

**THE LANGUAGE THAT WAS LOST ON THE ROADS:
DISCOVERING HEBREW THROUGH YIDDISH
IN AHARON APPELFELD'S FICTION**

Shachar Pinsker, University of Michigan

One of the guiding principles of Chana Kronfeld's work as a scholar, teacher and translator is the absolute necessity of understanding modern Hebrew literature in its multilingual contexts. This principle is clearly at work in her magnum opus on Hebrew and Yiddish modernist poetry,¹ as well as in numerous articles and lectures. In one such lecture, the 2005 keynote address at the conference of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, Kronfeld suggested that "the first Israeli phase of modern Hebrew poetry (known as the "Statehood Generation") may have been mediated by, indeed partially modeled on...the once-flourishing international Yiddish modernism."² She ended the lecture claiming that such "submerged connections can only have stayed invisible all these years because of the blinders, the restricted vision that was imposed by a monolingual pseudo-nativist historiography, where Yiddish and Hebrew literary histories, even when they involve the same trends (*haskala*) and the same cast of bilingual writers...We stand to lose a lot if we don't start reading modern Hebrew literary culture in its multi-lingual articulations."³

This assertion, while hardly new to anyone familiar with Chana's work, resonated with me, because I had just begun working (at that point, without knowing about Chana's work on "Likrat" and Yiddish, but clearly influenced by her writing and teaching) on a research project examining the crucial, yet often submerged role of Yiddish in Israeli-Hebrew writers. One of the writers I am engaged with in this project is Aharon (Erwin) Appelfeld, undoubtedly one of the most well-known Hebrew writers in Israel and around the world. Born in 1932 in the city of Czernowitz (then Cernăuți, Romania), he survived World War II in concentration camps in Transnistria, and then in the forests of Ukraine. He arrived in Palestine in 1946 as a refugee after spending time in displaced persons' camps. Appelfeld began his literary and critical activities in the early 1950s, as a poet and critic (his first poems and essays were published in 1952), while a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Appelfeld came out of relative obscurity only later, however, when his first collection of stories, *Ashan* (Smoke), was put out in 1962 by the small publish-

ing house *Achshav* (Now), which was associated with the avant-garde journal of the same name.⁴

A number of critics have identified in Appelfeld's stories a clear departure from Hebrew fiction of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵ One of the most penetrating early readings of these stories was by Israeli-Yiddish writer Leyb Rokhman. In a review published in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, Rokhman identified Appelfeld as a "new star in Hebrew literature." Rokhman highlighted the fact that the young writer was the first to write Hebrew stories from the point of view of a refugee and a Holocaust survivor, something that was, as Rokhman hinted, not so unusual in Yiddish literature written in Israel during these years.⁶ Appelfeld acknowledged his debt to Rokhman more than once, regarding him as a father figure and mentor:

I had some great mentors, but with Rokhman I walked the longest path... Not everything he could give me I was able to take. Nevertheless, my entire awareness came from the days I spent with him...Through his memories, I was able to wander throughout Jewish Poland, spent many days in Mińsk Mazowiecki, Otwock, the [Hasidic] courtyards, as well as in Tłomackie 13 [The Yiddish Writers Union in Warsaw.] In these journeys, I encountered many books and writers that without Rokhman, I would probably never know about.⁷

Despite this acknowledgement of Rokhman's crucial role in his life and development, relations between Appelfeld and Yiddish, as well as between Appelfeld's fiction and Yiddish literary traditions, remain unclear and unexplored.

Linguistically, Appelfeld's Hebrew fiction sounds to the Israeli ear as though it were inflected with Yiddish and/or German, a fact that added, for better or worse, to the impression of "foreignness" in his stories and novellas.⁸ Appelfeld recounted on many occasions over the years the painful process of losing his "mother tongue" as a child at the outbreak of World War II, and the immense challenges he faced while adopting a new personal and literary identity in Hebrew, a language which was imposed upon him, and to which he was, at least initially, hostile. Over the years, Appelfeld gave different accounts of the "mother tongue" which he lost as a child during the war. In the aforementioned essay about Rokhman, Appelfeld wrote the following:

