals, the OSI in Washington.

Films are being produced, [00:29:00] television programs broadcast, interviews conducted, school books edited, high school and college courses introduced. Things have changed. Another domain where extraordinary change has taken place is Russia. So many of my memories are located there. I was there recently. In Moscow or in what is called today St. Petersburg, you go there, shuls are open, and of course Chabad is there, naturally everywhere. (laughter) Both -- there are two in Moscow. One is not enough. We have two in Moscow. And everywhere you find that, but you meet young people who come now to study.

You have schools now. I heard in Riga you have schools, Jewish schools, day schools. Where don't you have day schools today? All over the place, which means the voice of Torah, which was stifled for so long, [00:30:00] is being heard again. I remember my first visit to Babi Yar in Kiev. I remember Sukkot in Leningrad, Simchat Torah in Moscow. How can I forget the Simchat Torah in Moscow? Last week Simchat Torah here in New

York, and I love holidays. I love Jewish holidays, especially Simchat Torah. But there is something about the Torah which, you know, it's just so very special. It's a physical -- I like the physical contact that a Jew has when he or she holds the Torah. It's physical love, really, physical love.

And in Moscow thousands and thousands of youngsters, the first to brave Soviet dictatorship, I repeat it to the end of my days, were not Solzhenitsyn, nor even Sakharov, or the other dissidents but young refuseniks, those who came out of the darkness on Simchat Torah evening three [00:31:00] blocks away from the Lubyanka and danced to the glory of Jewish tradition and Jewish memory and Jewish life and Jewish honor. One of my trips to Russia then, it was still under the regime of dictatorship, I had a moving, moving scene.

We had a clandestine meeting with refuseniks, and one of them came up. There were a hundred people or so. There must have been some KGB informers too, but even they must have been seduced by the joy that these people had when they met one another. And one came up to me and said, you know, I had a present for you for years. I translated your first book *Night in Samizdat* in Russian. And they were all gone, and I have one

copy for you. And he gave me the copy. So I embraced him with tears. In another room another person came up to me.

Said, you know, [00:32:00] I translated your book *Night* (laughter) in Russian. And he said, I -- of course he distributed in samizdat all the copies, but I kept one book for you. (laughter) I embraced him too. And then I took him to the first. (laughter) And that's when you saw really joy. Instead of being jealous of one another or envious, they were transfixed in gratitude towards one another. They embraced, and what did you feel? What I felt, you felt was, look, they were so grateful they weren't alone. They weren't alone. So I have these two manuscripts, which I keep as cherish souvenirs that belong to our people.

Then, to me, [00:33:00] Moscow, Leningrad is, of course, the eyes, the Russian eyes. I wrote about the eyes, the eyes. At that time the eyes were the only way for them to express anything. I shall never forget those eyes, the eyes of the old Reb Yehuda Levin, chief rabbi of Moscow. Then I wrote a play, which was marvelously, marvelously done by Joseph Wiseman, who was is one of the great, great, great actors of today and yesterday. He personified the rabbi in the plays before many of

you even were born. But these were my memories, and they all go back to Russia.

Today it's done. The chapter is closed. Because Russian Jews are free. They can leave. They can come to Israel. I hope they can come anywhere they want to. If they want to come here, we should help them. But they are there, and they once more have [00:34:00] united themselves with the destiny of our people. I wrote a novel about it too, but something else at what -- the Jewish writers. And that novel is dear to me. It's called *The Testament*. In French the title was *The Testament of a Slain Jewish Poet*. And I wanted to do it.

It took me years and years of research because on August 12, 1952 Stalin gave orders, personal orders to execute all the major Jewish writers and poets and artists in the Soviet Union. And on that day all of them were executed. And what worried me, what bothered me, what troubled me, what disturbed me, what pained me was that the KGB had a rule then that all the archives had to be sealed forever. [00:35:00] Every document was sealed with something saying to be kept forever sealed. Nobody could open them. And I felt they belonged to us because although some of them lived as communists, but they died as Jews. And what they wrote is part of our heritage.

