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The Jews That Never Returned: Internalised Displacement in Aharon Appelfeld's Works

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Abstract

With the publication of his first collection of short stories (*Smoke*, 1962), Appelfeld is among the first to distance himself from the dominant Zionist narrative by giving voice to European Jews who are either unknowingly heading toward annihilation or struggling to recompose their shattered identity in the aftermath of the Shoah. In his extensive review of modern Hebrew fiction, Shaked works on the assumption that this corpus engages in a constant dialogue with the so-called Zionist meta-narrative, "the basic Zionist myth about the return to Eretz Israel as a redeeming process" (Holtzman 2008, 283). Following Shaked's interpretive model, this paper offers an analysis of character description in Appelfeld's works that reveals a hidden tension toward the dominant framework and the emergence of an alternative identity paradigm.

Keywords: Aharon Appelfeld, Displacement, Identity, Israeli Literature, Survivor

1. Introduction

When the King of Assyria, laid siege to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel,[1] legend has it that after the fall of the city the ten tribes which constituted the kingdom (out of the twelve ancient tribes traditionally descended from the sons of Jacob) underwent mass deportation, never to return. Unlike their ancestors in Egypt and their neighbours' descendants in the south a few generations later, they never came out of the

[1] There were two kingdoms in Palestine at the time (721 BCE), the abovementioned kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah, the latter located, broadly defined, in the southern halves of Israel and the West Bank, whilst the former extending northwards up to the border with Syria and Lebanon.

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desert.[2] The promise of "אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלָב וּדְבָשׁ […] אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וּרְחָבָה […]" (Exodus 3:8 in BHS)[3] remained unfulfilled.

Another story tells us that those who had managed to escape the murderous claws of the German beast found refuge in that very land, which for hundreds of years had been just a distant dream. There those remnants of a world pushed to the brink of annihilation began, "לבנות ולהיבנות בה" (Appelfeld 1975, 122)[4], to lay the foundations for their new lives, gradually piecing together the shattered fragments of their old selves. That strip of arid and scorched land offered them redemption from centuries of subordination and oppression in the shape of a new home and language. There they would finally be free to determine their own fate.

As will become clear over the course of the exposition, both these stories are relevant to Aharon Appelfeld's fiction, as they represent the author's specific articulation of the tension between what Gershon Shaked calls "the Zionist meta-narrative" (Holtzman 2008, 283) and its alternatives, constantly competing for the same audience and struggling to get wider recognition (287-88). Throughout his career Appelfeld went to great lengths to avoid presenting his readers with yet another variation on the Jewish theme of redemption, wherein the "tribe" successfully escapes the wasteland to the promised land. What the author gradually discloses to his readers is a world of perpetual inner displacement, of constant wandering, where *'eretz Yiśra'el* (the land of Israel) is nothing more than an empty container to the characters that live in it, an unkept promise, "yet another way-station in a world of transports" (Shaked 1995, 97).

Taking Shaked's concept as the main interpretive lens through which Appelfeld's fiction will be observed, this study will trace the author's ambivalence toward the above-mentioned Zionist meta-narrative. Despite his being quite careful to position himself as one of its fiercest critics, he included in his own work one of its most distinctive views concerning Shoah survivors in particular, and European assimilated Jews in general, namely the unresolved tension between considering them worthy of compassion and at least partly responsible for their own demise. To this end we will examine those characters Appelfeld chooses to depict – as well as those that he prefers *not* to include – and the distinctive traits he assigns to them.

2. The Eichmann Trial and Appelfeld's literary debut

In order to appreciate the full significance of his choice, the broader social context of the time must be taken into account. Aharon Appelfeld had his literary debut in 1962, when he published his first collection of short stories, עשן (*'ashan*; Smoke).[5] Although no direct connection can be made between the two events, the significance of the close proximity of *Smoke*'s publication to the Eichmann trial cannot be overstated. The trial, which took place in 1961,

[2] Sources close in time to the events alluded to here inform us that deportations did take place, though they certainly did not affect the population in its entirety. Whether the fall of the northern kingdom must be ascribed to Shalmaneser V or Sargon II is still a matter of dispute (Miller, Hayes 2006, 383-91; Fales 2019, 92-95, 98; Radner 2019, 105-09; Tappy 2019).

[3] From the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Key Numbers*: "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey".

[4] Trans.: to build and to be built in it [the land]. This idea inspired the generations that came to Palestine during the third and fourth *'aliyyot*, in the 1920s (Tavarnesi Ben David 2008, 6-28; 2010-2011, 547-48). The commitment to the Zionist project to establish an independent Jewish state (*livnot*) required these generations of immigrants to adopt a whole new identity (*lehibbanot*), which often stood in sharp contrast to the old one.

[5] Previously, during the 1950s, he had published a few poems mostly in yiddish (Shaked 1998, 238 and n. 26). *Smoke* is his first book of fiction to receive critical acclaim.

was a major turning point in the history of Israel and its relationship with Shoah survivors (Weitz 1996). One of the main consequences produced by the trial was that the larger public "met" survivors for the first time; they saw them taking the stand and recounting their own traumatic experiences. At that moment, Israel "re-discovered" not only the genocide related in excruciating detail, but also the fact that the victims had been living amongst them for almost twenty years (Shaked 1998, 236).

During those twenty years "הדחיקה החברה הישראלית את חוויית 'העם היהודי שנהרג', לא קיבּלה את ההשמדה ואת שורדיה והעדיפה ליצור לעצמה מיתוסים של מרד ו'גבורה'" (Shaked 1998, 235).[6] Therefore, the startling revelation that the trial brought to the public's attention lay in the fact "that the Shoah had not been a heroic war of the few against the many (like the 1948 War of Independence), but rather a process of mass annihilation of defenseless Jews, who were led to the ovens 'like lambs to the slaughter' " (Shaked 1995, 88). Appelfeld himself offers a harrowing account of the treatment reserved to Shoah survivors in Israel:

> שנים על גבי שנים היו מאשימים את ניצולי השואה על שלא עמדו על נפשם והובלו כצאן לטבח. היתה זו תערובת של בורות והתנשאות, שמצא אחיזה בתנועות הנוער, בהכשרות, בימי עיון, באסיפות הקיבוצים והיכן לא. עם הסתלקותה של האידיאולוגיה וההתפכחות — הסתלקה, תודה לאל, גם האשמת שווא זו. […] לימים, משראה הניצול כי עדותו אינה מתפרשת כראוי והוא מואשם בעקיפין שאמירותיו מסתלפות, ניסה לתקן באומרו: לא הובלנו כצאן לטבח, שמרנו כבוד האדם. היינו פרטיזנים. כך נוצר הצירוף האפולוגטי שואה וגבורה, וכך נסתלפה האמת. […] בארץ שרר איזה פונדמנטליזם הומניסטי ואמונה תמימה כי האדם הוא בן חורין ואין גבול ליכולתו. הניצול עמד מול הפשטנות הזאת ולא ידע מה לעשות בה. הוא הביא עמו לכאן עולם מסובך, מסוכסך, מלא סבל ורגשי אשמה. […] הספרות העברית שדבקה מאז שנות הארבעים בלוקליזם ובתקווה התמימה כי יהודי חדש עומד לקום לעולם, עשויה למצוא עצמה לא רק מוצפת באופנות סרק, אלא בדרך לחידוש מלוא העומק של הנסיון היהודי. […] והספרות העברית תהיה שוב מה שהיתה תמיד: הזכרון הקולקטיבי של השבט. (Appelfeld 1994 in Shaked 1998, 235)[7]

The Eichmann trial began to alter the climate of rejection and marginalisation described by Appelfeld as dominant at the time. This gradual process affected the literary landscape as well. On a more general level, there is a notable increase in the literary production concerning the Shoah, as well as a profound change in perspective. Prior to 1961, only a few authors had

[6] Trans.: Israeli society repressed the experiences of 'the Jewish people that were slaughtered', did not accept the annihilation and those who survived it, and preferred to create myths of uprising and 'heroism'. The false dichotomy between "heroes" and "victims" imposed upon survivors had been at the core of the debate over the institution of both Yad Vashem and Holocaust Remembrance Day already in the 1950s, to such an extent that it was reflected in their official denominations (Bensoussan 2008, ch. 3): יד ושם – רשות הזיכרון לשואה ולגבורה (*Yad Vashem – Rashut hazikkaron laSho'a velagvura*; Yad Vashem – Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Authority) and יום הזיכרון לשואה ולגבורה (*Yom hazikkaron laSho'a velagvura*; Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day).

