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By Clare Hurley and Clara Weiss
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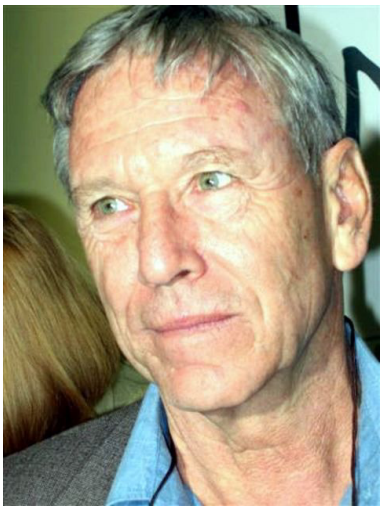
Israeli writer Amos Oz (1939-2018): A critical appreciation

Amos Oz, one of Israel's most significant literary and intellectual figures, died of cancer this past December 2018 at the age of 79. Oz published 40 books of fiction, collections of essays, speeches and letters that have been translated into 45 languages, including Esperanto. *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2002), the memoir of his family's experience in the final years of British-Mandate Palestine through the establishment of the state of Israel, was made into a film directed by and starring Natalie Portman in 2016.



Amos Oz in 2005 (Photo credit-Mariusz Kubik)

Oz's personal history, literary works and political views speak to many of the major historical issues of the 20th century that confront the working class, not just in Israel-Palestine but internationally. As such, they merit examination.

Born in 1939 in British-Mandate Palestine, Oz was the only child of Yehuda Arieh Klausner and Fania Musman, Lithuanian and Ukrainian-Russian Jews, respectively. Together with their parents and siblings, they had sought refuge in Palestine in the early 1930s.

Oz was born, as described in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, into a world of cramped, book-filled apartments, where the lights were kept dim and the heaters low to save electricity. Traditional, rather than Orthodox Jews, they maintained some vestiges of religious observance, "just to be on the safe side, you never know." They were "petty clerks, small retailers, bank tellers, cinema ticket sellers, school teachers, dispensers of private lessons, or dentists. ... They all had very definite views about the British Mandate, the future of Zionism, the working class, the cultural life of the land, Dühring's attack on Marx, the novels of Knut Hamsun, the Arab question, and women's rights. ..."—all of which they debated at length over Russian tea.

His family was acquainted with and related to many of the leading writers and intellectuals in Jewish-Yiddish and Zionist culture of the time. Oz's father, Yehuda Arieh Klausner, was the nephew of Dr. Joseph Klausner, a renowned scholar specializing in the life of Jesus, who emigrated to Palestine from Odessa in 1919. After losing the first Israeli presidential election in 1949 to his friend Chaim Weizmann, Klausner became the chair of Hebrew literature at newly founded Hebrew University. To avoid the appearance of nepotism, Klausner hindered more than helped his bookish nephew, Oz's father, who spent his life as a librarian at the National Library at Mount Scopus.

Through "Uncle Joseph," the young Oz came in contact with preeminent Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky (born Russia 1875—died Jerusalem 1943), as well as Klausner's neighbor and rival, the writer S.Y. Agnon, among many others. Oz's parents also reflected the wide and varied cultural milieu that characterized their generation of secular, middle-class Jews from Eastern Europe. Between them, they read as many as 15 languages and were fluent in four or five.

A kibbutz dining room in 1953

Oz's mother had been educated in Rovno at a Tarbut ("Culture") school, a network of secular Zionist Hebrew schools that flourished between the first and second world wars in Poland and Lithuania. In addition to providing a rigorous education in the classics of Hebrew and European literature, philosophy, science, history and art, Tarbut schools promoted Zionism and emigration to Palestine in response to the anti-Semitic degradation and persecution to which Jews were subject in the former Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire.

The two sides of Oz's family represented the two ideological camps of Zionism that have determined Israeli political developments. On his father's side, the Klausners were adherents of the secular-nationalist Revisionist movement, founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Basing themselves on Biblical interpretations, they claimed all of British Mandatory Palestine as the Jews' rightful homeland. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Revisionist Irgun led by Menachem Begin, which drew inspiration from Mussolini's fascist Italy, used terrorism as a means to drive out the British colonial government. Revisionism subsequently formed the basis of the Likkud party, which is now in power under Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as other far-right parties that advocate the expansion of the settlements and the expulsion of the native Palestinian population to realize the goal of an exclusively Jewish state.

In contrast to the militaristic, right-wing Zionism—which Oz amusingly describes himself as a child emulating in battles between buttons on the living room floor—his maternal grandfather Hertz Musman was "practically a Communist." However, like many Jews sympathetic to Communism, Musman became the target of the anti-Semitism revived by

Stalin as part of his counter-revolutionary program of building “socialism in one county.” Under conditions in which Stalinism was falsely equated with socialism and the program of the Russian Revolution, the Stalinist promotion of anti-Semitism contributed to the rise of Zionism and the turn away of a layer of the Jewish intelligentsia and working class from the perspective of Marxism and socialist revolution.

