

The Lost World of Unspoken Horrors: Aharon Appelfeld's Holocaust Universe

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**The Lost World of Unspoken Horrors:
Aharon Appelfeld's Holocaust
Universe**

Dvir Abramovich



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Introduction

This book, drawing on a vast body of scholarship, offers a close reading of five novels by Aharon Appelfeld (1982–2018), Israel’s most celebrated Shoah author. Fuelled by a desire to introduce this literary giant to foreign language readers, this collection of essays is a tribute to a prolific writer who, for more than four decades, won international acclaim for his subtle and enigmatic novels, which shimmer with premonitions of the unimaginable horror to come. Transforming memory into fiction, his stories, which reveal unfathomable depths in the search for meaning and healing amid the chaos, usually tackle the years immediately before and after the destruction of European Jewry. As one commentator astutely observed, “Appelfeld succeeds where other writers fear to go. Rather than pouring down as in a thunderstorm, the story splashes forth like drops of rain. His life is a patchwork of shadows, fleeting memories and character-rich parable.”¹

Though rejecting the label of a Holocaust writer – “I write more about individuals than about the Holocaust,”² – Aharon Appelfeld has stated that the European catastrophe that befell the Jews can never be overtold in fiction since it has become a metaphor for the twentieth century: “There can not be an end to speaking and writing about.”³ Describing himself as a Jewish writer, Appelfeld sets out the key themes that stud his pages as “... the uprooted, orphans, the war.”⁴ Indeed, as Shaked appositely observes, Appelfeld was the first author in Hebrew literature to integrate into his canvas “... refugees, the elderly, women, children, the uprooted, and those who were persecuted, terrified and broken.”⁵

The author of over forty novels, short stories, essays, collections of poetry and plays, Israel Prize winner for Literature, recipient of the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and France’s Prix Medicis literary award, Aharon Appelfeld was one of the world’s most respected and lauded Holocaust authors. As Avraham Balat remarks, Appelfeld

was Israel's most "sensitive writer, whose entire corpus is anchored in the forgotten, distant world that existed prior to the Holocaust ... he is a writer who provides a mirror to the soul, who utilizes a style and substance so as to peer, through the prism of the individual, into childhood landscapes, into to the unknown world of Jews who lost their Jewish identity but who were struck by that reality."⁶

Adding to the consensual chorus of acclaim was American author Philip Roth, who called Appelfeld: "Fiction's foremost chronicler of the Holocaust ... The stories he tells are small, intimate and quietly narrated, and yet are transfused into searing works of art by Appelfeld's profound understanding of loss, pain, cruelty and grief. He has made of displacement and disorientation a subject uniquely his own."⁷

It is noteworthy that Appelfeld, whose books have been translated into more than 30 languages, was one of the first Israeli artists to address the epochal events of the Holocaust in fiction, undeterred by a publisher who rejected his first book, *Ashan (Smoke)*, (1961) because of its confrontational subject matter. His primary concern was the psychological trauma and pain inflicted on the survivors by the Nazi inferno rather than evoking and depicting the concentrationary universe. "Most books about the Holocaust are dealing with the Holocaust proper," Appelfeld explained. "What I'm doing is taking the Holocaust backwards and forwards, so my territory is larger."⁸ In an extensive interview with Esther Fuchs, Appelfeld was asked why he never writes directly about the terrors of the war. "I am not a historian of the Holocaust," he replied. "I am not interested in describing the events that took place. I could not have done so even if I had wanted to. How can one describe the thing itself? Can art ever compete with life? All I am trying to do is to elicit certain universal and eternal elements from the historical event. I want to learn from it something about us, human beings of all times and in different situations."⁹

Further, in a wide-ranging conversation with his friend Philip Roth, he elaborated on the reasons for not venturing into the hell of the killing centres or had not, at that point, crafted a memoir (which he eventually penned in his 1999 *The Story of a Life*): "The reality of the Holocaust surpassed any imagination. If I remained true to the facts, no one would believe me."¹⁰ Likewise, as Gila Ramras-Rauch

rightly notes, “It is the very absence of the direct depiction of the Holocaust experience and its omnipresence that conveys the sense of horror.”¹¹ In furnishing a similar assessment, Schmuël Schneider contends that Appelfeld’s universe is populated by ordinary characters propelled toward heroism – which, in its most primal, basic essence, is an existential struggle for survival – by the circumstances enveloping their world.¹²