[7] Trans.: For years Shoah survivors have been blamed for failing to defend themselves and for letting themselves being led like lambs to the slaughter. This was a combination of ignorance and arrogance that gained a foothold in youth movements, training programmes, seminars, at *qibbuts* gatherings, and so forth. With the disappearance of the ideology [Marxism] and the return to sobriety — thank God disappeared this false accusation as well. […] Over time, as survivors realised that their stories were misunderstood and that they were being indirectly blamed for the fact that their words were twisted, they tried to remedy the situation by saying: we did not let ourselves being led like lambs to the slaughter, we retained our own dignity. We were partisans. Thus, was created the apologetic expression 'Shoah and heroism', and thus the truth was distorted. […] In the country prevailed a humanist fundamentalism of sorts and a blind faith in human freedom and limitless potential. Survivors contemplated this superficial stance, not knowing what to do with it. They brought here a complex world, filled with suffering and guilt. […] The Hebrew literature that from the 1940s adhered to localism, naively hoping that a new Jew was about to come into the world, may not only realise to be full of futile fashions, but also find itself on a path to renewing the Jewish experience in its entirety. […] And Hebrew literature will once again be what it has always been: the collective memory of the tribe.

devoted their attention to this topic. Not coincidentally, they were all survivors themselves, who not long after the events felt the urge to begin processing their traumatic past through their writing, in order both to come to terms with it – or at least make some sense thereof – and to bear testimony to the mass extermination executed by Germany.

With regard to fiction, the first such publication was סלמנדרה (*Salamandra*; Salamander) by Ka-tzetnik 135633 (1946),[8] which he wrote in Yiddish from a British army hospital in Italy in 1945 and was translated and published in Hebrew a year later (Mikics 2012). The novel, the first of six, is a fictionalised account of the author's – as well as his wife's, Sonia Schmidt, and his family's – ordeal in the Auschwitz lager up to his liberation. The novel had a considerable success "mostly for the wrong reasons", as noted Omer Bartov (1997, 68). The graphic depictions of violence and sadism, often bordering on pornography, contributed to fix in the minds of generations of young Israelis a representation of the Shoah quite different from that which would be elaborated in the following decades (47-50).[9] The other two novels that focussed on the Shoah experience before the Eichmann trial were the first volume of Naomi Frankel's trilogy שאול ויוהאנה (*Shaul ve-Yohanna*; Saul and Joanna) and Uri Orlev's חיילי עופרת (*Chayale 'oferet*; Lead Soldiers), both published in 1956. Orlev, like Ka-tzetnik, is a survivor who relates his own suffering during the Shoah, first in Warsaw's ghetto, then in Bergen-Belsen. Frankel, though born in Germany, fled to Israel in 1933, thus had no direct knowledge of the camps. This led her on a different path, that resulted in the trilogy mentioned above, where she brings to life pre-War Germany through the vicissitudes of three generations of German Jews, with the catastrophe looming ahead.

What renders Frankel's approach of great interest is her choice of a topic more in line with her own experience. As a non-witness she deliberately avoided making the camps the centre of her narrative focus. She resolved, instead, to write a historical novel about the demise of German Jewry and the rise of the National Socialist Party, exploring the social and historical *milieu* that produced the Shoah. As will be shown, Frankel has very much in common with Appelfeld in this regard, preceding him by almost a decade.

Where the two authors depart from each other is in the different literary choices they make. Frankel picks as her models the European family saga in vogue between the 19th and 20th centuries in the form of the historical novel. Moreover, the author seems "to present escape to Palestine as the only salvation option available to German Jews", committing the Zionist ideological core of the trilogy to the character of Joanna (Levin 2019, 60; furthermore, Tavarnesi

[8] His name was Yehiel Feiner, but his identity was kept under a thick veil of secrecy by the author himself until Feiner took the stand at the Eichmann trial. The pseudonym originates from the German acronym for concentration camp (KZ, Konzentrationslager) with the addition of the yiddish suffix ניק- (*-nik*), that denotes a person by virtue of their relation to the described group or institution, therefore in this case a camp inmate. The consequences of this uncertainty in regard to his biographical details become immediately apparent in some studies about the polish-born author (Bartov O. 1997, 42-43; Mikics 2012).

[9] Bartov seeks to explain Ka-tzetnik's appeal to the young Israeli readers in the context of the so-called "Stalags", "a type of pornographic literature that circulated in Israel of the time, written by anonymous (but most probably Israeli) writers, replete with perverse sex and sadistic violence" (1997, 49). He confines to a footnote an important remark suggested to him by Linda Mizejewski, that merits much greater attention and should be made object of further investigation: "The word 'Stalag' is derived from the German *Stammlager*, or prison camp. I should add here that this type of pornography was most probably read mainly by boys, whereas Ka-Tzetnik was read, I believe, just as often by girls. This would imply that boys read Ka-Tzetnik differently from girls. I have no way of ascertaining this assumption, however. To be sure, this would also be relevant to the fact that these boys later became combat soldiers who had to negotiate between their self-image as defending the survivors (*sheerit hapletah*) and their perceived need to become as tough and cruel as the enemy. (Women in Israel served in combat only in the 1948 war, and even then in very small numbers.) I wish to thank Linda Mizejewski for drawing my attention to this important gender distinction" (Bartov O. 1997, 72 n. 16).

Ben David 2010-11, 549; Shaked 2011, 244-46); however, Levin (2019, 75-79) has refuted the critical consensus that saw the trilogy as a Zionist story by drawing attention to the unfulfillment of the Zionist dream within the narrative scope of the series, as well as to the numerous clues that point to a critical view of Zionism. Appelfeld, similarly but differently as well, rejects this sort of teleological interpretation of Jewish history. The course upon which survivors are set is erratic and certainly Israel is not their final destination, where redemption awaits them.

However, these first attempts to shine a spotlight on the darkest hour of Jewish history were overwhelmingly outnumbered by examples of the Zionist meta-narrative. The first generation of native authors (*sabras*; natives), that dominates the literary landscape starting from the 1930s and 1940s, is, with few exceptions, completely absorbed in "תודלותיה הפנימיים של מדינת ישראל" (Shaked 1998, 239).[10] They write about their struggle for survival, political independence, and self-determination. Their stories are centred upon the idealised *sabra*, brave, strong, armed with his rifle, ready to sacrifice his own life for a country that is being built (Tavarnesi Ben David 2010-11, 548-50).

