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THE ETERNAL LIGHT

"A CONVERSATION WITH DR. SOMA MORGENSTERN"

Chapter 1129

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ANNOUNCER: THE ETERNAL LIGHT. The National Broadcasting Company and its independent, affiliated stations present, THE ETERNAL LIGHT a program which comes to you under the auspices of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Today we present "A Conversation with Dr. Soma Morgenstern," distinguished author and philosopher. Talking with the author of The Third Pillar and the trilogy, The Son of the Lost Son, In My Father's Pastures, and The Testament of the Lost Son, is Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Wolfe Kelman.

RABBI WOLFE KELMAN: Dr. Morgenstern, I can't tell you how overjoyed I am that I have this privilege of talking with you and having the audience of THE ETERNAL LIGHT listening in to hear your views about your life, about your books. Dr. Morgenstern is one of the most remarkable living Jewish authors that I have ever known. Born in the last century, a vigorous 80 year-old, born in a little village in part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire which was part of Poland near the city of Tarnapol, you served in the Austrian Army as an officer, then came to Vienna. The capital of the much shrunken Austrian-Hungarian Empire, where after finishing your law studies, you became an important journalist - the Viennese music and drama critic for the Frankfurter Zeitung, which in the twenties and the early part of the thirties, was the outstanding newspaper in Europe if not in the world.

Now, on an assignment for this newspaper, you went to attend the first Congress of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish party called the Agudah. What happened at that Congress that caused you to give up your journalistic career temporarily and devote yourself to writing the great trilogy which you wrote?

DR. SOMA MORGENSTERN: Yes. I was impressed by this kind of Jews, whom I didn't see for a long time.

KELMAN: When had you last seen them?

MORGENSTERN: I last have seen them, not them, I have seen pious Jews, but not of this size.

KELMAN: What kind of world did you grow up in as a child?

MORGENSTERN: I grew up as a child in a Hassidic house. My father was a Hassid.. He would go every year to the Chardkova.

KELMAN: What did he do for a living?

MORGENSTERN: At that time, when I was talking about, he was a bailiff on a farm, on a big farm.

KELMAN: Were there many Jewish farmers in that part of Poland?

MORGENSTERN: Yes. There were many Jewish farmers, and some were landowners, and some who were joined by a Polish landowner, one or two villages, and they paid them rent

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and they were a kind of tenant.

KELMAN: And you left this world, of course...

MORGENSTERN: I left this world in 1904. In 1912, I went to Vienna. And then, my Jewish life was cut off.

KELMAN: You became a cosmopolitan intellectual.

MORGENSTERN: I became a student, and they're not very near to Jews. I went to Yiddish theater...

KELMAN: Was the Yiddish theater performed...

MORGENSTERN: No..All the American styles came there...

KELMAN: I see.

MORGENSTERN: I have seen them all, you know. But - and there was even in, since 1906, 1907, was a new Hebrew school where they learned Ivrit.

KELMAN: But you were not a part of that..

MORGENSTERN: Yes, yes, I was a pupil of the school.

KELMAN: In Vienna.

MORGENSTERN: In Vienna. Yes:.

KELMAN: But then, what happened when war began there?

MORGENSTERN: In 1914, when the war broke out, I escaped to Vienna. But immediately, I was drafted, and they took me to the Army. So from January 1915, I was a soldier until the end of the war.

KELMAN: Where did you serve during World War I?

MORGENSTERN: I served in Hungary and in the parts which are now Rumania.

KELMAN: And after the war, you became a journalist.

MORGENSTERN: After the war, I finished my law studies because I just started it before the war.

KELMAN: Why did you go into law studies? Did you intend to become a lawyer?

MORGENSTERN: No, no, never. I intended to be a judge. But my fatherland was not existent anymore. You know, Austria, the small Austria wouldn't take a Jew.

KELMAN: What was the first piece of journalism published under your name?

MORGENSTERN: The first published was a necrologue for Kafka.

KELMAN: That's like a eulogy, a necrology.

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MORGENSTERN: Yeah, a necrology for Kafka.

KELMAN: For Franz Kafka.

MORGENSTERN: Yeah.

KELMAN: And before that..

MORGENSTERN: Before that, I didn't intend to be a journalist and even considered myself too good to write for the newspapers.

KELMAN: And that was the first time that Kafka was mentioned outside of Prague.

