

Elie Wiesel In Modern Literature: Paltiel Kossover

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) I first met Grisha Paltielovich Kossover at Lod airport one afternoon in July 1972. A plane just landed, was rolling down the runway. Outside groups of welcoming relatives, friends, reporters stopped chatting and stood waiting. I often go to Lod to witness the most astonishing ingathering of exiles in modern times. Many of these men and women I have met over there in Soviet Russia in the realm of silence and fear. Had I told them then that a few years later I would be welcoming them on the soil of our ancestors they would have looked at me reproachfully. "Don't make fun of us, friend. [00:01:00] False hopes are painful."

In the crowd I would sometimes recognize a young student or a Pioneer girl with whom I have sung and danced one Simchat Torah eve in front of the great synagogue of Moscow. Once a shoemaker from Kiev burst into tears on seeing me. Another time a university graduate from Leningrad embraced me as though I were his brother, lost and found again, and in a way I was that brother.

Tense, nervous, the new arrivals restrain themselves. They do not cry out. They do not call, not yet. They hold back their silence before shedding the first tear, before pronouncing the first blessing. They are afraid, afraid to precipitate events, afraid to believe what they see. They [00:02:00] almost seem to claim their fear. It links them to the past just one last time before they can dismiss it.

Then one lone figure detaches itself from the arriving crowd, a drawn out cry reverberates, amplified by collective emotion, "Yakov, Yakov," and suddenly nothing exists but this running shadow, this shout that rends memory. That memory, the day itself, will be called Yakov, will call Yakov forever more.

Yakov, a young officer trembles. He wants to leap towards his father, but his legs refuse to obey. Glued to the ground he stands waiting for time to flow, for the years to dissipate and turn him into the stubborn schoolboy he once was, able to hold back the tears that now flood his cheeks. [00:03:00]

As if in response to some mysterious call, the two groups break up and then reform 10 times, 100 times. People speak to one another, kiss one another, laugh, weep. They repeat the same words, the same messages. They shake the same hands. They

caressed familiar and unfamiliar faces. They say anything to anyone. It's a celebration. What a celebration. When did you leave Riga? "The day before yesterday. No, a thousand years ago." "I am from Tashkent." "And I am from Tiflis." "What about Leibish Goldmann, any news?" "Leibish is waiting his turn." "And Mendel Porush?" "Waiting his turn." "And Srulik Mermelstein?" "Waiting his turn." "Will they ever come?" "Oh yes, they will come. They will all come."

A few steps away two young brothers stay with one another in silence. They are alone, without family. Neither theirs make the opening gesture. There they are face to face, gazing at one another [00:04:00] with steady, painful intensity. "Don't ask me anything," a stocky woman cries. "Don't tell me anything, please. First let me have a good cry. These tears have been waiting a long time."

Further off a giant of a man lifts up a thin young girl with brown hair and twirls her over his head. "Is that you, Pnina? The little beauty smiling at me from the picture, is that you? And my son is your father." Drunk with joy and pride this grandfather dances with his memories. He has only one desire left, to be allowed to dance like this all day and all night and tomorrow too until the end of his days.

A young man is standing to one side, forgotten on the runway. No one has come to welcome him. No one speaks to him. I address him in Russian and ask whether I can be of help. He does not reply. Too much [00:05:00] emotion, no doubt. I extend my hand. He touches it. I repeat my offer to help. He remains silent. No matter, he will answer later.

The man in charge of welcoming the newcomers invites the group into a large room around tables covered with white cloths and flowers, vases of flowers. Waitresses bring orange juice, fruits, cookies. "We have got something better," a man shouts, waving a bottle of vodka. Glasses are filled and clinked, and one of the men proposes a toast.

"I just want to tell you that," his words tangle and clog his throat. He starts again, "What I want to say is," once more his voice breaks. He is choking, gasping for air. "I really want to tell you that --" His face contorted, he casts a hopeless look over the crowd, begging for help. And he collapses, shaking violently by a sob drawn from the depths of centuries. "I don't know," [00:06:00] he says. "I no longer know what I want to tell you. So many things, so many things."

Lest they betray their emotion, people lower their eyes. "Devil with speeches," someone yells. "Let's drink. That's worth more than all the speeches and commentaries put together. Isn't that so, friends?" And heads are raised and so are the cups. They drink of the sounds of l'chaim, to life, to the future, to peace. Incredible what a glass of vodka can do.

At the other end of the room I notice the taciturn young man. He has not joined in, either the drinking or the eating. Tall, slender, with fine features and dark hair, his eyes are somber, and his lips are set. Everything about him suggests suffering. I try to find out who is he? An official scans his list and tells me Grisha Kossover. His name is Grisha Kossover. "A special case," the man says. "He is mute, sick, you know what I mean. Well, he is from [00:07:00] someplace in the Ukraine, in White Russia, Krasnograd, yes, that's it, Krasnograd."

I hurry over to the boy. "I know this city," I tell him. "No, I've never been there, but I know a poet who used to live there. A melancholy, generous, obscure poet, unfortunately not well-known enough, to be quite frank, not known at all." I get confused. I mentioned my passion for sacred poetry and for the profane prayers of the Jewish poet-singer whom Stalin, in an explosion of hatred, in a fit of madness, ordered shot together

with the Russian-Jewish novelists, poets, and artists of the time.

I talk and talk and talk and do not see the amused wrinkle around his lips, the gleam of recognition in his eyes. I talk. I talk until I finally understand how stupid I can be. I did not make the connection. Grisha Kossover, this lonely mute immigrant from Krasnograd, yes, is [00:08:00] my poet's son, the son of Paltiel Kossover. How could I have guessed? I didn't even know the poet was ever married.

The blood rushes to my head. I feel like touching the youth, carrying him on my shoulders in triumph. I feel like shouting, and I am shouting, "Listen to me. Listen, all of you. Miracles exist. I swear it." People around us don't understand, don't seem to care. I get upset. "You don't know? You don't know who just arrived? Paltiel Kossover's son. Yes, the son of the poet. You don't know him?" No, they do not know him.