Authors like Haim Gouri and Hanoch Bartov, who up until 1961 had firmly established themselves as champions of the "Mythological Sabra" (Zerubavel 2002),[11] felt compelled to pay renewed attention to Shoah survivors in the immediate aftermath of the Eichmann trial. Both writers had had first-hand experience with survivors as early as the end of World War II, when they were dispatched to Europe to assist refugees. And yet, almost twenty years had passed since those first encounters, before they could be properly processed and afforded literary dignity.

Bartov's first foray into Shoah territory came four years after the trial. His novel פצעי בגרות (*Pitz'e bagrut*; Acne, translated in English as *The Brigade*, 1965) is a Bildungsroman, whose main character is a young boy, Elisha Kruk, who enlisted in the Jewish Brigade, animated by a burning desire to fight and to avenge his "brothers", who were slaughtered. However, his eagerness is destined to remain unsatisfied. Not long after being dispatched to Italy and, later, to Germany, comes the end of the war, leaving Elisha to battle his inner demons, to question the legitimacy of a Jewish revenge on German soil. During his journey Elisha meets with survivors, exposing the deeply rooted ambivalence of the young sabra towards the archetype of the "old Jew", passive, weak. His inability to resolve the tension between compassion and rejection will lead him to consign the whole experience to oblivion (Ben-Dov 2016).

In the case of Gouri, the change in artistic sensibility can be directly traced to the trial. At the time, Gouri covered it for the newspaper *La-Merchav*, work which won him the Sokolow Award for Israeli Journalism in 1962. Later, he collected a selection of his reports in the book מול תא הזכוכית. משפט ירושלים (*Mul ta' ha-zekhukhit. Mishpat Yerushalayim*; Facing the Glass Booth. The Jerusalem Trial, 1962). As we have observed for Bartov, Gouri hardly became aware of survivors' existence at the trial. He had several encounters with them as early as 1947, when he was on a mission for the Haganah[12] to train and smuggle survivors into Palestine. However, it wasn't until twenty years later that that experience could be processed and be a legitimate object of his literary efforts in the novel עסקת השוקולד (*'Iskat hashokolad*; The Chocolate Deal, 1965).[13]

[10] Trans.: the inner history of the state of Israel.

[11] Decades later, in a decidedly post-Zionist political and social climate Bartov had to defend himself from mounting criticism of his role in shaping the dominant literary landscape, who silenced any opposing voice and marginalised alternative narratives. He articulated his defence in the essay *I Am Not the Mythological Sabra* (Bartov H. 1995).

[12] הגנה "defence". The main Jewish paramilitary force during the British Mandate over Palestine.

[13] The import of this long interim period has been investigated by Reuven Shoham (1999), casting new light on Gouri's early poetic production as a first attempt "to feel and express the inexpressible" (99). Shoham offers a more balanced account of the trial's role as a "catalyst in a very painful process" (*ibidem*) that began more than a decade earlier.

In this context Aharon Appelfeld made an unprecedented move, one that can be much better appreciated against the background outlined above. A year after the trial, not only did he shift readers' attention away from the epic narrative of a newly born nation, still in the very process of giving itself a coherent identity, but he did so intentionally and consistently. He uncovered images of a lost and all but forgotten world. Unlike his predecessors mentioned above, Appelfeld spent his entire career escaping "the inner history of the state of Israel" with its pioneers and soldiers. By his own account, he had to fend off increasing public pressure to write "about the life in Israel":

מאז פירסמתי את סיפורי הראשון ברטה אצל גבריאל מוקד ב "עכשיו" לפני יותר משלושים שנה, ועד היום, לא פסקו להטריד אותי בשאלה, מתי כבר תכתוב על החיים בארץ. היו בהטרדות אלו קצת כוונה טובה וקצת רצון להועיל וכמובן שמץ אי־הבנה, ואם תרצו גם לא מעט רשעות. כיוון שלא נעניתי למשאלה זו, היא הפכה במרוצת השנים להטחה ולהאשמה, ואלה נשמעות בקירוב כך: הוא שייך לשם, הוא אינו משלנו, לא רק המ־לייה אינו משלנו, גם העברית אינה משלנו. ובנוסח אחר: הוא סופר יהודי, יותר מדי יהודי, הוא תלוש, הוא מנסה להחזיר אותנו לשם. ומכיוון אחר: טוב שיש אחד כמוהו [...] ועכשיו בגילי אדם, תודה לאל, כבר לא משתנה. (Appelfeld 1993a in Shaked 1998, 239)[14]

Despite the obvious animosity displayed between the author and the Israeli literary establishment, Appelfeld received every form of official recognition available, not to mention the considerable success his works have enjoyed over the course of his career.[15]

In an increasingly post-Zionist climate, Appelfeld, along with other prominent members of his generation like Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Yoram Kaniuk, Yehoshua Kenaz and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, abandoned the beaten track and shifted attention away from the pioneers and soldiers that had achieved and maintained dominance within the canon. However, unlike his contemporaries he focussed his efforts on a very specific archetype of antihero: the "old Jew" (Ramras-Rauch 1998, 494; Shaked 1998, 244).

3. The Old Jew

Shaked (1998, 244) has rightly remarked that in directing his readers' attention towards Jews in the European Diaspora Appelfeld "עירער את הבסיס הרוחני של העברית החדש (שלילת הגו־לות), כשהוא משיב למחזור החיים הספרותיים בארץ ישראל את היהודי הישן".[16] As will become clear, to a certain extent this is an accurate representation. Appelfeld's relationship with the Zionist meta-narrative is, nevertheless, less obvious than Shaked contends.

For those who lived in Israel the old Jew represented the problem to which Zionism constituted the solution; in this respect, the Shoah was considered to be the inevitable outcome of the Jewish experience in the Diaspora. On the other hand, Appelfeld seems to have seen this archetype primarily as an opportunity to uncover the roots of the catastrophe and to investigate the wider role of European Jewry in 20th century history (Ramras-Rauch 1998, 498).

[14] Trans.: Since I published my first short story "Berta" on Gabriel Moked's *Akhshav* more than thirty years ago, and to this day, they have never ceased bothering me with the question "When are you going to write about life in Israel?" These annoying requests were partly well-meant, partly intended to be helpful and of course betrayed a certain inability to understand, as well as, if you will, a good deal of malice. As I did not accede to this wish, over the years it has become an accusation that sounds approximately as follows: he belongs there, he is not one of us, not only is his background different, but his Hebrew is different from ours. And in another version: he is a Jewish writer, too Jewish, an outsider, he is trying to bring us back there. And from another angle: it is a good thing that there is someone like him [...] and now at my age a man, thank God, cannot change anymore.

[15] He consistently received positive reviews since the publication of his first short stories (Shaked 1998, 542 n. 32).

[16] Trans.: undermines the spiritual foundation of the new Jew (the negation of the Diaspora), whilst he reintroduces the old Jew into the literary life of Eretz Israel.

3.1 The Post-Survival Stage

Appelfeld captures the archetypal character at three different stages:[17]

1. the post-survival stage;
2. the survival stage;
3. assimilation.

The stories that centre around survivors in a post-Shoah environment consistently portray them in their Sisyphean struggle against the past. Their natural desire to forget is inevitably overwhelmed by a ceaseless deluge of memories, which prevent them from moving either forwards or backwards. They are unable to progress in any way towards a new life, whilst also being unable to return into the woods, be them literal or figurative. From an external condition the characters' displacement morphs into an internal state of mind.