I want to know what Peretz Markish did in prison. I want to know what Bergelson told the interrogator. I want to know what Kvitko did the last day of his life. I wanted to know these things. And I felt impossible because sealed. So I wrote a novel, and I invented a character called Paltiel Kossover. And Paltiel Kossover is a kind of combination of Der Nister. There was a man, a writer called Der Nister. That was his pseudonym. And he was a Bratslaver Hasid. He wrote a novel about *The Family Mashber* out of stock. It's too good to be sold.

[00:36:00] But if you can get it, read it.

It's a very great novel about Bratslaver Hasidim in Russia. And I wanted Paltiel Kossover to be part of him and of Peretz Markish who was a very great Yiddish poet. I wrote the novel, it came out in French, and just when it was published I had to be in Switzerland for a lecture on Rabbi Akiva at Geneva. And a young man came up to me. And he introduced himself as a professor of the university there. And he said, did you know my father? I said, who are you? He said, my name is Shimon Markish. I said, your father was Peretz Markish? He said, yes. I said, why do you ask? He said, I read your novel, and you know, I felt it was my father. Did you know him?

Well, I didn't know him, of course not. But I was so much taken by him that I know him even today. [00:37:00] And there are certain things which are in the novel as a fruit of my own imagination that actually correspond to the real life story. But I invented a character called Victor Zupanev. Victor Zupanev was a kind of court reporter, a stenographer because in communist regimes they still perturbed -- they used a perverse attitude towards law. They wanted the killings to be lawful. And therefore they insisted so much that all their prisoners should confess. That was the matter of the confessions.

Why should they confess? They had to confess and sign their reports. And the Victor Zupanev, he was a stenographer. And he simply was like furniture. That's why he survived. Like a furniture. He didn't exist. He simply took notes. And he therefore was there [00:38:00] when Paltiel Kossover was interrogated. And he fell in love with him, I mean really, marvelously thoroughly human relationship. He was taken by the man. And one point he said, I, who cannot prevent his death, I will do justice to him after his death. And he is the one who smuggled out the documents, the story, the life, and the death of Paltiel Kossover and gave it to his son, to Paltiel Kossover's son.

The first words of Zupanev in the novel is, I have never laughed in my life. He could never laugh, he said. He tried to. He could never laugh. At the end he was laughing. So this is the description of the last night of Paltiel Kossover in a jail, in the jail in Krasnograd, one of the cities in Russia. "I remember, says Zupanev [00:39:00] scratching his head, "I remember that night more clearly than all the others spent spying on your father and transcribing his every word. Fact is, I had become fond of your big child of a father. I was going to miss him, his voice, the way he had of frowning, his short, staccato sighs, his pages covered with barely legible writing. How was I going to detach myself from him? He was a part of my life, that fool.

"He was a part of me. I had read his tales for so long that I had created a place for myself in them. I waited impatiently to read the continuation of certain chapters in order to learn of my own future. And now, oh well. Your father did not know that he was living his last night. He could not have guessed. With one brief sentence, Abakumov, who was then the minister of police, transmitted a clear and irrevocable order. The Jewish poet Paltiel Gershonovich Kossover [00:40:00] was to be executed before dawn. Before dawn, repeated Abakumov, in anger.



"We did not know it, but the same order had been transmitted the same night to all the magistrates who in Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, and Leningrad were in charge of extorting confessions from Bergelson, Kvitko, Markish, Pfeffer and all the other Jewish writers, poets, and artists of the Soviet Union. The order came from Stalin in a fit of madness. Was he afraid that he might die before them? He had decided to have them all liquidated that very night at the same hour in the same way.

