

Aharon Appelfeld

“Everything was Death. But Within It There Was a lot of Love”

Michal Govrin: I am excited to welcome Aharon Appelfeld, who will be opening the first session of our research group. We were not there, in the Holocaust, and the “memory” we hold of it is comprised of transmitted traces and a process of shaping similar to that of fiction. Therefore, we have undertaken to discuss the transmitted memory as a form of fiction. Aharon Appelfeld survived the Holocaust as a child, and chose to shape his memory through the prism of fiction. The characters he created accompany us beyond convention and ideology, and a reading of his works, one by one, reveals the roundabout way in which fiction can strike at the heart of the human kernel of the Holocaust and epitomize the good that flickered in the depths of darkness. Over the years, I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to engage in one-on-one personal and professional discourse with Aharon. I find myself following the trail he blazed, both in his literary act and in the depth of thought that rises up from his work. My dialogue with the works of Aharon Appelfeld also formed the basis for my decision to establish the discussion group Transmitted Memory and Fiction. During our preparation for the session, Aharon suggested that we include some excerpts from his works. He will read them himself, and at his request I will join in occasionally.

Aharon Appelfeld: I will read the opening section from *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*:¹

1 Appelfeld, Aharon (trans. Jeffrey M. Green). (2017). *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*. New York: Schocken, 3.

Translated from Hebrew by: Shaul Vardi.

Note: This is a written version of a conversation with the writer Aharon Appelfeld that took place at The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute on April 20, 2012 and constituted the opening session of the research group. A video recording of the encounter is available on YouTube in two parts (in Hebrew, see: <https://tinyurl.com/366y85tn>). At Professor Appelfeld’s request, the encounter took the form of a conversation rather than a lecture, and this is reflected in this written version. As part of the encounter, Appelfeld read selected excerpts from his books. He read most of them himself and Michal Govrin assisted. Some of the excerpts have been omitted from this text for the sake of brevity; readers can find the full texts in Appelfeld’s works, many of which have been translated into English. [Comments in parentheses are by the editors].

At the end of the war, I became immersed in constant slumber. Though I moved from train to train, from truck to truck, and sometimes from wagon to wagon, it was all in a dense, dreamless sleep. When I opened my eyes for a moment, the people looked heavy and expressionless.

No wonder I don't remember a thing about that long journey. I ate what they gave out or, rather, from what was left over. If I hadn't been thirsty, I probably wouldn't even have gotten up to look for a slice of bread. Thirst tortured me all along the way. If some memory of that sleep-drunk journey still remains with me, it's the streams where I knelt to gulp the water. The chilly water put out the fire inside me for a while but not for long.

The refugees carried me and supported me. Sometimes I was forgotten, and then someone remembered me and went back to pick me up. My body remembers the jolting more than I do. Sometimes it seems that I'm still in that darkness, drifting and being borne along. What happened to me during those days of sleep will probably be unknown to me forever. Sometimes a voice that spoke to me comes back, or the taste of a piece of bread that was shoved into my mouth. But aside from that, there is just darkness.

Michal Govrin: I will read the opening section of *The Story of a Life*:²

The pages before you are segments of contemplation and memory. Memory is elusive and selective; it holds on to what it chooses to hold on to. I won't say that it retains only what is good and pleasant. Very like a dream, memory takes specific details out of the viscous flow of events—sometimes tiny, seemingly insignificant details—stores them deeply away, and at certain times brings them up to the surface. Like a dream, memory also tries to imbue events with some meaning.

Ever since my childhood, I have felt that memory is a living and effervescent reservoir that animates my being. When I was still a child, I would sit and visualize the summer holidays at my grandparents' home in the country. For hours I'd sit by the window and picture the journey there. Everything that I recalled from previous vacations would return to me in the most vivid way.

Memory and imagination sometimes dwell together. In those longburied years it was as if they competed. Memory was tangible, as if solid. Imagination had wings. Memory pulled toward the known, and imagination sailed toward the unknown. Memory always brought me pleasure and tranquillity. Imagination would take me from place to place, but eventually would depress me. At times I learned that there are people who live solely by the power of imagination. My uncle Herbert was like that. He had inherited considerable wealth, but because he lived in a world of imagination, he wasted everything and was completely impoverished. When I got to know him better, he was already a poor man, living off the goodwill of his family, but even in his poverty he did not cease to dream. His gaze would be fixed far beyond you, and he always spoke about the future, as if the present or the past didn't exist.

It's amazing how clear even my most distant and hidden childhood memories can be, in particular those connected to the Carpathian Mountains and the broad plains stretching out at their foothills. During those last vacations before the war, our eyes would devour the mountains and plains with a fearsome longing, as if my parents knew that these were the last holidays, and that from now on life would be hell.