They know nothing. They have read nothing, a bunch of ignorant barbarians. (laughter) "Come," I say to Grisha, "follow me." He did not go to the hotel with the others. That is settled. He will stay with me. I have a large apartment. He can have his own room. I push him past immigration police and customs.

I speak for him. I explain. I get his luggage, and there we are outside. It is evening. [00:09:00] My car is right there. The road opens up before us. We drive at high speed in silence, pulled upward by the hills and the sky of Jerusalem.

I think of Paltiel Kossover whose poems I discovered by accident. Arrested a few weeks after his famous Moscow fellow writers, he was executed at the same time in the NKVD dungeons in Krasnograd. The rumor of his death made its way slowly, cautiously through the Soviet Union until it reached the free world. It aroused neither anger nor consternation for his work was unknown.

Less famous than Dovid Bergelson, less gifted than Peretz Markish, his readers were so few that they all knew one another. (laughter) Was he a great poet? Frankly, no. He lacked scope and vision, also ambition and luck. Who knows if he had lived longer -- The only collection of his work, [00:10:00] called *I Saw My Father in a Dream*, is quite modest, memories of childhood and war, parables, poems, and nightmares. His voice but a murmur, his prose seems lit from within by an unsteady, wavering flame. We are a few to savor his taste for austerity. We like his nostalgia, his melancholy. Forever uprooted, he remained a refugee to the end, his life and his death a discarded draft.

Our memorial evenings in his honor draw only a limited audience, but while our circle is small its enthusiasm is great. We had eight of his poems translated into French, five into Dutch, two into Spanish. We are diehards. I comment on his work in my courses and refer to it on every possible occasion. Nothing gives me greater satisfaction than to see one of my students turning into a Kossover devotee.

And here I am facing a task a thousand times more arduous:

[00:11:00] getting his mute son to talk. But I manage without difficulty. Actually, it has nothing to do with me. The credit belongs entirely to his father. Barely settled in my place, Grisha pulls a book from his pocket, and without a word I go to my room and return with my own copy. Yes, it is the same book, *I Saw My Father in a Dream*.

Astounded, Grisha takes it, examines the binding, reads a notation or two and gives it back to me. I think he's just as shaken as I. "For a long time I thought I had the only copy," I say to him, "as you did, no doubt." Grisha takes out his pen and scribbles a few words on my memo pad. "There is a third copy," he says. "It belongs to a night watchman in Krasnograd."



From my window I show him Jerusalem. I evoke its past and explain the passion that binds me to this city whose every stone and cloud are familiar. I offer some practical advice for [00:12:00] tomorrow and the weeks to come: where to go, where to buy what, and when. I describe our neighbors: government clerks, new immigrants, soldiers, and opposite us on the ground floor a war widow.

"Grisha, you are tired," I say. "Go to bed." He shakes his head. Tonight he wants to stay up. "Alone?" Yes, alone, he says. He corrects himself. No, not completely alone. "I don't understand, Grisha." And then he makes another gesture to indicate that he would like to write. "Are you a writer like your father?" No, not like his father, in place of his father.

This is the introduction to the story and the life of Paltiel Kossover whose testament we shall hear tonight, or at least some excerpts from it. In the course of our encounter, the last this year, we shall explore the destiny of a man and a generation, both marked by wounded memories [00:13:00] of gods that failed and words then betrayed.

By now you know that Paltiel Kossover is a Russian Jew. And through his story we shall remember other Russian Jews who want

to leave Russia and cannot. And through them we shall remember some people here who want to come in and cannot. (laughter)

[00:14:00]

From Grisha, the son's, memory: "Who is this, Mommy?" A man with a melancholy, anxious smile, a man both very old and very young, very sad and very happy. How can one tell? The picture was frayed, dusty. Grisha must have been three at the time. He had held out to his mother the book with the picture.

"Where did you find that?" said the mother. "Give it to me." She had snatched the book from his hands and quickly put it back in its place on the highest [00:15:00] most inaccessible shelf behind the pile of dishes, glasses, and pots. Grisha did not understand why his mother was so upset. He had not done anything.

Finding the book on the floor, he had opened it casually not knowing why, hoping, perhaps, to find some funny drawings of animals having marvelous adventures. But there was only a single photograph on the cover. "Mommy, that man, who is he?" "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Grisha could not forget the man in the picture. The way his hands were clasped, palms out, he seemed to be looking for something or someone or perhaps telling a story about wild animals, hungry children, a story about -- "But, Mommy, who is he?" "Don't bother me."

Grisha had never seen his mother in such a bad mood. She usually talked to him calmly, explaining what he was supposed to do or not to do, say or not to say. And here she was turning her face [00:16:00] away from him, dodging his gaze. She washed the dishes, hung up clothes that were lying about, all the time avoiding the little boy's eyes.

"What did I do, Mommy?" he asked, feeling guilty. "Nothing."  
"But you are angry." "I am not angry." Grisha felt like crying, he who always prided himself on not crying. His eyes wide open to keep them dry, his jaw set, he held his breath. Raissa took him in her arms. "I don't want to cry," said Grisha, crying. "I know. I know," said his mother. "You are a big boy, and big boys don't cry."

He wanted to start questioning her all over again but changed his mind. Why make her angry? He loved his mother and told

himself how lucky he was. She could have been some other little boy's mother.

"Promise me something," Raissa, his mother whispered. "Promise me never to touch that book again, and if someone asks you say you have never seen it." "But who is that man in the picture?"

[00:17:00] At that point a confused Grisha, feeling misunderstood, started to cry. He saw himself floating in the air, sitting on the highest shelf, the book on his knees, and the man was saying to him, "Grisha, my boy, aren't you ashamed of yourself crying like that?"

"He is your father," Raissa said. And Grisha calmed down. My father, he thought, is not a man like other men. My father is a photograph. And then a moment later he collected himself. My father is not a father like any other father. My father is a book. And for years he was to carry this discovery within himself like the most precious of secrets.

