



VINTAGE

# Panther in the Basement

Amos Oz

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## About the Book

A VIVID, POIGNANT NOVEL ABOUT GROWING UP IN A TROUBLED CITY

Jerusalem 1947. British soldiers patrol the streets, and bullets and bombs are a nightly occurrence. Caught up in the fervour and unrest against the occupying forces, 12-year old Proffy dreams of being an underground fighter. But some of his dreams are less heroic. Temptation lurks everywhere for the youth who wants to be a man - and betrayal is not far behind.

## About the Author

Born in Jerusalem in 1939, Amos Oz is one of Israel's finest living writers and also well known as a political commentator and campaigner for peace in the Middle East. He is the author of eleven previous books of fiction, including *My Michael*, *Black Box*, *To Know A Woman*, *Fima* and *Don't Call It Night*, as well as acclaimed works of non-fiction, *In the Land of Israel*, *The Slopes of Lebanon* and, most recently, *Israel, Palestine & Peace*. His work has been translated into twenty-eight languages and he has won many international literary awards. Amos Oz is married, with two daughters and a son, and lives in Arad, Israel.

Nicholas de Lange, the translator, teaches at the University of Cambridge and writes on a variety of subjects. He has won prizes for his translations, and has translated nine books by Amos Oz.

ALSO BY AMOS OZ

Fiction

*My Michael*  
*Elsewhere, Perhaps*  
*Touch the Water, Touch the Wind*  
*Unto Death*  
*The Hill of Evil Counsel*  
*Where the Jackals Howl*  
*A Perfect Peace*  
*Black Box*  
*To Know A Woman*  
*Fima*  
*Don't Call It Night*  
*Panther in the Basement*

Non-Fiction

*In the Land of Israel*  
*The Slopes of Lebanon*  
*Under This Blazing Light*  
*Israel, Palestine & Peace*

For children

*Soumchi*

For Dean, Nadav, Alon and Ya'el

Amos Oz

PANTHER IN THE  
BASEMENT

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY  
Nicholas de Lange

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



# 1

I HAVE BEEN called a traitor many times in my life. The first time was when I was twelve and a quarter and I lived in a neighbourhood at the edge of Jerusalem. It was during the summer holidays, less than a year before the British left the country and the State of Israel was born out of the midst of war.

One morning these words appeared on the wall of our house, painted in thick black letters, just under the kitchen window: PROFİ BOGED SHAFEL 'Proffy is a low-down traitor.' The word *shafel*, 'low-down', raised a question that still interests me now, as I sit and write this story. Is it possible for a traitor not to be low-down? If not, why did Chita Reznik (I recognized his writing) bother to add the word 'low-down'? And if it is, under what circumstances is treachery not low-down?

I had had the nickname Proffy ever since I was so high. It was short for Professor, which they called me because of my obsession with checking words. (I still love words: I like collecting, arranging, shuffling, reversing, combining them. Rather the way people who love money do with coins and banknotes and people who love cards do with cards.)

My father saw the writing under the kitchen window when he went out to get the newspaper at half past six that morning. Over breakfast, while he was spreading raspberry jam on a slice of black bread, he suddenly plunged the knife into the jam jar almost up to the handle and said in his deliberate way:

‘What a pleasant surprise. And what has His Lordship been up to now, that we should deserve this honour?’

My mother said:

‘Don’t get at him first thing in the morning. It’s bad enough that he’s always being got at by other children.’

Father was dressed in khaki, like most men in our neighbourhood in those days. He had the gestures and voice of a man who is definitely in the right. Dredging up a sticky mass of raspberry from the bottom of the jar and spreading an equal amount on both halves of his slice of bread, he said:

‘The fact is that almost everyone nowadays uses the word “traitor” too freely. But what is a traitor? Yes indeed. A man without honour. A man who secretly, behind your back, for the sake of some questionable advantage, helps the enemy to work against his people. Or to harm his family and friends. He is more despicable than a murderer. Finish your egg, please. I read in the paper that people are dying of hunger in Asia.’

My mother pulled my plate towards her and finished my egg and the rest of my bread and jam, not because she was hungry but for the sake of peace. She said:

‘Anyone who loves isn’t a traitor.’

My mother addressed these words neither to me nor to Father: to judge by the direction she was looking, she was talking to a nail that was stuck in our kitchen wall just above the icebox and served no particular purpose.

## 2

AFTER BREAKFAST MY parents hurried off to catch their bus to work. I was free, with oceans of time ahead of me till the evening, because it was the summer holidays. First of all I cleared the table and put everything away in its proper place, in the icebox, the cupboards, or the sink, because I loved being at home on my own all day without anything to do. I washed the dishes and left them upside down to drain dry. Then I went round the apartment closing the windows and shutters, so as to have a shady den till evening. The sun and the dust from the desert were liable to damage my father's books that lined the walls, some of which were rare volumes. I read the morning paper, then I folded it and put it on the kitchen table, and I put my mother's brooch away in its case. I did all this not like a repentant low-down traitor but from love of tidiness. To this day I make a habit of going round the house every morning and evening putting everything in its right place. Five minutes ago, as I was writing about closing the windows and shutters, I stopped writing because I remembered to get up and close the bathroom door; though it might have preferred to stay open, to judge by the groan it made as I closed it.

