

Israel — Dreams and Realities¹

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, good evening and 'shalom' to all of you. It's a very special pleasure for me to be in Lodz. When I was fifteen years old and I came in to live on my own in kibbutz Hulda, I was adopted by a couple of teachers who came from Lodz. They told me a great deal about this city, which they missed and I knew Lodz, even before I came to Lodz from the stories. I knew about the Jewish life here. I knew about the city. I knew about the famous places so I am in Lodz for the first time but not entirely for the first time. Now is for agenda of this evening. I am going to take five minutes to tell you about myself, five minutes to tell you about the Hebrew language in which I write and the rest of the evening will be about Israeli dreams and Israeli realities. I live in a small town in the desert, the Negev of the desert, the town in called Arad and it's literally in the middle of the desert. Every morning at five o'clock, before sunrise, summer and winter I take a walk in the desert for about thirty to forty minutes. The desert begins literally five minutes' walk from my home and I walk in the darkness. I inhale the desert air and I take in the smells of the desert. I watch the silhouettes of the heels of the desert, the emptiness, the deep silence and then I return home and if I turn on the radio and I happen to hear a politician using the words 'never' or 'forever' or 'for eternity' I know the stones out in the desert are laughing at him. Then make myself a cup of coffee and before six o'clock every morning I am by my desk asking myself: What if I were him? What if I were her? What if I were them? How would I feel? What would I say? How would I dress? What would I eat? What would I fear? What would I dream about? And this is really what I do for a living. I put myself in other people's shoes or even under other people's skins. I imagine other people so in other words the driving force for my writing is curiosity. I am a great believer in curiosity. I happen to believe that that curiosity is a moral virtue. I think a curious person is a better person, than a person who is not curious because the curious person asks himself or herself the question: 'What if I were the other?' I even believe the curious person is a better lover than the person who is not curious, but it is too early in the evening to talk about his aspect of curiosity. Actually I was curious ever since I was a little boy. My parents used to take me to cafes in Jerusalem. I was the

¹ Transkrypcja wykonana przez Jagodę Sałaj, autoryzowana przez Amosa Oza.

only child and they promised me that if I keep quiet during their conversation with their friends, I will get an ice cream in the end. Ice cream was a big, big attraction in Jerusalem in the 1940's. So I had to keep quiet and they conducted conversations with their friends for seventy seven hours nonstop. And in order not to die of boredom I began to spy on the other guests in the cafe, that's how I became a writer. I would watch the people in the next table. I would overhear snatches of the conversation, and invent in my head the rest of the conversation. I would look at the great dresses. I would look at the body language. I would look at the faces, and the faces expressions. I would look at the shoes, shoes always tell me an important story. Be careful of me, the people in the first line of the auditory. I can see your shoes. I would invent little stories about those people. I have to admit that even today, when I have to kill time, at a dentist waiting room or in a railway station or in an airport, I don't read a tabloid. I spy on other people. I listen to the conversations of strangers. I look at the body expressions and the face expressions. I look at the clothes and I invent stories. It's a wonderful pass time, recommended not only for writers but for every one of you, and you get an ice cream in the end. So I write out of curiosity. And I write if I have to tell you in one word what I write about. If you put a gun to my head and told me: you have one word to say what all your novels and stories are about, I would say 'families'. If you gave me two words. I would say 'unhappy families'. If you gave me three words you will have to read my works. I find the family the most mysterious institution in the universe, the most paraxial institution in the universe, the most tragic and the most comical and the most impossible and the most unlikely institution in the universe. After all, most of us are not born monogamous, the normal family: man, woman, child, another child is an abnormal, contradictory to human nature, and yet it functions somehow from generation to generation with many floors, making funny noises, very often breaking all together, but still it exists. For thousands of years we've been hearing prophecies about the intending end of the family. None of that happened. Jesus Christ had a better idea: 'Live your families behind it follow me'. Plato had a better idea: Let's all live in communes, bring our children up together, and not even care who the biological parent of each child is. Nobody followed or very few people followed the advice of Jesus or the advice of Plato. The family still exists and it exists in Iran by Ayatollahs and it exists in post — modern Greengage village and exists in Africa by the Bushmen and it exists by the Eskimos in the North Pole, exists in South Korea somehow, mysteriously. I am fascinated by this institution, by the contradictions, by the comedy and the tragedy of this institution and by the way, comedy and the tragedy are not too different planets are we tend to think when we are young. Comedy and tragedy are no more than two different windows, from which we view the same landscapes of our lives. When I write a story I try to erase a line between comedy and tragedy. However, if I was given the choice between two options: option one to join the first manned spacecraft to the planet Mars and option two: to spent twenty four hours as a fly on the wall in the house of a family, any family at all. I prefer to be a fly and not the astronaut. In the first place it's more safe, and in the second place it's much more interesting to be. So I am a writer of families. I write about families. I write about Israeli families. Israeli families are more complex than families in other countries because Israel is a strange conglomeration of immigrants from many countries. Jewish population of Israel consists of Jewish emigrants from no less than