MORGENSTERN: No. When Kafka died, he was so little known that only three papers reacted to that. One was written by Max Bode who was the friend of his life, as you know. One was written by a journalist, Anton Kuh who was a friend of Kafka. And I was the third, who wrote in *Berliner Tag Blatn*.

KELMAN: Which was the most widely circulated paper..

MORGENSTERN: Yeah, second only to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Nobody knew me, but then I wrote it in longhand, and I was very cautious with my first name, because usually it came out *Sonya*. So I wrote *S. Morgenstern*, and it came out as a *G. Morgenstern*, which didn't bother me, because I hadn't and ambition to make it a career.

KELMAN: But you did become a very distinguished journalist.

MORGENSTERN: I later became a journalist, and I decided in 1924 to go to Berlin, because in Vienna, it was a very hard terrain for young people. Everybody was sitting on his chair, old, Jewish, and it was a very, very, very close situation. So I went to Berlin where it was easier to make a career as a journalist.

KELMAN: You gave up your journalistic career, and you wrote a trilogy of very remarkable novels. The Son of the Lost Son, In My Father's Pastures, and The Testament of a Lost Son. And all three really deal with one basic theme, the returning son, the returning Jewish son. If I'm not mistaken, Soma, that was the first time that that theme was dealt with in Jewish literature.

MORGENSTERN: I don't see any other in Jewish literature..

KELMAN: Now, what made you want to write about this theme of the cosmopolitan intellectual who returns to rediscover his Jewish tradition.

MORGENSTERN: The real reason was the fullness of my life was Jewishness, Judaism,

KELMAN: And you weren't trying to suppress it.

MORGENSTERN: Not only trying not to suppress it..

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It was the only possibility for me was to be sincere. I decided I will write about my element.

KELMAN: The novels first appeared in German; they were later translated into English. When they first appeared, how were they received?

MORGENSTERN: In Germany, it was, it appeared in 1935. The Jewish publisher was a great publisher, but at the time that they got my manuscript, and my manuscript was sent to him by Stefan Zweig, who read the manuscript and he said, it's a great epic novel, it's a masterpiece, and it's going to be the classic novel of the Jewish nation.

KELMAN: I agree with Stefan Zweig.

MORGENSTERN: I sometimes agree, too. So this man was a Reiss.

KELMAN: Eric Reiss?

MORGENSTERN: Eric Reiss. At that time 1935, he was allowed, to publish books.

KELMAN: Hitler was already in power then.

MORGENSTERN: Of course. He was two years already in power. It was called Jewish culture. It was allowed. They were forbidden to sell my novel to Christians, only to Jews. As it turned out it was the last financial success of Reiss.

KELMAN: Now, how did Jewish readers in Germany and in other parts of the world receive it then?

MORGENSTERN: I will tell you. In Germany, they received it wonderfully. In Austria, too. But the amazing thing is that I wanted to publish this book with publishers who emigrated too. There are two Jews who in Amsterdam met two publishers, for the immigrants. They told me, my book is too Jewish for the immigrants, but in Germany, certainly Jews will read the book with pleasure. I had great success in Germany in 1935 with a Jewish book.

KELMAN: Now, this theme of the returning son is now much more popular. Do you feel today in the general atmosphere in which we live there's a greater interest of people who have been taken away from their Jewish roots or other ethnic roots to return to the roots of their tradition?

MORGENSTERN: When I came here to the United States, I asked my friend Abraham Heschel, what's going on here with the Jews and Judaism?

KELMAN: What year was that?

MORGENSTERN: This was 1941.

KELMAN: After you came here as a refugee.

MORGENSTERN: Yes. He told me, it is a wasteland. It's nothing..it's dying out. Judaism is dying out here.

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KELMAN: What would you say 31 years later?

MORGENSTERN: Thirty years later, I say that there are so many yeshivas here now, that..

KELMAN: High schools of Jewish education..

MORGENSTERN: ..that I am very hopeful..

KELMAN: You are basically an optimist.

MORGENSTERN: I have to be.

KELMAN: You are basically an optimist then.

MORGENSTERN: I am basically an optimist, because there are still pious Jews. Like you, you know, and other people..

KELMAN: There are many fine Jews.

MORGENSTERN: And institutions, and they will save Judaism, because Judaism always was saved by a minority.