"Let me tell you about that night, Grisha," that was the name of Paltiel's son. "And your turn will come to tell it. You are mute, never mind. We shall give a meaning to your silence. Since I cannot make you talk, you shall be the ideal messenger just as I was. Nobody will suspect you just as nobody suspected me. One does not suspect a fountain [00:41:00] pen, a table, a lamp. One does not worry about a stenographer. The judges and the investigators have all been eliminated by their successors, but we stenographers were overlooked. Nobody thought that we had a life of our own, an independent memory, attachments, remorse, projects of our own. And nobody will see in you the trustee, the custodian, and the witness of a life that enriched mine, ours.

"And so you will read and reread this document and try to remember it all. And later, far from this land, you will write it down, and you in turn will assume your role. You will speak on behalf of your dead father. That is a decision I made before I met you, my boy. I made it one summer night in 1952 when you were scarcely three years old. You were asleep in your mother's room, unaware that you had become an orphan. That night I was so [00:42:00] disturbed that I did something I rarely do. I went out for a walk. Krasnograd that night is not so inviting.

"The streets are deserted. The lights are dead. Like a prison only bigger, with invisible jailers behind the dismal facades. Every window is a peephole, every noise a moan, a cry of horror. The inmates hold their breath just as one does on the morning of an execution. I stroll through the park in the direction of the river, which divides the main street in two. I come to a halt. Motionless, I listen. The river is noisy tonight. I turn my head in all directions and end up making myself look suspicious. A militia man accosts me. 'This is no place for vagabonds and loafers like you. Go home. Go on, scram, or I'll put you in jail.'

"He gets excited, annoyed. I do nothing to appease him. 'Have you lost your tongue? Go on, you wretched drunk. [00:43:00]

Get out of here.' The fellow is furious, and that is when, very quietly, without any hurry, savoring every second that increases his rage, I pull out my card and show it to him. No need to draw him a picture. The fellow has understood. He stiffens, stands at attention, and starts sputtering apologies and servile formulas, enough to make you sick. 'At your service. I didn't know who. How could I have guessed that?' I leave him without bothering to interrupt him. Even as I reach the main square near the movie theater I can still hear him make his apologies. Ridiculous.

"That's what they all are, ridiculous wretches, but I am not laughing. I cannot. That terrible awareness brings me back to your father. Poor devil. Nothing funny about his life. I wonder whether he had ever had the opportunity to have a good time, to laugh with all his heart. Strange, I know his life, yet, I do not know the essential fact. Did he or did he not learn the [00:44:00] art of laughter? I am tempted to go to him just like that, a surprise visit, and tell him, 'Listen, my dear poet, you shall be executed tomorrow morning. I am telling it to you so that you may be ready. Ivan, the gentlemen of the fourth cellar, that is the name of the executioner, already has his instructions.

"Say, do you mind if I ask you a question that has been gnawing me for quite some time? It concerns you. Have you ever laughed? I mean, really laughed, body and soul? What I mean is, with your whole being? For you see, in your confessions you do not speak of it. And that could mean two things, either you don't speak of it because you have never laughed or because you have laughed so much that it doesn't occur to you to mention it. And so you see, I'd like to -- ' that would be outrageous, right? I return to my solitary wanderings because -- you understand.

"The breeze rustling through the trees is mild, but I am shivering. First of all, I am sensitive to cold, [00:45:00] and then the idea of seeing your father again and for the last time is not one that pleases me. Does he realize that I was present at the interrogations, that I have read his testament, that I know all about his loves, his struggles, his doubts? Does he know that I exist? Another militiaman comes up to me. He's called to order by the first, who no doubt is following me in order to spare me unpleasant encounters. I would do better to go home and go to bed, but I shall not be able to close my eyes.

"I know myself. I am afraid. I'm afraid of -- you know what I mean. I let myself fall onto a bench. I contemplate

Krasnograd, and I see through your father's eyes and then through the eyes of the Angel of Death, whom your father described so well. A man will die tomorrow. Today, soon. My heart beats faster. My heart is heavy, for, [00:46:00] did you know this, men and women of Krasnograd, stenographers do have a heart? And mine is flowing over. Your father, my boy, will cost me nights of sleeplessness. I feel it. For yes, I do love him. I love him, my boy. And because of him I love you too.