The years spent in hiding, seeking refuge from their captors, resurface in the form of traumatic memories and are constantly relived in a persistent state of paranoid fear. These circumstances render every effort to return to some semblance of normality and routine utterly futile. Despite his attempts at a normal life (a job as a driver for the public transportation company, a love affair), Zimmer seems unable to escape his pursuers. His managers at work become the new oppressors, whose perceived threat triggers past memories in an altered state of consciousness where memory and reality begin to merge irreversibly.[18]

Once again Zimmer "נזכר ברכבת המשא, שיצא בה בערב מעיירתו ושני גרמנים ניפנפו לה" [...]"; ("נסיון רציני" "*Nissayon retzini*"; "A Serious Attempt" in Appelfeld 1962, 100).[19] Suddenly, the past becomes an integral, yet corrupting part of the present, which in turn rapidly morphs into a protracted hallucination. An action as trivial as running towards a friend's room brings Max back into the woods, when he was fleeing his pursuers:

אגש לר' אריה. אצלו בוודאי אמצא סיגריה. ונזכר איך רצו הוא ור' אריה ביער סמלינקה, ואיך רדפו אחריהם, ואיך נסתבך בין השיחים, ור' אריה נשא אותו על כתפיו. ואיך לבסוף נפלו בתוך השוחה העמוקה וניצלו. וכך בריצה מהדהדת קרב לחדרו של ר' אריה. משראה אור בחלונו של ר' אריה רווח לו, ודמעות קור החלו מתנשרות מעיניו. (Appelfeld 1962, 135-36)[20]

[17] These stages are for the most part consistent with both Ramras-Rauch's (1998, 496-97) and Shaked's (1998, 259-60) chronological division of Appelfeld's works. Ramras-Rauch adopted an external chronological criterion, distinguishing three periods on the basis of the novels' time of publication: the 1960s (where Appelfeld predominantly deals with survivors haunted by their traumatic past), the 1970s (where the author contemplates assimilated Jews seemingly oblivious to the impending danger that awaits them) and the 1990s (survivors escaping annihilation). Shaked, on the other hand, opted for an internal criterion, identifying five periods depicted in Appelfeld's fiction: the "time of refuge" (after the war), the "time of survival" (during the war), the period immediately preceding the Shoah, the decades between the end of the 19th century and the interwar period, and finally "mythical time", the foundation of all the periods mentioned above, which constitute historical manifestations of the ever-repeating Jewish fate.

[18] A similar narrative device is masterfully employed by Savyon Liebrecht in "חגיגת הארוסין של חייותה" ("*Chagigat ha'erusin shel Chayyuta*"; "Hayuta's Engagement Party" in Liebrecht 1986 , 122). A few years before his niece's engagement party, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Mendel's memories of the time when he had been captured by a Nazi patrol unit and then managed to escape into the woods resurfaced at the mere sight of the abundance of food laid on the table. That food instantly overlapped with that on which a friend of his had choked on after months of starvation.

[19] Translated by Mann, and Morahg in Shaked 1995, 97: "[…] remembered the freight train that carried him away from his little town in the evening, and two Germans waved to it".

[20] Trans.: I will go to Reb Arieh's house. Surely, there I will find a cigarette. And he remembered how he and Reb Aryeh ran away together in the forest of Smelinka, and how they chased them, and how he got entangled in the

The protagonist tries to contain the destructive force of the past by symbolically confining it to two rucksacks. By reifying his unprocessed and repressed experience Max maintains the illusion that it doesn't affect him. However, despite having a definite placement within the narrative space, that is, out of the main character's sight, those rucksacks – and the objects therein, belonging to Max's pre-war past – inevitably "burst open", signalling the gradual transformation of the present into a belated manifestation of the past:

ברוקזאקים אלה מונחים החפצים, שהביא עמו מחו״ל, מיד אחרי המלחמה. הרבה טרח עבור שני הרוקזאקים, בהם נדחסו במצופף שארית הבגדים של אביו ושל אמו ושל אחותו ז׳אני. חפצים שהצליח לאספם, בין חורבות בית־הכנסת שהועלה באש, וכל הקהילה נחנקה שם בעשן. משבא ארצה הניח את הרוקזאקים בפינה ולא פתחם, כל השנים עמדו מצופפים בפינה ולא פתחם, אבל היום משום מה נתאווה להוציא מתוכם, לאוורר ולמיינם ובכלל לראות מה שיש שם. (*Ibidem*)[21]

Max's past manifests itself in his compulsive behaviour over the bags, as well as in the uncontrolled resurfacing of his memories. When his older friend and business partner Reb Aryeh falls ill, Max realises that despite his best efforts he has not managed to progress towards the future he had envisioned. He is still being chased in the forest of Smelinka. This time, however, his pursuers are immaterial, therefore survival proves to be elusive. The present does not entail deliverance in Appelfeld's stories and survivors are not, in fact, "survivors" (Shaked 1998, 252). They are prisoners in their own minds: "בטי עמדה ליד סוגרי החלונות. ידעה: אין לה כנפיים להרקיע, הנוצות נשרו. זה חודשים שבויה ביד זכרונותיה והם שורפים אותה" (Appelfeld 1971, 140).[22]

Stuck in a present that reveals itself to be a belated manifestation of the past, survivors are inescapably bound to relive the latter in an endless cycle.

In מכות האור (*Mikhvat ha'or*; The Searing Light; Appelfeld 1980) the author explored a somewhat different variation of this character type. This short novel follows a group of young refugees coming to Israel. However, these are not עולים חדשים (*'olim chadashim*; Jewish immigrants that deliberately choose Israel as their new home, adhering to Zionism), but "regular" immigrants, for whom Israel holds little prospect of redemption. A deep sense of guilt over those whom they left behind overwhelms them and thwarts any attempt at a new life. Appelfeld depicts this absence of "internal" movement, as opposed to their wandering, through a subtle linguistic play of inversions. Words that are supposed to refer to the Shoah enter the semantically opposite domain of "redemption". Therefore, the "אוקסימורון גרוטסקי" (Shaked 1998, 253).[23] devised by the author transforms Israel into a "מחנה ריכוז" (*machane rikkuz*; concentration camp), whilst those responsible for the Zionist education of its "inmates" are referred to as

bushes and Reb Aryeh carried him on his shoulders. And how in the end they fell into the deep pit and survived. And thus with echoing running steps he neared Reb Aryeh's house. When he saw a light in Reb Aryeh's window he felt relieved, and cold tears began falling down from his eyes.

From the short story that gave the title to the collection: "עשן" ("*ashan*"; "Smoke").

[21] Translated by Mann, and Morahg in Shaked 1995, 96: "The rucksacks contained things he had brought with him from abroad immediately after the war. He had gone through a lot for these two rucksacks, bulging with the remainders of his father's, mother's and his sister Jani's clothing. Objects he had managed to collect from among the ruins of the synagogue, which had been set on fire, and the entire community suffocated there in the smoke. When he arrived in Israel, he put the rucksacks in a corner and didn't open them; all these years they had stood cramped in the corner, and he hadn't opened them, but today for some reason he felt an urge to take those things out, to air them, to sort them through, just to see what was there".

[22] Trans.: Betty was standing at the window grates. She knew: she did not have wings to soar into the sky, the feathers had fallen. For months she had been held captive by her own memories, they were consuming her.

[23] Trans.: grotesque oxymoron.

warders. The journey towards Israel is perceived as a "טרנספורט" (*transport*; transport) as well as the local transfers to which those who rebel against the programme are subjected. The very place that should provide a safe haven is just another destination towards which they proceed "like lambs to the slaughter".

