

Chaim Potok: A Life as Zwischenmens

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Abstract

Some decades ago, the works of the Jewish American writer Chaim Potok were widely read. And although his popularity has somewhat dropped off, his relevance and interest for countless readers remains unabated. Moreover, for Jewish and Christian minorities worldwide — who face the tension between their world and the secular world beyond —, his novels on the seemingly insurmountable gap between orthodox and liberal 'Jewishness' and the attempts to bridge that gap still seize the imagination. In this essay I want to shed light on influences on Potok; the importance of the past, the meaning of fundamentalism, the role art plays in his life and works, his gradual assimilation/acclulturation, the question of the Theodicee and the omnipresent image of the eye. And, as a matter of course, Potok's stay in Korea, on which the great shift in his works hinges, will also be addressed.

Key words: antisemitism, Chaim Potok, fundamentalism, Jewishness, Zwischenmensch

A writer, a poet, a painter, a philosopher and a Rebbe without a congregation...

A writer that leaves no one untouched; partly because his works are relatively easily accessible. His novels are realistic and unsophisticated, transparent and yet conspicuous for their profound psychological insight. In his books more is often being concealed than revealed to the reader. Potok's protagonists do not keep silent out of sheer laziness or cynicism but out of tact, or out of respect for things that cannot be said or cannot yet be said.

But even more because Potok knows how to touch us when he writes about the confrontation of one's own small, well-defined environment and the challenges of the vast world beyond. What it is to belong to a minority and how this relates to a world around you that does not understand you and does not want to either. In Holland, Potok was very popular for a long time and, although this popularity has diminished somewhat over the last decade, the fact that a Dutch publisher quite recently decided to publish Potok's complete oeuvre again, probably shows something of his timeless appeal. Especially in (orthodox) Christian circles he has received much acclaim for the description of this struggle of clinging to your traditions and convictions on the one hand and adapting and acculturating to another world on the other. In fact any minority group that finds itself set against a vast majority community finds a kindred spirit in Potok.

Strikingly symbolic in this respect is the episode in *My Name is Asher Lev* when Asher's Brooklyn Crucifixions are described. Asher's mother is chained to the blinds that cover the windows, looking out. This is poignantly depicted by Potok on the book cover for the first Dutch issue of *Asher Lev*. She is motionless and powerless, while Asher walks out into the street, into the world that is dazzling new to him. The father is in the back of the room, completely petrified with fixed gaze, not even able to look at the windows. Potok knows how to create a world that is surprisingly recognizable to us. One cannot blame Potok for any form of superficiality since his novels all discuss serious and real life issues.

Potok was born in the Bronx and as such he belonged to the second generation Jewish American writers like Malamud, Bellow and Philip Roth. In this they differed from writers such as Singer, Abraham Cahan and Henry Roth, who quite personally knew about pogroms, suffering and being ostracized. Unlike in some other writers' works, such as Saul Bellow's, Potok's characters and themes are overtly Jewish. He grew up in a closed community which he describes as "a Chassidic world without the beard and the earlocks." (Cusick)

Although he speaks with respect about his upbringing Potok felt a "Zwischenmens" right from the beginning. The first fissure in "that strong wall of permanence" for Potok was literature, which he later called "legitimate voyeurism" since it enables you to get to know the lives of others through the keyhole of language. According to Potok, the American Jew microcosmically mirrors the area of tension in the macrocosm of Western civilization with its bond to the past on the one hand and new ideas and developments on the other. It is this strong underlying and far-reaching symbolic meaning that makes Potok's novels readable and universal; in this Potok stands in a long and respectable literary tradition. Potok's great example James Joyce once remarked; "For myself I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities in the world. In the particular is contained the universal." (Cusick) So Potok's confined Jewish world has universal meaning and universal appeal.