136 different countries. Imagine each one with his or her love, hate affair with their old country, each one with his or her formal languages, each one with his or her nostalgia, each one with his or her traumas. It's a complicated country.

I write in Hebrew, I promise to speak five minutes about the Hebrew language. Hebrew is a unique, phenomenal modern, as you all know the Hebrew language has been as dead as ancient Greek or Latin for seventeen centuries, nobody spoke it except in the ceremonies in the synagogues, or by the high table in high holidays, they are much like Latin, ceremonial purposes, scholars correspondent in Hebrew, scholars from different countries. Jewish scholars from different countries corresponded in Hebrew but nobody actually spoke it. In the living room, in the nursery, in the kitchen, or in the bedroom, for seventeen centuries for such a language to come back to life takes no less than a miracle. And the miracle occurred, not as many people believe because of one genius called Eliezer Ben — Yehuda who created the Modern Hebrew language dictionary and invented some fifteen or twenty thousand new Hebrew words by adding prefixes and suffixes to typical words. His genius is beyond doubt but not single genius could persuade Polish people to wake up one morning and start speaking Korean. That would be impossible. The revival of Hebrew happened as a result of the encounter in Jerusalem. One hundred and ten years ago within the local Jewish population and the European Ashkenazi, Jewish immigrants. The local Jewish population spoke Ladino which is a Spanish Jewish dialect; they spoke Arabic, in some cases, Turkish or Persian. The new comers spoke Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, German, the only way to ask directions to the welling wall, or to rent a business or to buy vegetables was to resort to the prayer book Hebrew and use it as a spoken language, that was the only language which the locals and the immigrants had together. I know it is forbidden to conduct experiments with human beings but if you put on a desert island one thousand, well educated, church going Roman Catholic, Polish people, together with one thousand, well educated, church going Roman Catholic, French people, Latin may be revived for the same reason, for practical reasons, for communication. So Hebrew was revived because of the encounter between North and South, between European Jews and South Arabic Oriental Jews. I can tell you the exact minute when Hebrew came back to life. And the exact minute occurred when the first boy said to the first girl, or maybe the first girl said to the first boy 'I love you' in Hebrew, for the first time in seventeen centuries. The boy must have been South Arabic and the girl Ashkenazi or vice versa, the girl was European and the boy was Oriental. But they said 'I love you' in Hebrew. And at that moment Hebrew once again became an intimate language, a language of life, not a language of books and scholarship but a language of life. I really hope that this boy and that girl who said 'I love you' in Hebrew had a long and wonderful life together. They deserved it. They are the real revivals of Hebrew. But then the fascinating phenomena is that on that night when the boy whispered to the girl or the girl whispered to the boy 'I love you' in Hebrew, there already existed a considerable body of secular, modern Hebrew literature written by Jewish writers in Poland, in Germany, in Russia, in the Ukraine, in Romania and in the land of Israel. Those writers never spoke Hebrew in everyday life and yet they wrote realistic novels, mimetic novels a la Charles Dickens, a la Balzac, in Hebrew. Four idealistic reasons: they had readers, who read their novels but read the novels without ever being actual using, practical using

of this language, but when the boy whispered 'I love you' to the girl or the girl whispered 'I love you' to the boy, their next sentence which they said to each other must have been a quote from one of those modern Hebrew novels written in the nineteenth century in Europe by idealistic Jews who believed in the revival of Hebrew. However when this happened in Jerusalem it involved a few hundred people, no, more than a few hundred people, maybe a few thousands. Forty years later in the 1940's when I was a child of five or six the overall number of speakers of Hebrew worldwide was already about four hundred thousand. Most of them in British Palestine, a few of them in Hebrew speaking gymnasiums here in Poland and in Romania, and in the Ukraine but mostly in Palestine, four hundred thousand. In fact when I was a boy, only people who were below the age of forty spoke Hebrew. Everyone who was over forty spoke Ladino or Arabic or Jewish or Polish or Russian or German or Romanian or Algerian. So much so as a little boy I feared that one day when I wake up to be forty I will wake up speaking Jewish, I felt that was something which comes with age like greying hair or wrinkles on the face.

