

Chaim Potok: Confrontation of Ideas Is Confrontation of Cultures

By John R. Wiggins

Chaim Potok, novelist and historian, discussed diminishing cultural isolation and the clash of cultures at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Bangor on Sunday evening.

"Two hundred years ago, most people on this planet were born, grew up, and died without ever encountering a stranger or a new idea," said Potok, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

"They never traveled more than 25 miles from the point of their birth. In learning cities, there was no perceptible contact with anyone outside your own quarter or neighborhood. No one understood the idea of a stranger except aristocrats, clergymen, the military, wandering merchants, or beggars or thieves on the run. Today everyone grows up inside a small and particular world, and we learn the value system of that small world of family, neighborhood, or small town. We learn from birth what is important to the people raising us. But there are elements from outside that little world that impinge upon us. Our mother and father tell us how to handle a given situation. Television tells us another way to handle it. We notice that a neighbor might handle it in a different way."

We are, he said, inundated by values different from those we learned in the immediate little world we were born in.

"This is true of every individual in western civilization and its cultural satellites. You grow up inside one tight little world, and you learn the value systems of that world, but early on you experience value systems from outside your world. We react to outside values in a variety of ways. The Jew in the ghetto had a closed cultural experience. Within a century, within a single generation, that Jew went from ghetto to suburb, from a closed world to the world we all know today."

Speaking of his own career, Potok said that writing stories occupies no position of significance in Jewish values. "Of all the things I might have done with my life, writing stories is somewhere in the basement. Scholarship is the real

measure of accomplishment by Jewish tradition."

His mother, a sophisticated Viennese, assured him that she was proud of him when his first popular book came out. She was in Florida at the time, sitting in a beach chair, and when purchasers of his book came to her holding copies in hand, she grandly signed them "Molly Potok, mother of the author." However, when at age 15 he told her that he planned to spend his life writing stories, she acidly replied, "how very nice. And you'll be a brain surgeon on the side?"

"How can someone take up a vocation that tradition regards as a frivolity?" he exclaimed, expressing the orthodox view of his choice.

Potok recalled the time, at age 15, when he knew the time had come to take a crack at reading a difficult contemporary adult novel. He went to the library and took out Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. The librarian warned him not to take it out unless he were willing to invest the time and effort to get through the first 75 or 100 pages. "She knew that it was, for me, an intergalactic leap in literature."

He described the book as being about an upper class English family in the decade before World War II. "I attended a Jewish parochial high school. For me it was school, supper, study, and sleep, year after year. You can be sure I knew a great deal about upper class English Catholics. I am grateful to that librarian. I did stick with that book, and after page 75 or 78 I began to understand the world described in that book, a world I had known nothing about."

A schoolboy whose curriculum was chiefly the Talmud, he began to get involved in the characters of the novel and their conflicts of religion and class.

"I grieved when I finished it. I grieved because the characters and their world were gone. The vocabulary is astonishing. It is a story that fuses words and imagination, a world that becomes more real to the reader than his real life. Until then I always wanted the language in a book to disappear so that I could



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN R. WIGGINS

Chaim Potok

look directly into the story. For the first time in my life, I was inside the people, inside their thoughts, because of the cadence of the language, the rhythm of the words, the nuances. Story, content, and form fused together to create a whole I had never experienced before. That was the beginning of my strange commitment to write stories. I don't understand it to this day. The why of it I leave to psychiatrists, who also need to earn a living.

"I began to read, and I began to write. One afternoon, when we were

filing out of the Talmud class, a teacher said, "What's this I hear? You want to be a writer?" He was horrified. He believed in tradition: The Bible and the Talmud were everything. Everyone knew that you only had social studies in the afternoon so the school could get licensed by New York. The idea of studying social sciences was appalling. I had to add to that by wanting to write stories! More to the point, he was Eastern European descent, and I sensed that I was making contact with the great civilization that was western humanism, western socialism, modernism, or post-modernism

all that came in the wake of the wave of enlightenment of the 1700's and 1800's. We are all part of that civilization. We participate in it. We create it. We are the entrepreneurs, the physicians, the teachers, the students, the clergymen who make it up. That civilization gave us the Constitution, all of western civilization. To my Talmud teacher, any contact with it was antithetical to Jewish tradition, especially any contact with the literature of that civilization. As it turned out, he was right, absolutely right. He sensed something about the nature of literature that I was unable to perceive at that period of my life.

