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DR ISAAC ASIMOV
TALKS WITH
SLAWEK WOJTOWICZ

Slawek Wojtowicz © 1988

SW: If you ask any SF fan in Poland "who is Isaac Asimov?" he or she will answer without any hesitation - "one of the greatest SF writers in the World". You might be surprised to learn that you are so famous in a country where only a small fraction of your works has been translated into the native language and the majority of people cannot read English. But an average Polish fan wouldn't be able to say much about Isaac Asimov as a person. What could you tell us about your life?

IA: Well, I was born in the Soviet Union in 1920, came to the United States with my family in 1923 and lived in New York since. I got my Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1948. I'm married and have two children from my first marriage. I started reading Science-Fiction when I was nine years old. I sold my first story when I was eighteen and my first book when I was thirty. Since then I have published 394 books. I have twenty five other books in press. Some of these are mysteries, some are children' books, others are on straight science, literary subjects, humor, mythology - on everything I can think of.

SW: Can you tell us how your day time schedule looks like?

IA: This morning I did my weekly science column for the "Los Angeles Times" Syndicate. I'm working on a novel - it is little over half finished in first draft. Pretty soon it will be time to write my monthly essay for "Fantasy and Science Fiction". I'm writing a big "History of Science" and I've got up to 1945, so it is only little over forty years left, but they were very hard forty years... So I've got lots of work.

SW: Do you have any time left for other things besides writing?

IA: All I do is write. I do practically nothing else, except eat, sleep and talk to my wife.

SW: Is it a secret what are you working on now?

IA: The novel is called "Nemesis". It is not a part of any other series I'm doing - it is not as "Foundation" nor robot novels. It's something completely different.

SW: What are your plans for the future? What topics are you going to explore?

IA: I don't have any specific plans. I just keep turning out novels. Often publishers ask me to do something and that's how I know what I'll do next.

SW: Have you ever written any screenplays for SF movies?

IA: No, I'm no talent for that and I don't want to get mixed up with Hollywood. If they are going to do something of mine, they will have to find someone else to write the screenplays.

SW: Have you heard about any plans concerning screenplays for "Foundation" novels?

IA: Oh, every once a while somebody talks about doing it, but so far nobody has ever managed to dig up enough money for it.

SW: Do you like the covers of your books? Do you have any input in their design?

IA: No, I don't have any input into that. Publishers take care of that entirely. They never ask any questions and I never offer any advice, because my artistic talent is zero.

SW: Do you have a favorite SF painter?

IA: Well, there is a number of painters that I like very much. To name just a few: Michael Whelan and Boris Vallejo are between my favorites. I'm impressed by them, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything - I don't know that I have any taste in art.

SW: Have you ever tried to paint something yourself?

IA: No, I can't even draw a straight line with a ruler.

SW: What do you think about current trends in SF?

IA: Well, to tell you the truth, I was brought up in an earlier, simpler day and I have never broken away. In other words, the novels I write in nineteen eighties are very much like the novels I wrote in forties and fifties - they tend to be a little old fashioned. Fortunately the readers read them anyway...

SW: Do you like Fantasy? Tolkien stories?

IA: I like Tolkien himself - I've read it five times. I don't read much these days, honestly. When you write as much as I do, you don't have enough time for reading. Oddly enough, when I do read, I tend to reach for murder mystery and I look for old fashioned murder mysteries. I'm a very old fashioned person...

SW: What about comic strips? Would you agree with an opinion that this is also art?

IA: Yes, it is. I don't have anything to do with it, but if somebody wanted to convert one of my stories into a comic strip, I'd only ask that it be a good one. That's all.

SW: What sort of SF do you like most?

IA: What I like most is rather old fashioned science-fiction. I find it difficult to understand modern stylistic experimentation, so, I'm afraid, I look for simple stories of the kind I write myself.

SW: Most of the readers are also looking for this kind of writing...

IA: I'm glad if they are, because they can find it in my stories and I will be able to make a living.

SW: Do you have any favorite SF writers?

IA: My favorite is Arthur Clark. I also like people like Fred Pohl or Larry Niven and others who know their science. I like Harlan Ellison, too, although his stories are terribly emotional. But I don't consider myself a judge of good science-fiction - not even my own.

SW: What about mainstream writers?

IA: Mainstream writers I don't read much of, I'm afraid. I read mostly non-fiction: new books on science, mathematics, things like that. Most of the stuff I write, except for my novels, is non-fiction. I have to keep up with science. And that is most of my reading.

SW: Do you have any vision of what the near future of Mankind has in store?

IA: I have several - some bad, some good, depending on what we do. I can see a computerized world, with robots doing most of the dull work or a space centered world with people moving out into orbit about the Earth and reaching the asteroids. But I can also see a polluted world in which the quality of life sinks and one in which there is a nuclear war and we destroy ourselves. There is nothing that MUST be, everything depends entirely on what we decide to do. Naturally I would like to see Civilization to continue and improve. I think everyone would. But still, people tend to do things that harm Humanity.