2 Appelfeld, Aharon. (trans. Aloma Halter). (2004). *The Story of a Life*. New York: Schocken, 1–2.

When World War II broke out, I was seven years old. The sequence of time became confused—no more summer and winter, no more long visits to my grandparents in the country. Our life was now crammed into a narrow room. For some time we were in the ghetto, and at the end of autumn we were thrown out of it. For weeks we were on the road, and then, eventually, in the camp, from which I managed to escape.

During the war I was not myself, but like a small creature that has a burrow, or, more precisely, a few burrows. Thoughts and feelings were greatly constricted. In truth, sometimes there welled up within me a painful sense of astonishment at why I had been left alone. But these reflections would fade with the mists of the forest, and the animal within me would return and wrap me in its fur. Of the war years I remember little, as if they were not six consecutive years. It's true that sometimes images surface from the heavy mist: a dark figure, a hand that had been charred, a shoe of which nothing was left but shreds.

These pictures, sometimes as fierce as the blast from a furnace, fade away quickly, as if refusing to reveal themselves, and again there's the same black tunnel that we call the war. This is the limit of conscious memory. But the palms of one's hands, the soles of one's feet, one's back, and one's knees remember more than memory. Had I known how to draw from them, I would have been overwhelmed with what I have seen. On some occasions I have been able to listen to my body, and then I would write a few chapters, but even they are just fragments of a pulsing darkness that will always be locked inside me.

Yehudit Inbar: There's a sentence in *The Story of a Life* that has stuck with me for many years. You say that in order to survive or to keep living during that period, someone had to reach out their hand to you. Otherwise it was simply impossible. I keep that motto with me whenever I have to deal with difficult materials. When I'm choosing what to include in an exhibition, I try to look for positive materials, because there was a lot of positive there. In those circumstances, that little gesture of reaching out a hand is amazing. These are things you give us, and in many ways this is what we should learn from the Holocaust—not just the endless victimhood that leads us to terrible places. You descend into the depths and look at them, and from there you create life and the positivity of life. In many senses, I received the hand you talk about. You, too, gave me a hand.

Aharon Appelfeld: I'd like to comment on the point you've raised. When we talk about the Holocaust, we talk about the horrors, dreadful sights, pain . . . all kind of ugly things associated with the subject that lead people to reject it. And that's a tragedy. When I arrived in this country in 1946, at the age of thirteen and a half, the first thing I sensed was that people didn't want to touch the subject. That was part of the silence. I arrived on a farm, a kind of kibbutz, for training. Whenever I tried to say anything—I didn't have any words and I couldn't say much—but anything I tried to say met with rejection. Essentially the message was: what you're about to say is meaningless. What matters is the present. The past with all its suffering and ugliness and death doesn't matter.

And what I wanted to say here is that my memories of the Second World War—and I hope this won't surprise you—are associated for me with a lot of love. Endless love. Anyone who was in the ghetto saw how mothers protected their children, how they didn't eat and only worried about feeding their young ones, how young lads stayed with their parents so that they wouldn't be left alone and protected them up to the last minute . . . What endless love. Of course everything was a catastrophe, everything was death. But within it there was a lot of love.

If I ask myself where the strength to write comes from, then it isn't from the horrific sights but from these images of love, and they were everywhere. On the personal level, there was an exceptional kind of devotion in this time. This devotion was expressed in words: you said a kind word to someone and just by doing that you saved him, because he was on the brink of death and that word was what saved his life. And it's interesting that people instinctively knew the right word to say at that moment. Not to mention that in those days someone would offer you a piece of bread, or half a piece of bread, or a quarter of a piece. On the brink of oblivion, on the brink of death, there was a lot of love.

The Jewish family, which was the most important kernel of Jewish life, was visibly manifested in those times. Grandchildren cared for the elderly up to the last moment, even though there was nothing you could do, nothing you could change. The only thing young people might have done was . . . but if the young ones had fled or abandoned the elderly, that would be the tragedy of the Holocaust. And even if you did run away, you didn't even want to think about what would await you.

There was some kind of love there. More than the civil code—some exceptional love. That's what I absorbed from it all. Ka-Tsetnik, for example, presented in his writing everything that people still dismiss to this day, the full ugliness—and there was ugliness there, but the victims were not to blame for it. When you're hungry, after two weeks of hunger, or a month, you're more like an animal . . . you're constantly hunting for a crumb.

So I believe that the people who said a kind word to me then, or reached out their hand to give me a piece of bread, saved me as a human being. My world was not left with the image of the hangman; my world was not left with the sight of endless, irreparable evil. I was left with people, and I loved them.

Even when I was outside [the ghetto], after I ran off to the forests, the Ukrainian underworld adopted me and I stayed with them. This was a cruel and harsh underworld, but even there someone would give me a piece of bread. I remember a wonderful moment there when one of the criminals noticed that my shoes had completely disintegrated and he gave me another pair. He changed me; he made me a different person.