Furthermore, the "stillness" of the characters is revealed by the fact that most of them resume the same activities which allowed them to survive before coming to Israel, namely smuggling and peddling. They try to navigate through waters into which they were thrown against their will. When they return to the world outside the training camps, they show no sign of change. They are still displaced refugees, haunted by a past that does not seem to pass. Ultimately, they all experience persistent fear and anxiety, that for some will prove to be an intolerable burden.

3.2 The Survival Stage

The survival stage represents a smaller proportion of Appelfeld's production. The author carefully eschews any direct reference to the crematoria. The dominant features of the years 1940-45 are escaping, hiding and the constant fear that accompanied them. However, in a fashion quite similar to that which was observed in *The Searing Light* (Appelfeld 1980), the author dismantles all previously set expectations by inverting the values that would be typically assigned to the different stages in the characters' life. The time of survival is perceived as a positive phase *despite* all the suffering and distress that befalls survivors. In the minds of the protagonists "the days of the bunker" are a time towards which they look back with a feeling of nostalgia: "אינני מבקשת יותר אלא שנהיה שוב כולנו ביחד, כמו בימי הבונקר ור' יצחק וברל נמצאים עמנו, ומוכנה אני אז ללכת מסוף העולם ועד סופו"; ("*'aviv qar*"; Cold Spring, in Appelfeld 1962, 58).[24] All the hardships and pain and horror to which they were subjected in those times do not negate the generally positive attitude displayed by Appelfeld's characters towards those years. In an apparent, yet studiously devised paradox the bunkers and the woods are where the characters achieve the highest degree of freedom to express their true selves. In a way, confinement seems to unbind them:

> ימים יפים עשה עם שר ביערות ולאחר־מכן באיטליה. שר הפליא לטפס, לשחות ובשעת הצורך להכות או לחמוק.
> בכל מעשיו, גם הנועזים, ניכרה השלמות, כמו נועד למעשים נועזים.
> ("*Bartfuss ben almavet*", in Appelfeld 1983, 112)[25]

The time spent in hiding is clearly as well as intentionally associated with bravery and adventure, even though the actions depicted unequivocally relate to a context of persecution. Violence is subtly mentioned as if it were an accessory, carefully disguised as an expected feature of life in the woods. Climbing, particularly when associated with swimming, evokes freedom of movement in a space which connotes neither hostility nor danger.

The major turning point is represented by the very moment Appelfeld's characters emerge from the woods. Then, the inversion between the values assigned to the time of survival and the time of liberation is rendered transparently obvious:

[24] Trans.: I only want for us all to be together again, as we were in the days of the bunker with Rabbi Yitzhak and Berl, when I was ready to go from one end of the world to the other.

[25] Translated by Green in Shaked 1995, 93: "Those had been good times with Scher in the forests and afterwards in Italy. Scher had been a marvelous climber and a wonderful swimmer. When necessary, he could strike out or slip away. In all his deeds, even the most daring ones, he showed his full self, as though he were born for bold acts."

לפני שיצאו מן היערות אמרה: כמה אני אוהבת יערות אלה, איזה יופי, איזה תום. אילו זה היה תלוי בי לא הייתי יוצאת מכאן. מה יש בעיר, שוב להתגנדר, שוב רומאנים מפוקפקים עם בחורים מפוקפקים. כבר התרגלתי ליער. אין לי חשק לשבת בסאלון ולדפדף בעיתוני נשים. כאן אני חופרת לי שוחה וחיה כמלכה. ("*1946*" in Appelfeld 1975, 124)[26]

The Hebrew word used by Appelfeld to designate the figurative שוחה (*shucha*; hole) is the same as the one found in the short story "Smoke", when Max remembers being chased in the woods, falling into a pit and being saved by Reb Aryeh. Both instances occur in the same context (persecution), however they clearly have opposite connotations. The pit is associated with protection and safety during the time of survival, when the pain and suffering are experienced directly; it then acquires its negative connotation after the Shoah, when it returns as a haunting presence in the mediated form of a memory. Only when the traumatic nature of that experience resurfaces can the pit return to being the place where the characters nearly met their death.

The simplicity of life during the Shoah resides in its perceived תום (*tom*, innocence), namely absence of responsibility.[27] After their liberation, when confronted with the prospect of returning to society, Appelfeld's survivors are overcome with fear. The new-found freedom does not give cause for celebration, as one would expect, but rather precipitates survivors into a state of anxiety, that often translates into a conscious attempt at procrastinating the inevitable conclusion: departure and the necessary change that it portends. They look back on those days spent in hiding as though they were their greatest source of happiness:

כמה טוב היה ביערות, אומרת ריטה. נדמה לי שלא השלמנו את ישיבתנו שם. עוד שנה־שנתיים היינו הופכים ליצורי טבע. שוב חזרנו אל התרבות. בלומברג מצית את המקטרת הכבויה ואומר: אולי את צודקת. (*Ibidem*)[28]

3.3 Assimilation

Lastly, Appelfeld captures the "old Jew" during the years that precede the genocide. This time constitutes the focus of short novels like שנים ושעות (*Shanim vesha'ot*; Years and Hours; Appelfeld 1975) and תור הפלאות (*Tor happla'ot*; The Age of Wonders; Appelfeld 1978), both of which display a binary structure, with the two sections presenting a pre- and post-Shoah setting respectively.

In באדנהיים עיר נופש (*Badenheim 'ir nofesh*; Resort Town Badenheim)[29] – the first section of *Years and Hours* – a little Austrian town, holiday destination for both the Jewish and non-Jew-

[26] Adapted from Bilu's translation in Shaked 1995, 93: "Before they left the woods, she said: 'How I love these woods, how beautiful they are, how innocent. If it was up to me, I wouldn't leave. What has the city got to offer? Getting all dressed up, having stupid romances with stupid men. I'm used to the woods now. I don't feel like sitting in a parlour, leafing through women's magazines. Here I dig myself a hole and live like a queen.' "

[27] In this regard Shaked (1995, 95-96) mentions the semantic ambiguity of the German expression "as free as a bird" (*vogelfrei*). The term refers to both a free person and an outlaw. During the time spent in hiding survivors are not bounded by the constraints that society would normally impose upon them. Survival is the framework in which their every action is understood, therefore evaluated. Nonetheless, they are also "outlaws" liable to be harmed. Curiously, there appears to be an Italian phrase semantically mapped in a similar fashion: "woodland bird" (*uccel di bosco*). This phrase refers to a fugitive, therefore to an individual who is roaming freely in an attempt to evade capture.

[28] Trans.: How beautiful it was in the woods, says Rita. It seems to me that we didn't complete our stay there. Another year or two and we would have become creatures of nature. We came once again back to civilisation. Blumberg lights the extinguished pipe and says: maybe you are right.

[29] In its numerous translations the story was published as a separate volume. English translation by Bilu, *Badenheim 1939* (Appelfeld 1975).

ish bourgeoisie, awakens in the spring for the annual music festival. The holidaymakers are about to invade the town as usual, but this year an intrusive presence makes its appearance: the Sanitation Department.

