

## Potok, Chaim

(pō'tok hī'em)

Feb. 17, 1929- Writer. Address: b. c/o Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 201 E. 50th St., New York City, N.Y. 10022; h. 20 Berwick Rd., Merion, Penn. 19131

The world of Brooklyn's Orthodox Jewish community first came alive for millions of gentile readers through Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* (1967), the first of the series of five best-selling novels in which Potok has explored the conflicts of, in his words, "individuals who are very committed to the core of their particular world, Judaism, and at the same time committed to the ideas that come to them from the core of the secular umbrella world in which they live." Potok has explained the appeal of his fiction for non-Jews, especially Christian evangelicals, by saying, "I think I stumbled quite inadvertently upon the central problem of any system of





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faith in the secular world." Outside of his fiction, Potok, a Conservative, "non-pulpit" rabbi, has written *Wanderings* (1978), a history of the Jewish people, and articles for *American Judaism* and other publications on the conflicts of the religiously committed in a secular society.

Chaim Potok was born in the Bronx, New York City, on February 17, 1929, the eldest of four children of Benjamin Max Potok and Mollie (Friedman) Potok, both of whom had emigrated from Poland. His father was a jeweler and watchmaker, with a shop on East 170 Street in the Bronx. His brother, Rabbi Simon Potok, is the spiritual leader of the Nanuet (New York) Hebrew Center, and both of his sisters, Charlotte and Bella, are married to rabbis.

Potok described his upbringing to Cheryl Forbes of *Christianity Today* (September 8, 1978) as "very Orthodox . . . Hasidic without the beard and earlocks." "I prayed in a little shtetel, and my mother is a descendant of a great Hasidic dynasty and my father was a Hasid, so I come from that world." He was "locked into a daily regimen" that began with the praying of morning service in Hebrew, continued through an eight-hour day in a yeshiva, or all-male parochial school, and ended with an evening devoted to homework, relieved perhaps by fifteen minutes of *The Lone Ranger* on the radio. The Sabbath was strictly observed, as were the kosher dietary laws.

When he was eight Potok began to draw and paint, to his parents' disapproval. "No religious Jew ever participated in Western art," he explained to George DeWan of *Newsday* (November 15, 1982), because the arts, like painting and sculpture, are "considered at best a waste of time and at worst an act of sinfulness," a breach of the second commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee a grav-

en image." The study of the Talmud might involve aesthetics, but never aesthetics for its own sake. After a brief battle, he "diverted the creative energy into writing," which was "less an attack on Jewish religious tradition than painting since the written word and sacred texts are the basis of Judaism." In the interview with George DeWan he recalled his mother's reaction when he told her he thought he would spend his life writing stories: "She looked, and said, 'You want to write stories? That's very nice. You be a brain surgeon, and on the side you write stories.'"

Writing wasn't "anything he sat down and decided"—it "grabbed" him "rather than the other way round." The decisive point came when, at fourteen, after years of devouring Tom Swift, Doc Savage, and other juvenile and pulp fiction, he went to the public library with the intention of tackling "a really tough, adult novel." More or less at random, because the title intrigued him, he chose *Brideshead Revisited*. The upper-class British Catholic world of Evelyn Waugh's Marchmain family "overwhelmed" him with the realization that one could use words to create "a space-time slice," as he told George DeWan: "I found myself inside a world the merest existence of which I had known nothing about. I lived more deeply inside the world in that book than I lived inside my own world, for the time it took me to read it. I remember finishing the book and feeling a sense of bereavement. These people were gone. It was a feeling of astonishment. The whole thing had only been a story! That was the beginning of it, the beginning of this strange business about writing stories. Anything I read after that, even the most frivolous fiction, had as its fundamental purpose how to create worlds out of words on a paper. I began to read, and I began to write."

The misunderstanding of his parents and the ridicule of his Talmud teachers and schoolmates served only to fuel Potok's commitment to writing, which became a solitary obsession. For five years, as he recounted in an interview with Marc Wallace for the Philadelphia *Inquirer's Today* magazine (February 11, 1973), in every spare moment, on the bus to and from school, during recess, at night, and on the Sabbath, he "read, studied, took apart, and put together again" the novels of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and other masters, learning how "the great ones" did it. During those five years he drifted ever further from the fundamentalism of his parents and teachers. "No one can work with the novel and remain inside any fundamentalist sect. . . . The serious novel is the stance of the rebel, the individual who is constantly poking around. . . . I did not want to be, at that point in my life, just another puppet in a fundamentalist world . . . moving across the surface of life, pushed by forces of the past."