Yiddish was my mother tongue, but in fact, only in a partial way. My Yiddish was marred with a muddle of German and of words that I absorbed during the years of the war. From Rokhman, I heard for the first time a pure and rhythmical Yiddish, that was not only like music to the ear, but caressed the heart with its sweetness...I say Yiddish, but it is not only a language, but a territory, "the Jewish continent."⁹

In this account, it is never clear if Appelfeld refers to Yiddish as the proverbial Jewish *mame-loshn* ("mother tongue" in Yiddish, literally the language of the mother) or to a "real" language with which he was familiar in his childhood. Appelfeld writes, moreover, that his encounter with Rokhman, in Jerusalem during the 1950s, gave him not only a sense of (re)discovering Yiddish

as a language, with which he was already familiar, but also with a distinctive rhythm and musicality, and with the lost continent of “Yiddishland” that encompasses a vast cultural landscape, which Yiddish seems to embody for him. In his later autobiographical accounts, Appelfeld wrote about a multiplicity of languages in the Czernowitz of his childhood. He recounts tangible memories of certain distant and difficult words like the German *Erdbeeren*—which means strawberries, but for Appelfeld is particularly associated with his mother and with the berry’s sweet taste—as well as certain words in Yiddish he heard in his grandparents’ house:

One word remains, and that is *mistome*. The word is strange and incomprehensible, yet Grandmother repeats it several times a day. Many times I was about to ask what this strange word meant, but I didn’t.... Sometimes it seems to me that the way Grandfather and Grandmother talk makes mother uncomfortable, and that she’d prefer for me not to hear the language. All the same, I summoned up the courage and asked—“What’s the language that Grandmother and Grandfather are speaking?”—“Yiddish,” Mother whispers in my ear.¹⁰

In this reconstruction of memory, it becomes clear that Yiddish was not a “mother tongue” in the traditional sense of this term. Like many acculturated Jews in central Europe, Appelfeld’s mother spoke German, but it was mixed with the Yiddish that his grandparents spoke. In this memory, the word that sticks in the child’s mind is the Yiddish word *mistome* (probably, presumably), a prominent example of what is termed *loshn-koydesh*, the Hebrew/Aramaic component of Yiddish. *Mistome* is one of several words of Talmudic Aramaic that have entered Yiddish vocabulary.¹¹ It is not a coincidence that this word, which must have sounded strange in Czernowitz of the early 1930s, was etched in the memory of Erwin Appelfeld the child.¹² Importantly, the word *mistome* or even the more modern Israeli pronunciation of the Aramaic word, *mistama*, is not usually used in modern (spoken or written) Hebrew outside of Yiddish-speaking circles. In Appelfeld’s fiction the word is used quite extensively. In the story “Brunda,” for example: “When he came from there, exhausted and worn-out, Brunda would tell him that he probably (*mistome*) deserved it.”¹³ In the 1972 novella *Ke-ishon ha-a’yin* (The Apple of the Eye), we find the following: “Our urbane family members presumably (*mistome*) know that there is no point in being upset, but they grumble in a way that turns into a shriek.”¹⁴

As the linguist Zeldia Kahan-Newman has shown, Appelfeld’s literary Hebrew is saturated with influences and traces of Yiddish.¹⁵ The morphological and syntactic structures of Yiddish can be detected underneath Appelfeld’s Hebrew fiction. This is especially pronounced in cases of calques (loan translations), like the employment of the Hebrew word *k’mo* as it is used in the Yiddish *vi* (to contrast two clauses), or Appelfeld’s use of the word *ach* in ways that are typical of the way Yiddish speakers use the word *nor* (in the meaning of “only” or “just.”) Also very common is Appelfeld’s unique employment of Hebrew words and expressions as if there were the *loshn koydesh* component of Yiddish, rather than the way they are typically used in spoken or literary Israeli Hebrew.