SW: When I wrote in my letter that it is great to live in the world advanced fifty years in time (comparing Eastern Europe and the United States) you disagreed... Why?

IA: Well, you can always catch up with technology. One hundred years ago Japan put a mind to it and caught up to Western Europe. When there is a model to follow it is easy. However advancing, as we do, means also that we probably pollute the environment more than any other nation does and we use up more resources more wastefully. These things are not particularly admirable. Not all "advancement" is advancement.

SW: Who do you think will be the next president of the United States? Will this be good or bad for the United States?

IA: Oh, that I can't say. I know who I'm voting for - I'm voting for Dukakis. But I vote Democratic all the time. Sometimes I win, sometimes I don't. I'll vote Democratic this time.

SW: If you were to choose a place and time to live in, when and where would you choose? And why?

IA: It would be right now, right here. I'm used to this world. I know how to get along in it and it has some things in it I don't want to give up - like modern medicine. Without it I would be dead now. My angina was very bad and I didn't think I had long to live. I've had a triple bypass surgery and now I feel fine... I had half of my thyroid taken out sixteen years ago, because it was cancerous. If not for that I'd probably be dead by now. That's why I don't look

towards a simpler life without antibiotics, without modern surgery, anesthetics etc. In this simpler life in the Past there are also slaves. Who knows? I might have been a slave. So I'll take it right now, with all its faults.

SW: What do you think is the most difficult barrier to overcome in figuring out the methods of interstellar travel?

IA: The most insurmountable is the speed of light limit. As long as we can't go faster than the speed of light we can't reach any but the nearest stars in our lifetime. In a case of speeds close to the speed of light it may seem to the people who are traveling that in less than lifetime they can reach a distant galaxy. But here, on Earth, millions of years will pass - so that they'll never be able to come back to their own world. And I'm afraid there is no way of beating that...

SW: In your novels people are traveling faster than light...

IA: That's true! But that's in the novel. You must never confuse your dreams with reality. It is easy to dream and it is fun to dream. But if you actually think that reality is got to fit your dreams, then I'm afraid that you are not quite sane.... I'm sane. I know what is real and what is a dream.

SW: Our perception and knowledge about this world is based on Einstein's General Relativity theories but these can be replaced in the future with better ones, just like Newton's theories were...

IA: I know, and in my books I'm always careful to point out that there are things we don't know and that Einstein's General Relativity belongs to this Universe. Perhaps you can get out of this Universe. Perhaps there are deeper laws that we don't yet understand. Perhaps... I say all that, because I'm a good science-fiction writer and I don't just make things up without trying to justify them. But I don't really believe it.

SW: Is it true that you don't like traveling?

IA: I don't! I never take airplanes and I don't like to be away from home for long. It simplifies life - means that I turn down all invitations to travel long distances and I don't often travel short distances. I stay here with my typewriter, my books and my quiet life. And I like it.

SW: So you wouldn't be able to attend our National Convention, Polcon, that will be held next December in Gdansk?

IA: Sorry, I hardly ever attend them. I'm not going to New Orleans. I think next year it is going to be in Boston. I can make it to Boston.

SW: If we were to organize the Worldcon in Gdansk, would you attend?

IA: No, I'm afraid not. The only way I could go would be by ship and only if I had a time. But it is not very likely... So I'm terribly sorry. I would like to see Gdansk, after all it is the city where the World War II started and it is a very lively city right now. But I don't think I'll have a chance.

SW: Do you know anything about the Polish Fandom?

IA: Not a thing. You are my entire knowledge of it.

SW: You might be familiar with the history of Poland...

IA: Oh, yes! I know the history of the world generally. Yes! First partitions 1772, second partitions 1793, third partitions 1795, Great Duchy of Warsaw under Napoleon, revolt in 1863 against Russia... I have it all.

SW: What about our history before partitions?

IA: Absolutely! I know Jadwiga and Jagiello getting married and Poland being a large country at that time and Jan Sobieski who saved Vienna in 1683...

SW: Talking about history - do you believe in the theory of the "Wheel of History" - in other words, that people tend to repeat their mistakes over and over again?

IA: Unfortunately they do. In many respects people don't learn from the past. They fight civil wars and always call the outside forces to help one side or the other. The outside forces help them and take over the country. Happens over and over again. And they never seem to learn the lesson.

SW: Do you think the human species will change radically in the course of evolution?

IA: Well, unfortunately that is almost impossible to predict. Right now, I think, the chances are that we wipe ourselves out before we'll have a chance to undergo any startling changes. Also, we've reached a stage where we change environment to suit ourselves, so there is less pressure to fit the changing environment. Secondly, now we can handle genetic engineering, so we might change ourselves without regard to the environment. Just change ourselves the way we want to, which may not always be wise. That's why I think we reached a point where things of the Future, as far as evolutionary changes are concerned, are absolutely unpredictable.