KELMAN: And you see such a minority today.

MORGENSTERN: I see a greater minority in the world than ever before.

KELMAN: A growing minority.

MORGENSTERN: Yeah. Yeah.

KELMAN: Now, I know that you don't go after fashion and what is popular. I once heard you tell a story about your meeting with Hugo von Hofmannstahl, who was a very fashionable writer in Vienna, and you had an exchange with him about famous writers and writers which weren't so famous.

MORGENSTERN: Yeah. I will tell you how it happened. I was always interested in theater, because I wanted to become a theater critic. But I didn't have a job yet. And I was entirely unknown except for this about Kafka, Kafka was still alive when this happened.

I attended a performance in the Reithardt Theater. It was a matinee. And there was a very bad play, and I didn't like it, but I was a friend of an actor who had a part in this unfortunate play and went with him to lunch. And in the restaurant, in came Hofmannstahl whom I knew. I was introduced to him as a Dr. Morgenstern, not as a writer.

KELMAN: Hofmannstahl was one of the best-known writers, and he was a great poet, and he was a great person. And he asked this actor whether he could sit at our table and talk with us. So he sat down, and the actor told him that I just tore to pieces this play. So he looked at me. He wasn't a man to embarrass somebody. And he was much older than I, of course. And he said he wanted me to say why. So I repeated what I said to the actor. So he was silent, and then he said, "There should be a rule, if somebody tears to pieces a writer like you

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did now, immediately just to repent and to clean the air, he must name a name whom he admires, let's say unknown, even. Can you tell me someone?" I said, "Yes, immediately. Franz Kafka." So he said, "Who's Franz Kafka?"

KELMAN: Hofmannstahl had never heard of him.

MORGENSTERN: No. At that time he hadn't heard of him. And it is not a marvel, because there were a couple of hundred people in Prague and in the smaller cities in Germany and in Vienna-- a couple of hundred people who knew Franz Kafka. And for these, we have to thank a man who used to have recitals, not musical recitals, but recitals of poetry.

KELMAN: How do you explain that this unknown writer became one of the world's most famous writers in less than a generation?

MORGENSTERN: Well, I have to finish the story you asked me. In 1951, I went for the first time to Europe after the War, and I was in London. In London, I met a friend who guided me around and wanted me to see Oxford and Cambridge and the other places where there are colleges. So I went to Cambridge, and in Cambridge his son was studying. And his son wanted to show me how students were living, and took me to his colleague with whom he was living. And there was a handbook of German and Austrian literature. So I asked him, I would like to see what they are saying there, what this book is saying and what authors were included, so I opened the book and leafed through it and on one page was a photo of two Austrian writers, great writers, Hugo von Hofmannstahl and Franz Kafka.

KELMAN: That was less than twenty years later.

MORGENSTERN: It was twenty years later

KELMAN: I'd like to ask you another question about what I consider the greatest book on the Holocaust by a living writer, The Third Pillar, which you published a little over twenty years ago and, which is a remarkable evocation, treatment of what is really a theme so many writers have tried to deal with. Now, it took you a few years until you could write, and it was very different than the way you wrote your trilogy about life in Eastern Europe. What was the difference in the style that you used?

MORGENSTERN: You know, I had misgivings in touching this theme of the horrors which happened to the Jews in Europe in the German language. But it's my language, a language in which I could express myself. I was for a long time inarticulate because I had seen too many of these pictures of the concentration camps and what happened there, and I became inarticulate. So I sort of gave up my writing.

And then, one day, I decided I will write a book.

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Although in the German language, it should be written as a man writes who has never read any other book but the Bible. This was formerly a big task, because the danger was to be archaic which is something.