In the 1967 novel *The Chosen* we find ourselves in Williamsburg, the Jewish New York ghetto. Chassidim have their own synagogues, cemeteries, shops and even Rebbe. Nearby live orthodox groups and these two would probably have been living apart together had it not been for WW2. The first confrontation is a hard one ending with a piece of glass in the eye of one of the protagonists, Danny Saunders. What happens on this urban battle field is worked out by Potok in the shape of the marvelous metaphor of the eye: the eye as gate to and mirror of the soul. And those that use tradition to shut themselves up are repeatedly described as having squint or empty eyes. Those, however, who consider tradition as the basis from which to view the world are depicted with wide open eyes. To Potok the power for introspection is quintessential but equally important is the power to maintain a broad view on the world beyond. The individual is the living link between the firm rock of tradition and the vivid flow of everyday life. The individual is expected to interact strongly between the self and that tradition. People forge and influence a tradition as strongly as they are moulded by it. Rebbe Malter says to his son:

Human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked what value is there to a human life. There is so much pain in the world. What does it mean to have to suffer so much if our lives are nothing more than the blink of an eye? . . . I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives the span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. Do you understand what I am saying? A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life. It is hard work to fill one's life with meaning. That I do not think you understand yet. A life filled with meaning is worthy of rest. I want to be worthy of rest when I am no longer here. (217)

In *Asher Lev*, Asher's way of looking at the outside world is no blunt rebellion: He says:

That was the night I began to realize something was happening to my eyes. I looked at my father and saw lines and planes I had never seen before. I could feel with my eyes. . . .I felt myself flooded with the shapes and textures of the world around me. I closed my eyes. But I could still see that way inside my head. I was seeing with another pair of eyes that had suddenly come awake ... and I was afraid. (88)

The struggle to develop his eye and practice his visual art while remaining faithful to the extreme interpretations and teachings of religion fuels the conflict, a conflict almost omnipresent in all Potok's early novels. But then Asher attempts to depict his mother's suffering by painting his Brooklyn Crucifixion. Asher Lev knows no other symbol can give full expression to the feelings that he has about his mother's long torment. His use of a crucifixion is considered highly provocative, given the reaction of visitors to the exhibition. Here Potok quite likely used Chagall's example of numerous crucifixions, a symbol of suffering the Jewish faith does not have. Quite striking is the fact that soon after the exhibition Asher's mother gives him a book called the Art Spirit. A random passage read by Asher poignantly phrases his situation.

Every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a "universal" without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere. (203)

Again there's a link to James Joyce, where in his *Dubliners*, the main characters are bound to their roots on the one hand but at the same time there is this incessant yearning for freedom. Who does not know the striking passage in *Dubliners* when Eveline is rooted to the spot and has to see her boyfriend leave? For Potok, the solution to the problem of our relationship to tradition seems to lie then in precisely the kind of willful person like Asher, "who does not attempt to destroy his or her tradition or to embrace the world wholly, but who builds some bridge, however flimsy, between the two" (Timmerman 215). The question that the young protagonists of Potok's novels begin to ask of their fathers is, "Can we trust our tradition sufficiently to grow with it, or must we only guard it jealously as a precious memory?" They are all 'Zwischenmensch': Danny Saunders in *The Chosen*, Asher Lev, Gershon in the *Book of Lights*, Volodya and Masha in the *Slepek Chronicles*, but it was Potok himself who felt this the most. After having walked through the streets of Kyoto he later conveyed:

It was a very exhilarating experience to find myself in a world where I wasn't being judged for what I was. I was only another white face. The irony was that this was a pagan world. It was a world that my scriptures told me to avoid, to condemn. (Cusick 9)

After having seen an old man that prayed to his gods he experienced a life changing moment; later he said about this encounter:

It not only relativized my Jewishness, it relativized my American-ness and my westernness simultaneously. It set everything into specific culture contexts and at the same time taught me that my culture could be viewed from outside its perimeters by another culture, and be seen in an altogether different way. What happened was

that I began to see my culture from the outside. When that happens to your head, you are never the same again. (Cusick 10)

Whereas the *Book of Lights* still can be seen as a Western-American view on the world of the East, its successor, *I Am the Clay* is written from an eastern point of view. It is a sober, intercultural novel about human suffering and the will to survive. But then it seems as if Potok's traditional religious background has no longer any satisfactory answers anymore. In his novellas "The Trope Teacher" and "The Canal" it seems as if a turning-point has been reached in Potok's moderate optimism. In the late nineties, Potok told in an interview that for ten years he "had moved about in dark and ambiguous areas." (Interview Reformed Daily). He added that as he got older, life became much less coherent.