I think it's impossible to create in any field, and certainly in this field, without love. That's the foundation of our lives and that's what builds them. And since in this case the catastrophe was so enormous, I would suggest that there was a need for some kind of surfeit love. On some level I thank God that along the whole way there was always someone who reached out their hand and said a word to me. I was alone in the world, a boy alone in the world . . . but someone gave me a piece of bread. If you only connect to the evil, you absorb and accept that evil. Evil is poison. I stood many times in the rows [during roll calls]. Throughout the whole war, nobody—no Jew, no victim—ever thought to themselves that they wanted to be like the officer at the front. No. I'm not saying that there weren't traitors or bad people—there were plenty. But the light . . . there was always some kind of light. That's the image that comes back to me. On every transport—the transport going there, and later, after liberation—there was always a Jew who had a Torah scroll on his back instead of a knapsack. He would walk alongside us or at the front carrying the Torah scroll on his back. For me, at least, that's something I remember more than all the thirst and hunger and stuff . . . That devotion, that moral devotion to declare that the Torah is more important than everything that is going on. That is might.

Yehudit Inbar: People need to shout out the things you say across the world.

Aharon Appelfeld: Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place and seen his reality. Because it was so difficult, because everything seems so satanic, people cannot imagine that there was also good and light there; there was also humanity.

I really like Primo Levi. He's a very dear person. But if you notice, in his books the Jewish heroes have been infected by the murderers and they've become a bit similar to them. But that's not how it was, that's my deep sense. The victim did not become a murderer, even if he underwent some kind of transformation. It's interesting that Primo Levi describes all kinds of cripples who absorbed evil, and their body—and maybe their soul, too—changed completely. They became a kind of reflection of what was around them—and then everything was bad, everything was evil. But with his last bit of strength, the victim held onto something good, kept something good within him. If that hadn't been the case, I wouldn't be standing here before you and I wouldn't write. A person cannot write from a point of negation, of no—a person writes from the basis of something internal, something with language. I'm not talking about my early years at home, up to the age of seven or eight, when I absorbed a lot of love and loyalty and friendship and affection, of course. I'm talking about the ghetto, the camps, everywhere; also the return after what happened, the long journey across Europe to Yugoslavia, Italy, and the Land of Israel. Yes—there, too. There, too. This is what we live on:

we live on the good. We can't live on poison, poison doesn't nourish. Sorry for saying this . . . but I need to add a reservation. I was a child, and children have both limited absorption and over-absorption: it moves between these two poles. For example, when I was in the forest I used to love watching the water and seeing my reflection. I drank, but more importantly than drinking I wanted to see myself in the water, it made me really happy. My reflection shimmered in the water. It's hard for me to explain the happiness I felt then, but I can remember the amazing happiness of seeing myself in the water.

Raya Morag: What about humor? How does humor connect to this life? Humor not necessarily as something comic or ironic, a distant glance, but as something that plays a different role in your texts.

Aharon Appelfeld: Look, humor appears in some places, but not in all the places in our life. There isn't humor in the synagogue; there isn't any overt humor in that sphere of human and God. During the Second World War, there was plenty of black humor. But I think the religious sphere also existed during the Holocaust. People were close to the edge, close to death, close to evil, and that leads to some kind of movement that you could call "religious." We forget that by this time some people were already removed from this realm, yet the Holocaust drew them in and sparked some form of religious revival in people's souls.

I'll read a passage from chapter six of *The Story of a Life*.³

Every town, it would seem, had its own Janusz Korczak. In our town the person who led the blind children to the railway station was the director of the Institute for the Blind, the teacher Gustav Gotesman. He was short, the same height as the children, and he did everything fast. He was renowned for his method of teaching: everything was learned through music. Melodies were continually wafting from the Institute for the Blind. Gotesman believed that music not only served as a good instrument for learning but also enhanced sensitivity in people. All the children at the institute spoke in melodic tones, even when they addressed one another; the frailty of their little bodies complemented the pleasantness of their speech. In the afternoons, they would sit on the steps and sing. They sang classical songs and Yiddish folk songs. Their voices had harmony and sweetness, and passersby would stand by the railings and listen to them. [. . .]

On October 13, 1942, the director of the Institute for the Blind was ordered to bring his children to the railway station. The children dressed in their Sabbath best; each put a book in Braille in his backpack, along with a plate, a mug, a fork, a spoon, and a change of clothes. Gotesman explained to them that the road to the railway station was not a long one, and that they would make five brief stops en route. At these stops they would sing classical songs and Yiddish songs. When they reached the railway station, they would sing their anthem. The children were excited, but not frightened. [. . .]

