

A TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH CHAIM POTOK

Glazer

You say in the book that each generation has its own conflagration, it seems to me that your new book that arrived just as the new century began read to me like a very profound and often anguished telling of the history of the 20th century, from the great war to Stalin to World War II as if you were taking stock of the century by telling its story. Do you see the main figures in these three stories as the real voices of the last century?

Potok

The main figures of the last century are in three books.

Glazer

Right, Any would you describe it as you did in the book of life as a very strangely terrifying world?

Potok

It's terrifying, it's altogether unique and all those things, that's what this world is all about.

Glazer

Do you see those wars as defining our century?

Potok

Oh yes, yes indeed.

Glazer

You have described your father as having served in the Polish troop of the Austrian army in the First World War, did that have a great impact on you as well? It's recurred in the work.

Potok

It recurs in the work and it had a great deal of impact on me. He told it to me early on in his life and it impacted him personally and affected me personally as well.

Glazer

And you served in the Korean War.

Potok

Yes.

Glazer

Did you have a lot of contact with Holocaust survivors after World War II?

Potok

After World War II I ran into them everywhere.

Glazer

One of the things that troubled me a great deal is that Mr. Piske goes back to find the inside of himself that he left behind when he went to America, but he burns up in a concentration camp. Should we look at the inside of the Jew that goes back, it seems to me that this points out the tremendous dilemma to go back and find the inside of ourselves, is to be destroyed? Could you talk a little bit about that?

Potok

He went back to find the inside of himself not thinking that he would be destroyed, nobody at that point thought that the Holocaust would be so established that it would be destructive of a Jew, the Jew inside. He went to find the inside of himself as a Jew, he couldn't find it in America.

Glazer

Do you think that says something about just Mr. Piske or is that many of us?

Potok

Mr. Piske and many of us indeed. A lot of Jews didn't go back because they didn't feel like going back since to them it was going back to nothing. But he felt that it was still there that the inside of him was still there and he was willing to gamble on it. That's how I read the story.

Glazer

It was troubling me so much as I was seeing him as a metaphor of the Jewish dilemma, that we are not going to find ourselves in some deeply authentic way here, not with the depth that might have been possible elsewhere in another culture, and we can't turn back either.

Potok

That is exactly the dilemma the Jew is in at that point in time.

Glazer

And what about now.

Potok

It's erased somewhat in that we have found a hope that we can find some sort of way out of the dilemma of necessary Europeanism and there would be another way out in terms of the hope for America.

Glazer

That wonderful harp from the earlier book, is inside her house now.

Potok

Yes.

Glazer

Did that mean something special to you that it could no longer be on the outside or no longer was?

Potok

Well it wasn't on the outside as much as always on the inside of the house ping-pong away at a door.

Glazer

It hasn't become a more private kind of a thing?

Potok

It could become a more private kind of thing if you bring it into your room and you salvage it to the rest of the house, from that point of view is yes.

Glazer

You described it somewhere else as the decent music of the world. Is that one of her functions in the book?

Potok

That's one of her functions in the book, yes.

Glazer

Could you talk a little bit about as where you see the decent music in the world, elsewhere in this very moving book?

Potok

I see the decent music of the world inside the strings of that harp. And it is what each one of us interprets those strings to be that forms the decent music of the world.

Glazer

Can we talk a little bit about these two views of history that Benjamin Walter and his colleague talk about? There's Benjamin looking for connections and trying to understand patterns and there is his colleague who talks about the chaos theory of history, chance chance chance. Life connects us, he says, not artifice. Could you talk a little bit about what that conflict between the two of them means to you and how you see it worked out in the book?

Potok

I don't see how it can be worked out in the book in any positive or negative way. For Benjamin Walter the thing is, it's a knockout blow against the possibility of chance and so on and so forth, he will always look for connections. The other one, he will never look for connections. For him, history is one fact based on another, and whatever happens, happens, and that's the way it is. And so it's not possible for him to look at history and see one thing following another. Whereas for Benjamin Walter there is always the possibility of one fact following another.

Glazer

And do you think it is any elusive search and endlessly elusive search for Benjamin?

Potok

An absolutely elusive connection and disconnection.

Glazer

Do you think stories are the only way we can create connections?

Potok

Stories are the only way of connecting history is by connecting stories.

Glazer

Can we go back to talking about the Devita again, because she really interests me. As she moves from the beginning from being this young, sad Devita to this elusive doll who keeps changing form in the last of the stories, could you help me understand her a little more, I'm trying to understand why she is so elusive at the end, and she sort of disappears into this ID and I'm wondering how you saw her and help me understand what is going on with her a little more.

Potok

Well she disappears in the end because she is all story. She is very much present in the beginning because she is anything but what she is. In between is what occurs when she transfers from story to non-story and so on and so forth. And that in-between I am beginning to explore now. It is somewhere between the age of 15 I guess and 35-40 when she really forms up and that's the important part of her life and that's the part I am exploring now.

Glazer

You mean in something you are working on now?

Potok

Yes, now and later on.

Glazer

How interesting. Is the work in progress focused on her?

Potok

No. The work in progress is focused on _____ and I'm think of Devita again.