

From Badenheim to Bethlehem: Literature of Holocaust Survivors in Israel

Naomi Taub

Literature and Language Department
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Richard Chess

Abstract

When the first Holocaust survivors arrived in Israel, then Palestine, they were received under a cloud of uneasy, slightly hostile silence. The memory of their ordeals in Europe was perceived by Israeli society as a threat to the Zionist cause and therefore the survivors' efforts to recount their struggles and reclaim their individuality were suppressed. The purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the experience of the Holocaust survivor in Israel by examining the literature they produced in the years that followed. Since the memory of the Holocaust has been most effectively preserved in the giving and receiving of personal testimony, it is far more revelatory to look at a literary timeline of Israel after the Holocaust than an historical one. Israeli Holocaust Literature, exemplified here by the work of Aharon Appelfeld and others, deals directly with two major difficulties confronted by the survivor: the pain of coping with personal grief and the psychological strain of recollection, and the inability to reach catharsis through self-expression because of the unwillingness of their Israeli audience to engage in open dialogue. Motifs throughout this literature such as madness, Otherness, grief, and silence, are a response not only to the emotional traumas of the Holocaust itself but to the unsympathetic attitudes of Israeli society. Sixty years later the Holocaust occupies a singular, integral place in the narrative of the State of Israel. Literature gives us unique insight into how this dramatic change in consciousness occurred because it gave the survivors a medium through which to address these issues on a personal level, and it is at that individual level that we can best understand the depths of the survivor's experience.

Keywords: Aharon Appelfeld, Holocaust survivors, Zionism

1. Introduction

In his book *First Person Essays*, titled in Hebrew *Masot Be-Guf Rishon*, Aharon Appelfeld draws on his own experiences to introduce us to the difficulties faced by a Holocaust survivor in Israel, then known as Palestine. "We arrived in the Land [of Israel] in 1946," he writes, "We were about twelve or thirteen years old, with the suffering of years tied to us like a hard coil... Our suffering was not only in lacking in meaning, but it was also shameful. In the Land [of Israel] life hummed with deeds, purpose, and resourcefulness, while our tortured childhood was, as it were, bent further under the burden of all those deeds" (qtd. in Jacobson 130). He goes on to explain how the Holocaust survivors, called the *She'erit Hapletah* or "surviving remnant," were isolated within Israeli society. They were seen as living representations of Jewish victimhood, standing in direct opposition to the Jewish identity that the *Yishuv*, or Jews born in pre-state Israel, were attempting to cultivate. Appelfeld explains, "The application of the interpretation swooped down on us and without mercy established parallels: exile – redemption, Zionism versus assimilation, the guilty as opposed to the blameless, the wise as opposed to the naïve. There was a terrible transparency in these analogies" (qtd. in Jacobson 130). From these excerpts we can start to develop an idea of the twin obstacles faced by a survivor in Israel: first, the pain of dealing with the grief and horror of their memories, and second, the tacit

hostility directed at them by Israeli society. These apparent dichotomies would become themes in Appelfeld's fiction; he would attempt to interrogate and in some cases dismantle them, to cleanse the survivors of the implications of these parallels. He also added thematic parallels of his own which we will discuss here: ignorance versus awareness, revelation versus concealment, and madness versus sanity. These themes resonate not only throughout Appelfeld's work, but also in the works of others. However, to fully understand these dichotomies and their impact on Israeli Holocaust Literature, and beyond that to understand the experience of the Holocaust survivors in Israel, we must first establish a cultural and historical timeline of Israeli society after World War II.