Today ladies and gentleman, there are ten millions speakers of Hebrew, of modern Hebrew in the world, that is in Israel, in the occupied Palestinian territories and outside of it, ten millions, this is more than the overall number of speakers of Danish or Norwegian or Finnish. This is more than the overall number and gives me a special satisfaction to point out more than the overall number of speakers of Austrian, German, and I am delighted to say this. And this is even more than an overall number of speakers of English in the days of William Shakespeare, when on both sides of the ocean, there were barely five and a half million speakers of English. Today, even as I talk to you about the Hebrew language, people fly jumbo jets in Hebrew, they conduct open heart surgeries in Hebrew, they launch satellites into orbit in Hebrew, and this is because modern Hebrew developed like a second and third floor on top of biblical and post biblical Hebrew. The biblical Hebrew and the post biblical Hebrew are still accessible even to a seven year old child. A seven year old child can read the words of prophet Alzaya missing one word here or one word there. The prophet Alzaya couldn't understand the seven years old boy because his Hebrew is much richer than the Hebrew from the prophet Alzaya but the typical Hebrew is still preserved within the modern Hebrew as the ground floor. This ladies and gentlemen provides a challenge for the writer of Modern Hebrew. The writer of Modern Hebrew can take excessive liberties with the language. It is still possible for a writer or a poet of contemporary Hebrew to legislate into the language, to invent new forms, to invent new words. This is very much like an Elizabethan English, when the language is still not petrified, it's still like melting lover, like an erupting volcano, and writers and poets can invent, they can shape the language. I have invented one or two words, which are already in the official dictionary of the modern Hebrew language. One of those words came back to me from a taxi driver who had no idea that I was the proud parent of this word; this ladies and gentlemen is as close to immortality as the mortal can opt to get. That much about Hebrew, I could go on speaking about Hebrew for the rest of the night because it is my passion. I am not a chauvinist for the country but I am a terrible chauvinist for the Hebrew language, which I think is a marvellous musical instrument, it is my violin but I promise talk to you about Israeli dreams and Israeli realities.

Now, Israel was born out of a dream. This is unusual for countries. Countries are born out of history, out of geography, out of demography, out of politics, not Israel. Israel was born out of a dream. The Jewish State was the name of a futuristic novel by Theodor Herzl, just a hundred and ten years ago. Tel Aviv was a title of another futuristic novel by Theodor Herzl long before it became a vivacious, big city. So everything came out of dreams, everything came out of books. Now it's a fact of life that a dream comes true is slightly disappointed. The only way to keep a dream perfect and unsullied and unspoiled is never to live without. This is true of any dream, travelling abroad or raising a family or leaving out a sexual fantasy or building a country. Israel is a dream come true and as such it tantalises a certain disappointment. The disappointment is not in the nature of Israel. The disappointment is in the nature of dreams come true. Now when I say Israel was born out of a dream I should say this in the plural. Israel was born out of a variety, the whole spectrum of dreams and visions and aspirations. To mention only a few, some of the founding fathers and mothers of Israel dreamt of renewing the days of old, creating a biblical country, a nation of priests, fathers, soldiers who will speak Hebrew and live the life of our old biblical existence. Very romantic dream. Others still others dreamt of creating a replica of the Jewish Shtetl in the heart of the Middle East, speaking Yiddish not Hebrew religiously observed going to a synagogue, preserving the East European melodies and traditions, a Shtetl in the heart of the desert. Still others meant dreamt of creating an exemplary social democracy. A social democracy which will be a model for the whole world, a model of social justice, of progressiveness, model of mutual responsibility and solidarity. Still others dreams of creating of a Marxists paradise. Yes, there were Marxists, Zionists and they were enthusiastic ones. They founded kibbutz and they had a dream which they never expressed in words but in my capacity as a story teller I can put their dream into words for them. They dreamt until 1953 that one day Stalin himself will come for a visit into kibbutz and they will give Stalin the grand tour. They will show him the chicken poultry and a cow shit and the dormitories for the children and then they will drag Stalin to the communal dining home for a length to be paid into the night about Marxism and Leninism. They will teach him what Marxism and Leninism really means because they knew better. I am not being ironical, they really knew better than Stalin. Then in their fantasy at the end of the night they dreamt Stalin will rise to his feet and say to them in juicy Russian: 'Bloody Jude I have to admit you did socialism here better than we did in Russia and then die of happiness'. Next door to their Marxists there live the Tolstoyans, the founders of old kibbutz Hulda. They did not even want to build a state. A state for them is something clumsy, undesired, they wanted to tell the country into the loose federation of small, peaceful, rural community, where people will have a purifying religious experience, not through the church or the synagogue but through working, living on the middle of countryside, sharing everything with one another, living like brothers and sisters, and conducting simple life. Semi — religious social anarchists, that's what they were. I know it sounds absurd but that's what the founders of my kibbutz were. They were semi — religious social anarchists. Next door to them there were the Jude who come from the Austro Hungarian empire and dreamt of creating no less than a replica of Franz Joseph's Austro Hungary in the middle of the Middle East. With red tiled roofs and very good manners, people calling each other 'frau doctor' and