As time passes, the department proceeds efficiently to collect detailed information on all Jews in Badenheim, without any apparent indication as to their aims:

ובמחלקה הסאניטארית נערכות החקירות בשקט. זהו עתה המרכז ומהמרכז הזה מסתעפים החוטים. במחלקה הסאניטארית יודעים עתה הכל. יש שם שפע של מפות, ירחונים, ספריה, יכול אדם לשבת לעיין אם הוא רוצה. המנצח נרשם במחלקה וחזר שמח. ארון שלם של חוזים, רשיונות ומסמכים הראו לו. מוזר, אביו זקנו כתב ספר חשבון בעברית, הם יודעים הכל, ושמחים להראות לאדם את עברו – אמר המנצח. בשער העיר הוצב מחסום. אין יוצא ואין בא. אך אין זה הסגר שלם. החלבנים מביאים חלב בבוקר ומשאית הפרי פורקת ארגזים במלון, שני בתי הקפה פתוחים, התזמורת מנגנת כל ערב, ואף על פי כן דומה איזה זמן אחר, זמן לא מקומי, פלש לכאן ומתבסס בשקט. (Appelfeld 1975, 31)[30]

The Jewish guests staying at the hotel follow the Department's actions with a mix of preoccupation and excitement. Although the author chose to cover his narrative with a thin veil of allegory, the reference to the "Reich Health Office" (*Reichsgesundheitsamt*) responsible for the implementation of the Nazi racial policy is glaringly obvious. The readers know from the very beginning that the narrative alludes to the Shoah, and furthermore the author is well aware of their cognisance.

Nevertheless, Appelfeld disappoints once more every reasonable expectation his readers might hold. We would certainly expect the hotel guests to be afraid of the Department's enquiries into their Jewish ancestry, as well as terrified at the prospect of being "transferred" to Poland, according to a rumour being circulated. However, the characters seem to be much less bothered by the Department's sudden interest in their Jewishness, than they appear to be by being reminded of it. They find the relevance of their Jewish identity utterly bewildering.

This apparently peculiar attitude is rooted in the distinguishing feature that Appelfeld ascribes to his fictional characters: התבוללות (*hitbolelut*; assimilation). Most of the Jews who feature in *Badenheim 1939* belong to the Austrian middle class; some of them even converted to Christianity and married into the local aristocracy. When suddenly the matter of their identity is brought abruptly into the foreground, the guests are astounded:

אני מבקש סליחה. לפתע נשלל ממני הכל. דחפו אותי לכאן בתואנה שיהודי אני. ודאי התכוונו לאוסטיודן. ואני הרי כמוכם, אוסטרי. אבותי? אינני יודע. ייתכן. מי יודע. מה חשוב מי היו אבותי. (Appelfeld 1975, 71)[31]

[30] Trans.: And in the Sanitation Department investigations take place quietly. Now this is the centre and from this centre the strings are pulled. Now the Sanitation Department knows everything. There was an abundance of maps, monthly journals, a library, you can sit and read if you want. The conductor registered at the Department and returned happy. A cabinet full of contracts, permits and documents they showed him. Strange, his old father wrote a maths book in Hebrew, they know everything and are glad to show people their past – said the conductor. A barricade was placed at the town's gate. No-one enters nor leaves. However, it is not a full quarantine. The milkmen bring milk in the morning and the fruit truck unloads crates at the hotel, the two coffee shops are open, the orchestra plays all evening, and yet it seems as if a different time, a time not of this place, invaded the town and was quietly set.

[31] Trans.: I beg your pardon. Suddenly I am denied everything. They shoved me in here under the pretext that I am Jewish. Certainly, they must have meant an Eastern Jew. And I am indeed just like you, an Austrian. My ancestors? I don't know. Possibly. Who knows? What does it matter who my ancestors were?

The term אוסטיודן (*'ostyuden*; "Ostjuden") refers to the Jews residing in Eastern Europe, who did not achieve juridical parity as well as undergo the complex process of modernisation experienced by their Western counterparts. One of the hallmarks of this process was indeed assimilation.

With few masterful strokes the author vividly depicts the harrowing psychological implications of assimilation. The guests' Jewish identity had been almost completely obliterated in the wake of emancipation. Therefore, they could not think of themselves as anything different than Austrian nationals. The illusion of equality is carefully deconstructed by Appelfeld with every page thanks to the underlying allegorical structure of the narrative – that presupposes the reader's knowledge of extratextual events – as well as to the transparently contrived carelessness the characters display throughout the novel towards their Jewishness.

For some it seems to be a simple question of religious belief, for some others nothing more than a bureaucratic matter to resolve by providing the appropriate documentation. The conductor, whom we have seen earlier in a more than collaborative attitude towards the Sanitation Department, is said to have with him at all times "בכיס חזייתו מסמך מענין: תעודת הטבילה של הוריו" (Appelfeld 1975, 28).[32] The inescapable consequences of his inability to realise that his Jewishness was unaffected by any legal document, therefore deemed immutable by design, are poignantly adumbrated by the close proximity with another "interesting" document: a parental rights' waiver whereby Mrs Zauberblit's daughter severs all ties with her Jewish mother. The disparity in legal power between the two documents reinforces the predetermined hierarchy. Mrs Zauberblit's daughter appears to be able to remove any trace of her Jewish roots by virtue of her non-Jewish father, General Von Schmidt, whilst the conductor, despite his being son of converts to Christianity, is condemned to a condition of irredeemable otherness.

Dr Pappenheim, the impresario in charge of the annual music festival, actively encourages the "Polish delusion" by reassuring his fellow guests that when they will "be transferred" to Poland – that is to say, deported – nothing will change. "הכל יעבור לשם, אמר פאפנהיים. בני אדם לא יקופחו" (Appelfeld 1975, 55).[33] Even at the end, when the time comes for them to leave and the revelatory freight cars enter the scene, Pappenheim helplessly cleaves to his delusion, utterly incapable of grasping the reality of a journey from which he will never return:

> אך ההשתאות קפאה על עמדה. קטר, קטר מחובר אל ארבעה קרונות משא מזוהמים, הגיח מן הגבעות ועצר בתחנה. כה פתאומית היתה הופעתו כמו עלה מתוך בור. להיכנס, צווחו קולות. והאנשים הלכו ונספגו פנימה. […] ואף־על־פי־כן עוד הפסיק דוקטור פאפנהיים להשמיע את המשפט הבא: 'אם הקרונות מלוכלכים כל כך, משמע שהדרך אינה רחוקה'.
> (Appelfeld 1975, 103)[34]

In the second part of *The Age of Wonders* (Appelfeld 1978) the father of the main character refuses to see reason in the face of the impending disaster:[35]

> מאובר היה מתחנן: למה אתם לא יוצאים מכאן. למה אתם לא מהגרים לפלסטינה. היה בקולו משהו מן האמונה המעשית. ובעוד הכומר מגבב נימוקים על גבי שידולים, הסיר אביו את הכובע ואמר: אני על כל פנים, לא אהגר. מוטב לי להיות מוקע על קלוני זה ולא אהגר. שום רע לא עשיתי. סופר אוסטרי אני. את תוארי זה לא ישלול ממני איש. מאובר, הלום תדהמה, השפיל את ראשו ואמר: אינני מבין עיקשות זו.
> (168)[36]

[32] Trans.: in the pocket of his waistcoat an interesting document: his parents' certificate of Baptism.

[33] Trans.: 'Everything will be transferred there', said Pappenheim. 'No-one will be dispossessed'.

[34] Translated by Bilu in Miller Budick 2005, 35: "But their amazement was cut short. An engine, an engine coupled to four filthy freight cars, emerged from the hills and stopped at the station. Its appearance was as sudden as if it had risen from a pit in the ground. 'Get in!' yelled invisible voices. And the people were sucked in. […] Nevertheless Dr. Pappenheim found time to make the following remark: 'If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go' ".