3 Ibid., 42–46.

At [the] first stop, the children sang songs by Schubert. There was a strong wind near the well, and the children strained to raise their voices. No one was there apart from them, and their song sounded like a prayer. [. . .] At the fourth stop, next to the ghetto's fence, many emotional people were waiting for them and showered them with gifts. One man on a balcony shouted at the top of his voice, "We love you, children, and soon we'll meet again. We'll never, ever forget how you sang. You were the angelic choirboys of our ghetto." [. . .] Here, too, women surrounded the children and didn't allow them to continue on their way. But now they were no longer on their own. The soldiers posted alongside the ghetto's fence began swinging their clubs, and all at once, the singing ceased.

On the narrow road to the railway station, the children halted and again broke into song. The guards must have been taken by surprise and let them sing at first, but not for long. They immediately set upon the children with their clubs, and the children, who were holding one another's hands, trembled as one body. "Don't be afraid, children," Gotesman whispered, and they managed to overcome their pain. At the railway station, they still managed to sing their anthem in its entirety before being pushed into the cattle cars.

Someone wrote a seminar paper about this chapter. He went off and checked whether there was really an orphanage in the town and whether I had got all the details right (I was eight and a half years old when I left my hometown). And what did this seminar paper discover? That there really was an orphanage, and the children were deported. There were Communists and observant Jews, and they were all deported. That's what happened in every town, not just in my town. That's what happens when you look for reality in a writer's work. The particular is true if it is general. Otherwise it just remains in the confines of the particular.

When I was very young, twenty-four, I wrote a story called "The Road from Drubna to Drovitz." What was this journey? A group of Jews, most of them observant, but there were also some who weren't, and a small boy among them are traveling to visit their rebbe. They travel from Drubna to Drovitz, and there are stops along the way. At the first stop they sing psalms, light a fire, and drink coffee. The two-year-old boy is excited by what he sees. Then they make a second stop at a slightly higher altitude. Here they sing special songs and part of Ibn Gabirol's "The Kingly Crown," then again they light a bonfire and all the rest of it. This journey lasts for a whole night—they set off in the evening and reach Drovitz: from Drubna to Drovitz. And there are stops along the way, and at each stop there are also some arguments. There was one Bundist who wants to sing at one of the stops and they don't let him. Eventually they allow him to go ahead and he sings a Bundist song in Yiddish. And so it goes on. When they reach Drovitz in the morning, the town is empty. Nothing. There was a pogrom, people were killed or fled, and the town is empty. That's how the story ends. I was very young and I was trying to say something. If you ask me now what I was trying to say, I don't know. And of course there was some element of imagination. A month after the story was published, I received a letter: "Dear Appelfeld, I also made the journey from Drubna to Drovitz."

Period. I also made the journey from Drubna to Drovitz. “I’m eighty-two; you may even be a little older than me” (I was twenty-three or twenty-four at the time). “I’m surprised that you remember all the details so well, and you remember exactly what happened at each of the stops. The coffee we drank is still before me, I still drink from it. And the special night, the slivovitz we drank . . . especially Reb Mendel’s slivovitz.” The old man repeated every detail. “I imagine you are living in an old people’s home, but if you could write me I would be very grateful, you will be reviving my soul. You presented an entire world; you gave me such a gift that I do not know if I will ever be able to repay you.” That’s what he wrote. I put the letter in my coat pocket and of course to this day, more than a few years on, I never replied . . . But without mystifying the whole thing, the interesting point is that I wrote the story out of some feeling of inner conviction . . . my conviction was so strong that it became a reality: Drubna exists and Drovitz exists. I just chose the names because of the way these sounded—Drubna, Drovitz. But for him it was tangible reality. I’m not raising this for no reason. I’m trying to show you that my writing is not realistic, it’s not realism, it’s not a replica of reality. A large part of my work is not just a replica of reality.

I remember that when I sent my first stories to editors, then of course they would send them back. They didn’t publish them. They would write: “Where did this happen?” Or a page and half on, in parentheses: “You need to expand here . . . where did this happen, why did it happen like this?” Gradually you have to become sure that what you see is really true, that it isn’t leading you to some kind of false place. It must be true in terms of your inner world. Your inner world leads you to the true images. That kind of thing has happened to me a lot over my life. I remember that I wrote a story in the 1950s about refugees who came to Israel after the Holocaust. They didn’t go to the kibbutzim or moshavim or Tel Aviv, but they lived on the beach in huts, a bohemian life by the sea. They’d come from the camps and ghettos—a normal life wasn’t an option for them. They’d drink coffee, play cards, deal in the black market, things like that. And that was the life they . . . I mean, after the Holocaust you can’t just sit in an armchair and read *Haaretz*, so you live that way. None of them were married, each of them had a boyfriend or girlfriend and they lived on the beach. There was a very well-known literary critic at the time, Azriel Uchmani from Sifriyat Poalim, who was on the far left of the scene. He looked at me and asked, “Appelfeld, how old are you?” “Twenty-five.” “This is what you want to write? This?! Instead of them working, getting up each morning, you write . . . What is this?! Is this educational? What is this stuff? We have moshavim and kibbutzim and training programs and the army . . . and you have to write this?” Of course it was a slap in the face for me. I mean, I felt that maybe what he was telling me was true. After that final point, he said: “Anyway, now show me where it was. I’m willing to go

with you to that place, show me exactly where it was.” So I told him, “I saw it in . . .” “Ah, so it didn’t exist. You didn’t see it.”