At this point perhaps we should interrupt our reading and make a few preliminary remarks. I told you what we are going to do tonight, or perhaps I should. [00:18:00] We are going to read. Maybe I should also say what we are not going to do, meaning we are not going to talk about the elections. (laughter)

But as is customary, customary because we have established our own tradition, for the last encounter in the series we devote this session to reading from a work in progress or rather from a work soon to be published. In a way I am a bit apprehensive because here I am ready to explain to you a book you have not read and perhaps most of you never will.

But still, in French the novel is called *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassin*, which means the testament of a slain Jewish poet. In English the title will be shorter, *The Testament*, and translated by Marion Wiesel with exquisite [00:19:00] grace and skill. The book is scheduled for publication in February, I think, if the messiah will not come earlier. (laughter) If he will it's either I shall write another book or no book.

Perhaps we should also recapitulate what we have done for the last three encounters. This year we have explored the hero and the antihero. Is there a third category? Yes, the non-hero, someone who is defeated and who accepts his or her defeat, someone who existed but ceases to exist as the person he or she has been. And Stalinist Russia has for years been peopled by non-heroes or non-villains, non-leaders, non-generals, non-workers, non-names, in short, non-persons. Trotsky and Kamenev,

Bukharin and Tukhachevsky, Yakir and Gamarnik, and thousands upon thousands of famous revolutionaries [00:20:00] who had shaken history and whom Stalin had made disappear from history, their plot was the worst for heroes and antiheroes frequently change roles.

Yesterday's villain seizes power today. Last year's idol is today's -- everyone's favorite scapegoat. In the Talmud we call it *olam hafuch ra'iti elyonim l'mata v'tachtonim l'mala*. There is a world where everything is upside down. History, we know, in our case, moves in cycles. Love and disenchantment are intertwined, and therefore the antihero has no reason to despair for he ultimately will become hero. As for the non-hero, he is beyond despair.

Jonah and his anguish, Rabbi Hanina ben Dossa and his prayers, both silent and spoken, and Rabbi Wolfe of Zbarazh and his mysterious taste for absence and wandering. [00:21:00] With Paltiel Kossover tonight I hope to be able to acknowledge what both he and I, myself, owe them. He, Paltiel Kossover in his poetry, and I in my tales, have been drawing from ancient sources. I have learned more from Rabbi Akiva than from Spinoza, from Jonah more than from Bergson, and from the Besht more than from modern literature.

Paltiel Kossover went to cheder, to yeshiva, and immersed himself in Talmud and Midrash where after various dramatic upheavals and metamorphosis he found himself again but too late. Were it not for his memory, which is more than his own, he would have lost his way. But as for Joseph, according to the Talmud, who saw *deyokeno shel aviv*, in a critical moment he saw the face of his father. Paltiel Kossover at every crossroad always remembered his [00:22:00] father, and his father, long dead, served as barrier, as bearing, as prayer, as instrument of rescue.

Why the testament? For many reasons. We are all students, and Moses is our teacher. And his testament is poetry. So it's only fitting that Paltiel Kossover's poetry be a testament. Also, for a more immediate reason, we belong to a strange and traumatized generation. We have been writing on tombstones every word, every whisper, every outcry a part of our people's memory, a part of a people's testament.

What Rabbi Nachman of Breslov says about laughter we could say about man's need to leave a scar on certain words and prayers and hopes and dreams. Remember Rabbi Nachman's quote.

[00:23:00] I use it as another motto for the tale. There was

once a country that contained all the countries of the world, and in that country was a city encompassing all the cities of the country, and in that city was a street gathering into itself all the streets of the city, and on that street was a house sheltering all the houses of the street, and in that house was a room, and in that room was a man, and that man laughed and laughed as no one had ever laughed before.

Well, somewhere in the world there is an imprisoned nation, in it an imprisoned city, in it a building, in it a cell, in it a man, and he is putting words together to make them live, to make them sing.

In a letter to my publisher and friend I wrote explaining the book, "Dear Jim, of all my novels this one is the hardest and easiest to define or describe. Richer and more complex than the others, it evolves around more than one theme, [00:24:00] involves more than one destiny, and evokes more than one setting. I began working on it in 1965 during my first visit to the USSR. I knew I would not meet Paltiel Kossover there. Like the real life Jewish poets and novelists, he was executed in 1952. But I had hoped to find out more about him and then.



"Remember, at the end of his life Stalin, demented, his anti-Semitism was more voracious than before, and this led him to order the arrest and then the murder of the leading Jewish writers in Russia: Peretz Markish, Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister, among many others vanished without leaving a trace. Nothing is known on how they behaved in jail, what they told their interrogators, and how they confronted their executioner.

"He, the executioner, has done the ultimate. [00:25:00] He has deprived them of their death. And I found it the ultimate injustice. And therefore, in a way, I decided to write this book in order to restore their death to them. This is the substance of the story. A novel of action and ideas, suspense and anguish, it reflects the dreams and the hopes of our century marked by disenchantment and violence.

"Everything begins and ends with words, the same word, except that the meaning is altered in the process, and suddenly yesterdays' heroes receive their share of malediction.

Messianism and communism, revolution and poetry, love and adventure, clandestine missions to Nazi Germany and pre-war Palestine, pogroms and exile, the Spanish Civil War and frontline duty on the Russian front, all these events find their

denouement in a solitary cell of the Soviet Secret Police where silence [00:26:00] becomes the more refined of tortures.

"The characters, a certain Viktor Zupanev, a night watchman who is unable to laugh, a messianic wanderer called David Abulesia, who emerges wherever Jews are being persecuted, a shrewd persecutor who traps his victim to write his confession, and of course Paltiel Kossover the poet who tries to explain to himself and to his judge and to his son how a religious, mystically inspired adolescent became an agent for the communist revolution and how he unmasked its false idols.

