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Penn Libraries Receive the Chaim Potok Papers

PHILADELPHIA, PA – The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) has received the papers of noted novelist, rabbi, professor, and Penn alumnus, Chaim Potok. Spanning the second half of the 20th century, the collection documents Potok’s literary career and rabbinical life. It comprises correspondence, writings, lectures, sermons, clippings, promotional material, memorabilia, and fan mail. Among more than 1,200 correspondents is Elie Wiesel, who writes in May, 1992: “I shall read [*I Am the Clay*] as I read all your books—with fervor and friendship.” Examining the papers, scholars will be able to trace Potok’s writing process from conception to publication: from notebooks for ideas and drafts, to annotated typescripts with comments, to galleys. The collection also provides insights into Potok’s life, including his vocation as a rabbi, his service as a U.S. Army chaplain in Korea from 1955 to 1957, and his work at the Jewish Publication Society, where he served as editor-in-chief from 1969 to 1974.

“It’s an honor for us to curate the papers of Chaim Potok,” says Carton Rogers, Vice Provost and Director of the Penn Libraries. “His publications have had a widespread impact on generations of students and researchers, and we are looking forward to opening his unpublished works to that same audience.”

Born in the Bronx in 1929, Potok graduated from Yeshiva University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was ordained as a rabbi, and earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania with a study of eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Solomon Maimon. A beloved teacher at Penn in the General Honors Program, Potok was Baccalaureate Commencement speaker in 1983, when Penn awarded him an honorary degree. With well over a million copies in print, Potok’s first novel, *The Chosen*, received the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Book Award and was nominated for the National Book Award. Potok worked in many genres, including novels, short stories, and plays, essays, reviews, editorials, and non-fiction works, including *Wanderings: Chaim Potok’s History of the Jews*, and, with Isaac Stern, *My First 79 Years*, a biography of the violinist. He died in 2002 and bequeathed his papers to the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. A reception to celebrate the arrival of the Chaim Potok Papers at Penn will be held in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library on what would have been the author’s 81st birthday, February 17, 2010. This invitation-only event will feature a talk by Jane Eisner, editor of the influential Jewish newspaper, *Forward*.



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