"I decided to change your life because he changed mine. And the incredible thing is, he was never to know it. Yes, my boy, that is one night I remember. Dawn, as always during the month of August, lights up the sky and glides over the roofs and tree tops. On the other side the mountains clinging to the night. I feel like pleading, let night go, God of the mountain. Send it back to us and keep the sun. Keep it as a hostage, and give us back the darkness. Let it cover the city with its shadows once more. Let there be another day, another life.

"Under the reign of night, the gentleman of the fourth cellar, the executioner will not [00:47:00] make the acquaintance of a Jewish poet who -- oh well. It's all foolishness. It's all useless, I know. The prison is quiet. Silent, but awake. Already the inmates are beings of a different kind. They know.

Ivan has not as yet received his orders, and the prisoners already guess what they are. This morning they rose before it was time in honor of your father. Do they know it is your father's turn? They have smelled death. They feel it close at hand. And that has what has pulled them out of sleep, death and not Ivan.

"Ivan has not arrived yet, neither has my chief, too early. A crazy hope take shape in my mind. They will not come. They will not come ever. Killed in an accident perhaps. I'm impatient. I find myself cumbersome. I would like to be rid of myself, to die before witnessing death. Here I am delirious, rambling, casting myself in the role of martyr, [00:48:00] not my style. Besides, the chief has arrived. He looks drawn, sullen, troubled. Could an examining magistrate be sentimental too? Impossible.

"He's annoyed, that's all. He would have liked to bring his trial to its conclusion, and he's been frustrated. He considered his idea of allowing a writer to express himself, of encouraging a poet to remember a stroke of genius. And suddenly it had all gone to hell. It's neither just nor professional, if you want his opinion. Of course, my chief would not guess all the ramification of the affair. He did not know that Kossover

was only one among many and that the others elsewhere were going to be shot too. Had he known the order was coming from that high up he would not have dared question it, not even in his thoughts. And surely he would not have displayed its humor.

"He picks up a file, leafs through it, signs some papers, the final formalities, in other words. Oh well, [00:49:00] he does not agree, but the matter is closed. As far as he's concerned the Jewish poet Paltiel Gershonovich Kossover has ceased to live. One day another examining magistrate would be sitting in his place signing the same form relating to his predecessor. While writing, without looking up he asks me, 'Do you really want to accompany Ivan?' 'Yes, Citizen Magistrate.' 'Whatever for?' 'I don't know, but -- ' 'But what?' 'Nothing. Except that I have never seen the gentleman of the fourth cellar at work, and I was wondering.'

"'You wouldn't be something of a pervert, my dear Zupanev?'

'Just curious, Citizen Magistrate.' And so my chief shrugs his shoulders and goes on with his work without speaking to me again. As for me, I cannot stay put. I must force myself to remain seated on my usual stool from which I saw your father fight a battle that was already lost. Surreptitiously I glanced towards my secret drawer, my favorite poet's writings are still

in it, well protected. I promise you, my little poet, they are protected. [00:50:00] But I really should let him know this, reassure him with a wink, a gesture, but how? No, it's a bad idea, a cruel one.

"What is the use of warning him that he's about to die? If I make him understand that I am taking care of his testament he will guess immediately. He's not stupid. He'll guess it if I am prepared to take such a risk. Ivan must not be far away. And there he is, Ivan. He has come in without knocking. He shakes the chief's hand and throws me an absentminded good day. Arrogant, dressed in a well-tailored uniform, he's a handsome man, only I find him ugly, repugnant. I pretend that I am working, but I am too nervous to transcribe the routine nonsense.