Like his primary education, Potok's secondary schooling was Orthodox. At the Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy of Yeshiva University High School in Manhattan he was student body presi-



dent and literary editor of the school magazine. Among the few people who encouraged him in his writing was the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, who sent him a heartening letter along with a rejection slip. Another was David Fleischman, an English instructor at Yeshiva University, where Potok majored in English and was literary editor of the senior class magazine. His "serious doubts about the possibility of creating literature inside a fundamentalist mode of thought" led to a complete break with Orthodoxy by the time he took his B.A. degree *summa cum laude* in 1950. Discovering in Conservative Judaism, which was a Westernized, historical approach to the study of Biblical texts, "another kind of Judaism altogether, with depth and maneuverability and an intellectual breadth that he thought never existed," he transferred for his rabbinical studies to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, a Conservative institution near Columbia University, in New York City. That transfer made it possible for him to receive a rabbinical education—which he wanted for the good of his writing—without becoming a pulpit rabbi. It also made him an outcast in the fundamentalist world in which he had grown up, as he recounted to Tom Nugent of the *Baltimore Sun* (December 15, 1981): "When I left the parochial school system . . . I had to rebuild my world literally from zero, and to this day there are people from the old world who won't speak to me."

Potok received his rabbinical ordination and an M.A. degree in Hebrew literature, along with the Hebrew and homiletics prizes, at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1954. During the following year he was national director of the Leaders Training Fellowship, the Conservative movement's leadership training program, for which he wrote several pamphlets on Jewish ethics and contemporary social problems, and from 1955 to 1957 he was a combat chaplain with the United States Army in Korea. His experience in Korea took him another giant step away from the parochialism of his childhood and adolescence, curing him of his residual fear of the goy, the gentile, because "there it didn't make any difference what the hell you were—you all got killed the same way."

A novel Potok wrote about his experience in Korea was never published, but it spawned his first five published books, beginning with the novel *The Chosen* and ending with his massive history of the Jewish people, *Wanderings*. "I found as I was writing that Korea book," he later explained, as quoted by Michael Fine in a syndicated Gannett News Service article published in the *Burlington (Vermont) Free Press* on November 5, 1978, "that I was constantly taking the hero back in time, through flashbacks. What I ended up with was that each of my novels was a flashback, an effort to discover a different facet of that individual in Korea. *The Chosen* was the character as a kid. Each book had a different component. *Wanderings* will explain all the culture he takes with him to the Far East. It will explain Jewish cultural encounters for the past 4,000 years."

From 1957 to 1959 Potok taught at the University of Judaism, a Conservative institution in Los Angeles. During that period he also directed Camp Ramah, a Hebrew-speaking Conservative summer camp on the outskirts of Los Angeles. He was scholar-in-residence from 1959 to 1963, while he was doing postgraduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. The university awarded him the Ph.D. degree in philosophy upon acceptance of his dissertation, "The Rationalism and Skepticism of Solomon Maimon," in 1965. Much of the work on the thesis was done during a year in Israel. For a year after his return to the United States in 1964 he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and was managing editor of *Conservative Judaism*. For nine years beginning in 1965 he was editor-in-chief at the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, and after stepping down as editor he continued to serve the society as coordinator and style consultant for the third and final volume of its monumental Bible translation project.

