

An Interview With The Author Prof. Aharon Appelfeld

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The Prominence of the Holocaust in Culture and Literature

Q: In your opinion, has the Holocaust become present in a real way in Western civilization? Would it be fair to say that the Holocaust is evident only at the level of news, or has it been internalized at the deeper levels of culture — literature and philosophy — fields that are perhaps less visible but much more meaningful?

A: The Holocaust is first and foremost a Jewish experience. But to this day, neither Western civilization nor the Jewish people have confronted it seriously. The West doesn't confront the Holocaust because it has guilt feelings. It senses that something terrible, perhaps unprecedented, happened on its territory, and it represses it — it cannot pass judgment on itself. We Jews, on the other hand, for almost the opposite reasons, avoid the subject — we repress the Holocaust because of shame, fear, repulsion. We feel that we weren't heroic enough, that we were led “like sheep to the slaughter”.

The preoccupation seems intense because many history books and chronicles have been written about the Holocaust. But history, by its very nature, creates distance, generalizations, and partitions, so it can't be said that the Holocaust has been internalized as a matter of psychic probing. Even in literature — whose essence is coping with the unconscious and with the deepest levels of the soul — the Holocaust has not become a central theme. Moreover, to this day no personal film has been made about the Holocaust — a film that follows one Jewish family and describes what happened to it before, during, and after the Holocaust. After all, to understand any phenomenon we have to go to the micro level, not the macro. But we don't yet

have a micro. We have a macro — there's Holocaust Remembrance Day, there's history — but these don't contain an understanding of the soul. I think this is a clear indication that this terrible event, which should have been a guide for Western thinking and for our own, is slipping away and escaping.

Q: Elie Wiesel once said that the Holocaust invented the genre of testimony. Is that the micro you're talking about?

A: Those testimonies are certainly important, but they are limited. The testimony tends to be a form of psychological release rather than coping. The testimonies create the right void for forgetfulness. The survivor who gives his testimony feels that by doing so he has done his duty and closed the subject. The testimony doesn't create circles and doesn't reverberate inside.

Q: I want to ask you again what you mean, then, when you say the matter isn't being confronted seriously. After all, Holocaust museums are being established all over the world, and international conferences about the subject are held each year in many countries. In literature, too, a lot of attention is paid to the Holocaust. In Israel, for example, K. Zetnik, Yoram Kaniuk, Ida Fink, and you, of course, have written about it, as have writers from the young generation such as Grossman and Itamar Levy. In the United States Elie Wiesel is very popular. Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, and Nelly Sachs have been translated into all languages. What do you consider “serious?”

A: Perhaps we should begin with Hebrew literature. The Holocaust was unquestionably the deepest and most painful laceration that the Jewish body, and perhaps the Jewish psyche, has ever absorbed. You would expect something like that to reverberate powerfully in all sorts of works — in folk songs, in other songs, in belles-lettres. But no! The top writers have hardly written anything about the Holocaust. Agnon didn't. Hazaz didn't. Yizhar wrote almost nothing. The only member of that generation who wrote seriously about the Holocaust was Uri Zvi Greenberg. Even the authors you mentioned

from the young generation, their works on the Holocaust are more of a literary experiment than a literary experience or an experience of psychic depth.

It saddens and hurts me that I am the only author in Israel who is dedicated to writing about the Holocaust. No one else has taken this issue and tried to internalize it and render it into a flow of words, images, and pictures. You would expect that in a country where every third or fourth person is a Holocaust survivor or the relative of a survivor, I wouldn't be the only one writing obsessively about the Holocaust. You would expect at least 100 authors to be obsessed with the subject around the clock.

One of the reasons for the paucity of literary writing about the Holocaust is no doubt the Zionist perception after the Holocaust that saw itself vindicated more than ever. It regarded itself as the winner in its struggle to negate the Diaspora, and it looked down “arrogantly” on what had happened in Europe and on the survivors. In a way, Zionism favored the repression. It claimed: “What's over is over; now we're building new lives, a new Jew.” This attitude of looking from the outside and wanting to be right is what interfered with in-depth observation and correct assessment of the situation. The outer surroundings said, “We warned you”; “We've told you so since the turn of the century and no one wanted to listen”.

The point of departure was laying blame, and the sense of guilt percolated into literature and all layers of life. Thus a dichotomy of “attacker” and “repressor” developed. The fiercer the attack was, the stronger the repression became. Instead of opening up, the victim retreated into apologetics.

Q: Where would you expect to see this event in American or European culture?