"How my disillusioned hero has recovered his faith, how his mute son managed to redeem his dead father's testament, how an anonymous court stenographer succeeded in outwitting the KGB, all this and more is part of the tale which ends on the eve of Yom Kippur 1973, which means the tale does not [00:27:00] end there. It begins again."

Now, the problem that we had in finding documents and material about these writers and poets, the problem is difficult because those of you who know a little bit, the system in Russia, surely remember that the KGB, or before the MVD, the NKVD, all the secret services in Soviet Russia had a stamp with which they

seal all the documents that are in their possession. The stamp means to be conserved for eternity, which means no document from the political police can ever be revealed. And therefore we have a problem. How can you get these documents, these confessions or these accusations out of the KGB?

But we found a way. And [00:28:00] then we found out something very interesting, that was actually the key to the book, how the judge trapped the poet into writing his confession. Because the poet was a hero in the beginning. He didn't want to answer anything. And the police used all the methods at its disposal, all the terrors, all the torments, all the anguish that they can instill into a person they instilled in Paltiel Kossover, who left a two-year-old boy at home and his wife at home. And he was isolated and tortured by silence and memory.

But then the judge had an idea, great idea. He said to him, listen, all right, at this point we understand there is nothing we can do. You'll stay in prison, but since you don't admit, you don't confess, there is not much I can do. But there's one thing. You are a writer. Why don't you write? Anything. Don't write (inaudible) politics. Write your life.

And after a day or two [00:29:00] or three or four or five or six or seven days Paltiel Kossover the writer succumbed where the man had failed. The writer in him couldn't withstand a challenge. And when they brought him pens and paper he began writing his life story, which is his testament. But from time to time he would interrupt his writing and write letters to his son, which are part of the testament, knowing that his son will never read them. And this is how he begins his testament:

"With your permission, Citizen Magistrate, I should like before I begin, and I shall begin with the end, which I know to be near, to express my gratitude to you. You were kind enough to allow me to continue to exercise my profession here. Thanks to your kindness I enjoy a privilege that in our tradition is accorded only to the tzadik, to the just. The tzadikim, we know, are forewarned of their end so as to [00:30:00] enable them to live their death and above all put their affairs in order and their thoughts and their memories.

"A just, me? Of course I am joking. I find that religious notion strangely appropriate here. Have not our relations, Citizen Magistrate, developed from the beginning under the sign of religion? You have been urging me to repent, to confess, to purge myself, to expiate, to atone, to seek pardon, to be worthy

of salvation. These acts are all essentially religious. Priest or inquisitor, you serve the party whose attributes are divine, great, and magnanimous, omnipotent and merciful, infallible, omniscient.

"You have interrogated me a thousand times on the crimes of which I stand accused, and a thousand times I have answered you that none of it made any sense. [00:31:00] But to show you my appreciation I have today the honor of informing you that I have changed my mind. I plead guilty. Not on all points, not on those that implicate other persons, only on those that for me, and hence for you, have symbolic value.

"I plead guilty to having felt something akin to hatred for the glorious Russian nation into which I was born and for which I have fought. I plead guilty to having nurtured a little late, too late, an exaggerated, boundless love for an obstinate people, my own, whom you and your people have endlessly denigrated and oppressed.

"Yes, Citizen Magistrate, today I break my links with your world, a world protected and represented by this prison. I espouse the Jewish cause. I espouse it entirely and totally. Yes, I declare my solidarity with the Jewish people wherever

they are. Yes, [00:32:00] I am a Jewish nationalist in a historical, cultural, and ethical sense. I am first and foremost a Jew and regret not having been able to declare this earlier and elsewhere.

"And now the facts. You will laugh. I should like to express myself in words, but that would take a lifetime. Name, given name, patronymic. Best to write them down. You know very well who I am. It is true that under the pressure of your interrogations one reaches the point of forgetting one's own identity. And you, do you learn any more from that?

"Forgive me the impotence, me, the maker of words, but my history binds me to you forever more whether you want it or not. For one day you will be old and alone with your reflections as I am now. And you will ask yourself who you are, and you will answer I am the one who was seen by a Jewish poet before he died. I am the one whose [00:33:00] image Paltiel Gershonovich Kossover carried with him to death. Yes, Paltiel Gershonovich Kossover, that is my name, poet by avocation, Jew by birth, and forgive me, communist, or former communist, by conviction.

He goes on telling his story. He begins in Russia and Romania, goes through all Eastern Europe, 1908, 1910, first pogrom, how

they left. And he tells his story in very subdued tone, very sober, contained, almost like a slow melody, a narrative. I say the writing is testament Paltiel Kossover had sought precision first of all.

Every word contains a hidden meaning. Every sentence sums up a [00:34:00] wide range of experiences. Could he have imagined that his writings would survive him, that his words would be read and reread, studied and restudied by his son? Like all prisoners, all condemned people, this singer of Jewish suffering, this poet of dead hopes knew what would be expected.

In the dark, solitary cells of the political police people wrote only for the interrogators, the torturers, the judges. Awaiting death, they wrote only for death. Did Paltiel Kossover, in spite of everything, believe in the impossible? He hinted at it somewhere.

And he writes, "You asked me why I am writing and for whom. At one times these questions were easy to answer. In fact, at the time I was touring the collective farms and communes I was asked these two questions after each of my lectures. The Soviet people wanted to understand, and the Jewish poet tried to supply them with explanations. I am writing in order to vanquish evil

and to glorify their victory. I am writing to justify the 30 or 40 centuries [00:35:00] of history I bear within me.

Grandiloquent, pretentious? So what. My words reflected what I felt.

"As for the second question, for whom I was writing, I answer I am writing for you, for you who are alive today, my contemporaries, my allies, my companions, my brothers. I should like to take your arm, watch you smile as you listen to my story, which is also yours. But today I no longer know. I am writing but I do not know for whom. For the dead, those who abandoned me en route and who are waiting for me.