Apart from the word *mistome*, Appelfeld uses the word *mashal* extensively in his fiction to link two independent clauses (as Yiddish does with the phrase “*a mosh!*” instead of the common use of the word “*le-mashal*” in the meaning of “for example”) in a way that is typical of Yiddish speech and writing, but not of contemporary Hebrew.¹⁶ Appelfeld also employs a syntactic device called “fronting,” which involves moving a syntactic unit (word, phrase, or clause) to the front of a sentence that would normally appear later in the sentence, or in order to put an emphasis on this unit. Fronting is typical of Yiddish, and of Hebrew spoken or written by native Yiddish speakers. In Appelfeld’s Hebrew, one also finds extensive use of a rise-fall contour to convey a question or a statement that presupposes a negative. This contour, which defines much of the “musicality” of Yiddish speech, has been identified by Aizik Zaretski, Uriel Weinreich, and other linguists as originating from the Talmudic chant of Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁷

Appelfeld himself described the way Yiddish enabled him, somewhat paradoxically, to become a Hebrew writer in a poetic 1966 essay entitled *Ba-derech el atzmi* (On the Way to Myself.) He focuses on his first years in Israel, and the alienation he felt toward Hebrew and toward his existence in Tel Aviv in the late 1940s:

I didn’t have anyone in Tel Aviv. I was strolling in the city, and finally sat on a bench in the boulevard. There were some beggars there who spoke among themselves Yiddish; Yiddish mixed with a few Russian words. I suddenly felt that the *nigun* (contour) of their language flows within me. I knew that this is my tongue that was lost on the roads. Now, it was embodied in the beggars... Later on when I discovered the stories of R. Nahman... I felt the same familiar flow. It was a strange and familiar language, a warm mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew, until I imagined hearing my own voice that was lost on the roads.¹⁸

Appelfeld emphasizes the *nigun* of Yiddish, its distinctive contour and musicality, which he found both in the speech of the beggars, and in the Hasidic stories of Reb Nahman. But the meaning of the seemingly paradoxical feat of finding his own Hebrew voice through Yiddish is crucial and far-reaching in order to understand Appelfeld’s world and literary work. The fact that Yiddish was *not*, in any simple way, Appelfeld’s mother tongue, makes this dynamic an especially fascinating one. Appelfeld fashioned a unique Hebrew literary language and style, which owes much not only to the Yiddish that he heard from the beggars and read in Nahman, but also to the vast territory of Yiddish literary traditions, from European and American Yiddish literature of early twentieth century to Israeli Yiddish literature of the 1950s and 1960s.

Critics have long been at pains to explain the thematic and stylistic sources of Appelfeld’s poetics. Avner Holtzman described the poetics of Appelfeld’s early stories as “the gap or the tension between the restrained surface of the stories and what lurks underneath them.” He writes about “economical and controlled poetics of restraint and intimation, which leaves the reader with the task of deciphering the real plots of the stories, which take place in the depth of the souls of the protagonists.”¹⁹ Although many critics have pointed out these

elements in Appelfeld's fiction, they have found it hard to explain the models which enabled it. Arnold Band argued that Appelfeld's scholars and critics are still searching for what he aptly calls "the missing intertext" of his early fiction. Band notes the difference between Appelfeld's early stories and writers of the previous generation like Shmuel Yosef Agnon or Haim Hazaz, as well as from *sabra* (native-born) writers like Moshe Shamir and S. Yizhar, or his contemporaries Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. Band goes on to suggest that this "missing intertext" might have something to do with the holistic view of Jewish literature of Appelfeld's teacher at the Hebrew University, Dov Sadan.²⁰ Appelfeld himself described his studies with Sadan in these terms:

I studied Yiddish with Dov Sadan...For Sadan, Yiddish and Hebrew dwelt side by side, like twin sisters. In his classes we spoke Hebrew, but we read the texts in Yiddish. From Sadan, I learned something that was not much talked about in those days: that most Hebrew writers were bilingual, that they wrote simultaneously in the two languages. This was a sensational discovery for me. It meant that the "here" and the "there" were not cut off from each other, as the slogans proclaimed. We read Mendele Moykher Sforim in his two languages, and Bialik, Steinberg, and Agnon. Their Hebrew was connected to places with which I was familiar, to landscapes I remembered, and to forgotten melodies that came to me from my grandparents' prayers.²¹