A: You have to draw a distinction between European culture, which had a direct bearing on the Holocaust, and American culture, which can keep a certain distance. In European culture the sense of guilt is extreme. It is

prominent in Germany, France, and basically everywhere in Europe. As I said, it's hard to be in the defendant's chair. The moment you become the bad guy, either you write apologetically or you fall silent, since silence is stronger. Nevertheless, Europe does have what I would call "a few decent voices," humane, humanistic voices that have overcome the guilt feelings and managed to cope by means of literature with the rupture that the Holocaust caused in culture. I am referring to an author like Camus, who wrote, a sort of allegory for what happened in Europe in World War II. True, he only mentions the Jews en passant, but, in a sense, it is an existential way of coping with the absolute evil created by Nazism. I think existentialism, which developed extensively after World War II, primarily around such figures as Camus and Sartre, indirectly draws on the Holocaust for sustenance.

So there are voices, but not many. You mentioned Borowski. Yes, he writes about the murder of the Jews, but he depicts the Jews as being in a meat grinder, in their last writhings between the cattle cars and the crematorium. These are his Jews. This isn't the profound view that literature should adopt. But hardly any other books exist. I have not yet found a single book — and I'm always looking — that boils down to this: Jews used to live in this town, and they vanished. What happened to them? What befell them? What was their affinity to their place of residence? What sort of Jews were they? Good Jews? Bad Jews? You won't find such a book!

Kafka, Modern Jewish Experience and the Holocaust

Q: You said that the Holocaust is above all a Jewish experience. On the other hand, in *Masot be-guf rishon* ("First-Person Essays" [Heb.]) you write that the person who first helped you find the words to express your own personal experience in the Holocaust was Kafka, and he isn't considered an essentially Jewish writer. Shouldn't the Holocaust be thought of, then, as a universal case of suffering that transcends the Jewish experience?

A: Most of the people in the ghettos, the labor camps, and the extermination camps were Jewish, and therefore the Holocaust was a Jewish experience.

But it was not a one-time Jewish experience and it was a modern Jewish experience, not a traditional Jewish experience. Kafka is a good way of illustrating this. Kafka was a Jew in his heart and soul. He learned Hebrew and Yiddish. He attended a beit midrash in Frankfurt and he wanted to settle in Palestine. He had lots of women, but most of them were Jewish. I don't mean that he proclaimed his Jewishness every morning, but that he was connected with Jewishness in every sense of the word. For example, the pounding at the castle — the desire to enter and understand this mystery — is a very Jewish longing. For good reason, authors such as his colleague Max Brod tried to find kabbalistic meaning in his works.

Consider, for example, his two greatest works, *The Trial* and *The Castle*. He felt that he was a defendant who had done no wrong. A man is sitting at home or in a pension, looking forward to breakfast, and suddenly someone comes in and says, “You're under arrest! You are accused!” for no reason and no purpose. That's the classic Jewish situation, manifested most acutely during the Holocaust. It was a situation of total guilt with no sin. People were accused, taken from their homes, shut up in ghettos, led to railroad stations and from there to extermination camps — not because they had done anything wrong but because Jewish blood flowed in their veins. Kafka illustrated the absurdity of Jewish life in Europe even before the Holocaust. In this sense Kafka grasped the lowly position Jews held in European civilization.

Q: Would you say, then, that the Holocaust sums up the absurdity of European civilization?

A: To a certain extent, yes. After all, Jews believed that if they abandoned their heritage, customs, way of life, and faith, and integrated into European civilization, assimilated into the fabric of European civilization, they would be doing the best thing for themselves and their surroundings. So they did it in Germany, France, even Poland. Most Jews between the two world wars were on the brink of abandoning their Jewishness en route to a Jewish universalism or cosmopolitanism of sorts. The tragedy is that at that very moment someone

came and told them, "You can't do that. You're a stranger. Your thoughts, your mentality, and your nature are alien. You're not only alien; you're also dangerous, and we're going to obliterate you." In other words, just as the Jew's every fiber leaned toward assimilation, there came a radical, satanic force that not only halted this trend but wiped out the people who were inclined to pursue this process. That's the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Q: In fact, however, Kafka largely represented that assimilationist trend.

A: Kafka performed a psychic analysis of the defendant. Although he refrained from mentioning the Jew explicitly in order to give this absurd situation a much broader meaning, this, in essence, is Jewish psychology. A Jewish fate, if you will. Interestingly, this analysis led him indirectly to Zionism, and he even wanted to settle in Palestine.