*The Chosen* (Simon and Schuster, 1967) came "mostly out of a desire to write about the confrontation of the twentieth century," especially Freudianism, "with those Jews who were not hung up with their Jewishness." Set in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, it relates the rivalry between two intellectually maturing yeshiva students from opposed sects and how that rivalry grows into friendship. One of the boys is Danny Saunders, the brilliant, restless son of a stern *tzaddik* ("righteous one"), as the Hasids' hereditary rabbis are called, and Reuven Malter, the son of a "merely" Orthodox, progressive Talmudic scholar and teacher, a gentle Zionist regarded by Reb Saunders as an *apikoros*, or atheist, a well-educated Jew who denies the basic tenets of his faith. Reuven shares with his father a serene approach to Judaism and scholarship. Danny, raised cruelly "in silence" by his father, is in conflict about both; he ultimately rejects his role as the "chosen" heir to an Hasidic dynasty and opts to enter a forbidden field of secular knowledge, psychology. In an interview with Martha MacGregor for the *New York Post* (April 22, 1967) at the time of the publication of *The Chosen*, Potok summed up his view of Hasidism: "Tremendous piety, tremendous intelligence, and a frozen creed. They are totally committed to the kind of Judaism that prevailed at the time their movement was founded in the eighteenth century. You would think the intelligence would collide with the creed—and that is what happens in my book to Danny Saunders."

While initially slammed by some critics, mostly in the fundamentalist Jewish press, *The Chosen* was a phenomenal nationwide success. One reason was the simple and direct, if sometimes halting, style, reminiscent of Hemingway. Other reasons were enumerated by Potok on the basis of letters he received from readers: "One, it is a good story; two, it deals with universal themes: friendship, child-parent relationship, and the transmission of traditions from one generation to another." Josh Greenfield, writing in *Life* (April 21, 1967), ac-



claimed Potok "though far from polished in every sense . . . already a master in the art of the allegorical specific" and predicted that "his remarkable book will give universality to a tiny section of Williamsburg in Brooklyn as Joyce gave an eternity of urbane meaning to one day in Dublin's fair city." *The Chosen* was on the New York Times best-seller list for thirty-nine weeks and sold over 400,000 copies in hard-cover and more than 3,000,000 as a Fawcett Crest paperback. A film version of the novel produced by Ely and Edie Landau and starring Rod Steiger was released in 1981.

Potok changed publishers when his editor at Simon and Schuster, Robert Gottlieb, moved to Alfred A. Knopf. *The Promise*, published by Knopf in 1969, followed the two young protagonists of *The Chosen* into the beginning of their professional lives. Now in their early twenties, Reuven Malter finishes his studies for the rabbinate in an Orthodox seminary and Danny Saunders, still pious but shorn of his earlocks and beard, earns his doctorate in psychology at Columbia University. Added to the cast of characters is another young Jewish figure in conflict with tradition: Michael Gordon, a boy patient in a treatment center where Saunders works. The manifestation of Gordon's mental illness is triggered when he is cheated by an old Jew at a gambling game at a country fair (an autobiographical incident). His explosion of anger at the old man turns into raving against all of the Jewish Orthodoxy that has excommunicated his father, a brilliant scholar, for trying to discover an existential basis for traditional Judaism. Gordon's obsession helps both Saunders and his friend Reuven Malter to find their identity in relation to Jewish tradition: they realize that their respective religious legacies must be accepted, but with personal input, and be passed on thus revitalized. The emphasis is on Malter's decision to accept modern textual criticism as it applies to Talmudic writings, although not as it applies to sacred biblical literature.

The theme of *The Promise* is the existential necessity of gambling, in the sense that Abraham gambled on God's promise that he and his progeny would be agents of universal redemption. The novel is prefaced with a quotation from Blaise Pascal: "You must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked." Some reviewers complained that in *The Promise* Potok was tiresomely elaborating material explicitly or implicitly present in *The Chosen*; others felt, on the contrary, that the novel marked a decided advance. Among the latter was Hugh Nissenson, who viewed *The Promise* as "a better book" than *The Chosen*. "Despite an occasional technical lapse," Nissenson wrote in the New York Times Book Review (September 14, 1969), Potok has demonstrated his ability to deal with a more complex conception and to suffuse it with pertinence and vitality." *The Promise* reached the number-four spot on the best-seller lists.

Among the critics who saw *My Name is Asher Lev* (Knopf, 1972) as the signal that Potok had ended his apprenticeship as a novelist was Guy Davenport, who in his review in the New York Times

Book Review (April 16, 1972) hailed that novel as "little short of a work of genius." Asher Lev scandalizes his Landover sect in Crown Heights, Brooklyn when he decides to become a painter instead of a builder of Hasidic schools like his father. He becomes a world-renowned artist only to be ostracized by the entire Hasidic community for exhibiting two crucifixion-scene paintings, in one of which his mother hangs in agony from a Crown Heights apartment window. He did the paintings "for all the pain you suffered, my mama . . . for dreams of horror, for nights of waiting, for memories of death." At the same time, he is "terrified before such an act of creation . . . knowing the pain those works would soon inflict" on the people he loves.

