

**Preisrede von Amos Oz  
anlässlich der Verleihung des  
Bruno-Kreisky-Preises für das politische Buch 2004**

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**Information**

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Mr Swoboda and Members of the Jury, Excellencies, friends:  
Good evening, Shalom to all of you.

It's a very special honour for a member of the Israeli Peace Movement to be a recipient of the Bruno Kreisky Award. I regard Bruno Kreisky as a visionary, although, like many visionaries, he was not always an easy man, and very often not a tactful man, but this is typical of many people of vision.

Back in the late 1960ies and the early 1970ies the number of people who believed in an Israeli-Palestinian compromise, in a two-state-solution, in a partition of the beloved homeland into two national homelands, was so small in Israel and even smaller in Palestine that we could practically conduct our national peace assemblies inside a public telephone box. It is against this background that I want to emphasize the vision of Bruno Kreisky, who was probably the first world-statesman to have adopted, promoted and enhanced the idea of a painful compromise between Israelis and Palestinians and of a two-state-solution. Bruno Kreisky was also a visionary as a social democrat. He had not just the ideas in him, but the kind of sensibilities which represent that genuine tradition of social democracy to me. Many years ago, in the 50ies, one of Israel's early social democratic leaders, Zalman Aranne, once said very angrily, "Don't you ever say to me that 6.5% unemployment is not a reason to worry, it's normal, in fact it's quite good. Don't ever say this to me, because every unemployed person is 100% unemployed." And Bruno Kreisky had this sensibility in him, which is why I am very emotional to be the co-recipient of the Bruno Kreisky Award.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I agree completely with what Kathrin Röggla just said about everything being political. Every novel, every legend, every poem, every human creation is political in the broad sense of the word, and yet, when I say every creation is political, I draw the line – and I want to draw it very sharply – between a work with political significance and a manifesto. I have done both in my life, I have written many manifestoes, articles, essays, statements, but I have never written a novel or a story in order to tell my government what to do, or in order to tell my people how to vote, or in order to tell my readers what political attitude they should have. This I do in my articles and I draw a very clear line between the two.

Each time I have the urge in me to tell my government to please go to hell, I write an article and I say, "Dear government, please go to hell!" They read my articles and for some reason they don't go to hell. Each time I want to tell my people, "Please reconsider, please rethink what you have been doing for many years", I write an essay or an article or I sign a petition or I make an appearance on television, I say, "Please reconsider!" I have never written, and I think I will never write a story or a novel in order to simply make people change their political attitudes.

In any case, people changing their political minds, people changing their minds on anything at all, is a very mysterious phenomenon, in fact very hard to measure and very hard to explain. We all know, because it has happened to every one of us, how sometimes in a restaurant, when we order fish, even before the waiter has walked three steps away we call him back and we say, "No, you know what, I prefer to have the chicken." God knows what might have gone through our minds with this little change of mind. I don't know how it is in Austria, in Israel I hardly ever met a person who said to me, "You know, I read your articles and I changed my mind!" Even if people change their minds, especially men (women are not as bad), they will never admit it. They say, "Well, I'm saying now what I said five years ago and ten years ago, you just misunderstood me, I haven't changed my mind, I have always said the same

thing." This has to do with the human comedy and, yes, this human comedy is the subject matter of my literary work.

I have mentioned a few times in the past that I don't compose on the word-processor. I have some sensual obsession with pen and paper, but on my desk in Arad in Israel I have two pens, not one. Very simple ball-pens, very inexpensive, but in two different colours: one is black and one is blue. One is for writing stories, the other one for telling the government to go to hell, because I think I don't want to mix the two. I don't want to turn my tales into manifestoes, into exclamation marks. In other words, each time I find that I agree with myself 100% and without reservations, I write an article. But in those cases when I hear more than just one voice inside me, when I develop a certain ambivalence or when I am convinced that I am right, but I can very strongly see the persuasiveness of arguments of people who don't agree with me, moreover when I can share the emotions of people whose politics are very far from mine, that's when I know that I am pregnant with a story or a novel and not with an article and that's when I know I am going to use the second kind of pen.