In that connection, one must also mention the Hebrew author Uri Zvi Greenberg, whose Holocaust dirge, *Streets of the River*, is regarded as one of the greatest Holocaust works ever written. Following the publication of Appelfeld’s *Ashan*, the young author was summoned to Greenberg’s home, where he was excoriated and chided by the elder statesman for the book’s focus on the private and personal rather than the national:

Greenberg told him that the Jews’ gift from the creator was that of vision and prophecy. The individual was not the point. The collective must precede him ... because the collective is what creates language, culture and the belief system. If the individual makes his contribution to the collective, he raises the level of the collective and that of himself, too. A creative person who does not do this will not be included in the nation’s memory.¹³

To be fair, Greenberg’s disdain was not directed solely against Appelfeld but was levelled at the prevailing tenor of Hebrew literature at the time. As Alan Mintz explains, according to Goldberg’s polemical and artistic worldview, poetry “... takes responsibility over the lot of the nation ... it is occupied with the Holocaust, with the struggle for national survival, and with Israel’s sovereign statehood”.¹⁴

It is of note that eminent Hebrew scholar Avner Holtzman maintains that the sterling reviews of Appelfeld’s early fiction, specifically his first book *Ashan*, spotlighted the striking difference between his artistic finesse and subtlety, and other Holocaust depictions that were “... infected by vulgarity, sensationalism and pornography, and which pounded the reader only with the force of their thematics”.⁵

Aharon Appelfeld was born on February 16, 1932, in the village of Zhadova near Chernivtsi, then located in Bukovina, Romania, and

now in Ukraine. This region of Eastern Europe was long steeped in Jewish history, folklore, and religious ideas, well known through the stories of great nineteenth-century Yiddish writers such as Shalom Aleichem. However, his parents, Michael Appelfeld and Bunia Sternberg, leaving behind the Hasidic orthodoxy and Yiddish of their parents, raised young Aharon as a secular, German-speaking boy. “I grew up,” he recalled, “in an assimilated Jewish home where German was treasured. German was considered not only a language but also a culture. All around us lived masses of Jews who spoke Yiddish, but in our house Yiddish was absolutely forbidden. I grew up with the feeling that anything Jewish was blemished.”¹⁶ In fact, Appelfeld revealed that since it was a secret in the home, he did not know that he was Jewish.

It was only later in life, after Appelfeld had reached Palestine and began to teach himself Hebrew, that he came to learn about his Jewish background. As such, when he writes about Judaism during those days before World War II, during the Holocaust, and its immediate aftermath in Europe, the faith is articulated differently from his private inner feelings and remembered images of boyhood experiences. These are images in the sense of vague and material perceptions, earthy and domestic smells, nonverbal sounds, natural and man-made textures, and inviting and repellent tastes.

With only one year of formal schooling, Appelfeld grew up speaking not just the literary German his parents spoke at home but the Romanian, Yiddish, and Ruthenian languages he heard in the neighbourhood and the forests. His memories, therefore, though often multilingual, are those of both an uneducated and naïve child, and of a person feeling the world viscerally, in a state of shock, a world that has disappeared and exists for him in fragments of memory and inarticulate feelings. Here is how Appelfeld put it in an interview with David B. Green, taking the kind of memory arousal described in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (Appelfeld has confessed that “I am writing from memory like Proust”¹⁷) even further from an intellectualised sensory perception: “A great deal of my memory is in my body, in my senses, not my mind. What I mean is that much of what I experienced in these years is in my body – in my legs, my arms, my hair, in my ears – and that’s an important source. Say I feel the

dampness in the rain that takes me to those same days. On cold days, I'm back in those days, back in the war."¹⁸ More so than other survivors of the Shoah, Appelfeld has a deep-seated distrust of language, logic, and words. Critics, following the writer's own confessions in the interviews, see his literary texts as an attempt to speak in "silence, muteness and stuttering."¹⁹

At the age of eight, his idyllic world collapsed as World War II closed in with its apocalyptic waves of invasion. He heard his mother Bonia's screams as she was murdered in the street when the Germans reached the city of Chernivtsi. He and his father, Michael, were first sent to a ghetto in his native Chernivtsi and were later sent to a Nazi labour camp in Transnistria. When the two were separated shortly afterwards, Aharon fled into the forests and spent the next three years living precariously among peasants and horse thieves. In the harsh winters, he claimed to be a Romanian Christian orphan named Janek and worked for local peasants, a band of horse thieves, and witches for food and shelter. For a time, too, he found refuge in the home of a prostitute, chopping wood and hiding in her closet by day, listening to her entertain clients by night.