Israel declared its independence in 1948, by which time over 70,000 Holocaust survivors had emigrated from Europe. At this point the growing Jewish population in Palestine had been fighting ferociously to oust the British occupation for decades, making the timing of this victory quite significant. It can be easily implied that lingering guilt over the events of the Holocaust heavily impacted the UN's decision to finally allow the State of Israel to be established as a Jewish homeland. Yet Israelis did not wish Israel to be associated with the Holocaust in any way. Idith Zertal explains, "The State of Israel [was]... a monument of selective amnesia and erasure of certain chapters in Jewish history that would have hindered its constituting effort and contradicted its narrative of power and revival" (Zertal 101). Zionism was a new beginning, and in a way this new beginning necessitated detaching from all that was old, the generation of the parents being abandoned to clear the way for the children. A new Jewish identity had been cultivated over time by the *Yishuv*, which rejected the history of Jewish persecution that stretched back over thousands of years. The symbolic term for this new identity was the *Sabra*: tanned, muscular, and virile, ready to fight and die for his country. The survivors, as they pulled into port fresh from transit camps in Europe, represented the ultimate threat to this new identity. They were pale and emaciated, their clothing ragged and their minds fragile, the very essence of Jewish victimhood that Zionists were attempting to disown. Politically speaking, it seemed imperative that the memory of the Holocaust be suppressed so that the State of Israel would not be defined by, or even associated with, victimhood. Although it is understandable, considering the lengthy and enduring history of the Jews as an oppressed and powerless people, that Zionists would choose to focus entirely on their newfound power, the unfortunate result was that the survivors were prevented from achieving the catharsis they so desperately needed, which could only come from speaking out about their individual experiences.

Of course there are other non-political aspects of the Israelis' feelings towards the *She'erit Hapletah* that cannot be ignored, one of which was guilt. We must understand that most of the Jews living in Israel at this point were of Eastern European origin. Most had emigrated within a generation, if not in living memory. Many had left family behind in Europe to lose their lives in the ghettos and concentration camps, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust they were afraid of the guilt they would have to endure if they faced up to the survivors directly. More to the point, the eyes of the survivors the *Yishuv* saw ghosts of their former selves, a constant reminder that they had just barely escaped the clutches of the Nazis, and that for all their cultural progressivism, they had much more in common with these victims than they wanted to admit. And then, of course, there was the problem of where to place blame. Someone would have to be held accountable for this terrible atrocity. One crucial concept to understand here is the notion widely held by the *Yishuv* that in assimilating into European society these Jews had essentially been the authors of their own fate. They were regarded as being inexcusably naïve if not complicit in the machinations of the Nazi regime by abandoning their Jewish heritage and becoming members of the European bourgeoisie. Zionism and assimilation were presented as entirely opposing ideas, and European Jews has chosen the wrong path, sealing their destiny.

Under this cloud of guilt and mutual recrimination, an uneasy silence prevailed. The first fifteen years after the Holocaust were marked mainly by a period of non-communication between the two groups. Memories of the Holocaust seemed to fade, stultified by lack of discussion. Though only a decade had passed, the tragedies of the Holocaust were noticeably absent from educational curricula and politicians' rhetoric. If the Holocaust was mentioned it was only in terms of the few victories that could be salvaged from the wreckage, such as the story of the uprising in Warsaw Ghetto, and the Holocaust was to be remembered as a European disaster, not a Jewish one. The general opinion was that the ideal way to do justice to the tragedy of the Holocaust was to put it entirely in the past and focus solely on the development of the State of Israel. Still, it would be a mistake to suggest that there were no efforts made on the part of the Israeli government to memorialize the Holocaust during this time. Plans for memorials and days of remembrance were proposed to the Knesset as early as the mid 1950s. However those plans never spoke to the idea of remembering the Holocaust not just as a tragedy for Jews or for Europe or even for Israel, but as a tragedy of people.

The capture and trial of Adolph Eichmann, a high-ranking Nazi official, in the summer of 1961 represented a major turning point in the communication between the Holocaust survivors and Israeli society. Eichmann was captured in Argentina and, after a lengthy legal battle, extradited to Israel to stand trial on a number of counts, among which was crimes against humanity. This allowed Israelis to address the specter of the Holocaust from a new

position, one of power and control, giving them a way to turn the Holocaust, a destructive event, into a constructive one. This trial is notable for many reasons. For one thing, it was a highly publicized affair. The proceedings were broadcasted nationally on the radio, so that everyone might hear and experience them. It was also the first criminal trial to be televised. Secondly, the way in which the trial was conducted is vital to our understanding of how it marked a change in consciousness. Gideon Hauser, the chief prosecutor, recalls his strategy, saying “In order merely to secure a conviction, it was obviously enough to let the archives speak; a fraction of them would have sufficed to get Eichmann convicted ten times over. But I knew we needed more than a conviction; we needed a living record of a gigantic national and human disaster...” (qtd. in Porat 623). Instead of focusing on the plethora of documents they had amassed, all signed by Eichmann’s own hand and all incontrovertibly proving his role in the annihilation process, the prosecution decided that the centerpiece of their case would be the individual testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Over a hundred witnesses were called to the stand, and each were asked to recount their personal horror stories not just to the jury, but to the open ears of millions of Israelis listening from their homes. In this way, the Eichmann trial is the earliest and best example of Israeli society allowing the survivors to reclaim their individuality. Of course this was merely the first step in a lengthy and arduous process of reckoning. Yet we can easily see how this historical event paved the way for the literary voices that emerged in the following decades. By exploring the literature of Aharon Appelfeld and others, we can see how the Holocaust survivors began to express themselves more openly and created a deep and vital dialogue with the *Yishuv* from this point onward.