Appelfeld makes it clear that his studies with Sadan were crucial to the process of finding a Hebrew voice by reconnecting with Yiddish as a language of the "grandparents." But even this account conceals as much as it reveals. With Sadan, the young Appelfeld explored not only the bilingual literature of Mendele (Sholem Yankev Abramovitch), Chaim Nachman Bialik, Agnon, and Jacob Steinberg, but also writers of Yiddish fiction and poetry whose names were less familiar to Israeli Hebrew readers. When examining carefully the early stories of Appelfeld, as well as the essays and letters that he wrote in the 1950s, one discovers that during these years he was preoccupied mainly with Yiddish literature written by European and American writers, such as Dovid Bergelson, Lamed Shapiro, Yankev Glatshetyn, Arn Zeitlin, H. Leyvik, Moyshe Leyb Halpern, Yehoash and others. Appelfeld wrote and published essays and reviews of Yiddish writers, sometimes under the name Aharon Appel. He also met writers such as Leyvik, Yosef Opatoshu, Yankev Glatshetyn and Arn Glants Leyeles at Rokhman's house, which was the informal "center" of Yiddish literature in Jerusalem in the 1950s.²² Moreover, Appelfeld read widely, and was personally acquainted with contemporary Israeli Yiddish writers. In fact, Appelfeld even presented himself, in a 1954 letter sent to Gavriel Talfir (editor of the Hebrew language journal *Gazit*), as someone who writes mainly in Yiddish, and has written just a few poems in Hebrew.²³ In a recent interview with him, Appelfeld told me that during these years, his ambition was to become a bilingual writer, and only gradually it became clear to him that his literary future was to be in Hebrew.²⁴

My claim is that a significant part of Appelfeld's "missing inter-text" was Yiddish literature of the pre- and post-World War II period. This literature

supplied Appelfeld with important poetic models that were useful for him in fashioning a restrained, anti-rhetorical, and impressionistic Hebrew fiction that expressed disorientation and extreme introspection. It is interesting, for example, to compare Appelfeld's early stories in *Ashan* (Smoke), *Kfor al ha'aretz*²⁵ (Frost on Earth; 1965), and *Adney ha-nahar*²⁶ (Pillars of the River; 1967) with the stories of Lamed Shapiro (born 1878 in Ukraine, and resident in America from 1905) published in the collection *Di yidishe melukhe un andere zakhn* (The Jewish State and Other Things, 1919.) The titles of two of Appelfeld's most well-known early stories, *Ashan* and *Bertha*, are, in fact, Hebrew versions of the titles of Shapiro's stories: *Roykh* (Smoke) and *Bertha*. And it is not only the titles, but also the style, themes, and overall structure that are strikingly similar. Shapiro's Yiddish impressionistic stories are key intertexts for Appelfeld's stories of the 1960s.

For example, Shapiro's story "Smoke"—although written and published in 1915, when he was already living in New York—describes in a restrained, impressionistic style the radical changes taking place in a small Jewish town with the disintegration of traditional society. Shapiro's narrator focuses on the life of a certain character, Menashe, who begins as a poor youth studying in a Hasidic synagogue and becomes a merchant, working in partnership with his father-in-law Reb Shoel. Menashe makes routine business trips to Danzig and other cities in Poland and Germany, and although he returns to his family from time to time, everything in the small town turns upside down because of rapid social and economic changes. The story makes highly effective use of the leitmotif of smoke and smoking as a way to depict Menashe's inner life and the ways in which he, and the other characters, experience and absorb the upheavals: "At the first puff his face turned deep red, as if he were straining to lift a heavy load and he broke into a violent cough. Still. There must be something to it: the grownups smoked. He grew stubborn—and got used to it."²⁷ Throughout the story, Menashe gives himself over to the pleasure of smoking, and lets the smoke surround him and the people around him with haziness, through which readers are nevertheless able to recognize the radical changes that occur underneath the surface. Talking about Danzig, Menashe tells the young people in the shtetl:

People live and die there just as they do here" he would answer shortly, smiling with his eyes.... And he would stare at the thread of the smoke, talking care that the white ash, which sat like a Cossack's hat on the head of his cigar, should not fall but remain there as long as possible.²⁸