- KELMAN: Archaic.
- MORGENSTERN: Archaic. See, my pronunciation. Thank you very much.
- KELMAN: It's fine, it's fine.
- MORGENSTERN: So I don't like archaic production, so I had to avoid archaism, and I had to write it in a language, in the German language which testifies that I cleansed myself from European culture..
- KELMAN: Now, why did you feel that you had to cleanse yourself of European culture?
- MORGENSTERN: Because I started to realize that I belong to Judaism, not to European culture. And I decided to write as a man, who never read any book, any book but the Bible. And I, when I finished it, I was sure that I succeeded. And the one who immediately realized that it is written this way was Ludwig Lewisohn. When he read the manuscript, he said, you wrote this like a man who only read the Bible. In English, this language exist, which I didn't know. I could easily translate it, because this language, your German language exists exactly in English. But Lewisohn did a good job. He did a good job, reading it..
- KELMAN: This book also ends with kaddish, hope. After describing what you do..
- MORGENSTERN: A book which doesn't end with hope, if it is not hopeful, it is not a Jewish book. But, of course, the Jews are organically not capable to be pessimists.
- KELMAN: So you were able to write a book about the Holocaust and end on a hopeful note.
- MORGENSTERN: Yeah. And of course, we are hoping for redemption. Whatever form it may be, redemption.
- KELMAN: And you feel that we're closer to redemption? Or further from redemption?
- MORGENSTERN: Redemption is something which is always a far aim, and I wouldn't take the honor to predict anything. But I think that the Jews are now a better way than they were twenty years ago..
- KELMAN: Do you think that the Jewish State has solved certain problems?
- MORGENSTERN: The Jewish State saved the corporals, the physical security of the Jewish nation. They have now a place to run away and they will run away from many countries in the future. On this, I'm not going to make any predictions either, but this has been repeating itself for 2000 years, that always they get warm in a country and get assimilated and they are happy, and then



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they have to run. So I don't know wherever they were going to run, whither they would go to run. You see, whither they..

KELMAN: To where, whither, whither.

MORGENSTERN: Yeah, whither they go to run. But run they will. Now they have a -- they didn't have a place to run, we realize that. Because even America didn't accept them.

I feel that this much, that I will tell you a secret. Before I wrote this book, I was near to committing suicide.

KELMAN: You had despaired?

MORGENSTERN: Yeah, between '45 and '48. But when -- only it saved me because the idea that I have a son that I'm responsible. I have no right to commit suicide.

But in 1948, they proclaimed the Jewish state I said, now I have a reason to live.

KELMAN: Where did the final form of The Third Pillar take shape in your mind?

MORGENSTERN: The final took shape in the Safit, in the cemetery where Ari is buried.

KELMAN: And what was there about the atmosphere of Safit that made it possible for you to grasp the final form?

MORGENSTERN: Safit is in some corners the atmosphere of cabalistic, cabalistic atmosphere.

KELMAN: Mysticism. Mystical.

MORGENSTERN: Mysticism. If you go to see the synagogue of Ari..

KELMAN: That's Isaac Luria.

MORGENSTERN: Isaac Luria, this is tremendous. But more than the synagogue impressed me the cemetery, the grave of Ari.

You have seen it?

KELMAN: Yes, I was there in Safit many times.

MORGENSTERN: Have I still time to talk about it?

KELMAN: Yes, please tell us about Safit.

MORGENSTERN: Now, you see, remember that there is a very big -- not a very big, but an impressive gravestone in the center, and there is Ari. And there is the grave of all his pupils. It is smaller, a smaller size.

KELMAN: May I just interrupt to tell our listeners that Isaac Luria was the founder of a special and very influential school of Jewish mysticism which began in the City of Safit in the sixteenth century.

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- MORGENSTERN: Yeah. And in some way the father of Hassidism.
- KELMAN: And very much influenced Hassidism, which is strongly under the influence of Lurianic Cabala.
- MORGENSTERN: Now, I was sitting there, and a friend of mine was one of the founders of Degania...
- KELMAN: That's the first kibbutz in Israel.
- MORGENSTERN: Yeah. And I was talking to my friend, and I was even not listening to him, because I had a vision of the casket, which plays a big part..
- KELMAN: A very important role in The Third Pillar.
- MORGENSTERN: And with this casket -- around this casket I built this story, and I had it in one piece in the cemetery.
- And I left --I wanted to stay in Israel for a longer time..
- KELMAN: You also used an ancient Jewish motif of a trial, of a debate.
- MORGENSTERN: Yeah.
- KELMAN: A debate with God in a way.
- MORGENSTERN: Yes. And I planned at that time to stay a longer time in Israel, but I had no -- I couldn't write in Israel. It was all too exciting, everything for me. And so I ran back and started to write, and it took me three years.
- KELMAN: Now, you said a few moments ago that you feel that this Jewish state has given physical security to those who need a place of refuge.
- MORGENSTERN: Yes.
- KELMAN: Do you think that it's possible to have spiritual achievement, striving, anywhere in the world? Or is that restricted to a special place?
- MORGENSTERN: I said twenty years ago when I was in Israel, and when I came back here then after ten years when I'd seen the growing of the yeshivas here, I told a rabbi who asked my view on the future that I was not sure whether the next Talmud that will be created, will be an Israeli Talmud or an American Talmud.
- KELMAN: Well, maybe we'll have two..
- MORGENSTERN: We have a Babylonian, we have a Jerusalem, and the Babylonian's even better and greater, I have not to tell you...
- KELMAN: Yes.
- MORGENSTERN: ..than Jerusalem. So that I'm not sure what will come out of the yeshivas here and the yeshivas in Israel.