So I humbly accept the marvellous arguments of the Jury and the Kreisky Prize for Political Literature, because "A Tale of Love and Darkness" is political in the broad and not in the narrow sense of the word. It's not a manifesto, it is a family tale soaked with politics and history, because our lives in the Middle East, the lives of Jews and Arabs, are soaked with history and politics. I nearly said poisoned with an overdose of Israelian politics. For us in the Middle East, Jews and Arabs, history and politics is not something that happens on the television screen across the room. It penetrates the most intimate tissues of our lives. It shaped our destiny in a very overwhelming way.

Ladies and Gentlemen, look at the fact that I am addressing you in English, not in German. This is a direct result of a political, historical catastrophe in my family history. Both my parents could speak fluent German and could read German, although they were of an East European extraction, but they were at home in German and in many other languages. Now, my elder daughter, Fania, who is a scholar, knows German very well. She speaks, she reads German. I am the lost generation in between, because my parents did not want me to have any European language. My father and my mother used to chat between themselves in Polish and Russian, for me not to understand, and 95% of the time they wanted me not to understand what they were saying, because they were talking about historical catastrophes, because they were talking about things which were no subject matter for a little boy. So they chatted in Russian and Polish, they read German, French and English for culture. I think they may have dreamt their dreams in Yiddish, but me they insisted on teaching only Hebrew, not for chauvinism, not for some kind of Zionist militancy, but for my own safety. Back in the 1940ies, when I was a kid, my parents genuinely feared that if I had even one European language, one of the many languages they had, I would eventually be seduced by the deadly charms of Europe, I would go to Europe and catch my death. So they stopped me from learning their languages for my own safety. As a result, the very first words I could express in a European language, in English, except for yes and no, were the English words "British go home", which is what we little kids in Jerusalem used to shout in 1946/47 as we were throwing stones at the British patrols in Jerusalem in what must have been the very first Intifada in the history of Jerusalem, the Jewish Intifada against the British administration, speaking about ironies of history.

Yes, my parents, as Mr. Swoboda mentioned, were devoted Europeans, so were my grandparents. They were Europeans at a time when no one else regarded themselves as Europeans. Everyone else was an Italian patriot, or a German patriot, or a Lithuanian patriot. My father used to joke very bitterly, saying that in Czechoslovakia

there are three nationalities: Czechs, Slovaks and Czechoslovaks, which are ourselves, the Jews. In Yugoslavia, nine nationalities: Serbs and Croats and Montenegrins and Slovenians, but there are also genuine Yugoslavs: ourselves, the Jews. Even in Stalin's Soviet Union there were 62 different nationalities if I am not mistaken, but there was also a Soviet nation: ourselves, the Jews. I was too young to grasp the bitter irony, the pain, the bleeding injury that lay behind my father's joke. Oh yes, they loved Europe, they loved Europe in a painful way, they loved European history, they loved European literature in various languages, they loved European landscapes, they loved European heritage and atmosphere, they loved above all the music, the one thing they could really take with them wherever they travelled.

I was born in an apartment which was barely bigger than this little stage here and yet it was filled with books in 16 languages and between the books there was barely a space for two inexpensive landscape-reproductions, cheap reproductions. In one landscape there was a river with bridges and a forest, in the other one snow-capped mountains, and both betrayed their censored longings for Europe, their pain of having been kicked out of Europe. Now, this is hard to grasp today when everyone is a European and those who are not yet European are standing in line to become Europeans. In a very few years Turkey will be Europe and then perhaps Iraq and Afghanistan will become Europe, I don't know. But in those days my family, my ancestors were labelled cosmopolitans, parasites, rootless intellectuals for being devoted Europeans and - mind you - those pejoratives were the shared vocabulary of Nazism and Communism. I am the child of parasites, rootless intellectuals and cosmopolitans, lovers of Europe.