Unlike Shapiro, Appelfeld's early stories do not focus on the disintegration of *shtetlach* in the wake of World War I and the Russian Civil War, but on the disorientation of protagonists who experienced the radical upheavals of World War II and the years they spent in forests and transit camps, and as refugees in Israel. In spite of the different settings, the stories of Yiddish writers like Shapiro supplied Appelfeld with useful models. This can indeed be seen in Appelfeld's story "Smoke," which recounts the story of Max who, as with Menashe in Shapiro's story, owns a small business (meat-packing) in

partnership with an older character, Reb Aryeh. Although it is hard to know it initially, the story takes place in an Israeli city (possibly Jerusalem) in the years following the World War II.

Just as in Shapiro's story, Appelfeld's narrator follows Max's actions, impressions, memories, and other expressions of his inner world, through the image of smoke and smoking. Here, smoke is associated with the cigarettes that Max loves, with motorcycles, and with a hint of memory of smoke from the war. It is only toward the end of the story that readers realize that Max came to Israel after his entire family was killed in the war. Moreover, the tense relationship between Max and his business partner Reb Aryeh dates back to the war. When Max is looking in vain for a cigarette, he runs to the house of Aryeh and remembers "how he and Reb Aryeh ran away together in the forest of Smelinka...and Reb Aryeh carried him on his shoulders. And how in the end they fell into the deep tunnel and survived."²⁹

There are likewise many similarities between Shapiro's story *Bertha* (written and published in 1906; included in *Di yidische melukhe*) and Appelfeld's story of the same title (published in 1958 and included in *Ashan*).³⁰ Both stories focus on a young woman named Bertha and her relationship with an older man who is infatuated with her. In Shapiro's story, which takes place in a "Lithuanian coffeehouse" in the city of Warsaw, Bertha is a young woman of unknown age, a waitress who catches the attention of Mr. Riegel, a habitu  of the caf . Bertha is described by Shapiro's narrator (mostly through Riegel's point of view) as someone with an "almost childish figure that was slender yet very well proportioned, small dainty hands, and a slim, finely chiseled face."³¹ Riegel is attracted to Bertha "on his very first visit to the caf ," and has been "haunted ever since by her childish figure, her soft voice, her way of talking... and especially her smile."³²

Riegel comes every day to the caf , ostensibly to drink coffee or tea, but really in order to be close to Bertha. He becomes more and more smitten with Bertha, especially when he observes that she is sexually attractive to other young men in the caf  and how they treat her. Suddenly, she seems to him a mystery to be deciphered: "her smile vexed him... it appeared to him unnatural, even distasteful."³³ He doesn't know whether she is "a beautiful, modest Jewish maiden, or a courtesan with a certain chic."³⁴ This perceived ambiguity about Bertha drives him crazy: "I must find the truth once and for all. I will put her to the test."³⁵ At the end of the story Riegel does indeed "put her to the test"—by seizing her hand and arms—but it comes too late, after he finds out that she is engaged to young Jewish man who works in a Lodz clothing store. Bertha, who apparently didn't know about Riegel's infatuation with her, is frightened and uncomprehending, eventually freeing herself and turning her back on him. Riegel is left at the very end of the story a broken man, feeling "as if he was drowning."³⁶

In Appelfeld's story, the setting and time are very different. Instead of the urban caf  culture of early-twentieth-century Warsaw and immigrants from small Jewish towns (Riegel continuously contemplates the shtetl from which Bertha/Basya came), we find Holocaust survivors/immigrants to Israel in Je-

rusalem of the early 1950s. The protagonists, the relationship between them, and the way the story is told by the narrator, however, are remarkably similar in the two stories. Appelfeld's Bertha is a young woman of unknown age who seems to suffer from some kind of developmental disorder, living with Max, a middle-aged man, a refugee from the Holocaust, who is a traveling salesman.