"I am writing because I have no choice. As in that story of olden days, King David used to love to sing, and as long as he sang the angel of death could not approach him. Composing his sounds, he was immortal, like me. As long as I write, as long as I put ink on paper, death will be powerless against me. You will keep me here between these hideous walls, and when I shall have told my last story, completed my last [00:36:00] reminiscence, your emissaries will come to fetch me to lead me to the dungeons. I know that. I live without illusion.



"So it is because of you if not for you that I shall go on writing. And since I have the right to tell everything, that is the only right I have, let me add this. These words, which you will be the only ones to decipher, are intended for others beside yourself. You can destroy my notebooks. No doubt you will burn them. But a voice within me tells me that the words of a condemned man have their own life, their own mystery. Does the word mystery make you sneer? Well, I'm beginning to believe in it. The words you strangle, the words you murder produce a kind of primary impenetrable silence, and you will never succeed in killing a silence such as this. [00:37:00]

In fact, Paltiel Kossover's problem in the beginning was that he wanted to be a communist, meaning to leave Judaism for communism. And from Jonah four weeks ago we have learned the universal dimension of being Jewish. *Ivri anochi*, said Jonah. I am Jewish in a world that is not. If you need my prayers, if you seek my contribution it is the Jew in me whom you must address. And Paltiel Kossover didn't understand it until it was late, perhaps too late. For in this respect Jonah was anti-communist.

He advocated the emphasis on identity whereas communism preaches the dissolution of the individual identity. But of course in

those days communism, in the beginning, was a beautiful idea. Well, that's what they thought. Now we know it wasn't. Now we know already that already then under Lenin there were prisons. You know, it's like the saying. There was a magazine in England called [00:38:00] *Punch*, and the editor said later on "*Punch* is a magazine that is no longer what it used to be and never was." (laughter) And so is communism. It isn't what it used to be, and it never was.

For communism in the beginning meant total assimilation for all people, all classes, all spheres. Is this another version of messianism, perhaps the wrong one. The Jewish concept of messianism is different. In the end we are told in our tradition the messiah will come and equality will reign. Yes, equality. Will it mean that all human beings will be similar and even the same? No. They will be true. Everyone will be true and just. And therefore the key word in messianism is justice and truth.

But there were times in the '20s and '30s when young Jews and non-Jews failed to understand the antagonist [00:39:00] that exists, that must exist inherently, basically, between the two world movements, between the two outlooks, concepts, visions between Judaism and communism.

In those times everybody was taken by it, everybody who wanted to do something for society. In the non-Jewish world all the leftists were taken by the message in Moscow. A man whom I love was Nikos Kazantzakis, the man who wrote *Zorba*, and he too was taken by the communist message. And he wrote a book. He wrote a book in the '30s after visiting Moscow. He wrote a book describing Lenin as the prophet, people from all over the world, from Africa, Asia, Europe converging on Moscow. And the hero of the book is typical of Kazantzakis's obsession. The hero is an African, and his name is [00:40:00] Toda Raba, (laughter) which explains why Kazantzakis left communism, and he became close to Judaism, and in effect he almost wanted to convert.

The saga of the Russian Jewish renaissance, because this is the beauty, that the Jewish communists, whether they wanted it or not, had to leave communism, and they came back to Judaism. And the saga of that renaissance reads like a legend, like a legend of old. Remember, always remember that before Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, before Bukovsky and Plyushch, before the dissident movement and courageous leaders of the human rights organizations in Russia, the first ones were our young Jews, boys and girls in the teens, college students who in the thousands, in the thousands would come into the street, into the

open, [00:41:00] in front of the synagogue, they chose the synagogue, and dance and sing. And I shall never forget their songs. Never shall I forget their friendship, their solidarity.

Well, I know I never miss an opportunity to recall their gallant combat, their secret dreams, their beginnings. Well, to each his or her craziness, and they are mine. Surely you know the story of the man in the train who cannot sleep at night because his neighbor keeps on complaining, "Do I have a headache. Do I have a headache." "Listen" said the traveler, "take two aspirins. Let me sleep." And he gave him two aspirins, and all was well. And five minutes later our traveler was awakened again by his companions who kept on moaning, "Did I have a headache." (laughter)

Well, Russian Jews are my headache, and Russian Jews are my pride, but then all Jews are my [00:42:00] pride. And beyond them and through them and thanks to them all human beings who are tolerant as you want them to be as we are, should be our pride.

The problem of universality in Judaism, of course we touch it in the novel, we must touch it because it's (inaudible), oh, there are so many problems about it. And they are their own problems.

Let me give you an example. I'll tell you a story that happened last year.

In February I went to Thailand, to Cambodia with a delegation because I felt, as a Jew, I felt that I must see the suffering there. As a Jew I always insisted on it. I must see the plight of the boat people and the hunger, starvation in Cambodia. And I said it in a statement. I said I go there because when I needed people, people didn't come where I was. So it so happened, you know, in coincidence, it so happened that that day when I came to the border [00:43:00] was my yahrzeit, yahrzeit for my father.

In the evening, for maariv services, there was no problem. I was in Bangkok, and there are enough Israelis and Jews in Bangkok. So we had the minyan. I could say kaddish. In the morning for shacharit again before we left we had a minyan. We said kaddish. But for Mincha, for the Mincha services, here I am at the border in Aranyaprathet. Only, only, only people from the region, and I don't have a minyan. And I got frantic. I began running from person to person. You know, I stopped Thai people asking maybe you are a Jew by any chance? (laughter) And they were not. (laughter)

Then I saw Ginsburg. Ginsburg, Alexander Ginsburg who came with the five that came as exchange program last year or two years ago to the state, a dissident. And I said to myself a man who is a dissident, his name is Ginsburg. [00:44:00] Alexander must be Jewish. But he was always drunk there. So I said, "Sasha, listen, I need you." He said, "Oh good." I said, "I need you for a minyan." He said, "What's that?" (laughter) So I explained to him. I need it for a minyan, it's a yahrzeit, kaddish. At that point he was convinced I was drunk.