Strangely enough, neither the Shoah nor antisemitism as a lasting profound effect on Judaism has received a real place in his early works. Obviously, it is repeatedly depicted and discussed. His early novels are all populated by survivors of the Shoah, but the religious-philosophical implications are only deeply and lastingly put under discussion in his later works. Potok's first novels are all dominated by religious-didactic objectives; and this in sharp contrast with his later works, which all have a stronger aesthetic bias. There his view on the world and humanity are far more pessimistic. As said before, his visit to the Far East changed Potok substantially and radically. This change is first perceptible after the publication of his 1981 novel *The Book of Lights*.

Potok's novellas *The Trope Teacher* (1992) and *The Canal* (1993) are both uneasy explorations into the question whether there is still light and life possible after the Shoah. The Holocaust struck a deep hole in the genealogy of a people indeed. Many of the horrors that besiege us come from the Sitra Achra, the Other Side. The concept of the Realm of Evil, of all that is diabolical stems from the Cabbalist way of thinking. This realm was created by the Ribono Shel Olam, The Master of the Universe, for reasons He only knows. It is a real, tangible world. In the way of thinking of the Eastern-European Jews this "other side" started to play a significant role. Much Cabbalistic literature preceding the horrors of the Shoah is about the Sitra Achra. It is therefore quite understandable that it played a significant role in the works of I.B. Singer. An unremitting preoccupation with the powers of evil, with the all-pervading sexuality, with uncomplicated people getting entangled in complex spheres of influence; that is the essence of Singer. With Potok this is far less the case, although his later works show that complex spheres of influence increasingly affect him.

The Trope Teacher takes place in New York in the thirties, the Interbellum period as well as present day America. It is an introduction into the emotions and thoughts of Benjamin Walter, a 65-year-old American professor, specialized in "war"; an accomplished and well-developed man. His journey back to his youth is a tedious but quintessential enterprise in order to understand a crucial period in his life he has long suppressed. He is writing his memoirs but part of it fails to be laid down properly. In conversation with a neighbour, a writer, memories of his trope-teacher come back to him. The lady's father has been with Potok's father in WW1. By sharing his memories with his neighbour a crucial moment of Walter experiences in the Second World War come back. In this story Potok applies the archetypal symbol of the tree. The tree, being the symbol of security and safety for Walter, has to be cut down after having been struck by lightning. When Walter unites with the anxiety dream of his youth and he has learned to speak the same words his trope-teacher once spoke, he seemingly disappears through a black hole into the thunderstruck tree and is gripped by terrible fear. The book ends without hope and consolation. In an

interview Potok once said that “we have to come to live with the thought that there are no ultimate answers. A frightening thought, but an honest one...”¹