While Max is traveling around the country for months selling soft drinks, Bertha is bound to the apartment in Jerusalem. Bertha "remained as she was [,] small and dwarfish," a young woman with "childish imagination."³⁷ The nature of the relationship between Max and Bertha is not clear to anyone around Max, or even to Max himself. How did he meet Bertha? When she was entrusted to him? (During World War II, as readers find out.) Why is she still living with him? Max cannot remember and is burdened by the presence of Bertha, and at the same time, he cannot let go of her. Like in Shapiro's story, Appelfeld's Bertha is a mysterious being, exercising power and unexplained attraction on Max; she is described as "the secret within ...[Max]"³⁸ imagined by him as "a princess, a devil, a gypsy, something that could not be contained in any human measure."³⁹ At the prompting of Mitzi, a woman Max met, he "tried to clarify the matter [of Bertha] to himself logically," but without much success. Like Riegel in Shapiro's story, Max attempts, at the end of the story, to resolve matters with a decisive action—taking Bertha to an institution for girls—but this plan fails miserably, as Bertha becomes sick and is taken to the hospital. Like Shapiro's story, this story also ends with a complete breakdown of the male protagonist: "Suddenly he [Max] saw that Bertha's clothes lay in his hands. He didn't dare to open them—or perhaps these were no longer his hands, but iron rings...."⁴⁰

It is interesting to note that the only place in the collection *Ashan* where actual Yiddish words appear is in the story *Al yad ha-chof* (By the Beach), when one of the protagonists, Fishl, says sarcastically about the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—"a *naye yidische melukhe*."⁴¹ (A new Jewish state.) Interestingly, "*Yidische melukhe*" is also the title of one of Shapiro's best stories, and of his collection of stories from 1919.

Lamed Shapiro has been described, correctly, as one of the great impressionist writers of Yiddish fiction, often mentioned together with his contemporary Dovid Bergelson, who was perhaps the most important stylist of Yiddish prose.⁴² Appelfeld wrote about Bergelson, and other Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union, in a 1957 essay in which he claimed that the real achievement of writers like Bergelson was the fashioning of literature that focuses on the inner world of the individual.⁴³ In a more recent preface to a volume of Bergelson's stories, Appelfeld writes that "Bergelson is the most important Yiddish writer, following the three classical authors who established modern Yiddish literature... The reader interested in learning about the transition from typical-general to the personal-individual will do well to turn to Bergelson."⁴⁴

Yiddish writers of the first half of the twentieth century, especially those bringing impressionism into Yiddish literature, were clearly important and served as stylistic models for Appelfeld. But the same can also be said about Appelfeld's contemporaries in Israel's Yiddish literary scene of the 1950s and

1960s. The work of these writers supplied Appelfeld with literary models to fashion the experience of the war and subsequent years in ways that were different from, and challenged, the Israeli-Zionist ethos typical of most Hebrew literature of the time. This is another example in which Yiddish literature was a crucial—but submerged and unacknowledged—model for what is known as “Statehood Generation,” not just in poetry, as Chana Kronfeld and I have suggested elsewhere,⁴⁵ but also in prose fiction.

Most important are the works of Rokhman, Appelfeld’s older friend and mentor. Rokhman wrote and published one of the first, most powerful, and unsentimental accounts of life in World War II in Yiddish, *Un in dayn blut zolstu lebn* (In Your Blood You Should Live; 1949), devoted mainly to the years Rokhman and members of his family were hidden behind a wall in the home of an elderly former prostitute and her brother, a thief by profession.

During the 1950s, Rokhman had been painstakingly deconstructing and reworking his earlier account to produce an astonishing fictional work that subverted the lines between testimony and fiction, resulting in the posthumous magnum opus *Mit blinde trit iber der erd* (With Blind Steps over the Earth; 1968.) This novel is a surreal narrative of the inner life of the victim and the survivor, which dispenses with the chronological-historical elements of testimony literature and depicts a different order of time in which remembering and suffering are intertwined. Echoes of Rokhman’s works can be found in early stories of Appelfeld, such as *Bi-shlosha* (In Three) and *Aviv Kar* (Cold Spring) that focus on the return to normalcy in the countryside, followed by liberation in 1945, and the disintegration of the strange and artificial “family” that formed when Jews escaped and were hiding in bunkers. Outside, life goes on as usual. The change of season from winter to spring, which is part of the eternal cycle of nature, signifies the process of healing. But the Jews who were hiding during the war live in a different order of time, and Appelfeld’s stories, like Rokhman’s novels⁴⁶, present an inevitable and painful link between memory and suffering.