(laughter)

I said, "All right, doesn't matter. But one thing, tell me, will you come. You are Jewish." "I am Jewish? I'm not Jewish," he said. "I converted to Greek Orthodoxy." And then I thought he was drunk again. But I found a minyan. Finally found a French physician, and two Israeli doctors. And what Israelis did there is extraordinary. The world didn't appreciate. The world doesn't know what Israel did in Thailand and Cambodia for these Cambodians.

And finally we had Mincha, and I began saying kaddish, and as I said kaddish a young man, a young French doctor repeated after me word [00:45:00] for word. When we finished I said to him, "Tell me, do you also have yahrzeit?" He said, "No." He said,

"Maybe you are in mourning." He said, "No." I said, "But then why do you say kaddish?" And he naively, innocently, stretched out his hand to the other side of the border, and he said, "For them." I was touched by that because kaddish is the most Jewish, the most beautiful, the most magnificent and awesome and solemn Jewish prayer. And here, just indirectly, it became a prayer for them.

What I have seen in Cambodia, it was something so familiar that I thought it belonged to my own memory: starving children, amputated fathers, mutilated faces, distorted and twisted expressions of death-filled eyes. And they are victims of madness. A madman took it upon himself to slaughter his own people. And he is still recognized [00:46:00] by our own government. And his representatives still sit in the United Nations. What a farce.

We shall speak of Paltiel Kossover's disillusionment little bit later, but I cannot not mention briefly my own. Never mind campaign promises or the broken pledges, all the smashed idols, the age of absurdity has been succeeded by that of hypocrisy, which in turn is succeeded by the age of cynicism. Words no longer mean what they say. Ideals are being used, ideas abused, and power misused. Strange as it may sound, there was hope in

'45. In '45 you were convinced that something will happen, that mankind will learn, will have learned something from what it has done to our people: no more hatred, no more wars, no more dying children, no more racism, no more violence, no more incitement to violence.

We thought that after Auschwitz man will know that the distance [00:47:00] between words of hate and massacre is extremely short. Fanaticism leads to bigotry which leads to disdain which begets hate which leads to anti-Semitism, which leads to Treblinka. And yet murders in France, threats in Nice, profanation of cemeteries in Long Island and hundreds of other cities. The UN has become an open forum for anti-Semitism with poisonous speeches against Israel coming from 120 nations. And if ever I'm overtaken by anger it's when I think of this cheap comedy.

But how dare they? How dare they judge an ancient nation whose memory is 4,000 years old? Who are our judges? Spokesmen for Khomeini, Gaddafi, and Pol Pot. Dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, police states, [00:48:00] they're to give sermons of morality to the people of Israel?



In another field, the tragedy of European Jewry is being trivialized, distorted, cheapened, and in many quarters denied altogether. In France the debate about the existence or nonexistence of death factories is going on. It's a valid debate in France. So how do you fight ugliness? Is this why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh and why Rabbi Hanina ben Dossa refused to say his prayers? The world wasn't worth his prayers?

And so I don't know. All I know is that we witness events that instill fear in all of us. Back to Paltiel Kossover. Paltiel Kossover, as I said, was a [00:49:00] poet, not a great one but a very good one, soft one. And he wrote his poetry in Yiddish, although the testament was written in Russian. Well, I like the Yiddish language. In fact, my very first book was written in Yiddish. And you know, God writes Hebrew, but he speaks Yiddish. (laughter) I shall read to you a few verses in Yiddish from Paltiel Kossover's poetry and with translation in English: Ikh hob mayn foter in troym gezen. Hot er mir gefregt tsi er iz nokh alts mayn foter. Halt ikh zayn hant un bin mit payn iberful un zog "farshtey foter, probir farshtey." Un zog un zog altsding vos iz yener zayt shprakh blaybt es nit derzogt. Tsum sof zey ikh mayn foter in troym. Ikh zey im ober nit zikh aleyen.

I'll read to you the longer version in English. "In my dream my father asked me if he is still my father. I hold his hand, and I ache. I talk to him, and I ache. I tell him call me, hold me back. Try to understand, Father. I tell him of my escapes into the future, into the past. I tell him of the ashes and the scars upon my forehead. I tell him to stay with me, watch over me, and never leave me. And so I see my father in my dream and fail to see myself."

Another poem. "Zusia, my master, Zusia, my brother, have you changed your mind? You said happiness exists and fills creation. You said God in his grace prevents man from suffering shame and death. Zusia, my father, think of your children and theirs, your [00:51:00] disciples and theirs. Think of them, Zusia, and tell me then, tell me that suffering does not exist. I see you, Zusia, smiling at your brother, the great Rabbi Elimelech. I hear you tell him that everything under the sun created by the creator is grace and compassion. Can you see the descendants of his prophets, Zusia? Can you see them in the sealed cattle cars, in the blazing forests? Do you hear their shouts, Zusia? They are on fire, brother. They are on fire, teacher, consumed by fire on the altar of our people. Please, Zusia, be Zusia, and stop smiling or else do not be Zusia."

Another poem, first in Yiddish. Lakht mayn foter in mayn troym, un lakht on shtim lakht mit oyg. And the translation: "In my dream my father is laughing, only his eyes are not. Why is my father laughing in my dream? Is it because I told him of my discovery? I have found a new rabbi. [00:52:00] I told him I found a new sage, a new prophet advocating brotherhood and equality and peace among nations, a new rabbi preaching joy for the poor and the oppressed, a prophet like Isaiah, a dreamer like Hosea, a consoler like the Besht. He laughed when I mentioned his name: Rabbi Karl, our teacher Karl, our prophet Karl Marx. And my father is laughing. And there are tears in the silence of my dream."

And one more, and that will be it. "Life is a poem that is too long or not long enough, too simple or not simple enough. Life is too much or not enough. Life is a poem that is too sad or not sad enough, too clear or not enough. Life is too much and not enough. Life as a poet? Too much and not enough."