[35] This section of the novel takes place after the Shoah, therefore it pertains to the post-survival stage discussed earlier; however, the passage quoted here refers to the time that immediately precedes.

[36] Trans.: Mauber was begging him: 'Why don't you leave? Why don't you emigrate to Palestine?' In his voice there was something of practical faith. And while the priest tried to reason with him and persuade him, his father

Bruno's father is portrayed as completely oblivious to the reality that surrounds him almost to the point of delusion.[37] He tenaciously holds on to his status as an "Austrian writer" in order to reaffirm the (for him) indisputable fact that he is an Austrian.

Interestingly, the language used leaves no doubt as to the character's self-perception. Whilst a priest can be reasonably expected to refer to Palestine as a place to which one "emigrates" (להגר; *lehagger*; to emigrate), the same consideration can't be extended to Jews without it going unnoticed. The verb "to emigrate" denotes a movement from one's country of origin to a *foreign* one. Therefore, Bruno's father unquestionably views Palestine as a foreign object, as it were. He could never return there, in that Israel could well have been the land of his ancestors, but it most certainly is not *his* land. He can only conceive of *emigrating* there.

Furthermore, the very fact that a priest is urging him to contemplate the prospect of salvation in Palestine is deeply significant. As Shaked (1998, 255) has rightly observed, the author did not have a Zionist, or even a Jew for that matter, present Palestine as the only place where European Jewry could legitimately express their identity, therefore ensure themselves a future. In this novel the absence of a point of view different from that expressed by Bruno's father is conspicuous.

Jewish characters are trapped in a "diasporic" state of mind, which the Shoah has not affected in any conceivable way. They did not try to integrate as Jews, but to disappear into non-Jewishness, either by converting or by "simply" denying their roots. When the matter of their identity is forcibly brought into the foreground as a discriminatory element, they fall into a state of denial that prevents them from appreciating the gravity of their plight.

Another aspect of assimilation that Appelfeld explores in his work is auto-Antisemitism or Jewish self-hatred. In his works this feature consistently appears in connection with Jews from the Diaspora and is presented by the author as a by-product of assimilation.

In *The Age of Wonders*, Bruno recalls conversations overheard in his house:

על יהודים דיברו בביתנו תמיד, אך תמיד בקול מלוחש, מלווה מין העוויה. ולפעמים מתוך התפרצות: אין להכחיש, גם אנחנו יהודים. מאז גילה אבא את בובר מצאה חרפה קטנה זו תיקון מסוים, תיקון לא שלם. לפני שנים אחדות יצא אבא לפרנקפורט לפגוש את מרטין בובר. היתה איזו צפייה בבית, שאמא לא ידעה לפרשה לי. אך שובו לא היה מרנין במיוחד. (Appelfeld 1978, 44)[38]

In an effort to sever all ties to their Jewish identity Bruno's family – and his father in particular – resort to a stereotypical representation that, in their intentions at least, should separate them from their peers beyond any reasonable doubt. However, the conundrum reveals itself to be impervious to simplistic solutions. The undeniability of their Jewishness that surfaces "sometimes in an outburst" urges Bruno's father to turn to Martin Buber.[39] The

took his hat off and said: 'Anyway, I am not going to emigrate. I would prefer to be shamed for this, but I am not going to emigrate. I did nothing wrong. I am an Austrian writer. This title they are not going to take away from me.' Mauber, astounded, lowered his head and said: 'I don't understand this stubbornness of yours'.

[37] Bruno is the main character featuring in *The Age of Wonders*. He survives and decides to return to the place that gave birth to him in search of his past.

[38] Translated by Bilu in Shaked 1995, 91: "They were always talking about Jews at home, but always in a lowered voice and with a kind of grimace. And sometimes in an outburst, 'You can't deny it, we too are Jews'. Ever since Father had discovered Martin Buber, this little disgrace had found a certain if incomplete remedy. A few years before Father had gone off to Frankfurt to meet Buber. There was an expectation in the house, which mother [*sic*] could not explain to me. But his return was not particularly joyful".

[39] Buber's influence on assimilated European Jews between the two world wars has been pointed out amongst others by Shaked (1998, 262; 545-46 n. 67). Yigal Schwartz (2001, 159-60 n. 30) has also noted the striking ambivalence that Appelfeld shows towards Buber in his works.

encounter, though, whether real or imaginary, does not produce the desired effect. Bruno's father comes home in a less than "joyous" disposition, that marks his failure to resolve the dilemma posed by his identity. Appelfeld leaves that part of the story conspicuously outside the scope of the narrative, exposing the inevitable outcome to which any similar attempt is destined.

Therefore, by failing to prove his "un-Jewishness" and by reducing his peers to a stereotype, the auto-antisemitism of the father is exposed in all its poignancy. He likens Jews to wasps, drawing an analogy between them and insects strongly reminiscent of the one already explored in *Badenheim 1939*: "אבא לא סבל את המקום וכינה אותו: קן הצרעות של הזעיר־בורגנות היהודית. שוב אינם יהודים אבל עדיין שומרים על שותפות האכילה וההמולה" (Appelfeld 1978, 33).[40] In his derogatory remark Jews are reduced to basic acts like eating and producing noise that are intended to show them as more akin to beasts than to human beings. Furthermore, his own private "bestiary" features Jews also in the form of mice: "לא פסק לחרף את היהודים למיניהם המתרוצצים כעכברים על פני אוסטריה, לאמיתו של דבר בכל מקום" (89).[41] The (self-)hate is overwhelming and Bruno's father tries to separate himself from the object of that sentiment by fully renouncing his identity: " 'אני כופר', רועם אבא,'ביהדות שמייחסים לי' " (64).[42] The attempt cannot but fail.

The reader of these novellas is constantly left with an impossible choice between empathising with characters who are represented as both victims and – at least to some extent – perpetrators and passing judgment on them. The victims have internalised their oppressor's antisemitic views, thereby sharing one disturbing trait with them. However, Appelfeld pushes the boundaries of accepted Jewish representation even further. Some of the assimilated Jews he describes indeed conform to the stereotype delineated by Bruno's father: they are noisy and eat voraciously.

The grotesque picture that emerges in his works is a potent rhetorical and literary device that allows Appelfeld to research the roots of the catastrophe that befell European Jews. The author's deliberate choice of searching its origin in that specific period (between the turn of the 20th century and the 1930s) and amongst its victims is as significant as it is problematic to contemplate. Why does Appelfeld feel compelled to look "inwards" in his search for the reasons that brought so many European Jews on the edge of the Pit, completely oblivious to the impending fate of annihilation? Why does he seem to struggle so forcefully with the inability of European Jewry to anticipate the disaster?

[40] Translated by Bilu in Appelfeld 1979: "Father couldn't bear the place and called it a hornet's nest of petit-bourgeois Jews. They weren't really Jews anymore; all that was left of their Judaism was their desire to go on eating and making noise together".

In *Badenheim 1939* the Sanitation Department is tasked precisely with exterminating "the Jewish insects", just as the Third Reich took it upon itself to eradicate "the Jewish plague" from the world (Shaked 1998, 260). Kafka's Gregor Samsa, the salesman that one day finds himself transformed into a giant insect in *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis), constitutes another literary example of this sort of imagery, one that assumes even greater significance in view of the fact that Kafka was one of Appelfeld's main sources of inspiration (Shaked 1998, 240-41).