2. Literary Voices

Now that we have an idea of the general tone and attitudes of the *Yishuv*, we can turn our attention to the survivors themselves. We begin with the parallel established by Appelfeld of exile and redemption. The theme of exile and redemption is a constant throughout Jewish liturgy, focusing on a desire for the Jewish people to return to Israel. However, even taking this into consideration, we are left with a simple question: were the *She’erit Hapletah* truly redeemed upon immigrating to Israel, or were they in fact in exile from their true homeland? As centuries passed in Eastern Europe, Jewish culture flourished and changed in this new environment; Jews who had settled there purely out of need had put down roots, started families, created their own traditions. And yet after the Holocaust the Eastern Europe that lived in their memory was gone. Prospects were bleak for those who wished to return to their former homes. Their property had been confiscated by the Nazis, their synagogues burnt, and their families annihilated. More to the point the toxic atmosphere of anti-Semitism had not died with Hitler, as evidenced by records of pogroms continuing in Poland well into the 1960s. Therefore it seems natural to us that the *She’erit Hapletah* would experience a sense of relief, of homecoming, when they arrived in Israel. As evidenced by their literature, however, this was not always the case, in fact many felt forced once again by circumstance, exiled from their true home. They could not part with their memories, but since the Eastern Europe they remembered no longer existed, it became an almost mythical place preserved in their minds. We see from their writing how they fictionalized their lost homeland, a place they both cherished and resented, mythologizing it in much the same way they once did with *Eretz Yisrael*.

An interesting representation of this predisposition towards myth and mystery comes from what we might call the second generation of Israeli Holocaust Literature, in *See: Under Love*, by David Grossman, who himself was neither a survivor nor the progeny of one, and yet deals direct with the survivors’ experience. The first part of the novel is narrated by Momik, a young Israeli boy who lives in a fractured community of survivors, including both of his parents. Through his eyes we can see how Eastern Europe became a place of myth and mystery in the Israeli imagination. It is constantly referred to as “Over There,” and no one will tell Momik what transpired in that mysterious, far-off place. He believes that Yiddish is the only language that God understands, mirroring the way Jews in Europe would have felt about Biblical Hebrew. Because no one will tell him precisely what happened, Momik uses his childish imagination to come up with an explanation for the strange behavior of the adults in his life. He creates a tale of the “Nazi Beast,” a fearful creature who feels no guilt and feeds on Real Jews, or Jews who speak Yiddish and come from Over There. To him the survivors seem like a secret society that has its own language and traditions, and they alone hold the knowledge of that place. In this way we can see how the myth of Eastern Europe served two functions: it allowed the *She’erit* to preserve the memory of their once beloved home, and it allowed the Israelis to distance themselves from the horrific realities of what happened there.

Another means of mythologizing pre-war Eastern Europe can be found in Aharon Appelfeld’s *Badenheim 1939*, in which he uses Absurdist literary techniques to make the events of the Holocaust easier to process for those who did not experience it. It is not that the setting or the characters are absurd: Badenheim is an Austrian resort town

populated by Jews that are characterized in much the same way the *Yishuv* perceived them. They are neither idealized nor demonized, simply idle bourgeoisie who choose to embrace European culture rather than their Jewish heritage. Rather it is their situation that gradually becomes more and more absurd, as little by little their lives come to be controlled by the nefarious Sanitation Department, which clearly represents the Nazi Regime. While we, by virtue of hindsight, know that they will inevitably be sent away to concentration camps and massacred, the people of Badenheim are blissfully unaware of their fate for most of the novel. This fictionalized version of events that Appelfeld presents us with is easier to swallow in its entirety than the inconceivable horrors of the reality of the Holocaust. As Jacobson explains, "By leaving out some of the more historically recognizable details, the author presents the readers with a Holocaust experience that appears to be significantly less horrible than they would expect" (Jacobson 140). The people of the town are never ordered to affix yellow stars to their garments, nor do they ever suffer through a state-organized pogrom like *Kristallnacht*, yet we know unquestionably that the author is writing about the Holocaust. Badenheim, though recognizable, is strange, and we can see this as Appelfeld's way of attempting to communicate unimaginable events to Israeli society by cloaking them in the realm of the absurd.

