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The Story of a Life by Aharon Appelfeld, translated from the Hebrew by Aloma Halter, Schocken Books: New York (2004), 198 pages

Aharon Appelfeld is a world renowned, highly accomplished novelist and essayist – and the author of a memoir that documents childhood trauma and a tale of survival that is extraordinary. The very first words of his preface hold his vision and alert us to the nature of memoir and the act of memory: “The pages before you are segments of contemplation and memory. Memory is elusive and selective; it holds on to what it chooses to hold on to…. Like a dream, memory also tries to imbue events with some meaning” (p. v).

What does it mean to begin a memoir in this fashion? And what sort of memoir will this be, that begins with a meditation on memory? Appelfeld went from an idyllic childhood to a nightmare, from being gently raised in a loving, cultured family to the annihilation of the Holocaust. The adored child became a hunted, resourceful, desperate animal with the soul and memories of a poet. From being immersed in the sweetest of possibilities, a happy child in eastern Europe, with religious grandparents and intellectual parents, he became a seven year old living on his own for six years, escaping from a Nazi forced march, surviving the perils of winters and the dangers of being turned over by peasants to the Nazis, until he winds up in a displaced persons camp and ultimately, at the age of 13, Palestine. Who was he, who had he become, who does he continue to become? To begin such a memoir in such a fashion is to commit one’s self to the interweaving of a child’s perspective with an adult understanding, to the interweaving of the vicissitudes of a child’s feelings and experiences with the deep sorrow of an adult remembering. And it is to commit one’s self to preserving the past through memoir, a past and a people under assault.

In his preface Appelfeld emphasizes that from childhood on his very being was brought to life by memory. Before the anxiety and scarring and dread of the trauma of the Holocaust, he was a child given to memory, memory that served as anticipation and as ground of being, memory as evidence of aliveness. And for Appelfeld, memory and imagination intertwine. In this he echoes one of the profound assumptions of psychoanalysis, that our subjective truths are made up of the interaction of event and fantasy (conscious and unconscious), and that memory is built from the drama and meaning of every day occurrences, given emotional significance both by the nature of the events themselves and the nature of our inner lives, our imaginative, fantasizing selves.

The few pages of his preface lead us to the specifics of his memories. They prepare us for his story. He says, “During the war I was not myself, but like a small creature that has a burrow…. Thoughts and feelings were greatly constricted” (p. vi). How could it not be so? These are dissociations necessary to survive, to use every ounce of energy, to use his native intelligence, his instinctual reading of others, his facility with languages, his sensitivity to cultural nuance, without succumbing to despair, without giving himself up to the forces of hatred and death that were emanating from a world sickness embodied in the Axis powers that was dedicating itself to devouring Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific.

Appelfeld has a sensibility that allows him to depict his own inner states and the evolution of his defenses. He shows us his survivor outlook, a desperation that buried feeling until it violently erupted and then subsided again. His memoir is a study in dissociation and trauma, in survival mechanism, but also it is a study in the emergence of a sensitive and feeling person. Because he survived, because he is a writer who allows himself to revisit the past, and because he has a depth of feeling, knowledge, and understanding, we are given a view of a European Jewry now lost, and of what that particular cultural milieu offered the child who was thrust into the unthinkable.

Again, we can ask, what sort of memoir is this that begins with a disquisition on memory? The voice of this memoir encompasses the simplicity of a child remembering, the simplicity of what a child cherishes, with the reflectiveness of a mature adult who understands what the child can only remember. The child knows that what he cherishes is valuable, and has been lost, except in his memory, and the adult knows that the child's view, the child's experience, must be retained even as we look at the historic forces that swept the child and his family and his people and the world into the madness of the Holocaust.

And so, Appelfeld's voice is deceptively simple. He describes what he remembers as if he were still that child. And isn't he? The sentence structure at times is disarmingly straightforward. And shouldn't it be? It is as if he were saying, but this is it, this is what happened, there is nothing else but to tell it, to string together the events, the sensuous experience, the inner chaos of feeling, the plain facts, some beautiful, some brutal; this is it, and this is the only way to tell it.

In the earliest pages, Appelfeld tells an idyllic story, a story of the people in his life, his beloved mother and father, his mother's parents, the house in the city where he lived, the village where his grandparents lived, his uncle's grand estate, the vibrancy of the natural world, and his early questions about religion, about God, and the strange and unvoiceable feelings that came over him. He reflects a sensitivity to his mother's inner world even as he struggles to formulate his own. We encounter a lovely and extraordinary child.