In *The Canal* we meet a Jewish-American architect, Amos Brickman. He is no longer able to shut out the war experiences during his childhood years. In some vision he hears someone call him to come. Gradually he realizes it is his past that is calling him. Till then he had consoled himself with the idea that as long as he does not address the call it has not taken place. Finally he undertakes a journey to Europe, from where he had emigrated to America in 1945 at the age of 13. He ends up in Auschwitz with all terrible recollections that come with it. Ultimately, along a canal, he starts to realize, partly subconsciously, what lives deep inside. Amos has received the question from a number of friends to design a new church. This request surprises him and keeps haunting him. One of them, Ellis, calls the design a means to construct a new dimension - one of reconciliation and healing. The new church of Le Corbusier in Ronchamp may herald a new era but Amos simply fails to see it. For him the past is still laden with agonizing memories. Ellis advises him to abandon the idea of the design. Desperately, Amos tries to come up with some new designs but nothing seems to help. Only after his visit to Poland he finally realizes that life “is a gift and a mystery, and a burden.” The three-dimensional wreck of history must be demolished. Amos opts for a church on a location outside the city near a brook which he incorporates in the design. With a brook that does not dry up *The Canal* gets cautiously positive after all. Only within that fourth dimension of reconciliation and healing does life become possible, even when accompanied by topical and painful questions. *The Canal* is a very impressive novella, in which the beautiful and suggestive style slowly unravels the mystery so as to reveal its full power. In these two later novellas Potok proves to be a *Zwischenmens* caught between the unanswered questions of the past and the challenges of modern time.

In sum, Chaim Potok is often recognized as a well-known popular writer, but not necessarily a writer deserving critical acclaim. Admittedly, Potok’s characters are problematic in that he romanticizes them. One critic said that his characters ‘display no real understanding of the dilemmas they have been chosen to exemplify’. Although we find almost all characters in their late teens and early adolescence, not one of them seems to express any sexual desire or frustration; and this in sharp contrast to Bellow’s and Roth’s writings. In fact much of the tensions in his works are almost entirely intellectual. In a sense his main characters are all intelligent, well behaved and critically thinking beings, whereas we quite regularly do see outcasts, village-idiots and social failures feature in Roth’s works, or the schlemiels in I.B. Singer’s and Malamud’s. Nevertheless, it seems that Potok’s readership accepted the multiplicity of Jewish Identity that suggestively pervaded Potok’s novels. Most readers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, saw Potok’s novels as stories that told their own stories. Moreover, they recognized that Potok dares to criticize values or at least to put them into perspective. But he never dismisses or denounces values. How easily are seemingly worthless or ossified traditions denounced! At least that is what is strongly noticeable in the Netherlands these days. Potok shows that traditions are inseparably connected to people and that’s why he treats them with the utmost care. He too well knew about the struggle of how to work out Jewish identity in the light of being an American, “but never to leave one’s Judaism behind” ((McClymond p. 18).

Moreover, Potok’s adolescent rebellions do not inevitably lead to permanent estrangement between family members or generations. Most of all, Potok’s protagonists like Danny and Reuven for instance, in *The Chosen*, never even think of abandoning their Jewish

¹ Potok, Chaim. Quoting in *Rondje om Tien; Interview with Chaim Potok*, Dutch Television, 1988.

identity, they much more try to integrate their religious identities in relationship with secular modernism. As said before, isn't this the very struggle found in any minority facing a majority?

Potok believed that literature has the power to transform individuals, to change their orientation to the world, to instill moral virtues in their characters and, coincidentally, make them realize the values of their own tradition, make them see how rich their own world is. Potok was very specific about the meeting of an artist and his 'audience', his 'witnesses'. In *The Gift of Asher Lev* Potok says: "Art takes place when that which is seen is mixed with that which is inside the artist" (p.315). Potok does not see his readers as being empty barrels that have to be filled up with a story. They bring in their whole existence. It is like a curve on which the artist and the 'witness' meet each other. And each one of these witnesses will meet somewhere else, but an encounter is quintessential. Art changes man but man equally changes art. Similarly, tradition changes man and man changes tradition. And isn't that the very reason we can never read enough?

Three quotes by Chaim Potok reveal his profound way of thinking in a nutshell:

"All of us grow up in particular realities - a home, a family, a clan, a small town, a neighborhood."

"Depending upon how we're brought up, we are either deeply aware of the particular reading of reality into which we are born, or we are peripherally aware of it."

"It is inconceivable to me that a million or three million or half a million human beings will think and feel precisely the same way on any single subject" (all Potok quotes from Morgan).

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