"I watch Ivan as he pulls out his *nagan*, his gun, and checks it. He's a professional, Ivan, a meticulous fellow. Having satisfied himself, he stuffs his *nagan* back into regulation holster attached to the belt under his vest. My chief looks up, opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again. [00:51:00] Dutifully, Ivan asks, 'Shall we go?' 'Let's go,' says my chief. I stand up when he does. Ivan turns to me, 'What do you want?' 'You know the regulation. He's curious,' my chief tells him.



Automatically I check the clock, which has stopped, and my watch. I like to situate important events in time.

"I remember looking at my watch, but what was the time?

Strange, this lapse of memory, for I remember everything else.

The morning light was blue. My chief was continually moistening his lips, and I had awful stomach cramps. Silently single-file we walk behind Ivan. Here we are in the subterranean labyrinth of the isolators, green bulbs on the ceilings, empty hallways.

Ivan stops in front of a cell and motions to us not to make any noise. Such is the procedure. One opens the door gently, oh so gently, and surprises the condemned man [00:52:00] in his sleep. One tells him that he must undergo another interrogation, and suddenly the problem is no longer a problem.

"The secret of success lies in surprise, in speed. Except that your father, my boy, receives us standing as though he had been waiting for us. I'm impressed by his calm. His face is scarred. His clothes are in tatters, but he looks noble to me. Foolish, don't you think? Briefly he dominates us, intimidates us. He is the one to speak. 'I worked all night, Citizen Magistrate.' 'Excellent,' says Examining Magistrate. 'I'm sure it is excellent. I shall read it this very day.' A silence. My chief is undecided. Ordinarily the condemned man is led to

the fourth basement where the gentleman shoots a bullet in his neck and leaves without any further ado. For your father the problem is different. The execution is to take place in the cell.

"I have come to review with you the description of what you call the pogrom of the printer's shop," my chief is saying. He spreads some papers on [00:53:00] the cot, and your father bends down to reread them. For a moment his eyes meet mine. He has just seen me for the first time. I'm overcome by fear. He will mistake me for Ivan. To prevent a misunderstanding, I introduce myself. 'Zupanev. I am the stenographer.' Your father's reassured. If the stenographer's here it really does mean only an additional inquiry to elaborate on some detail. Suddenly he sees Ivan behind me.

"He would like to know his name as well, but he restrains his curiosity. As for Ivan, he returns his gaze and says nothing. 'Very well,' says your father. 'Let's see that passage.' He begins to read, and my chief pretends to go with him to listen. I watch in horror as Ivan pulls out his *nagan* and pulls my sleeve to take my place behind the condemned man. I feel like howling to warn your father. Paltiel Kossover is entitled to leave this stinking world like a man, [00:54:00] facing death,

spitting in its face, if he so chooses. But I remain silent. Following your father's example, I tell my mind to go away, and the whore obeys me.

"My thoughts fly to the desk, to the notebooks neatly line up in the secret drawer. Others will be added, and one day, one day, my dear Jewish poet, not yet assassinated, one day your sparks will start a fire. And on that day I shall laugh. Do you hear me, Paltiel Gershonovich Kossover? One day you and I will surprise mankind with our laughter, and those fools of magistrate and executioners who see nothing, they think that they are finished with this Jewish poet, one more, and his work. They think they can control time as they dominate man to preserve for eternity? Now, I'll show them. I'll show them what we do with their secrets. I'll show them.

"But now Ivan is behind his victim. I watch him as he [00:55:00] raises his arm slowly, slowly. The bell almost touches the nape of your father's neck. My eyes become blurred. There are knots in my throat. The Angel of Death is not a monster covered with eyes but a well-dressed man armed with a *nagan*. Abruptly your father shatters the silence. He's speaking softly. 'You must understand,' said your father. 'The language of a people is its memory. And its memory is -- ' A

muffled explosion tears through me. The poet collapses, slides slowly, gracefully to the ground, his head slightly to one side as though dreaming. Ivan motions to us. It's all over.