We then plunge with him into the transition from a mysterious but engaging world to the angst of the dispossessed and persecuted. We follow him into the ghetto, where "children and madmen were friends" (p. 39). Quite literally. All the social institutions had collapsed, there were no schools for the children, no hospitals for the sick, and of course no mental hospitals, so that children and madmen roamed the streets together. The emptying of the mental hospitals becomes a harbinger of things to come, for the "madmen" were among the first to be deported. Appelfeld manages to mix the perceptions of a child with the interpretation of an adult in his description of this situation, which was to serve as a template for the Jews driven mad in the horrors of the ghetto. Describing a deportation of the insane during which ghetto residents tossed food to them as they were being taken away, food they could not catch, he describes their smiles, and imagines them thinking, “We never managed to do the right thing, and because of it we weren’t loved…. We don’t need your food now. A little attention, a little love would have gone a long way” (p. 41).

And then, Appelfeld concludes, “With that expression on their faces, they left us forever” (p. 41).

Appelfeld amasses a series of memories so devastating, so heartbreaking, it is unimaginable that a child actually lived them. He witnessed the deportation from the ghetto of blind children who had been trained as musicians, singing as they went, as local Ukrainian youngsters cried out, “Jews to the cattle cars!” Another time, he saw a woman trying to help a very young, abandoned child to escape deportation, only to see the child refuse her help, saying, “I have to go. What can I do? You have to understand this.” These emblematic stories set the stage for his own drive to escape. Surrounded by death, the delicately raised child had a core of determination and a will to live that was unshakeable.

His mother was killed in the early years of deportation. Appelfeld and his father endured a forced march, and he landed in a concentration camp, from which he escaped, alone. He wandered through the forests, from village to village, assessing who would shelter him, who could use him, who would tire of him or who might turn him in, taking food and shelter when he could, working when asked, and leaving when his instincts told him to. Eventually he found himself in transport to Palestine, among people who had survived as he had, among some of the most unpleasant and dangerous people he had encountered.

How does Appelfeld tell these stories? Like this: “World War II went on for six straight years, but sometimes it seems to me that it lasted only one long night, from which I awoke a completely different person” (p. 89). Or, “I say ‘I don’t remember,’ and that’s the whole truth” (p. 89). Or, “Everything that happened is imprinted within my body and not within my memory. The cells of my body apparently remember more than my mind, which is supposed to remember” (p. 90). And, perhaps most poignantly, “I’ve already written more than twenty books about those years, but sometimes it seems as though I haven’t yet begun to describe them. Sometimes it seems to me that a fully detailed memory is still concealed within me, and when it emerges from its bunker, it will flow fiercely and strongly for days on end. This is a fragment about a forced march that I’ve been trying to describe, without success, for years” (p. 92). Appelfeld then goes on to describe seeing other children, exhausted, fall and drown in the mud. He tells of his father dragging him to his feet, saving him from drowning. Appelfeld describes his father cleaning him off, rubbing his arms and legs, a caretaking so tender that he says, “it seems to me that not only my father is with me, but also my mother, whom I loved so much” (p. 93).

The poignancy of loss of his beloved mother is resurrected several years later in his relationship to language, as he settles in the land that is about to become Israel. His diary is written in a mélange of German, Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ruthenian. “Without language, everything is chaos and confusion and the fear of things you needn’t be afraid of” (p. 107). He speaks of his mother’s native language, German, and the use of language to contextualize relationships. There were times to use Ukrainian, or Yiddish, or a smattering of Romanian, or Ruthenian. And now, in Israel, he needed to use modern Hebrew. What could he consider his mother tongue? When a boy has lost his mother and his mother language, how is he to be known? Who will understand him? How will he understand himself? Growing further and further away from his mother’s mother tongue, German, or the tender “mamaloschen” (mother tongue) of Yiddish, he kept experiencing the pain of being the son of a murdered mother. Appelfeld’s “story of a life” also is the story of how he came to tell his many stories, all stories of a life, in a language, Hebrew, that he first learned hating the language and the people who taught him. The last part of his book is the story of his rebirth, his new beginnings, beginnings forged from trauma and loss and hatred and despair, his years in the Israeli army, his encounters with people who responded to him despite his need to stay sealed up, sealed in.

“During the war, words had less currency than faces and hands…. Words did not help one understand” (p. 104).

“Wickedness is like generosity: neither needs words” (p. 104).

“Throughout my university years I wrote poems, but these were more like the howls of an animal who had been abandoned and for years thereafter was trying to find his way home. Mother, Mother, Father, Father: Where are you? Where are you hiding?” (p. 149).

And in these university years, Appelfeld continued to study Yiddish, to read Russian literature, to explore Kabbalah, and ultimately to study with Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Ernst Simon, and Yehezkel Kaufmann. Two major influences were Dov Sadan in the Yiddish department, and S.Y. Agnon. In encountering two such mentors, Appelfeld was reunited with his sense of his ability to connect with the power of language. Reading the last part of his memoir is like reading of a homecoming, an internal homecoming that allowed him to tell of what had been lost and what was left alive.

The Story of a Life stands as a testament to the power of language, the power of memory, the power of connection, and the courage of a child who did not die. Those who are interested in psychoanalysis will recognize a tale of trauma and defense and resurrection, a truly human tale.