Both ideological camps that dominated the Zionist movement, the revisionist wing and Labor Zionism, explicitly rejected a fight against anti-Semitism and a socialist perspective and program that fought for the unity of Arab and Jewish workers and toilers. They supported the establishment of a capitalist homeland for the Jews in Palestine that would necessitate the expulsion and subjugation of its non-Jewish inhabitants. The Zionist project was thus entirely dependent on reactionary class forces, which in the final analysis determined the trajectory of all the diverse political currents that embraced Zionism.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky

In *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, and some of his other works, Oz vividly describes a milieu and atmosphere permeated as much with high culture, warmth and humor, as it is with political despair and disorientation. The years were overshadowed by the Second World War, with news of the unfolding Nazi genocide of European Jewry reaching those who had escaped to Palestine.

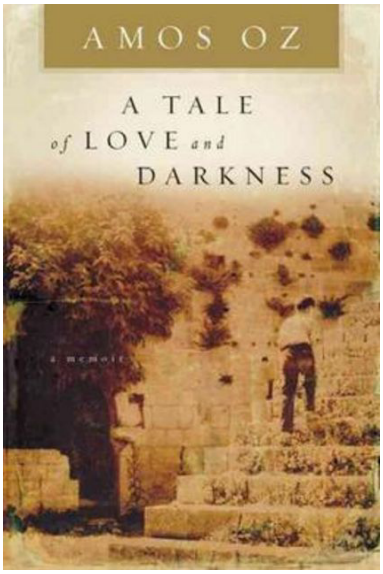
Surviving genocide with the knowledge that so many others had perished created a sense of guilt and foreboding. These enormous political and social tensions were compounded by the character of the Zionist occupation itself and the hostility of the surrounding Arab

population that erupted in bloody revolts in 1933-1936. Economic privation intensified with the siege of Jerusalem during the War of 1948.

Oz's mother suffered from severe depression and committed suicide when Oz was 13 in 1952. In interviews, Oz later pointed out that his mother had been profoundly unhappy in the newly founded state of Israel, yearning for a Europe that had rejected her and to which she would never be able to return. After his mother's suicide, Oz left Jerusalem to join Kibbutz Hulda where he spent the next 40 years of his life. Changing his name to Oz (Hebrew for strength), he rejected the right-wing Revisionism of the Klausners and moved to the far left of Labor Zionism, which politically dominated the first 50 years of the Israeli state.

First established in 1909 by early Zionist "pioneers," these communal settlements, which included kibbutz Hulda, were originally the only way to survive in the harsh agrarian economy of Ottoman-era Palestine. Following World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the British encouraged Jewish immigration and a third wave of Jews settled in British Mandatory Palestine, the majority of them from Eastern Europe.

In the 1920s, the Histadrut (the trade union federation) bought up land and set up factories and their own collective farms or kibbutzim with land purchased or otherwise obtained from often absentee Arab landowners under the slogan of "the conquest of the land," removing the Palestinian workers and villagers to create a Jewish working class and establish industries and production.



A Tale of Love and Darkness

In the late 1930s, when it seemed likely that Palestine would be divided between the Arabs and the Jews, other kibbutzim were established in outlying areas to ensure the land would be incorporated into a future Jewish state. Thus, the number of "kibbutzniks" grew from 700 people in 1922 to 65,000 by the early 1950s, when Oz joined Kibbutz Hulda, peaking in 1989 at 129,000, though it has declined steadily since then. In the early state of Israel, the kibbutzim were falsely glorified as a form of communism within the Jewish state.

Oz's stories and novels of kibbutz life, such as *A Perfect Peace* (1982) and *Between Friends* (2012), movingly capture some of the contradictions inherent in the kibbutz movement, and vividly describe early Israeli society. The idealism and commitment of an earlier generation of kibbutzniks, including an anarchist Holocaust survivor and his left-wing Zionist school teacher whom he describes in *Between Friends*, is contrasted with subsequent generations who struggle with the narrowness of kibbutz life, a sense of not living up to the expectations of their elders and an awareness—reinforced by the remains of abandoned Arab villages standing amidst the kibbutz fields—that their occupation of the land is unjust.

Oz's writing was at its best when it was autobiographical and concerned with a realistic depiction of his own experiences and Israeli society. He consciously placed himself in the tradition of the finest in Russian realism, above all the works of Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov. He also owed a major debt to American Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (short story cycle, 1919) ,among other formative influences. His autobiography *Tales of Love and Darkness* has justly been his most celebrated and widely read work.