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I would -- my guess would be that since they say, I don't know where did they say -- that the air of Israel makes wise. Maybe they'll be from Israel.

KELMAN:

Yes. Now you said once that Israel -- Zionism was an attempt to solve the Jewish problem. Do you think that there's anything that Jews can do to solve the Jewish problem? Or is this out of our hands?

MORGENSTERN:

It is out of our hands, because as I told you, in the Diaspora, the problem is not the Jewish problem, but a Christian problem.

KELMAN:

And how do you think that that problem will be solved?

MORGENSTERN:

I don't know, but I hope that the fact that Israel exists will take the sharpness away from this.

KELMAN:

But do you think, just as you're optimistic about the Jewish future, that you see signs of Christians becoming better Christians?

MORGENSTERN:

I don't see that, because you see the way that they treat the legacy of Pope John the twenty-third. I am very pessimistic about that.

KELMAN:

Well, I want to end on an optimistic note, Soma, and I can't think of a better statement of your optimism than my favorite passage in The Third Pillar, which is especially appropriate at this time of the year.

It's toward the end of the book, and with your permission I'd like to read it.

MORGENSTERN:

I would be very grateful, because I don't trust my pronunciation.

KELMAN:

"Creator of the world, we will renew our prayers even as Thou has renewed our hearts. We know that a time will come when there will exist on earth no strong and no weak. No hunters and no hunted. No oppressors and no oppressed. No slayers and no slain. No masters and no servants. No rich and no poor. For we know that this world is no waiting room for eternity. Eternity is here among us.

"Therefore we are bidden not to take thought for our own thereafter, but for our brother's welfare in this world. And we know that this teaching will survive all its enemies, and all our own. Are our enemies more mighty than we, but our Torah is stronger than their might. And our dream is greater than their night.

"The evil time is at an end. For redemption has begun. But so long as evil still dwells in the world, for the peoples of the world, and above all for Thy people, oh, Creator of eternity, let us while there are still oppressors and oppressed, be among the oppressed and not among the oppressors, among the hunted and not the hunters, among the slain and not the slayers. Above all, Creator of the universe, let us continue to side with the humble and not with the arrogant.

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"We know that this world will be saved from evil; should this not be true, may we know nothing further. For nothing further will be worth knowing."

I can't think of a more fitting summary of I know your view, your whole perspective on the world.

I know when we were recently publishing in the Rabbinical Assembly a new prayer book for the High Holy Days, we looked through thousands of books to try to get some statement that would give us hope in recalling the period of the Holocaust, and I'm proud to say that we selected this. And this has now become a part of the traditional liturgy, which Jews who use this prayer book recite on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. And it's only appropriate because Yom Kippur, as you know, plays a very important role in your book.

So I want to thank you, Dr. Morgenstern, for talking with me today. And giving our listeners a beginning of an understanding of you as a person and your writing.

ANNOUNCER:

Today's program was "A Conversation with Dr. Soma Morgenstern," distinguished author and philosopher.

Talking with the author of The Third Pillar and the trilogy, The Son of the Lost Son, In my Father's Pastures, and The Testament of the Lost Son was Executive Vice President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Wolfe Kelman.

If you would like a copy of today's program, please send your name and address with fifty cents to cover the cost of postage and handling to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, New York 10027.

We invite you to join us next week for THE ETERNAL LIGHT.

This is Vic Roby. THE ETERNAL LIGHT is produced for NBC by Rhoda Grady, for the Seminary, Milton E. Krents, Producer, Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, Program Editor, and Donna Burroughs, Program Coordinator.

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