All that summer my mother and father went out at eight o'clock in the morning and came home at six in the evening. My lunch was waiting for me in the icebox and my days were clear as far as the horizon. For instance, I could start the game with a small group of five or ten soldiers on the rug, or pioneers, surveyors, road makers, and fort builders, and step by step we could tame the forces of nature, defeat

enemies, conquer wide-open spaces, build towns and villages, and lay out roads connecting them.

My father was a proofreader and sort of editorial assistant in a small publishing house. At night he used to sit up till two or three o'clock in the morning, surrounded by the shadows of his bookshelves, with his body immersed in darkness and only his grey head floating in a ring of light from his desk lamp, as though he was laboriously climbing the gulley between the mountains of books piled up on his desk, filling slips and cards with notes in preparation for his great book on the history of the Jews in Poland. He was a principled, intense man, who was deeply committed to the concept of justice.

My mother, on the other hand, liked to raise her half-empty glass of tea and stare through it at the blue light in the window. And sometimes she would press it to her cheek, as though drawing warmth from the contact. She was a teacher in an institution for immigrant orphans who had managed to hide from the Nazis in monasteries or remote villages and had now reached us, as my mother said, 'straight from the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death'. At once she would correct herself: 'They come from a place where men behave like wolves to each other. Even refugees. Even children.' In my mind I would associate the remote villages with horrifying images of wolf-men and the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death. I loved the words 'darkness' and 'valley' because they immediately conjured up a valley shrouded in darkness, with monasteries and cellars. And I loved the shadow of death because I didn't understand it. If I whispered 'shadow of death', I could almost hear a kind of deep sound like the note that comes from the lowest key on the piano, a sound that draws after it a trail of dim echoes, as though a disaster has happened and now there is no going back.

I returned to the kitchen. I had read in the paper that we were living in a fateful period and therefore we must engage

all our moral resources. And it also said that the actions of the British were 'casting a heavy shadow' and that the Hebrew nation was called upon to 'withstand the test'.

I left the house, looking all around me like in the resistance, to make sure no one was watching me: a strange man in sunglasses, for instance, who might be concealed behind a newspaper, lurking in the doorway of one of the buildings on the other side of the road. But the street seemed absorbed in its own preoccupations. The greengrocer was building a wall of empty crates. The boy who worked at the Sinopsky Brothers grocery was dragging a squeaking handcart. Childless old Pani Ostrowska was sweeping away at the pavement in front of her door, probably for the third time that morning. Doctor Gryphius was sitting on her balcony filling out filing cards: she was a spinster, and Father was helping her to gather material for her memoirs of Jewish life in her native town, Rosenheim, in Bavaria. And the paraffin seller went by slowly in his cart, the reins lying slack on his knees, ringing a handbell and singing a plaintive Yiddish song to his horse. So I stood there and scrutinized intently the black words *PROFI BOGED SHAFEL*, 'Proffy is a low-down traitor', in case there was some tiny detail that could shed a new light. From haste or fear the last letter of the word *BOGED*, 'traitor', had turned out more like an *R* than a *D*, making me not a low-down traitor, *BOGED*, but a low-down adult, *BOGER*. That morning I would gladly have given everything I had to be an adult.

So Chita Reznik had 'done a Balaam'.

Mr Zerubbabel Gihon, our Bible and Judaism teacher, had explained to us in class:

'Doing a Balaam. When a curse comes out as a blessing. For instance, like when the British minister Ernest Bevin said in Parliament in London that the Jews are a stubborn race, he did a Balaam.'

Mr Gihon had a habit of seasoning his lessons with witticisms that were not funny. He often used his wife as the

butt of his jokes. For instance, when he wanted to illustrate the passage from the Book of Kings about whips and scorpions, he said: 'Scorpions are a hundred times worse than whips. I afflict you with whips and my wife afflicts me with scorpions.' Or: 'There is a text that says, "As the crackling of thorns under a pot". Ecclesiastes, chapter seven. Like Mrs Gihon trying to sing.'

Once I said during supper:

'You know my teacher Gihon, hardly a day goes by when he isn't unfaithful to his wife in class.'

My father looked at my mother and said:

'Your son has definitely taken leave of his senses.' (My father was fond of the word 'definitely'. And also of the words 'indubitably', 'evidently', 'yes indeed'.)

My mother said:

'Instead of insulting him, why don't you try to find out what he's trying to say? You never really listen to him. Or to me. Or to anybody. All you ever listen to is the news on the wireless.'

'Everything in the world,' Father replied calmly, refusing as usual to be drawn into an argument, 'has at least two sides. As is well known to all but a few frenetic souls.'

I didn't know what 'frenetic souls' meant, but I did know that this was not the right moment to ask. So I let them sit facing each other in silence for nearly a full minute – they sometimes had silences that resembled arm-wrestling – and only then did I say:

'Except a shadow.'

My father shot me one of his suspicious glances, with his glasses halfway down his nose, nodding his head up and down, one of those looks that conjure up what we learned in Bible class, 'he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes', and his blue eyes above his glasses shone at me in naked disappointment, with me and with young people in general and with the failure of the