The motif that pervades *Badenheim 1939* is the dichotomy of awareness, or sight, versus ignorance, or blindness, and from this perspective we can also see Appelfeld's techniques as a way of providing an eloquent defense of European Jewry. The novel opens on an ordinary day, just as the residents of Badenheim are preparing for the tourist season and happily anticipating the arrival of the musicians for their annual cultural festival. They take no notice when the Sanitation Department inspectors arrive to take measurements of their stores, requiring that all Jewish-owned businesses register with the government. Of course, this small detail sets off warning bells for a contemporary reader, but the citizens of the town think nothing of it and blithely comply. In the world created by the novel, we cannot say that their reactions to this minute occurrence are inexcusably naïve or downright stupid. This is how Appelfeld seeks to defend the Jews of Eastern Europe: by showing his audience, the Israeli Jews, that the work of the Nazis was done so subtly and efficiently at first that seeing the end result would have required superhuman foresight. The townspeople perceive these new government policies as strange but not necessarily threatening. Just as in reality, however, the Sanitation Department slowly begins to act more openly. Independent investigations are conducted, and suddenly no one is allowed to leave the town without permission. Almost overnight the townspeople find themselves hopelessly trapped, but by then they have been rendered powerless to save themselves. A wall is built with cement and barbed wire, and posters appear advertising the beauty of Poland in preparation for a forced relocation. Yet in the novel the Jews never fully realize what awaits them; the book ends just as they are being loaded into the filthy, stinking cattle cars which they think are simply taking them to Poland, although we know they are headed for concentration camps.

As they gradually become aware of their impending doom, the townspeople all have reactions that show their humanity in different ways. Dr. Pappenheim, arguably the leader of the town and certainly the most ironic character in the novel, remains staunchly optimistic to the very end. It is he that says, as the deportation trains pull into the station, "If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go" (144). In hindsight we see his optimism as pure stupidity, yet he shows us a common, very human response to stress, and in a way he fares the best out of anyone, since this blind faith allows him to remain happy and sane while nearly everyone else begins to fall apart. Many begin to exhibit signs of what we might call mental illness. The first obvious demonstration of this is when the half-Jewish waitress has a nervous breakdown at a party, brandishing a knife and attempting to cut slices of flesh from her thighs so that her customers can taste this "Austrian meat." Even as she offers her body up as a cannibalistic human sacrifice she makes a point of identifying herself as an Austrian rather than a Jew, but this knowledge of identity does not preserve her sanity. And why does she act out so suddenly, so irrationally, so self-destructively? We are simply told, "despair had driven her out of her mind" (53). She is not alone in this. Of the rest of the townspeople Appelfeld writes, "There was something unthinking about their movements, as if they were being led. It was as if some alien spirit had descended on the town," (27) and later, "They were like sick people asking about their illness. If the doctor refused to explain, maybe they could get something out of the nurse?" (81). Gradually they began to act out en masse: they break into the pharmacy and gorge themselves on drugs, or shut themselves away to write letters that they cannot send, as the Sanitation Department has closed all postal routes in and out of the town. Even the animals are not immune to anxiety. By the end of the novel, the headwaiter's dogs mirror the condition of the people: "[The dogs] stood without moving. There was a kind of yearning in their silent gaze... They had tried to break out of the town several times, but the sentries had stopped them. Two had been shot, and the two survivors seemed to understand that their fate would be no different from that of their fellows" (126).