Q: In your fiction, the attitude toward the assimilating Jew is very ambivalent. You show real contempt, but you also recognize that he represents the near past of the Jewish people and that one can't dissociate from him or deny him. After all, without a past it's hard to construct an identity and a spiritual world in the present. How do you deal with this problem in your works? And how can the Jewish people cope with the fact that not only has its past been rendered extinct by the Nazis, but it was also shown, as you claim, to be a failure?

A: I do not examine the issue of assimilation from the angle of Zionism and Judaism only. Assimilation created a Jewish type, a person who has uprooted himself and seeks his place with Western civilization. On the one hand, he feels the pain of severance from his heritage; on the other hand, European civilization has not given him a warm welcome. This created a rather complex type of person on the verge of neurosis. Otto Weininger, who committed suicide, and many others were genuinely neurotic. Nevertheless, this stimulating situation of life on the seam of two civilizations, actually induced new thoughts and feelings. It created a highly variegated literature of assimilated Jews.

It is interesting, for example, that even Joyce, seeking a main hero for his work *Ulysses*, created a Jew, Blum. This Jew, who lives in Dublin and is divorced from his roots but has no share in the other civilization, is emblematic of modernity. The assimilated Jews played such a central role in bringing modernity to the world, because they had extraordinary sensitivity and their thoughts blazed non-stop. Kafka, Marx, Husserl, Wittgenstein and others contributed to modernity at the highest levels, those of psychology and philosophy, precisely because of this stimulating position. Whereas modernity profited from the fact that the best Jewish brains were turning outward, for Jewish civilization, of course, it was a terrible loss.

Incidentally, even Herzl wanted to integrate the Jews into Western civilization. Before he came up with the Zionist solution and wrote *Der Judenstaat*, his plan had been to have the Jews convert to Christianity.

Q: So what is our past? Do we have roots?

A: Our past is complex. It takes a great deal of sensitivity and intelligence to address it correctly. In a crude sense, one may say that our past has two facets. One consists of the Jewish sources: the Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud, medieval literature, the Zohar, Hasidism, and Maimonides, that is, our great religious edifice. The other consists of the secular Jewish works created in Europe in the past two hundred years. The two facets are inseparable; only a proper combination of them is our past.

The Holocaust as a Religious, Human and Jewish Experience

Q: In your books you describe a yearning for a religious experience. Should the Holocaust be understood in religious terms?

A: The Holocaust was not just annihilation. World War II lasted about six years. Lots of thoughts, feelings, and emotions pulsed during those years. Anyone who experienced the ordeal of the Holocaust felt that something

profound had happened to him inside, unless he had shut himself off completely and repressed his experiences altogether.

There is no doubt that those deep inner feelings manifested themselves in various ways. There were, of course, manifestations of total cynicism and deeply rooted pessimism about the human psyche, but there was also a feeling that a person is not an insect. (I use the word “insect” because the Germans attempted to portray Jews as insects that had to be exterminated.) And just as one encountered a lot of cruelty during the Holocaust, one also encountered quite a bit of good-heartedness and humaneness.

These contacts at the most critical moments of your life, in which a person offered you a slice of bread, gave you a pat on the shoulder, helped you cross a body of water, or shared a bit of something with you — even a good word — gave you the feeling that a person is not only dust and ashes but also contains a spark. Call it a Divine spark. When I say that one could experience something religious in the Holocaust, I mean the religious element of the human being — something extra that the human being possesses, a nobility of spirit that we usually attribute to God but suddenly encounter in man. To paraphrase Brenner: We don't know whether or not God exists, but we do know what people have attributed to Him, so let's do what people have attributed to God. They say He's merciful, so let's be merciful. They say He's understanding, so let's try to be understanding. Since we have lost the simple faith of our ancestors, let's adopt the attributes have been ascribed to God. This is the religiosity that I mean.

Therefore, unless you pushed the Holocaust into some remote corner, it also gave you a sense of ascent, a sense of having emerged from the binding of Isaac without losing your human image. You're a human being now!

Q: In this context, I want to quote something from your book *Masot be-guf rishon* (“First-Person Essays” [Heb]):

The ego as a source of understanding life was swallowed up by the general. Uniquenesses were blurred and even the best documentary books, more than they fully express the suffering in the individual's life, they tend to construct some kind of metaphysical generalization.

You say that the “Holocaust obliterated the ego as an inclusive spiritual essence that has commitment. This ego, the essence of the human spirit, was imperiled.” How do such pessimistic statements fit in with what you just said?