Yes, it's a story of a disappointed love-affair, of an unrequited love, of a one-sided love. It's a story of an injury, a censored injury. You don't normally share such a story with your child, the story about a beloved one who dumped you before this child was born. But as a child I could sense it in the air. Not only in the two inexpensive landscapes on the wall, I could sense it in the languages in the books, in casual sentences. I remember for example my father saying to me on a certain occasion, "One day, my boy, not in our lifetime, but in your lifetime, this Jerusalem of ours will develop, will evolve and become a real city." I had no idea what he was talking about, for me Jerusalem was the only real city, even Tel Aviv was a legend. But today I understand that when my parents spoke of a real city, they meant a city with a river in the middle, and bridges across the river, and surrounded by forests.

You know what, if the Viennese mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, would have stayed around for another ten years, Jerusalem would have had a river and bridges, because he came from the same longings, from the same dream, from the same aspirations, from the same disappointed, unrequited love. To this very day, when my little grandchildren - and all Israeli children - are asked to sketch a house, without exception they always sketch a little house with a door and two windows, a red tiled roof and a smoking chimney. They have not seen the smoking chimneys in Israel, it's not our landscape. And those "gemuetlich" houses with red roofs are not "Israelis" either, and my grandchildren were born in Israel and their parents, my children, were born in Israel, and their grandparents, me and my wife, were born in Israel. It's the pain and the longings of their great grandparents, my parents, which manifest themselves in the sketches of my kids, so deep is the pain and the injury.

Yes, they wanted to become Europeans, desperately so, and this is one of the major themes in my "Tale of Love and Darkness". When anti-Semitism in Poland became unbearable in the early 1930ies, my paternal grandfather, Alexander, decided he wanted to become French and he applied for a French citizenship. They said, "No thanks, we have enough like you, we don't need more of you." He tried to become

British, he tried to become Scandinavian, everybody said "No". He tried to become American. They said, "You have to wait 17 years." My family had no 17 years to wait in the Europe of 1931. Now I am telling you a really surreal detail: My grandfather was even mad enough to apply for a German citizenship for himself and for his family, barely 18 months before Hitler came to power in Germany, and I am deeply grateful to the Germans for turning him down or else I would not be here today. So very sadly he and his family turned to Jerusalem and decided to go to Israel. You know what they were: they were the people who were thrown off the deck of the Titanic. Not at the time of the collision, when the "Titanic Europe" sank in the ocean, no, they were thrown into the freezing dark ocean while the whole of the Titanic was still dining and wining and dancing and having that one big ball and all the decks were lit and celebrating. 1931/32/33, they were thrown out of the Titanic into the cold dark ocean while the Titanic was flooded with music, partly composed by my ancestors, dining to a cultural menu, partly created by my ancestors, and they were lucky to be thrown off the decks of the Titanic, because if they would not have been violently thrown out in the 1930ies, they would have been murdered in the 1940ies.

So when people present the question today "Was Israel a good idea or a bad idea, was it a just solution or an unjust solution - in retrospective, bearing in mind that terrible injustice inflicted upon the Palestinians, bearing in mind the tragedy of war and bloodshed in the Middle East - was it a good idea?" I think the question is at best an ignorant question. It's not as if in the early 1930's my family went to a travel-agency and inquired about a holiday resort and took the wrong decision to go to Jerusalem, they should have gone to the French Riviera. Nobody wanted them, nowhere, no place in the world. The government of Canada, for example, declared in those years, when Jews were persecuted in many parts of Europe in the wake of Nazi-Germany, that they didn't want any further Jewish immigration, because "none was too many". The leaders of Australia for their part had a more original attitude. They said, "We think anti-Semitism is horrible, we despise anti-Semitism and therefore we will not let Jewish immigrants into our country, because we do not want to import anti-Semitism". Yes, Jerusalem was a lifeboat for about half a million Jews, European Jews, Balkan Jews. Later on it became the lifeboat for one million Jews who were kicked out brutally from the Arab countries, from Iraq, from North Africa, from Egypt, from Syria, from Yemen, from many Middle Eastern countries. Israel is a refugee camp, Palestine is a refugee camp. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is a conflict between two refugee camps and, as Mr. Swoboda quoted in his arguments, it's a tragic conflict between two former victims of Europe. The Palestinians and the other Arabs were victims of Europe through colonialism, imperialism, exploitation and humiliation. The Jews were the victims of Europe through persecution, discrimination and ultimately systematic mass-murder on an unprecedented scale.