How did he become a communist? How did a young man in Krasnograd in Eastern Europe become a communist when he was a cheder (inaudible) and a yeshiva bokher? [00:53:00] Strange, I have a friend here among you, is a very close, close friend. He told me that the story that happened to Paltiel Kossover

happened to him. He had the same experience. But then many have because something strange, it's incredible, but communism exerted a fascination over the Jewish mind.

So I describe here Ephraim, another yeshiva bokher, who began converting Paltiel to communism. And Paltiel says in his testament, "If Ephraim had used real Marxist propositions I would have turned my back, but instead of quoting Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin, he invoked a messianic hope we share, and I could only approve. He was pleading for justice for the victims and the dignity of slaves, amen. 'My father is one of the just,' Ephraim said. 'He has never done anything to harm a living being, and he is poor. We are hungry. Did [00:54:00] you know that? Two hot meals a week. That's all we can afford. Why are we condemned to hunger, to poverty?'

"And I answered because it's God's will. Who are we to wish to pierce the secret of God's ways? Let the messiah come and --' 'I have four older sisters,' said Ephraim. There is no money to marry them off. Why do you want my sisters to remain old maids?' And I answered, 'God's will is unfathomable. It's not up to us to question it. You know that perfectly well. Let the messiah come and --' 'The messiah. The messiah. For 2,000 years,' says Ephraim, 'men worthier than we have been imploring

him to make himself known and to establish his kingdom. And century after century injustice goes on.

'Do you know Hanan the coachman? He has nothing. He doesn't even own his horse or his coach. (inaudible), not even his body. He toils from dawn to dusk and often late into the night. Occasionally you can see him, eyes red from lack of sleep, lips parched, driving Jonah Davidovich. Think of Jonah sitting comfortably in the coach behind Hanan [00:55:00] and there deny that so much injustice makes it imperative for us to wait no longer.'

"And he goes on bringing examples from people they knew, the poor people, the wretched people, the damned people. And Ephraim expressed himself passionately. He disturbed me. We were alone, as usual, in the house of study. Outside it was snowing. And as he talked, one by one the candles burned down and went out, and Ephraim swayed back and forth while talking, as though we were studying a tangled commentary submitted by Rabbi Eliezer, son of Hyrkanos on the purity and impurity of certain objects.

"'You will tell me it's all up to God,' Ephraim went on. 'You are right but only partly. Human suffering concerns God, of

course, but it also affects us. Why do men make their fellow man suffer, Paltiel? That question concerns you and me.' And little by little, slowly and systematically Ephraim instilled in me his concept of the world. [00:56:00] Only communism allows man to overcome oppression. According to Ephraim communism was a sort of messianism without God, a secular social messianism while waiting for the other, the true one. And at the end, when Ephraim couldn't convince him anymore he had a marvelous sentence. He shouted. He said, 'Don't you understand, Paltiel? We must start the revolution because that is God's command. God wants us to be communists.'" (laughter)

And Ephraim ends the chapter by saying, "I was so naïve, Citizen Magistrate. I was a communist and didn't know it." Then of course, as most Jews from Eastern Europe, he went to Berlin, Berlin 1928, and he said, "I was 19, and life was beautiful. The world was crumbling around me, but I didn't mind. On the contrary, I felt alive, living, as the saying goes, intensely." [00:57:00] He began writing poems and more poems. They were not good.

He said, "Life was funny in Berlin. Though housewives no longer went marketing with suitcases stuffed with banknotes and shopkeepers no longer went home pushing wheelbarrows filled with

money, the poor were still poor and hungry." He became a communist more or less in Berlin, and there he says that how he, for the first time, also began having adventures with girls, women, but all they talked about when they met was communism.

From Paris, from Berlin even to Paris, Paris, the popular front, the 1930s, and then the Spanish War broke out, and he went to the Spanish War. And he arrived into Spain, and listen to his, the chapter on Spain: "I know this place. [00:58:00] I know this sky. I know these walls, these courtyards, these trees, searing, spellbinding. That was the thought that never left me, that obsessed me.

"I was walking through the streets of Barcelona after training in Albacete by myself or with comrades, and the landscape seemed eerily familiar. The hills overlooking the city, when had I experienced this blurred nostalgia as I arrived or as I left? I ambled through the streets ready to halt before a window to converse with a woman who had smiled at me centuries earlier. I cut through cemeteries, my favorite haunts, and deciphered barely visible Hebrew inscriptions. These names, these numbers recording births and their death, I remember them as though they were linked to my past, to my life.

"As a child I had studied the history of the Jews in Spain, the poets, the philosophers, the scholars, the ministers in their period [00:59:00] of splendor, then at the time of their distress, and I had loved it. I rediscovered Abulefia of Saragossa and his messianic navigations, Yehuda Halevy and his poetic visions, Shmuel Hanagid and his prayers, Don Itzhak Abravanel and his acts of faith. I saw myself among my brothers as they were being coerced into choosing between exile and disavow. I took my place among those who left and those who remained. I understood them all. The ones made me sad. The others made me proud. And both added to my sense of richness. I felt just as much at home as back in my town, Liyanov."

He wrote a poem there, one poem, because he wrote the poem about Abraham Abulafia, the unfortunate false messiah who, unable to gain recognition from his brethren, traveled to Rome to try his luck with the pope whom he planned to convert to the Jewish [01:00:00] faith. (laughter) No less.

So Paltiel Kossover wrote a poem, and it reads like that. "The pope? Why the pope, poor Abraham, innocent dreamer? Say brother, tell me, supposing you succeed, supposing the pope had bravely taken Joshua's side against Christ. Would you have won



the battle there would have been in the world one more Jew, that's all, one Jew another pope would have sent to the stake."

Camus once said there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties the enterprise may represent, I would like never to be unfaithful to the one or the other. As for myself, I would say that there is beauty and there is Judaism, which to me, as a Jew, means the essential form of humanism. And I would like never to be unfaithful to the one or the other.