A : The Germans planned first to humiliate the Jews into nothingness and only then to kill them. It was not an execution, as of people who have been charged with political or social crimes, who have been tried and are then executed with full respect for both sides. It wasn't an execution accompanied by pride of any kind, either in the killer or in the one killed. In the Holocaust the victims were subjected to infinite humiliation in ghettos, labor camps, and all sorts of other places. The Jews were humiliated anew every day in different ways for years.

Under such conditions the victim lost his sense of self. A person who has not eaten for a month loses his human image. He crawls. They went out of their way to obliterate your ego. Then they imprinted a number on your arm, and you became a number. This is what they sought to achieve — to make the victim into such an inferior being that the only thing left was to kill him — so lowly a creature that one would not only refrain from pitying him but would consider it one's duty to kill him.

But even in this grim situation, this contrived plot to subject the victim to defeat, humiliation, and contempt, there was quite a bit of light. Even there, in that darkness, no few saints stepped forward. And within the darkness, those saints, those few but wonderful people, gave you the feeling that a person is not an insect, that he has a spark of some kind. This is why you often find that the victims, the Holocaust survivors, have a sense that they have to do more

and more, not for themselves but for the collectivity, for the humanness if not the godliness of the human being.

Q: Nevertheless, your first heroes, in both *Ashan* (Smoke [heb.]) and *Kfor al ha-aretz* (Frost on Earth [Heb.]) are not great people. You didn't choose to tell the story of the saints; you chose to describe bruised and battered people.

A: Literature is built layer upon layer. I had to portray all these levels and to refrain from idealization. It was my duty to tell the truth, and the truth is very complex. The Holocaust created very grim situations — from utter cynicism and total fixation with self to a certain kind of bestiality. It thus created certain human types, and I had to render them accurately. Had I dealt only with those wonderful saints, I would not have been describing the Holocaust. Even when I attempted to describe them, I always found that they were simple characters, some poor saint, some little girl, some man who did something, displayed something, or saw something. I had to render the overall picture accurately.

Q: You are thought of as an author who has written about the Holocaust. In fact, however, you have hardly written about the Holocaust itself. The empty page in the middle of *Age of Wonders* has already become a symbol of the silence that the Holocaust forces on everyone who deals with it. Why don't you write stories about the crux of the Holocaust?

A: In certain areas, the soul seems to fall silent, and only a tiny portion of it still functions. That's how it was in the extermination camps, and literature has no place there. The ego contracted there to a minimum — to a bowl of soup, to a spoon with which you could lift the soup to your mouth.

In that part of the soul a person is so small that he's nothing but bread and water. There, a person's relationship with his family and his home keeps on diminishing. In my works I have chosen domains in which people still have their own image. They still see and hear; they can still analyze in some way what is happening to them.

In addition, it was important for me to stress that the Holocaust was not a sudden arbitrary catastrophe. It is related to the fate of the modern Jew who wanted to be part of Western civilization, and was vomited out — or more precisely, crushed — by this civilization. This requires a reckoning especially in literature. Therefore I had to connect the story of the Holocaust with what preceded and followed it.

For example, take even a wonderful and dear person, a man of truth: Primo Levi. He wrote books about his life in the camp as if he had been born there. But he wasn't born in the camp; he was born in Turin. He had a Jewish father and mother. We come to know only him, Primo Levi, in his books. We don't know who his parents were, who his community was, what he thought about his Jewishness. We know nothing about all of this; we only know about his experience in the camp. He regarded himself as an Italian, but like all the Italian Jews of Turin, this Italian was sent to Auschwitz. Primo Levi had a hard time admitting that Western civilization refused to accept him as an equal member of the community.

Therefore he refers to the inmates of the camps as “prisoners,” even though 80 percent of them, if not more, were Jews. A prisoner is almost a civic concept, expressing the fact that the defendant is accused of having done something concrete for which he is imprisoned. Is this an appropriate term for all those Jewish women, elderly people, and children who were brought to the camps having done nothing wrong? The Jews weren't “prisoners.” They were victims.

Q: How, then, does your perception diverge from the Zionist perception that you criticized in the beginning of our conversation for regarding this encounter between the Jewish and Western civilizations as fundamentally erroneous, not to mention disastrous?