I walked around with my first book for years. No-one wanted it. Every time the same question: “Why don’t these people work?” Before that, I had written a short story about a woman Holocaust survivor who arrives in Israel, lives on the edge of Tel Aviv, and can’t fall asleep. That’s her problem. She’s thirty-two years old and she can’t sleep. The story is her struggle with the night. I sent it to Yediot Aharonot or Maariv (these newspapers still had literary pages back then). They wrote on top, “What’s this about? What does it mean that she can’t sleep?” In the 1950s, the atmosphere in Israel was so ideologically mobilized that there was no room for anything else, not another word or imagination, not any other possible course of life. Either you went to the army or to training or you worked for the labor union. The people who came here in the 1940s and 1950s—Holocaust survivors—brought enormous baggage with them. Baggage of life and pain. And here there was a kind of wall. You couldn’t . . . I mean you could only speak in that language, you couldn’t introduce any other kind of language or any other word.

I remember one time I was walking with a friend of mine from Czernowitz who I’d met here. We were speaking German—that was my native language. Someone came up from behind me and said, “Jew—speak Hebrew!” The tragedy is that at the time—in 1946, when I arrived—the Jewish community here numbered half a million, maybe a little more. And so many refugees arrived—about 750,000 Holocaust survivors. The people who came brought a whole life with them, full of thoughts and feelings. Yes, it was hard for them to speak—but no-one helped them to speak. There were walls on every side—actually positive walls. You went off to a kibbutz or to work in the orchards—that’s fine, nothing wrong with that. But the orchard choked you . . . what’s so good about it if it chokes you?

Mendy Kahane: When I read your work, or when you talk and tell your stories, I hear echoes of Yiddish literature, I hear Zeitlin and all kinds of names. A very full world, as if the world of Yiddish is speaking in a Hebrew garb.

Aharon Appelfeld: I’m a Jew. I speak Jewish.

Mandy Kahane: You speak Jewish. And when I read the newspaper—it’s a bit hard for me to say this, but I feel that they don’t speak Jewish anymore.

Aharon Appelfeld: Let’s put it this way. Ideological life was so strong in the 1940s and 1950s, and if you will—so persuasive, that there was a kind of total repression of everything that came before. I was thirteen and a half years old when I arrived and I brought a lot of baggage with me. I didn’t have an education—I’d finished first grade and that was it. My mother tongue was German, my grandparents

spoke Yiddish, the surroundings were Ukrainian, our neighbors were Poles, the elite spoke French—I mean, anyone who graduated from high school, and there were two Latin high schools in my city, spoke French. Those were the languages of the elite, German or French. Not that I knew anything of all these languages—I didn't know anything. But I felt I'd brought some serious baggage with me, not just a bundle of rags on my back.

First they take your name from you. My name at home was Erwin, more or less Aharon. The only thing I brought from the Holocaust—no clothes, no belongings, no education—was my name. Erwin was a kind of exclusive name, a meaningful one, and one I had grown up with. So they took that from me. Occasionally—no, it was more than occasionally—I'd hear my mother in a dream or a daydream calling "Erwin, Erwin." The name always came like a ringing bell. Erwin. Another thing—we had a big house there, and I was an only child. I used to play in the inner room. I'd play with blocks, and I had a kind of little train that went round and round, like all the rich kids. Every half hour or so, as if to make sure I was still alive, my mother would call out, "Erwin, wo bist du?" (Erwin, where are you?). And I would reply, "Ich bin hier"—I'm here. It was like a kind of ritual, and it was really nice to hear, "Erwin, wo bist du?" The name sounded pleasant. Suddenly they cut the name away from you. As if in a circumcision, they cut your name off.

Secondly, you had some grounding in these languages, particularly in German and Yiddish, which for me went together—German from my parents and Yiddish from my grandparents. Then they told you, "No! That's forbidden! It's a foreign language!" So you start to stammer . . . We arrived without the language, and it's not such an easy task for your mouth to get used to the new language. After all, the most precious thing a person can take with them is their mother language. You don't have to be a psychologist or sociologist or whatever to understand that a mother tongue is like a mother's milk. If you cut off someone's tongue, they will be an invalid. All the group of children I was with, I see them now—they are engineers, physicians—and to this day they still find it hard to construct a sentence. Even now. They phrase it wrongly and it sounds artificial. It doesn't have a foundation, as if they had just plastered it on. To this day they still stammer. To this very day. So they take your name and they take your mother tongue.