If even the dogs eventually succumb to the plague of anxiety that has infected the town, then we must know that it is not actually the manifestation of a mental illness, not the product of a weak mind or spirit. There is but one character who displays outward signs of being mentally ill at the beginning of the novel. This is Trude, the pharmacist's wife. Trude is also the first person to show any kind of awareness of the townspeople's impending

doom. She is portrayed as a woman whose sanity is deteriorating: perpetually worrying about her daughter's new marriage when nothing appears to be wrong and even seeing ghosts walking the streets. Martin, her husband, dismisses her paranoia as old-fashioned, a product of the long stand posture of the Jew as victim. Yet Appelfeld continually uses the phrase "the world became transparent to her" to describe Trude's vision, and as the story unfolds her perceived mental illness begins to seem more like wisdom, or at least a preternatural awareness of the future. As those around her, including her husband, breakdown, Trude becomes calm, as if her neurosis had passed from her and infected them. Martin understands this, saying, "Trude's illness had seeped into his soul drop by drop" (5), and later, "Martin stood feebly at her side. He had absorbed her sickness, but in him it was without power, without roots" (97). He comes to understand that what she had been seeing was truth, that her fear all along was warranted, not a product of insanity. Mental illness is not communicable; we must find new terms with which to understand this disease, something that we might call an epidemic of awareness, a disease of despair. This is an illness that destroys the mind from the outside; as a person becomes aware, sees the horrors of the Holocaust, their mind begins to crack under the weight, and the change is irrevocable.

This sickness is not limited to European Jews who are not yet aware of their fate, nor is it limited to the work of Aharon Appelfeld. To more fully understand this disease of despair we might compare the figure of Martin to Momik in Grossman's *See Under: Love*. As we have already established, Momik lives in Israel in a community that seems to be entirely made up of Holocaust survivors. All of the adults around him are mentally unstable, even those who appear functional. His grandfather mumbles the same stories over and over under his breath, his father screams in his sleep, and Momik is regularly awoken by the deranged screams of Hannah, survivor turned indigent, running naked through the streets. The survivors living in the town seem unfazed by Hannah's actions. We too might easily see how the experience of the Holocaust might lead to a predisposition for mental fragility if not outright insanity. To understand it thus, however, is to overlook the infectiousness of this sickness. The adults around him refuse to enlighten Momik about their experiences, so he conducts investigations of his own. He goes to the library and reads books about the Holocaust, looks at pictures of the camps. In this way he gradually becomes aware of the horrific immensity of what has been hidden from him, and as his eyes are opened his sanity collapses. In the beginning of the novel he is a bookish but relatively normal nine-year-old boy, but the more he learns about the Holocaust, the more books he reads and stories he hears, the more deranged he becomes, to the point of luring elderly survivors into his basement in order to tempt out the "Nazi Beast" into showing himself. Momik is another victim of the disease of despair, even though he never experienced any of the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand. Like the citizens of Badenheim he is a victim of awareness, not of ignorance.

Badenheim 1939 has no clear protagonist; rather it is more a sociological novel that studies the behavior of the town as a single organism. Appelfeld's *The Immortal Bartfuss*, on the other hand, is a novel given over completely to solitude, to the thoughts and transformations of one man. Who is Bartfuss though? It is hard to say. Despite being the novel's central focus, we are given very little insight into Bartfuss's psyche or his background. We know that he survived the concentration camps and went to a transport camp in Italy, where he dealt with the import and export of some unnamed commodity, a venture which made him a great deal of money. Italy was also the place where he met his future wife Rosa, whom he liked only because she seemed silent and self-contained and whom he decided to marry almost on a whim when she became pregnant with their first daughter, Paula. Upon moving to Israel they had a second daughter named Bridget. While these biographical facts might amount to something, they are all we really know about who this man is, because all else surrounding him is legend, and although he is the only character into whom we are given insight, he never reveals himself by thought, word, or deed. The very first line of the novel is "Bartfuss is immortal." Bartfuss uses his silence to preserve this guise of immortality. He refuses to divulge the facts of his life, leading the people around him to color in his history with anecdotes that make him appear superhuman, like the rumor that he absorbed fifty bullets and lived. Bartfuss never confirms nor disproves this rumor, preferring to fortify himself in endless silence.