'herr director', peace and quiet between two and four in the afternoon, a lot of Bavarian cream. I could go on and on telling you about different dreams. I could write a trilogy, which I still threaten to do one day about the ocean variety of dreams. Now obviously it was impossible for all those dreams to come true, it was impossible, partly because as I said earlier. It is not in the nature of dreams, to be other utterly fulfilled, partly because there were different dreams were mutually exclusive, they cancelled each other, they contradicted each other. Whatever became of those dreams in today's Israel. Some are still alive and kicking other different manners, some have turned into nightmares, some vanished. What we have in Israel, is a talkative, argumentative society. There is I have to tell you a huge difference between Israel of the media and realism. In Israel of the European Media, I don't know about the Polish media, but in the Western European media Israel appears as a nation of 80 per cent fanatic, religious settlers, 19 per cent heartless soldiers in the road blocks, and one per cent of intellectual person like myself, who criticize the government and struggle for peace. Peace is utterly false, 70 or 80 per cent of Israelis live not in Jerusalem, and not in the west bank settlements but on the costal play. They are noisy, hearty, passionate, argumentative, pushy, impatient, hedonistic, materialistic, in short a very, very Mediterranean people and they argue all the time. Every line by a bus stop in Israel is likely to catch a spark and turn into a fiery street seminary with total strangers debating politics, morality, religion and the real purpose of God. With the participants of such a street seminary wildly disagreeing with each other about political and metaphysical good and evil, nevertheless elbowing their way to the top of the line. In one word we Israelis belong in Fellini's movies not in an Ingmar Bergman film. We are a nation of eight million citizens right now, Israelis and Palestinians, eight million citizens, eight million prime ministers, eight million prophets and messiahs, each and every one with his or hers immediate formula for immediate redemption. Everyone shouts at the top of their voices, no one ever listens, except from me. I listen sometimes, that's how I make a living. But Israelis are great talkers, they argue. It is very common in Israel for prime minister to invite a poet or a writer for a private, soul searching tet-a-tet, not in the office, in the prime minister's home. And the prime minister gives you a cup of coffee or a drink, depending on who the prime minister is and who you are, you get coffee or you get a drink and the prime minister passionately asks you: 'Where have the nation gone wrong?', 'Where do we go from here?'. He will admire your answers and ignore them completely. After all you can't expect today's writers and poets to be more successful than the prophets were in their day. The prophets will not do very well in persuading the public and the kings, so we can't do any better than them. The ceremony exists. Prime ministers invite you, me, many times for the private conversation about the present, about the future, about the trouble, this has to do with the fact that the literature in Israel much like in Poland, much like in the whole of Eastern Europe, literature is regarded more than just an entertainment. People expect the writers and the poets to show them way. I would call it a Judeoslavic tradition. Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon tradition where writers and poets are regarded as fine and settled entertainers. Even Shakespeare is regarded as a wonderful, genius of entertainer but not as a prophet not as a guide. In my country and in your country people still look for the writers for some kind of guidance, for some kind of essence of direction.