[41] Trans.: He didn't cease to swear at the Jews of all sorts running around like mice all over Austria, or everywhere for that matter.

Another noted example of Jews depicted as mice in literature as well as in visual arts is Art Spiegelman's *Maus. A survivor's tale*, a serialised graphic novel, published between 1980 and 1991. Spiegelman deliberately drew this type of imagery from Nazi antisemitic propaganda, namely from the 1940 pseudo-documentary *The Eternal Jew* (Bacchereti 2017, 410 n. 5).

[42] Trans.: 'I deny the Judaism others attribute to me,' Father thunders.

4. Perpetually displaced

The social and cultural milieu that gave birth and nurtured the author's literary efforts has certainly played a decisive role in the matter of the ambivalence that he displays towards assimilated Jews of Europe. The difficulties that Israeli society experienced in coming to terms with its diasporic origins have already been mentioned. Therefore, it is unsurprising that one of the most frequent criticisms levelled against Appelfeld was that he shunned the contemporary Jewish experience in his literary production, be it the Israeli one or any other (Schwartz 2001, xxi).[43] Conspicuously absent from his work were the vicissitudes of the young state, its wars, and the young nation's struggle for self-determination. Nonetheless, in his demarcation of the narrative space the author does not refrain from including Israel, although Appelfeld's Israel appears as a decidedly different place from that depicted by his contemporaries.

At least partly in reaction to this "nuisance" the author embarked on an inward journey aimed at recovering his past.[44] In order to achieve this goal, he built his entire literary world around European Jews. However, the author lived, breathed and worked, with a few exceptions, in that same Israel that struggled to integrate its diasporic component into the national identity. This specific set of circumstances helps shedding light on the manifest ambivalence exhibited by the author in the way he regards assimilated Jews.

Said ambivalence has puzzled critics to the point of producing diametrically opposite interpretations of it. If Appelfeld's resistance to the pressure exerted on him by the Israeli literary establishment can be construed as (moderately) anti-Zionist, on the other hand some have argued that his seemingly unsympathetic consideration of assimilated Jews should be read against a Zionist background (Miller Budick 2005, 27-30). However, this dichotomy is inconsistent with the data at our disposal.

If we consider the spatial architecture of Appelfeld's fictive world, we notice a carefully elaborated symmetry that is achieved by reorienting the literary space through an inversion of the values assigned to its different parts (Schwartz 2001, 35-37). Centre and periphery exchange roles and the respective existential possibilities that are available to the characters are reversed.

In this world the "Land of the Searing Light"[45] constitutes one of the two main areas along with the "Land of the Cattails", which represents Central Europe. The two areas are separated by an intermediate region, that corresponds to Italy. The defining traits of the main regions emerge by way of contrast with one another. Some of these features are expected in light of both the topographical and historical nature of the extra-textual counterparts upon which the main regions are based, i.e. light/darkness, hot/cold, an all-Jewish set of characters as opposed to the presence of both gentiles and Jews.

However, both regions feature a parallel structure where the respective roles of the centre and of the marginal areas have alternatively opposite values according to whether they are considered on the historical or on the fictional level. In *The Searing Light* the Zionist agricultural farm constitutes the centre of the action, whilst the country's great cities are left outside the

[43] Appelfeld called it a "הטרדה נמשכת" (*hatrada nimshekhet*; continued nuisance) in an article written for the newspaper *Yedi'ot 'Acharonot* in 1993, following the publication of *The Conversion* (Appelfeld 1993b; Shaked 1998, 239).

[44] Schwartz (2001, 3) refers to what he considers a distinctive feature of Appelfeld's fiction as "Lot's wife syndrome" or a "nearly obsessive clinging to the traumatic past".

[45] *The Searing Light* (מכות האור; *mikhvat ha'or*) is the title of a novel Appelfeld published in 1980. As already noted by Ramras-Rauch (1994, 112-14), the author alludes here to Leviticus 13:24-25, where "בְּעֹרוֹ מִכְוֶת־אֵשׁ" (*be'oro mikhwat-'esh*; "a burn on the skin") with specific features is understood as a symptom of leprosy. By playing with the two homophones, *'or* "skin" (as in the quoted verse form the Bible) and *'or* "light", he hints at the debilitating effect the new and foreign space has on the young survivors that populate the novel.

main narrative scope. Furthermore, the spatial tension between centre and periphery reflects the analogous tension occurring between the existential alternatives available to the characters: assimilation and "tribal" rootedness.[46]

Therefore, what constitutes "assimilation" in the stories set in the Land of Israel is self-annihilation within Zionist culture, while tribal roots are represented by the European non-Jewish world from which the characters come and to which they try to cling. Conversely, in the stories set in Europe assimilation is observed against the gentile background, while the idea of rootedness is embodied by Jewish life in Bukovina and on the Carpathians or by life in Israel (Schwartz 2001, 56). The respective values are reversed, leaving the main structure unaltered, thereby conveying a sense of recurrence that transposes Jewish history to myth.

The same plot takes place in the same spatial structure, whether the narrative deals with survivors who find themselves displaced in Israel or with Central European Jews on the verge of annihilation before the war. Both groups are torn between assimilation and rootedness in different contexts and times. Although the reference points never change, the narrative and the corresponding space are reoriented in order to match the characters' vantage point. This renders attributing different values to the same components possible and makes ambivalence perhaps the author's most significant literary device. Life in Israel is seen, amongst other elements, as an opportunity to hold on to one's roots in the European stories, where characters have all but lost their old self to gentile culture, whereas in the Israeli stories it conceals the threat of assimilation (to Zionist ideology), leaving its previous role to the old life in Europe.

Appelfeld's fiction is less about the Shoah than it is about recomposing the shreds of his own self (4-8). The Shoah constitutes an irrefutable experiential fact – after all, those were his formative years –, which functions as a starting point in his creative endeavour with the aim of exploring the question of Jewish identity. What is it that makes a Jew? What does it mean to be Jewish? Is it the Shoah? Is it tradition? Or perhaps Israel as conceived by Zionism?

Despite the fact that he found refuge in a country that was built upon Zionism and that he succeeded in integrating into Israeli society, Appelfeld certainly refused to adhere to its ideology uncritically, particularly when that meant erasing his past. Thus, the "Land of the Searing Light" revealed itself as an alien space for both him and his fictional characters. It was decidedly not a place where survivors would find redemption or any sense of closure; rather, it was a mere stop in an endless cycle of wanderings that brought them there inadvertently, or perhaps more accurately, by mistake (Shaked 1998, 253-54; 264-65; Schwartz 2001, 47).

It is precisely displacement in all its manifestations where Appelfeld directs the search for Jewish identity. This fact allows him to diffuse the tension between diasporism and Zionist ideology by recovering the "tribal" component that is intrinsic to both. Displacement as the absence of exclusive ties to any specific place legitimises every form of Jewish experience without distinction or discrimination. The Zionist meta-narrative of exile and redemption is unidirectional, the hierarchical values of its two components are fixed and immutable: redemption is the only possible outcome. Appelfeld seeks – and succeeds – to recover the "exilic" component by tying it to the "itinerant" existence of the Jewish people. In this fashion the Shoah can become an integral, albeit tragic, part of Jewish (therefore, also Israeli) identity without exhausting all of its possibilities.

[46] שבט (*shevet*; tribe) is the term that Appelfeld himself uses to refer to the Jewish people (Shaked 1998, 235) and what Schwartz (2001) alludes to in the title of his own book.

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