SW: Do you think that some people might survive the nuclear war?

IA: I hope it won't be me! Honestly I doubt that - I'm getting too old. But I think that people that will survive will be the unfortunate ones. After what we have done to the Earth, consuming its resources, destroying its forests, upsetting its soil, adding to that the effects of fallout, radioactivity, enormous fires, enormous deaths - so it may be impossible to rebuild in anything shorter than geologic ages... To be a part of a small group of human beings struggling along before the final curtain is no great pleasure...

SW: I've never heard about any story written by you with an action set in the past...

IA: That is true. And the reason for that is that I've never been able to find a time to do the necessary research. Jean Auel who wrote the "Clan of the Cave Bear" and "Mammoth Hunters", did a lot of research first and put years of work into it. That's why all my fiction is set either in the present or in the future. And if it's set in the present it's a present I know about. I don't look for exotic locations - all my murder stories take place in New York.

SW: Have you noticed that there are many similarities between the Roman Empire and the United States?

IA: One can think up things like that. I've often thought, for instance, that

Nazi Germany took the place of Sparta in Europe and I've had a little fun during World War II trying to compare the European situation with that in an ancient Greece in the time of Peloponnesian War and to see if I can explain what happened now, what happened then... History is so complex that you can do it in thousand different ways. Toynbee tried to show that all these different civilizations follow the same pattern, and I think, he failed. He chose the pattern that the Classical Civilization used and then forced over rest into it. So while he was popular in his time, now he is dismissed as someone who didn't really succeed.

SW: In your last novel "Prelude to Foundation" I found many characters and situations unique to the United States. Would you agree?

IA: You have to understand that the only culture I know and I'm at home with is the United States. I can't really use another cultures as my model, because I simply don't know enough about them. How much ever I know about Polish history it's all from reading. I've never lived in Poland, I've never experienced Polish culture. If I tried to present future society that has similarities to present day Polish culture, anyone who was in Poland would laugh! So I don't try. It is important to know what you can do.

SW: Don't you think that "Prelude" is much more food oriented than your past novels?

IA: Is much more what oriented?!

SW: Food oriented...

IA: I didn't notice that! But it is possible! Not on purpose though. If it happened, it just happened. Now when I think of it - might be. I was anxious to show different cultures and one way in which you can show a different culture is by the different things they eat, whether they eat alone or with people, you know, things like that. I can't talk very much about things like art or sport because I know nothing about them but like everybody else I eat.

SW: And what is your favorite kind of cooking?

IA: Well, let's see now... I'm in a constant struggle to keep my weight down and one of the reasons is that I love virtually all food. I like Chinese, French and Italian cooking, as well as Polish sausages... I don't know what a typical Polish meal is but if someone feed me one, I'd probably love it! So there you are. Oh, I also eat in Russian restaurants - we have here in New York all kinds of different ethnic restaurants and my wife and I, we know a large number of them.

SW: What about the "junk food"?

IA: She won't let me. I love hamburgers, hot dogs, all that stuff - I'd gladly eat it - but she won't let me.

SW: Why is that?

IA: Well, she wants to keep me alive.

SW: Which character in your novels is, in your opinion, most closely associated with the type of person you are?

IA: I suppose it would be Elijah Bailey in the "Caves of Steel", "Naked Sun" and "The Robots of Dawn". He is a person with virtues I wish I had and faults I know I have.

SW: Do you believe there is a place in Mankind's immediate future for robots?

IA: Yes, I think we are going, if we survive, to be developing robots and the robotic world of the future will be a little bit resembling the one I wrote about forty, Gee... almost fifty years ago.

SW: What motivates you to keep writing novels?

IA: One of the things that motivates me is that the readers seem to like them and I get innumerable letters saying: "will you write another novel ?", "please, write another novel", "we are waiting for another novel". Another thing is my publishers who tell me that they will kill me if I will not write another novel and the third is that I get a little money for it. I've got to make sure that if I'll die my wife and my children are well off.

SW: Don't you find pleasure in writing?

IA: True. But I enjoy my non-fiction more than fiction. And in fiction I enjoy mysteries more than science-fiction. The more I enjoy writing something particular - less money I get. So while I enjoy least writing science-fiction novels, I get most money for...science-fiction. What can I do?

SW: Please, keep writing!

IA: I will.

SW: Thanks a lot for this interview!

IA: Please, when you get back home, tell all the people in Gdansk and Poland that sometimes I wish I did travel, so I can meet my fans in Poland and indeed all over the world. But unfortunately the truth is I don' travel. So it has to be done this way, by the miracles of modern science: my voice in the recording device and someone traveling in a plane to come here and see me...

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