Another thing . . . This was a transitional period. My parents were assimilated Jews, but my grandparents were traditional. They lived in the Carpathian mountains and we used to visit them two or three times a year. There were tall trees there and low houses, and the smell of flowers and fruit . . . all the good things. Grandfather had a little synagogue next to his house that belonged to him. Since there weren't many Jews, on Sabbath the local Jews and visitors would gather at the synagogue. A little wooden synagogue coated in wine-red wallpaper. And inside sawdust, and flowers on the windowsills. It was enchanting, and the prayer was

part of it. Grandfather would wrap me inside his prayer shawl. Hopelessly (because he knew I didn't know anything) he would show me the letters, making an effort as I huddled under the prayer shawl. He was afraid of father, who would be furious if I learned it . . . The sight and smell also stuck with me. So all the meaningful things in life—name, language, belief or a drop of belief—were all taken from you. You are left with nothing. Then I made a desperate effort to find my way back to myself.

Not to mention the Holocaust, of course. There was a taboo about that, too—a strong taboo. Thirteen-year-old children arrived, and instead of saying, “Children, tell us how it was. What happened to you, how did you get here?”—instead of this, there were all kinds of slogans: “We have come to the Land to build and to be built,” “not like lambs to the slaughter.” It was all taboo. So you yourself have nothing, just a bit of the present. No parents, no grandparents, no familiar sights. In sociological and human terms, the consequences are harsh. I felt that if I wasn't going to live with my parents, and I wasn't going to live with my grandparents, and I wasn't going to be connected to their faith, then I would be nothing. Even at the age of thirteen, it was clear to me that my physical and spiritual existence depended on my connection to them. That's what I'm talking about.

Michal Govrin: Your comments are true regarding our whole existence here in this country.

Ron Margolin: I have a slightly harsher perspective on the Yishuv before the war and the Yishuv after the war. After all, a large majority of the people that supposedly gave you—the newcomers—this message of Zionism and building had also come from there. It's a reaction (that began then and continues to this day) of repression, and an inability to see the newcomers, who reminded them of all the people who didn't make it here—their brothers and sisters, and sometimes parents or cousins who had been murdered. When you read the famous comment by the Lubavitcher Rebbe (a comment that angered Haika Grossman back then) that the Holocaust was an operation that allowed the recovery of a sick people . . . then that's the ultra-Orthodox version of the secular slogan “from Holocaust to revival.” It's a sickness that has accompanied us since then, an egotistical way of looking at ourselves, instead of considering our commitment to those who are gone. But you look at the people who are gone. In Israeli culture the focus is always on ourselves. There's a structural and cultural problem here. And that's a great task, I think: to save the Jewish people from its disastrous inability to adopt a human perspective that encompasses everything you manage to say.

Etty BenZaken: Of course it has much wider ramifications. The Zionist ethos, which as you say was unable to contain or see those who did not make it here,

later developed into an inability to contain any alternative narrative, for example the narrative of the Mizrahi Jew or the Palestinian Arab. This influences us as a society. This healing we need is vital because we were raised on a very particular kind of ethos that cannot contain any otherness.

Michal Ben-Naftali: My sense is that the “us” or the “we” have undergone a process of pluralization. I have a strange feeling that you describe your experience here in Israel in much more brutal and difficult terms than what happened during those traumatic years (and you didn’t use the term traumatic). Your unique, existential ability to witness and mobilize good doesn’t seem to be applied to your experience in Israel.

Aharon Appelfeld: I spoke about the Holocaust and about manifestations of great love, of motherhood and love for children on the edge of the pit. That was one side of it. To this day I am grateful that I saw what happened to the victims and it didn’t lead me to an ideological perspective. The ideology in Israel, too, was alien to me, and it still is. Ideology classifies and numbers things. It tells you exactly what you are supposed to want; it sees the world and mandates the world and all you see. That’s alien to me; it always has been. I got a lot in Israel. It’s a wonderful country. For years I used to sit in cafés, and to this day I still like to sit in cafés. The cafés were full of Holocaust survivors. There was one café I went to for almost twenty years, Café Peter.

Aliza Auerbach: I remember you sitting there with a slice of cheesecake.

Aharon Appelfeld: I sat in Café Peter for twenty years and it felt like my home. People spoke Austro-Hungarian German there. They ate strudel or cheesecake, you could choose one or the other. I didn’t have money to pay and I had a long list of debts with Ilana. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel was surrounded by a wall of ideology, but most people were like me, more or less. Refugees, I mean. The minority that was ideology imposed its will on society as a whole. It was a harsh ideology that made lots of demands of people. But because I was . . . among my people, let’s say, then I didn’t feel it. In *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, the refugees take the young man from one train to the next, from one place to another, and in Israel, too, they kept on taking him.