In his 1978 interview with Cheryl Forbes of *Christianity Today* Potok explained how, for Asher Lev as for Picasso when his mistress was dying of tuberculosis, the crucifixion has "no religious significance" but is "an aesthetic vessel," a "form," a "motif" which the artist "fills with his own being." "Aesthetic motifs . . . are triggering mechanisms for certain emotions, and in this instance the emotions is evoked by solitary, protracted torment. . . . The crucifixion to Lev was clearly stripped of all its Christological salvationist content and was a vessel. To his parents it's what the crucifixion is to most Jews—even to many secular Jews, by the way . . . a triggering mechanism for images of rivers of Jewish blood. Countless Jews have been slain through the centuries for the deicide charge. . . . Asher Lev is essentially about a conflict of aesthetics." During its twenty-seven weeks on the hardcover best-seller lists, *Asher Lev* climbed to number two.

The "core-to-core culture confrontation" explored in *In the Beginning* is with anti-Semitism, "the dark underbelly of Western civilization." In the novel the Luries, a Jewish immigrant family living in the Bronx, exhibit "the entire spectrum of Jewish responses to anti-Semitism," an exhibition that broke a virtual taboo among Jewish writers and thus further alienated Potok from his fundamentalist critics. The response of the father, who left Poland because of a pogrom, is to organize Jewish self-defense units. The son, David Lurie, bewildered at first as to what his approach should be, is interested in modern Bible criticism. He knows that that criticism has been used by some gentile scholars "as a highly sophisticated weapon to get the Jews," but he also realizes that it "contains truths." Finally, he enrolls in a secular university as a Bible student, "joining the enemy camp in order to change the face of the enemy," a step viewed by his father as a betrayal, as "going to the goyim to study Torah." "Some of my friends did that," Potok told Cheryl Forbes. "They entered Bible scholarship in order to change the attitude of that discipline toward Jews—and they succeeded. This is their story." The final scene of *In the Beginning* is at the site of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, where David Lurie experiences a mystical affirmation of his decision to leave his family and community in order to "bring new life to our roots."



Combining his developed narrative skill with contemporary historical research, Potok wrote *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews* (Knopf, 1978), a massive, highly readable, handsomely illustrated volume. In the writing of that book Potok came to see that Judaism through the centuries has been a "cultural package" with borrowings from the civilizations that have surrounded it, and that insight moved him to thinking about "what it gave back to the world." The result was the controversial *The Book of Lights* (Knopf, 1981), Potok's most ambitious and powerful work, and also his darkest and most enigmatic.

*The Book of Lights* is primarily concerned with the age-old problem of good and evil as seen through the magical prisms of the Kabbalah, the system of esoteric theosophy developed by medieval rabbinical mystics. The author's youthful experience in Korea is brought full circle with his mature overview of Jewish history as he tells the story of two rabbinical students striving for inner enlightenment. One is Gershin Loran, a visionary who concentrates not on the legalistic Talmud but on the nonrational Kabbalah. The other is Arthur Leiden, who fled from physics into the rabbinate to exorcise his torment over the involvement of his uncle and other Jews in the development of the atomic bomb. As chaplains in post-truce Korea, the two visit Hiroshima and meditate on the irony of

men "holding in their hands the light of creation" and giving back to the world the "death light."

Chaim Potok is a brown-eyed, bearded man, five feet eight inches tall and thinner than the face in his photographs would suggest, who dresses impeccably and speaks in a professional manner, controlling his quick, intense air with pacing and precision of diction. He and his wife, the former Adena Mosevitsky, a psychiatric social worker, were married in 1958. They have two daughters, Rena and Naama, and a son, Akiva. The Potoks live in a spacious Tudor home in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion, Pennsylvania, and they maintain an apartment in Jerusalem, Israel, where they visit for protracted periods. Potok, who writes during the day, often spends his evenings painting. His style as a painter is expressionist, and his subjects include landscapes, still lifes, nudes, and self-portraits. He has been exhibiting since 1979. Among his recreations is photography.

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