In the Jewish tradition the [01:01:00] individual must be linked to the community. Some have been consciously, others subconsciously. Do you know that before Leon Bloom accepted the mandate to serve as France's first Jewish prime minister he went to consult the chief rabbi, asking him whether or not his appointment would be good for the Jewish people? As for the second Jewish prime minister of France, Pierre Mendes France, do you know that he has been obsessed, literally obsessed for decades with his Jewish genealogy? He is not a religious person, but since the '30s he has been studying every possible and available trace leading him to Spain, to the ancestors in Portugal from where they have been expelled at the end of the fifteenth century because they did not want to convert.

Strange how Jews are being found in other people's history. In doing the research on this book I found extraordinary things. The last governor of St. Petersburg [01:02:00] under Alexander Kerensky, was a Jew named Pyotr Pinhas Rutenberg. But who was commanding the Red Army that stormed St. Petersburg? Another Jew named Lev Bronstein, better known as Trotsky.

I believe that today the challenges facing us are extraordinary. The dangers are becoming more and more serious. I don't know who wins. One thing I do know, the situation will be more serious than before, and I am not convinced that we, the Jewish people, are prepared. Well, it's not new. The only answer, the only possible answer is from within. But I say, well, Jews, of course, only applies to us because I speak as a Jew, but some of you [01:03:00] may know, to me being Jewish is not an exclusion. It is an inclusion, meaning the example should serve to others as well.

I do not believe that what is good for me is good for others. I do not believe in conversion. I don't want convert others. I don't want others to convert us. But one thing I do know, it is from within Jewish history that the answer must come, for it is from within the Jewish history that the questions have made us richer and fuller.

I shall conclude tonight's session with a letter that Paltiel Kossover wrote to his son. Paltiel Kossover, who had such a life, such a rich life, in the yeshiva and out of the yeshiva, as the agitator in Germany and the [01:04:00] courier for the Internationale in France and Palestine, the man who fought in the Red Army during the war as a gravedigger. I don't speak about the Holocaust in the book except for a few pages where Paltiel Kossover arrives in Majdanek but after Majdanek has been liberated. And he is there alone in Majdanek, and he has a strange dream, but that is all.

But still Paltiel Kossover has lived all the events that made the century what it is, and he turned it into his own conscience. You know what Malraux used to say, an act of literature is to turn as much experience into conscience. And this is what Paltiel Kossover has done except when he has done it, it was a little bit late. He was already in the prison cell at the threshold of death.

So at one point he interrupted his testament, and he wrote a letter to his son [01:05:00] never knowing whether the son whom he left at the age of two will ever see it. "Grisha, my son, I am interrupting my testament to write you this letter. When you

read it you will be old enough to understand it and me. But will you read it? Will you receive it? I fear not.

"Like all the writings of prisoners, it will rot in the secret archives, and yet something in me tells me that a testament is never lost. Even if nobody reads it its content is transmitted. The call of the dying will be heard, if not today then tomorrow. All our actions are inscribed in the great book of creation.

[01:06:00] That is the very essence of the noble tradition of Judaism, and I entrust it to you.

"I am writing you because I am about to die. When, I do not know. One month from now, perhaps six. When I shall finish this testament perhaps, but then I cannot answer that question. It's night, but I don't know whether the darkness is in myself or outside. The naked bulb blinds me. The jailer will soon open the peephole. I recognize his step. I am not afraid of him. I enjoy certain privileges. I can write as much as I like and whenever I like and what I like. I am a free man.

"I [01:07:00] try to imagine you in five or ten years. What kind of man will you be when you reach my age? What will you know of the interrogations and tortures that have haunted your father? I see you, my son, as I see my father. As if in a

dream, in the reality of the dream my voice calls yours and his, even if only to tell the world of its ugliness, even if only for the purpose of our crying out together for help, of mourning together the death of hope, and sing together the death of death.

"I am your father, Grisha. It is my duty to give you instruction and counsel. Where can I draw them from? I haven't made such a success of my life that I can allocate myself the right to guide yours. [01:08:00] In spite of my experience with people I don't know how to save them or awaken them. I even wonder whether they wish to be saved or awakened.

"In spite of everything I was able to learn, and I have learned a lot, I don't know the answers that will have to be given to the grave, fundamental questions that concern human beings. The individual facing the future, facing his fellow man, has no chance whatsoever of survival. All that remains is faith, God. As a source of questioning I will gladly accept him, but what he requires is affirmation, and there I draw the line. And yet my father and his father believed in God. I envy them. I tell you so you will know [01:09:00] I envy them their pure faith. I, who have never envied anyone anything.

"Perhaps you will find a way to read my poems. They are a kind of spiritual biography. No, that is too pretentious. A poetic biography, it's not that either. Songs, they are simply songs offered to my father, whom I had seen in a dream. Among the most recent is one I intend to revise in my mind. Its title is both naïve and ironic: "Life is a Poem". No. Life is not a poem. I do not know what life is, and I shall die without knowing.

"My father, whose name you bear, knew, but he is dead. That is why I can only say to you remember that he knew what his son does not. [01:10:00] I have tried. If I have time I will tell you how. Let me at least tell you this: do not follow the path I took. It does not lead to truth. Truth for a Jew is to dwell among his brothers. Link your destiny to that of your people. Otherwise you will surely reach an impasse.

"Not that I am ashamed of having believed in the revolution. It did give hope to the hungry, persecuted masses, but seeing what it has become, I no longer believe in it. The great upheavals of history, dramatic accelerations, all things considered I prefer mystics to politicians. I am going to die within a month, a year, and I should like to go on living with you and

for you, to have you meet the characters [01:11:00] who are sharing my weight in this cell of mine.

"I must tell you, Grisha, that in my testament I did plead guilty. Yes, guilty. But not to what I take to be the meaning of the charge. On the contrary, guilty of not having lived as my father did. That, my son, is the irony. I lived a communist, and I die a Jew. The tempest has swept over us, and people are no longer what they were. I have grown up, Grisha. I have matured. I walked through the forest and lost my way. It's too late to go back. Life is like that, impossible to go back. Your father." [01:12:00]

(applause)

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