Now, some sentimental people assume that victims unite, they become brothers, especially victims of the same oppressor. They march together to the barricades, as it is in Bertold Brecht, for example. All the victims unite, they develop a sense of solidarity between them and they march together to the barricades, chanting the songs of Bertold Brecht. In real life, as I am sure some of you know, some of the worst and most terrible conflicts are precisely the conflicts between two victims of the same oppressor. Two children of the same cruel, violent parent do not necessarily love one another, no, very often they see in one another the image of the cruel parent, which is very much the case between Israelis and Arabs, between Jews and Arabs. Very often, when the Arabs look at us Israelis, they don't see us as what we really are: a bunch of half hysterical refugees and survivors, who fled by the skin of their teeth from Europe and from the Arab countries. No, they see an arrogant, oppressive, sophisticated and heartless colonial power. When we Israeli Jews look at the Arabs, we don't see them

as what they really are: fellow-victims, a defeated civilisation. No, Israeli Jews look at the Arabs and see Nazis, they see Pogrom-makers, they see anti-Semites who grew moustaches and got sun-tanned, but they are in the same ancient business of cutting Jewish throats for entertainment. And yet, in spite of this, I may surprise you by telling you that there is no essential misunderstanding between Israeli Jew and Palestinian Arab. Time and again I am getting those wonderful invitations from well-meaning institutions all over Europe to come and spend a relaxed weekend with Palestinian intellectuals, poets, writers, thinkers, so that we get to know one another, we drink coffee together, we discover that no one has horns and no one has tails and we like one another and the trouble will go away. This is based on the common, I am sorry to say, sentimental European assumption that every conflict is essentially no more than a misunderstanding. A little group therapy, a touch of family counselling and everyone will live happily ever after.

It is not that simple, Ladies and Gentlemen. The Palestinian Arabs want the land they call Palestine. They have powerful reasons to want this land, because they have no other homeland in the whole world. Not one country which Palestinian Arabs can successfully call home. Individuals, yes, but not as a nation. The Israeli Jews have no other homeland in the world, individuals yes. Individual Jews found homes in many countries. More or less happily, I don't know, it's a different question. But as a nation there has never been a home for the Jewish people except in the land which we call "the land of Israel". So they have a powerful claim, we have a powerful claim, the land is very small and the result is a painful tragedy, a clash between right and right, a clash between one very powerful claim and another no less powerful claim. Rivers of coffee drunk together cannot disperse the tragedy of two nations claiming the same little land as their one and only homeland rightly, both of them.