By giving us a protagonist as mysterious and self-dispossessed as Bartfuss, Appelfeld illuminates the survivor's ability to both reveal and conceal. This tension between silence and communication is the central theme of the novel, and for most of it we seem to be trapped in an echoing void between the two. Appelfeld explains, "While the survivor tells, reveals, at the same time he conceals. For it is impossible not to tell, but it is also impossible to live in this space. This revelation and concealment... creates a barrier between the apocalyptic world and the world of life that is almost impossible to bridge" (qtd. in Jacobson 131). We should pay special attention to this idea of a barrier between the Holocaust and everyday life in Israel. Bartfuss continually longs to return to the transit camp in Italy where he lived after the end of the war and before coming to Israel. This is because the transit camp represents, both literally and symbolically, the barrier between the horrors of the Holocaust and the minutiae of everyday life in Israel that he finds so oppressive. Just as Bartfuss wishes to return to Italy, he also wishes that he could forever live in the void between revelation and concealment. In order to do this, he erects walls of silence around him, shutting

out his family and society at large. Even though as readers we expect the privilege of being able to peer at will into the mind of the protagonist, we are likewise shut out. Just as Bartfuss is forced by circumstance to leave the transit camp, he is also eventually forced to breach the barriers of silence that he has built.

Towards the middle of the story Bartfuss has a life-threatening cardiac event that calls into question his façade of immortality. After this event he is seized by “an indefinable kind of mental weakness” (73), that is to finally speak of his experiences. This is one of the ways in which we can extrapolate Bartfuss’ story to the trends in Holocaust literature at large. As we have said before, the first years after the war in Israel were characterized by non-communication, perhaps under the assumption that an appropriate time would eventually come for the survivors to give testimony. However as time moved forward it became apparent that the survivors, though they had escaped death once, would not escape again, and their stories might be lost. This may be the reason that we see an explosion of testimonial literature come out of Israel towards the 1980s and onwards. The survivors, forced once again to face their own mortality, were possessed by the urge to give from the wealth of their experiences. In keeping with this idea, it from this point in the novel, that is when Bartfuss realizes that he cannot live forever, that the inner workings of our mysterious protagonist’s mind become far more accessible.

Thanks to this new level of openness with the reader, we begin to see that Bartfuss has been reaching for communication all along, despite his dedication to silence. There are many factors that complicate this internal struggle, not least of which is the at times outright hostility of those around him. The best representation of this conflict is in this description of a dream Bartfuss has after his brush with death:

Near the sea he remembered that in his sleep he had held a long conversation with a tall man about ugliness. The man perfectly understood what he meant and was willing to listen. Since he was willing to listen, Bartfuss found the right words, and he used them abundantly. But suddenly a kind of change took place in the man. His attention didn’t fade, but he became impatient. He said only, “Of course.” Bartfuss was sure it was an expression of agreement, but he immediately saw his error and realized it was impatience. The man had already pondered the matter years ago, and that repetition wearied him. (70)

We can easily see the man in the dream as a representation of the collective response of Israel society to the survivors. Bartfuss, who longs to communicate his feelings, is prevented from doing so by two things: his own inability to find the words, and the unreceptive stance of his audience. He seeks out others with whom he might feel comfortable sharing his memories, but he has difficulty with this because his fellow survivors are, at least in his eyes, disappointing. He refuses to share with his wife Rosa, whom he despises for giving her body to Polish peasants in exchange for her safety during the war. His business associates, most of whom are also survivors, he derides for what he sees as a lust for money. His first attempt to openly communicate with a fellow survivor goes horribly awry when Bartfuss is so angered by his compatriot’s refusal to answer a direct question that he is moved to physical violence. So we see that Bartfuss’s silence is not just a cold shell built by a selfish and bitter man, it is born out of both his hesitance to speak and others’ unwillingness to listen. From this we can see more of the shame Appelfeld speaks of in *Masot Be-Guf Rishon*, for when one gets the sense that a story he has to tell which is so central to his being will be met with boredom and impatience from others, he begins to doubt its importance. He begins to feel ashamed of how closely he holds this story, since no one else seems to care about it.

The man’s impatience also goes back to a dichotomy that is central to all Holocaust literature in Israel: construction versus destruction. While European Jews had suffered immeasurably at the hands of the Nazis, the land of Israel had developed and flourished. The establishment of the State of Israel was unquestionably a constructive event, while the Holocaust was unquestionably a destructive one. If nothing constructive could be gleaned from the memory of the Holocaust, did that render their suffering meaningless? David K. Danow explains this search for meaning thusly: “Bartfuss is a Holocaust survivor. That makes his human predicament all the more demanding: how does he square the fact that he survived when millions of others were killed? His concern goes beyond the age-old petulant question, *Why was I born?* to, *Why was I saved?*” (Danow 68). Bartfuss expects “greatness of the soul” and “generosity of spirit” from those who underwent the Holocaust. In order to understand why he was saved he must do something constructive with his suffering. We should linger on this notion of “generosity” that Bartfuss holds, and ask ourselves with what does he intend to be generous. We are told he has an unspecified amount of money that he has hidden away from his relatives, but as the novel unfolds it becomes clear that Bartfuss does not wish to be generous with his money but rather with his wisdom. “I have to open my treasure and pay my debts,” he thinks, “The people who were in the camps won’t betray their obligations... The fear of death is no disaster. Only when one has freed himself of that fear can he go on to freedom. For we foresaw that” (94). He believes that the only way to make something beneficial out of his suffering, to do something meaningful with his life, which had not been