"The magistrate and the executioner exchange procedural remarks. Burn the corps, also his personal effects, also his wretched ritual objects. Burn it all. Erase his name from history by striking it from all records. While they talk [00:56:00] I contemplate the poet's face and promise to avenge him. The bastard Ivan will not have the last word. He means to eviscerate your death just as my chief took away your life, but I am here. Those fools forgot me. The perfect witness, that's me. Though invisible I was present as they transacted their filthy business. I heard it all, understood it all, and filed it all away.

"Imagine their faces, those fools, on the day your father's song will come to haunt them from all corners of the globe. On that day I shall laugh. I shall laugh at last for all the years I tried so hard to laugh and did not succeed. Thank you, poet. Thank you, brother. I leave you, but you are not leaving me.

"Back at the office I hear the chief make his report, brief, neutral, concise. 'Your order has been carried out this morning

at 5:34 a.m.' He gives the necessary instructions. He calls for tea, for buttered bread. As for me, I experience a strange sensation. My heart is broken. [00:57:00] But I know that I shall laugh.

"And suddenly it happens. I am laughing. I am laughing at last. And if the chief doesn't notice it's only because he is a blockhead like all the rest. It's idiotic, even unjust, but it is the dead, the dead poets who will force men like me and all the others to laugh. I tell your father, and I repeat it to him, even though he's no longer living and no gravedigger will ever lower him into the ground because the ground is cursed and so is heaven. Never mind, I shall carry him, your big child of a father. I shall carry him a day, a year, 10 years. For I must hear him laugh as well. That is why I implant in you his memory and mine. I must, my boy. You understand, I must. Otherwise -- "

So that is one other night which I tried to describe the first night in *Dawn*, the last night of a English officer and [00:58:00] here the last night of a Jewish poet. So it's the last, the last words. What are the last words? What are the words that separate life from death? What are the words that separate an individual from his community, a father from his

son? And actually, I described all this in the first volume of my memoirs, why I wrote certain things and why I have not included others. I'll tell you simply, in conclusion, one story and one commentary.

The story is, which is from my second volume -- came out in France already. It has not been translated yet, but it's being translated, you know by whom. And it will come. It is a very sad chapter in my life, one of the saddest in my adult life. It is about friendship, but some of you may know that I celebrated friendship in all of my works. If I have written -- most of my writings have been not only for memory but [00:59:00] also for friendship. And this one is a story of a betrayed friendship. Maybe some of you know that I happened to be a close friend of President Francois Mitterrand in France for many years.

We were friends from before he became president, and we remained friends while he was president. And then one day it was, I think, 12 years in our friendship, one day I read a book about his past and was shocked and then heartbroken. Whenever we spoke about the war he used to tell me that -- he said, you know, I was an officer in the army. I was taken prisoner. I was in a camp. I tried to escape three times. Twice I was caught. The third time [01:00:00] I succeeded. I came back to

France, joined the resistance, and that's how my public life began.

True, except between his return to France and joining the resistance many months have passed, and those months he had spent in Vichy working for the Vichy government. He even received the highest decoration of the Petain regime. It's called the Francisque. And when I saw him and Petain on the same picture it wasn't one of the great moments in my life. Worse, we discovered that he had befriended a man named Rene Bousquet, who was the chief of the French police during the occupation responsible for the deportation of all the Jews to Auschwitz.

Well, it took me weeks, I was back in America, [01:01:00] to somehow to figure it out in my own mind and couldn't. So I went to French, between two planes, just to see him. And it was the saddest conversation I've ever had in my life. Because he already had cancer, so I didn't want to be so cruel, but I had to tell him certain things. So I actually began handing him a possibility of I don't know what, but something. I said to him, you know, Mr. President, we always had a deal never to discuss politics. We always discussed philosophy and poetry, literature, Jewish religion.