As the war drew to a close and the Russians came to liberate the Jews in 1944, Appelfeld, now in his early teens, joined the Soviet army as a kitchen boy. At war's end, he returned to his hometown to discover it was empty. He eventually made his way to Italy with other survivors, where he lived with a monk who taught him Italian and French. He then joined other survivors at a transit camp and eventually sailed for Palestine, arriving there in 1947. Like other children traumatised by their ordeal, Appelfeld was emotionally confused, socially alone, and intellectually ill-equipped to deal with the turmoil of Palestine, not least when fighting in the 1948 War of Independence.

Yet, survive he did and was sent to live on a kibbutz. Twenty years after being separated from his father and long assuming him dead, Appelfeld found his name on a Jewish Agency list. Here is an account of the emotional reunion: "Fearful that it might be someone else with the same name, Appelfeld, without making any prior contact, went to the field where his father was working. He recognized him from the back, approached him and said, 'Herr Appelfeld?' His father turned

around, stared at him and said nothing. He could not reconcile the young man standing in front of him with the boy that he had last seen many long years ago, the boy he thought was dead.²⁰ Though Appelfeld was unable to write or talk about the event, he credits this episode with helping him come to grips with, regain, and reconstruct many lost memories of his family before the age of eight.

Appelfeld studied philosophy and Yiddish literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and served for many years as a professor of literature at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev. He recalls how the accusatory questions from the native-born Israelis thrust at members of his generation drew them into a life of deep denial and stillness:

So, we learned silence. It was not easy to keep silent. But it was a good way out for all of us. For what, when all is said and done, was there to tell ... There was a desire to forget, to bury the bitter memories deep in the bedrock of the soul, in a place where no stranger's eyes, not even our own, could get to them ... How many years did that violent repression continue? Every year it changed colours and covered another region of life. The moment a memory or a scrap of memory was about to float upwards we would combat it as one does battle with evil spirits.²¹

Still, Appelfeld admitted that it was only in Israel that he was capable of penning his masterpieces: "I have written all my novels in Jerusalem cafés. When I'm abroad, I may jot things down, edit a page or even a chapter, but I've never completed a short story or a novel abroad. Only in a Jerusalem café do I feel the freedom of imagination. That's my starting point. That's where I depart from and it is to there that I return."²²

Typically, Appelfeld's vast panoramas of vividly detailed meditations are leavened by an understated, symbolic style that is often Kafkaesque. His novels rarely tackle the Holocaust overtly or realistically, relying instead on parabolic, figurative, and surrealistic ingredients to describe the hopelessness, disorientation, and despair that enrobe the author's dramatis personae. Not infrequently, silences dot his canvas. His personal geysers of protestations continually explode with a visceral and tragic dimension, lodging the reader in

the shocking frame of history and entrusting them with the onerous burden of supplying the human terrors the author never mentions.

Appelfeld, throughout his canon, explores the world of cultured, converted, and assimilated Jews whose complete immersion and desire for societal acceptance in Europe's elite, humanistic milieu did not shield them from the poisonous root of antisemitism that led to their demise. The author explained that the "blind" Jews that populate his canvas were certain that they were different from the Jews who were targeted by the Nazis: "One of the most vicious ironies of World War II is the fact that most Jews didn't even know why they were being punished. Most saw themselves as an integral part of their society, as equal citizens. Many of them were patriotic Germans, Poles, Hungarians and so on. Most of them didn't know or didn't want to know they were Jewish. The Holocaust did not find a unified people, committed to its national or religious heritage. The Jews were undergoing a certain transformation, they were in the process of assimilation."²³

Not wanting to make obscene art of the Holocaust, he limns, albeit rarely, the monstrosity of the perpetrators. Yet, at the same time, in the Appelfeld universe, the Holocaust is never a subject outside the human experience since, in many of his stories, he portrays the emotionally scarred lives of the survivors, adjusting to their mundane life after the sustained and prolonged episodes of deprivation and humiliation.

Appelfeld has characterised his lean, spartan parables as a "saga of Jewish sadness – long Jewish sadness that had different variations. And I am trying to pick up the last chapters."²⁴ Indeed, Appelfeld's literary quilt, based chiefly on his and his parents' lives, has been defined as one continuous attempt to chronicle the deracination of Jewish life in Europe.²⁵ Though the Holocaust is Appelfeld's prevailing theme, his focus is to put a human face on the individual victims who were determinedly blind to the storm clouds gathering around them, who were caught in the web of antisemitism, and who were forced to assume the Jewish identity they worked so hard to rid themselves of. Appelfeld shrewdly avoids simple moral judgments, opting to remain outside the death camps or the ghettos, and guys his narratives in the abyss of postwar Europe or prior to the outbreak of World War II.