One thing that the Land of Israel meant to me, and that’s stayed with me to this day, is my love of the Hebrew language. If you read *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, you’ll see that this young man was so frustrated by how hard it was to bond with the Hebrew language. He would sit every day and copy passages from the Bible, passage after passage. So you have the Hebrew language, and you have all the wonderful people I met here (and I don’t distinguish between those who arrived thirty years before me or twenty years after me) . . . People who

have a sense of a Jewish world. And I found lots of people here who have a sense of a Jewish world.

Michal Govrin: Suddenly lots of Jews arrive. The world you describe—of shelves left orphaned, of voices we buried deep in the ground because we couldn't cope with them. The landscapes we left behind that have no place in our reality here and that we cannot return to. In that sense, the transmission of the memory of the Holocaust is a metaphor for so many other uprootings. And your voice is a bridge for repeated transmission. Our need that never stops, the man who never stopped, never stopped . . . We stand in front of this abyss all the time; we have to cross it time after time and seek paths to it.

Odeya Kohen Raz: What relationship do you have today with your mother tongue, with German?

Aharon Appelfeld: A mother tongue is a mother tongue.

Odeya Kohen Raz: Do you write in it? Do you dream in it?

Aharon Appelfeld: I stopped speaking German when I was eight or eight and a half. I didn't nurture my German. During the war I spoke Ukrainian and Russian. I even had a Ukrainian name—Yanek. So I didn't nurture my German. And over the years it disappeared somehow, even from my dreams. [But] even now, occasionally, [when I'm writing], then when you write have to concentrate, you write a sentence and search for a word, and in my case I search for a word in Hebrew. And suddenly what springs to mind is not a Hebrew word, but a German one. I didn't expect it or anticipate it . . . it was buried there somewhere. Since a mechanism of effort is activated, then instead of the word I need, it raises up some word from somewhere else, and sometimes it's quite accurate.

Odeya Kohen Raz: Do you feel a need to write in German? Do you sometimes want to express yourself in the language?

Aharon Appelfeld: No. That doesn't happen. I mean . . . my German isn't cultural, it's from the home, like homemade bread, and it stayed on the level of cheese and bread and that kind of thing—very vital things that I love very much, but not more than that, and I didn't nurture it. I couldn't have done, because nurturing German would have meant that it would compete with my language, because I wanted to make Hebrew my mother tongue. I realized that if I didn't make Hebrew my mother tongue, I wouldn't be able to extract what you need to extract from the language. So there was an element of competition here. I didn't nurture other languages, either—even Russian, which I knew very well by this point. The one language I did nurture was Yiddish. Only Yiddish.

Odeya Kohen Raz: Did you want to write in Yiddish, too?

Aharon Appelfeld: No, because it wasn't . . . because I realized that if I wanted to be a Jewish writer, I must know Yiddish. It was almost an ideological decision, I'd say. I needed to know Yiddish, so I made an effort. During my visits to Meah Shearim, I learned to listen to how the children learn in Yiddish. Sometimes I would go into a study hall and learn a page of Gemara with someone in Yiddish. And there were also Bundists in Jerusalem who would meet once a week and talk in Yiddish, and listen to lectures in Yiddish. Later I learned some Yiddish at the university. With Yiddish, I didn't feel . . . with German, I felt there was a competition, but with Yiddish there wasn't any competition. I still enjoy speaking Yiddish. I'm not always fluent, but some days I speak very fluently.

Galili Shahar: There is a lot of ambivalence in your comments. The Holocaust event you describe isn't one of a concentration camp and an extermination camp, because the person is still clothed; they still have their human image, their tradition . . . they hold a page and speak a word; they still have a family. It's a kind of suspended culture, very Jewish, and the Holocaust still holds something in suspension. It even has continuity. Something very, very normal—and very extreme. I thought about Aharon—the priestly mission you were given when you arrived here, so to speak. There's the act of speaking, but all the stories are written with a kind of stammer. And you say: it's not just because of the struggle to learn the language. It continued here, in Palestine—the Land of Israel, and afterwards in the state. The Holocaust is also present in the experience of migration. Your study of Hebrew has something of an impulse or attraction in it. I'd call it the filling of a lack, because you describe things that were lacking, and from these depths stems speech—clipped, but nevertheless speech.

Michal Govrin: Aharon, your writing has addressed the reality in Israel as a piercing question, or in other ways—but it is also about Europe. In European writing, the image of the Jew is being drawn toward the image of the holy martyr, together with the growing expropriation of the Jewish story. Some Jewish writers have also got caught up in this easy route of echoing the ready-made European story. They blend into it and meet its needs in terms of the salvational image of the Jew suffering in the Holocaust. The struggle today revolves around questions about how to tell, who holds the story, and from what perspective it will be brought. And in this context, your tone is so important—a tone of non-innocent insistence, aware of the Jewish perspective, and with the strength and sound of the Hasidic tale that continues to rise up from the writing . . . and humor, in the sense of the ability to look at things upside down.