A: I believe there are disasters and processes that cannot be prevented. What happened in Europe would have been difficult to prevent, because in the past two hundred years, since the French Revolution, the Jews have perceived European civilization as the right civilization, the enlightened civilization, the pure civilization. It was perceived as The Human Civilization. This consciousness was fostered morning and night. Therefore, the tragedy could not have been prevented. The process was tremendously powerful. Even if people understood that the situation of the Jews in Russia wasn't good, in Berlin it was good. This was progress, and we Jews were walking in tandem with it. In contrast, Judaism, its faith, its books, its language were all perceived as anachronistic. It was a current that could not be stopped or diverted, and it swept the people to a powerful universalism.

Against this backdrop, Zionism looked like a reproach that was untimely or a perception that was incorrect. Jews asked themselves: "What does it mean? That we should leave the good theater, the good music, the good literature, the comfortable parks, the architecture, and go drain swamps in Hadera? That's ridiculous! The world is progressing!" Could this current have been stopped?

Q: So what do we have left now that the simple faith in progress, rationalism, and Western humanism has totally disintegrated?

A: I think that if we behave wisely and sensitively, we can have a true reconciliation with our tradition. It isn't easy, because for several generations already Jews have felt that everything that has to do with Jewish tradition is an anachronism, ignorance, and superstition, and therefore it has nothing to do with us and we have nothing to do with it. We accepted this erroneous insight and internalized it very strongly. Some of the strongest and most acrid antisemitic remarks were written by Jews. And I'm not just talking about people like Otto Weininger or Karl Kraus, but even about a Jew like Freud. But now, after the Holocaust, I think there should be a reconciliation with the totality of the great Jewish tradition, especially with the great texts, which can

be meaningful even for a Jew of this generation. It would be quite tragic if after the Holocaust we failed to understand how to make a proper reconciliation with our tradition. Never mind the emotional side of this reconciliation, the fact that some of the victims were associated with this tradition.

However, we also have to adopt the humanistic aspects of Western civilization, which is a vast world made up of Slavic, Germanic, and Latin elements, even if we see that it has many dark sides as well.

Q: From what you describe, it seems that a crucial component of Jewish civilization modern Jewish culture, the culture of the modern Jew is the crisis of Jewish culture. In other words, Jewish culture contained the crisis that led to its extinction. How can one confront this? How can modern Jewish civilization embrace those so-fruitful elements that are also lethal destructive?

A: Certainly, I agree with you, that modern Jewish culture contains within it the crisis that led to its extinction. But we have to bear in mind that death, apart from the pain and insularity that it causes, also creates new thoughts. Regrettably, we have not yet reached such a stage. We have not yet emerged from the field of deep repression with respect to relations between the modern Jew and Jewish tradition. I mean a Jew who has experienced the Holocaust in some fashion.

Q: Perhaps an event like this — of collapse and trauma — simply cannot be worked through, cannot be described. It isn't a story that can be told; only its breakdown can be recounted.

A: The moment you say it's impossible to cope with a trauma, you've said that your life has a black hole that you do not touch. Of course one can live with trauma; many people live with such things. But then you must also admit that your life will be poorer, because the pain of trauma provides a richness of sorts. Think how tragic it is to meet people who have gone through Auschwitz and behave like anyone else, small people squabbling over everything as if

they had never been there. If you disregard it, you've created not only a black hole in your soul, but also a poverty of the soul ,a mediocrity. Instead of the ordeal having elevated you, it leaves you mediocre.

Q: What tools can survivors use to understand what happened to them?

A: There is nothing simpler than understanding that the Germans took six million Jews and exterminated them. The question is how this experience can be assimilated. In other words, how does the victim assimilate the ordeal and give his life meaning? This is the problem.

Q: To conclude, I want to ask you a completely different sort of question. Do you think Jewish-Gentile relations have changed as a result of the Holocaust, particularly in the United States? Could there be a rejuvenation of Judaism in the United States, specifically after the Holocaust?

A: Sometimes I get the feeling that the effect of the Holocaust was an even stronger assimilation. It terrified the Jews. I saw this in the DP camps, where many Jews refused to circumcise their sons. I saw it when people fled to New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, South America, you name it, anywhere but Palestine.

Unfortunately, the Holocaust has not prompted a Jewish awakening other than a return to the Land of Israel. Instead, it has led to a desire to assimilate, even among the Israeli-born. In other words, the assimilation is not over. There's a deep-seated sense that it's dangerous to be Jewish, and so we should run away from it. Therefore, throughout the Western world, there is no Jewish efflorescence; this is evident even in the United States, where the intermarriage rate verges on 70 percent.

Q: Thank you very much .

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