snuffed out like so many others, is to share his story. In a way this is the intent of all survivor literature: to create meaning out of misery by imparting the wisdom that accompanied that misery to others.

3. Conclusion

By their nature, dichotomies create distance. Through the candid words of Aharon Appelfeld's essays and novels we can see how the parallels established by Israeli society in the early years after the end of the Second World War and the creation of the State of Israel, parallels like exile versus redemption and Zionism versus assimilation, were the means through which a barrier was silently constructed between the *Yishuv* and the Holocaust survivors who came to live among them. In this paper we barely scratch the surface of the ways in which Appelfeld and his fellow survivors attempted to narrow that chasm, to build a bridge between the resonating collective trauma of the Holocaust and the hopefulness of the Zionist ideals on which the State of Israel was founded. The literature produced by these survivors is an integral part of the process. We know this because while history can tell us the story of millions, literature tells us the story of one. Using literature as an outlet, the survivors attempted to reclaim the individuality, the identity, the humanity that the Nazis had deprived them of, and then to speak more openly about their isolation within Israeli society. What emerges, then, is not something that can be defined solely as Israeli literature or even Holocaust literature, because what is most crucial to understand about this work is how it represents a joining together of these two identities. For example, Aharon Appelfeld writes about the Holocaust, about the fate of the *She'erit Hapletah*, but he does so in Hebrew, in a sense refusing the idea that his identity as a Holocaust survivor and his identity as an Israeli are mutually exclusive.

As we can plainly see, sixty-five years after the liberation of the concentration camps the memory of the Holocaust has become a fundamental part of the Israeli identity. Israel's Holocaust museum *Yad VaShem*, first proposed in the early 1950s, has continually been renovated and expanded even in the past decade, and is an internationally recognized destination for those who wish to pay tribute to the millions of lives extinguished under the Nazi regime. The Holocaust is also now a requisite part of the Israeli educational curriculum, with the government even funding trips for young Israelis to tour the concentration camps of Europe. From this we can clearly see that there is no longer a line drawn between Israeli Jewish history and European Jewish history. Even more encouraging perhaps is the emergence of a second and even third generation of writers whose work deals directly with the Holocaust itself and its endlessly echoing aftereffects around the world. These successors are not just the children of the survivors, they also include people with no familial ties to the Holocaust at all, but who still recognize the importance of preserving consciousness of it.

Looking back at the oppressive silence that characterized the first decades after the Second World War, we might wonder how such a seemingly dramatic reversal of attitudes took place. We might believe, as Appelfeld seems to suggest in *Bartfuss*, that when the survivors aged and were forced once again to face their own mortality they were driven to create meaning in their lives, fueling within them an urgent need to relate their experiences. Or, possibly, we might suggest that it was a change in perspective on the part of Israelis, who, as we can see in the trial of Adolph Eichmann, eventually found a way to use this collective trauma as a means of empowerment, to do something constructive with it and show their strength as a nation. Certainly both of these are crucial elements in the process. But perhaps our answer is as simple as this: wounds heal over time, though sometimes very slowly. The Holocaust survivors eventually found the means with which to cope with their pain and loss, and in turn the *Yishuv* came to terms with their own guilt and their need to assign blame and seek vengeance. Both groups slowly mixed and joined together to find that they were faced with an immensely difficult and immeasurably important task. This task was to create a record of the Holocaust so deep and nuanced and inclusive that it would be immortal, indestructible, as the survivors themselves could not be, so that no tragedy of the scope and brutality of the Holocaust would ever happen again. This idea has often been reiterated but cannot be overstated, because it is here that all those involved – Israelis and survivors, children and parents, Jews and non-Jews – find common ground.

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