It is no less important to examine your act of writing as it appears in translations into European languages. The strength of a story that comes from Hebrew, has survived all the obstacles of local silencing, and then encounters the European silencing, which is perhaps even stronger than the Israeli equivalent—of a Europe in a state of repression, and with the return of antisemitism. The issue of transmitted memory and fiction is common to us and Europe, but are we aware of the echo created by what we do here in our internal discourse—how it looks from the standpoint of the other? In that sense, your writing acts within Hebrew and within Israel, but no less so in Europe and in the entire world.

Aharon Appelfeld: I will read the opening section of *The Age of Wonders*.⁴

Many years ago Mother and I took the night train home from the quiet, little-known retreat where he had spent the summer. The coach was new, and on one of its rounded walls was a poster of a girl holding a bunch of cherries in her hand. Our places were reserved, the seats solid and comfortable with embroidered white antimacassars on their headrests. The compartment door was open and a girl, very like the one in the poster, stood there with a wooden tray in her hands. She stood in the doorway for a long time and then suddenly, as if set in motion by some external command, started walking down the aisle serving coffee and cheesecake. [. . .]

The silence of the summer was over. Now we were on the long journey home. It too was magical, full of delicious details, such as the girl with the green silk scarf around her neck, who for some reason looked to me like a baroness. Her face against the white antimacassar was pale and transparent. Only a short while ago two servants had lifted her suitcases onto the luggage rack, and a swarthy man with a strangely elegant air had kissed her on the forehead. She had not moved a muscle since. She sat staring into space, her eyes apparently fixed on some point in the distance. Although she was partly hidden by the compartment curtain, half her face was enough for me. A stream of pleasure flowed through my limbs at the sight of her silhouette. But alas, my happiness was already flawed, created incomplete; a thin sorrow gnawed at it. The secret suspicion that this pretty face would wither before the end of the long journey shadowed my small joy. I fixed my eyes on her intently, determined not to miss the slightest movement of her face.

Michal Ben-Naftali: Did the Eichmann trial, or any other event, mark a shift in terms of the way you were accepted? Do you feel that your writing suddenly found a public echo, a community that reads and responds?

Aharon Appelfeld: In recent years I have received letters. Quite a lot of letters. Some of them are rather formal: “Thank you so much,” “fine writing.” Some imply a degree of reservation: “That’s fine, too.” And some letters follow a pattern that has repeated itself over the past decade: “Appelfeld, I’m the son of Holocaust

⁴ Appelfeld, Aharon. (trans. Dalya Bilu). (1981). *The Age of Wonders*. Boston: David R. Godine, 3–4.

survivors. My parents never told me, and I didn't ask. Now they are gone, and your books are my parents." No less than that! This shakes me every time, because I'm not willing to be a parent to so many children. A few, yes—but not so many! [laughs]. And it's not one or two letters. Almost every week I get a letter like that. I sense that there is a kind of undercurrent here. Because they don't say, "My parents never told me, I never asked, now they've gone and it's all over." No—it isn't over.

Michal Govrin: All of us are also a little bit your children.

Aharon Appelfeld: One more thing before we part. They are making a film based on one of my early books, *Night After Night*.⁵ I went to see them shooting the film. The story is about a boarding house in Jerusalem where people live in Yiddish. It's set in the 1950s, the people are Holocaust survivors, and they feel that if there is a holy language, it is Yiddish, so they speak in Yiddish. They live a bohemian life—lots of vodka, cards, lots of women, lots of everything—and lots of Yiddish. I wanted to see the actors. Most of them were the children of Holocaust survivors, aged around 30–35. Suddenly, because they were involved in this film, another layer was revealed—the Yiddish they picked up, the Russian they picked up, the Polish they picked up. As if on top of their Israeliness there was some kind of additional layer. The Israeli character can be a bit rough and crude; here there's another layer, a very delicate one, and a much more delicate, whispered kind of speech . . . That was a real surprise for me—in these particular conditions, suddenly a different kind of layer is exposed.

Michal Govrin: And that's also part of Israeliness.

Aharon Appelfeld: But it's not visible, it's latent, not fully expressed. Yet here it was expressed fully. Whole sentences in Yiddish, something you wouldn't expect from someone who came from some moshav or was born in Afula or . . . You wouldn't expect that . . . or, I don't know, my father was a pilot, you wouldn't expect that, either.

Michal Govrin: I would like to thank Aharon Appelfeld for his work, for the words in his books, for the words that led to the founding of this group, and for the words that have opened up our closed discussion here today and cleared a way for us. We could not have expected such works or for more words than we received. And I just want to ask for many more books from you. After all, you have suitcases full of manuscripts, I know that. So take stuff out of your suitcases! [laughs]

Aharon Appelfeld: Thank you very much, it was a real pleasure to be here.

5 Appelfeld, Aharon. (2019). *Night After Night* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Keter.