"There is no secret in becoming a writer. You read and you write, and then you read and you write. You go through a long tunnel of apprenticeship without knowing if there is an end to it. You send stories out to magazines. Some come back. You read and you write as the years go by. You discover you have entered a tradition called modern literature.

"In England the tradition is 300 years old, beginning with Richardson, who wrote novels in letter form. Fundamental to that tradition is a certain way of looking at the world, the stance of the iconoclast, of the rebel. Someone who grew up in a small world, who inherited the values of the past, must learn to sense the game that people play, the masks people wear, the hypocrisy that basically is a defense in a tough world. If the games, the masks, and the hypocrisy become intolerable, he can do one of three things. He can break with his own world and never return to it. He can leave it and be unsure of himself and be filled with self-doubt and anguish forever. Or he can break with it and return to it, and be back with it again and live in tension and uncertainty and anguish. Or he can say, 'I quit the fight!' and join that other world, and maybe he will be filled with uncertainty and self-doubt and anguish.

"For 300 years, on our side of the planet, the individual has been using folk tales. Through the tale, the story is one way we can speculate and construct the world using words and imagination. We make imaginative models and communicate our thoughts through them. For 300 years

the individual has been used to communicating with other individuals in the small world he was born into."

Citing some of the great stories of our time, he mentioned *Moby-Dick* by Finn. "Only two people understood it: Mark Twain (and I'm not sure about him) and that librarian in Concord who banned it from her library."

Polarization, the tension of opposites between individuals and their inherited values, runs through modern literature, "the river from which I drank deeply."

In France, Flaubert articulated the tension. "In the swamps of turn of the century Dublin, it was James Joyce.

Core to core cultural confrontation, he said, drove men like Voltaire, Darwin, Einstein, Kafka, and Picasso. "No matter what small particular world you were born in, sooner or later you encounter one aspect of another world."

"A culture is a very strange and mystic creation. We don't know how it comes into existence. Long before writing began, culture developed wherever people found themselves together on an island, on a mountain, in a valley, on a desert. They came up with a collective response to fear in the morning questions, questions like 'What am I doing here? What is this really all about? Does

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Stclair Lewis exposed the vacuity of small town prairie life. ... Nothing is sacred to the novelist. Nothing so sacrosanct it can't be poked into and opened up by the pen of an author. Our literature has moved from the drawing room to the dining room to the kitchen to the bedroom to the bathroom. We are not a jigsawed species, and a serious novelist shows a not-so-pleasant side of ourselves."

Potok said that when you grow up in a tradition that is 1,000 years old, things are sacred. "Your parents lived the life they taught you. Chances are you will come out of your teens understanding your traditions, understanding the human experience and seeing the world through that special vision. If, at the same time, you are studying literature, you will discover by the age of 18 or 21 that you have become a battleground for the contradiction of ideas."

"Literature is a fundamental endeavor of western man. The confrontation of ideas is the confrontation of cultures."

anything in life really mean anything? Who cares?"

"Culture is a hard response to those questions from an aggregate of our species. When one set of responses crashes against another, often enormous tensions are generated. We perhaps rethink our responses. Sometimes you turn your back on a new idea. Sometimes it pulls you, even paralyzes you. Sometimes one can't obliterate the other, and music is made or a great book is written. When core cultures meet in confrontation, a gift has been given to us, and we are a step further away from the dark magic of our beginnings."

The university, he said, is the greenhouse of western civilization. It is there that peripheral culture will yield under pressure from core culture, while the core is not really altered by the peripheral. Confrontation can be between core and core, core and periphery, periphery and core, or periphery and periphery. In the latter, which is a confrontation of ignorance, the yield is ugliness.

To study a confrontation of peripheral culture, he said, one can read the early works of Philip Roth, John Updike, and Hemingway. For core to core confrontation, read Joyce and Mann. For peripheral-core confrontation, read Saul Bellow.

This confrontation, he said, is the inevitable drama we are all involved in today.