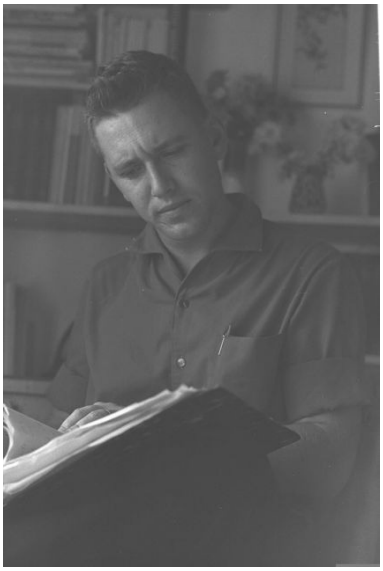
His writings leave an indelible impact through vivid descriptions and characters drawn with empathy and humor. Oz's writing was imbued with an acute awareness of the tragedy of the Jewish people, the experience of the Holocaust and how it has been refracted in the life and thought of people living in Israel today, as well as sympathy for the oppressed Palestinians. His humanism and readiness to face social and political truth made Oz stand out among Israeli writers, some of whom were plunged into despair, misanthropy or bitterness by the historical tragedies of the Second World War and Israel's never-ending wars themselves, while others turned in a more mystical-literary direction.

Along with his autobiographical writings and short stories, a number of his political essays provide important insights into Israeli society. They regularly appeared in *Ha'aretz,* the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and other media outlets and were published in several collections, notably *Israel, Palestine and Peace: Essays* (1995)

covering the period 1974-1994 and more recently *How to Cure a Fanatic* (2006). *In the Land of Israel* (1983, republished 1993) puts together Oz's conversations with often highly opinionated Israelis—workers, soldiers, aging pioneers, religious zealots, new immigrants, Palestinian youth—interviewed on a trip around Israel in 1982.

Perhaps Oz's most admirable political action remains his participation in the project to record his own and fellow soldiers' experiences in the Six Day War in 1967 during which Oz served his obligatory military service. In the days immediately following the war, Oz gathered with fellow kibbutzniks to record their experiences of combat. Far from the heroic victors portrayed in Israeli propaganda films, many felt shame and disgust at their actions, which some recognized amounted to war crimes. Especially for those like Oz, whose own parents had been refugees from the Holocaust, the forcible displacement of Palestinian civilians was abhorrent.

A portion of the interviews were published in a book so widely read the government censored the recordings for fear that the foundational myths of the Israeli state would be broadly repudiated. Only in 2016 were they released as a film, *Censored Voices*, directed by Mor Loushy, in which Oz and others react 50 years later to the voices of their younger selves in the original recordings.



Amos Oz in 1965

"I have only ugly experiences, I did nothing heroic. I did not want to take part in this war at all. ... What broke us was seeing the 'enemy.' When you come in contact with people, it's awful—it humiliates them and humiliates you. Zionism is a tragedy from the start if our liberation involves expelling other people. ... I'm becoming less Zionist...whoever

speaks that way is called a 'traitor.' ... As long as we occupy another people, we are not free." Though one man in the film says that he has become more right-wing with the passage of time, another concludes "we spoke the truth."

Similar to the documentary ***Winter Soldier***, originally produced in 1972 and only re-released in 2015, in which American GIs denounced the atrocities of the Vietnam War, Oz and his compatriots spoke out as part of a generation whose experiences in the service of imperialism left them deeply hostile to the policies of war and militarism of their governments.

Though acutely aware of the historical tragedy of the Palestinian and the Jewish people, Oz was never able to grasp its historical roots and never broke from Zionism and the deeply ingrained nationalist conception that a Jewish state was the only possible refuge for the Jews.

He was among the most prominent left-Zionist intellectuals who dominated the Israeli Peace Now movement, which called for a "two-state solution," one Palestinian and one Israeli-Jewish. The logic of the two-state solution was that each state would be ethnically homogeneous: As few Palestinians as possible would remain in Israel, and as few Israelis as possible would be subject to Palestinian rule—a clear separation of the two peoples.

In 1967, Oz wrote, "This land is our land. It is also their land. Right conflicts with right. 'To be a free people in our own land' is a right that is valid either universally or not at all," Oz wrote in "The Meaning of Homeland" from *Under This Blazing Light* (1967). Based on this perspective, Oz advocated dialogue with bourgeois nationalist leader Yassir Arafat and the PLO and opposed the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, with a return to the pre-1967 borders as outlined in the Oslo Accords signed 1993 and 1995 at Camp David.

Oz's political trajectory over the decades by and large followed the rightward trajectory of both Peace Now and the peace movement generation internationally. In 1982, he opposed the war in Lebanon, and in the 1990s left the Labor Party in favor of Meretz, the nominally farther "left" party of the Israeli Greens. In October 2000, at the start of the second Palestinian intifada, Oz proclaimed that the Jews and Palestinians "cannot live together as one happy family because they are not one. The only thing to do is to mark a partition somewhere across the country roughly in accordance with the demographic realities."

In 2005, Oz supported Ariel Sharon's unilateral pullout from Gaza, and in the following year supported the second war on Lebanon in 2006 as well as the assault on Gaza on the grounds of "self-defense" against Hezbollah and Hamas, respectively. Oz likewise urged the Israeli "peace movement" to support the 2008-2009 military operation in Gaza, again blaming Hamas for instigating the conflict by launching rockets at Israel from the beleaguered and impoverished open-air prison camp.

While his political limitations find a reflection in some of his weaker novels such as *Judas*, his major writings, and above all his autobiography, stand out as major literary documents on the history and society of Israel and deserve to be read widely.

24 May 2019