Remember, I said, I spoke to you a lot about Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav because he is one of my favorite masters. He said, yes, I remember. You remember I said, Rabbi Nachman said -- and I gave him a marvelous passage. Rabbi Nachman said, the world makes two mistakes. The first mistake is thinking that a great man can make no mistake. The second [01:02:00] mistake is thinking that once the great man made a mistake, he's no longer a great man. And I thought he would say, I am not a great man. But he said, I made no mistake. I said, Mr. President, God made mistakes. Remember, I can show it to you in the Bible in Genesis, book of Genesis.

God made a mistake, and he regretted it. That's why he brought the floods. He regretted it. And you didn't? He said, no, I did not. Well, 90 minutes I tried at least to say to him, look, it's so easy. Why don't you at least recognize that it was a mistake? I said, look, you should say I was young and stupid. When you are young you do stupid things. But since I've done other things. Because it's true. He has done other things, good things too, very good things. Impossible. That was the last time I saw him. [01:03:00] It was heartbreaking. He wanted me to accompany him to Berlin, to Moscow. I couldn't see



him again. Well, this is in my second point, which, maybe next time.

Now, in conclusion, two parts. First of all, we said that we shall -- I said in the beginning maybe we must do some study. Impossible otherwise. So I'll give you two what we call *chidushim*, I think I had. Prayer to me is also learning. I like to understand what I say. And there are two things which I had problems with. On Yom Kippur, you fast the whole day. And then in the Neilah service, which is such a great, great service, it's the most beautiful, most melodious service. And then immediately afterwards, immediately, you daven ma'ariv. And already, you say *Selach lanu avinu ki chatanu*, "Please, God, forgive us for our sins." [01:04:00] What kind of sins? When did you sin? (laughter) You didn't leave the synagogue. You were still there. When did you sin? And the answer is, if you ask the question, you are already a sinner. (laughter) What is a sin? Arrogance, *gaavah*, pride, vanity, you think you have no sins? That is a sin. (laughter)

The second part is last Saturday, last Shabbat was Birkat Hachodesh, and we have a prayer for the new moon, you know, for the new month. And we ask all kinds of very nice things. We ask *y'hi ratzon l'fanekha*, please be God *sheyitchadesh aleinu*

give us long life, give us good life, give us this and that. And all of a sudden we say, *titen chayim*, we say, *chayim shel osher v'kavod*", give us a life of richness and honors. What? We ask God to give us honors? No.

I learned from my [01:05:00] teacher Shaul Lieberman that whatever we do should be always *kipshuto*, meaning simple, the simple interpretation's always the best. What we say in our prayer is give us riches with honor. It should not be dishonorable riches. The riches itself must be an honorable riches, honorable wealth, not to be ashamed of it and not to put other people shame.

Now this is two, and now the third attempt of study is well, let's go back to our Hasidic tale. What did we say? We told you a tale about four masters, four situations, four crises, four dangers. And the tale therefore is a beautiful tale, comforting tale imbued with both beauty and meaning. Four times there were masters who knew how to intercede in heaven so as to prevent tragedy. Four times the Almighty [01:06:00] received their plays, their pleas and consented to save his children from enmity. What can be better? And yet, certain elements of the story are disturbing.

Four generations of masters felt the need to intervene on behalf of their people. That means four successive generations of Jews faced mortal danger. One may wonder, has it always been like that? Have Jews always lived while anticipating pogroms? Will it always be the fate of Jews in diaspora to need divine help in hours of distress? Will there always be a distress? But another element is more subtle but not less disturbing. Four masters want to help their people, but their intellectual or spiritual powers have diminished. The Maggid of Mezeritch knew less than his predecessor the Besht. Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov knew less than the Maggid. And Reb Yisrael of Ruzhin knew less than Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov. [01:07:00]

Oh yes, there is much sadness in this story. However, let's look at the outcome. All four Hasidic rabbis succeeded to avert disaster. And that is because they all knew the tale. Do we? Thank you. (applause)

**M1 :**

Thanks for listening. For more information [01:08:00] on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and all of our programs, please visit us on the web at 92y.org. This program is copyright by 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y.

END OF VIDEO FILE