What we need right now is not the coffee, we need a liveable compromise. Yes, it is painful, compromises are painful by definition. I have never heard of a happy compromise, it's an axiom. But we need the painful compromise, where Israelis and Palestinians will only get part of what they want. But where Israelis and Palestinians will have equal living conditions. Independence for independence, sovereignty for sovereignty, recognition for recognition, security for security. Palestine next door to Israel, and I'm not talking about a sudden honeymoon, I am talking more about a fair and just divorce. Now this is going to be a funny divorce, because the two divorcing parties are very definitely staying in the same house. No one is moving out. And the house being very small, it will be necessary to decide who gets bedroom A and who gets bedroom B and what about the living-room. And the house being very small, special arrangements will have to be made about kitchen and toilet. Not very nice, but much superior to the state of perpetual war, bloodshed, anger, suppression of the Palestinians by the Israelis and terrorising of both by both. Yes, we need to divide the house into two even smaller apartments. We cannot become one happy family, the Israelis and the Palestinians, because we are not happy and because we are not even family, we are two families. It is very sentimental to expect Israelis and Palestinians to be able to unite over night and become one happy family. No one in their right senses would propose that in the year 1945, immediately at the end of World War II, Germany and Poland should have become one nation. What we need now are two countries, two neighbouring countries, which will eventually develop economic collaboration, a common market. They will learn how to use the kitchen together, by which I mean: share the economy, and that will be the time for both parties to hop over the partition for a cup of coffee and eventually they will even be able not only to have coffee together, but to laugh together about their stupidities in the past. This will be the time for coffee, not now. Now is the time for a fair, painful, workable compromise.

Ladies and Gentlemen, "A Tale of Love and Darkness" is not a representation of the entire Israel. There is no way of writing a biography of a nation and I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing for many reasons, one of them: No single book can contain the entire hard disk of the memories of millions of people. It is a story of one family, one European Jewish family. It cannot and does not claim to represent the story of Middle Eastern Jews who were kicked out of Iraq, or who were expelled from North Africa. It cannot even dream of representing the stories of one million Israeli citizens who are Palestinian Arabs. I am not talking about the Palestinians in the occupied territories. I am talking about Palestinians who are Israeli citizens proper. Who am I to represent their story? I could only create a little disk to retain the memory and the story of my family for future generations.

I wrote "A Tale of Love and Darkness" after many years of anger and frustration and fury and rebellion against my parents' world, against their politics, against the self-righteousness of their rightwing Zionism, against their inability to see the other, against their intellectual tradition. When the anger and the fury were over, I could write "A Tale of Love and Darkness". In fact, I reached the age when I was older than my parents were at the time when they generated the tragedy which ended in the death, in the suicide of my mother and in the decline of my father. Only when I could look at my compassion, some empathy, some irony and above all, a real urge to tell - not to judge, to tell - not to wag my finger, to tell - not to sum up, I wanted to invite the dead, my parents, my grandparents, my whole neighbourhood. I wanted to invite the dead to my home and tell them, "Please sit down, have a coffee and a cake. We need to talk, because we never talked when you were alive, everything was hush, hush. You talked between yourselves in Russian and Polish and never talked to me. Sit down, it's time to talk. I want to listen to you, you have to listen to me, then I want to introduce my wife and my children to you, because you have never met them, they have never met you. It will be good for them to know you and for you to know them. And after that, you dead people, you may have another coffee and go away. You are not staying to live in my house, but you may drop by from time to time and have another coffee and another chat." That was the emotional mood in which I wrote "A Tale of Love and Darkness".

Ultimately, the one thing that may bind together my politics, my literary work, my family-life, is the attitude of compromise. And I know very well that the word "compromise" is regarded as a terrible concept in the eyes of many young idealists. For them compromise is dishonest, compromise is lack of integrity, compromise is opportunistic. Not for me. I believe in compromises as a way of choosing life. I believe in compromises as a way of repelling fanaticism of many forms. I believe in compromises as a way to conduct a family. I have been married to the same woman for more than 45 years now, I know one or two things about compromises, believe me. And when I say "compromise" I don't mean: capitulation, and I don't mean: turn the other cheek, I mean: try to meet the other half way, and the way to meet the other half way is to imagine the other. Put yourself in the other's shoes or under the other's skin, not in order to adopt his or her point of view, not in order to completely identify with the discords of your rival, no: in order to be able - through imagination - to reach a compromise. Believe me, the spirit of imagination and compromise, imagining the other and compromising with the other, will make us not only better political beings, it will even make us better lovers, but this is a subject for another evening or maybe later in the night.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is in the spirit of imagination and compromise, in other words in the spirit of Bruno Kreisky, that I hereby humbly accept this award. Thank you very much.