But Rokhman was certainly not the only Yiddish writer who supplied Appelfeld with literary models of coping with the experience of the Holocaust. Through implicit and indirect references, the Holocaust stands as an omnipresent dark “shadow” in the poetry and prose of Avrom Sutzkever. The same is true of younger Yiddish writers of Appelfeld’s generation, for example the writers associated with the group *Yung Yisroel*. The destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust also appears in subtle ways in the poetry of Moshe Yungman, Moshe Gurin, Rivka Basman, H. Binyomin (the Yiddish pen-name of Benjamin Harshav) and Avrom Rintler.⁴⁷ There are also the stories of Mendl Mann and the impressionists-symbolist stories of Zvi Eizenman, like his story *Der karshn-boym* (The Cherry Tree), describing a nightmare about the destruction Shoah in which characters move from a courtyard in Warsaw to an Israeli town.⁴⁸

Although we find many echoes of these Yiddish texts in the early stories of Appelfeld, Yiddish rarely appears in his work in an explicit way. Both the linguistic traces of Yiddish and the influence of works of Yiddish literature appear beneath the surface of Appelfeld’s early Hebrew fiction. Interestingly,

Yiddish begins to appear more frequently, and is also thematized, in Appelfeld's later novellas and novels. This might be seen as part of a general shift in Israeli literature in the 1980s and 1990s, when writers like Aharon Megged, Haim Be'er, David Grossman, (and of course the Hebrew work of Yossl Birsh-stein) bring Yiddish and diaspora Jewish culture into the light. In Appelfeld's work of the last two decades, the Yiddish language becomes parallel to the pilgrimage of the Jewish journey. In short novels like *Mesilat Barzel* (The Iron Tracks) and *Layish*,⁴⁹ Appelfeld increasingly draws on models of classical and modernist Yiddish literature such as Abramovitch, Sholem Aleychem, Y. L. Peretz, and Glatsh-teyn, in order to retell the archetypal Jewish journey in the radically new environment of a post-Holocaust world.⁵⁰

The thematization of Yiddish in Appelfeld's fiction—the explicit discourse about Yiddish language and culture, the insertion of Yiddish words into Hebrew, and the highlighting of Yiddish intertexts – culminates in the novel *Layla ve'od layla* (Night After Night, 2001.) The characters in the novel are European refugees, Holocaust survivors, who are residents of a *pension* (boarding house) in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia owned by the German-Jewish Mrs. Prakht. Set in the early 1960s, these survivors strive to honor and rescue Yiddish, “the dying language,” by resenting both the mold of Zionist ideals and the hatred of Yiddish by women like Mrs. Prakht, who forbids them to speak Yiddish. Of her, Appelfeld writes, “Yiddish, of course, she finds repugnant. Yiddish is not only a sloppy language, it also sounds miserable. The streets of Berlin or Paris would suit her better, but what can you do, like all of us, she ended up here.”⁵¹

Defying this negative attitude toward Yiddish, the pension-dwellers attend Yiddish poetry readings, hold cultural events, and collect Yiddish books. The first-person narrator of the novel, Manfred, is a Holocaust survivor who lives in the pension. Inspired by the visit of a beautiful, charismatic Yiddish woman poet, Manfred decides to donate half his savings for the “revival” of Yiddish language. Another pension-dweller, the painter Kirtzl makes the very words of Yiddish the painting itself, claiming that “Yiddish is both the form and the content.”⁵² He thus creates visual icons of, or monuments to, the lost language and culture, and makes a conscious effort to preserve its “essence.” The poet Zeidel continues to write Yiddish poetry and claims “only in Yiddish will we be truly resurrected.”⁵³

The narrator, Manfred (a German name), articulates the link between the destruction of his family and town and the threat of the disappearance of Yiddish:

From my hometown I've been cut off for years. Only at times, in the dark of the night, pain slices through my hips, and I know that the death of the town convulses me. If I were more connected with my mother tongue, I would not be so cut off from my town. Because of this sin, because of being cut off, I have forgotten my parents. They do not appear in my dreams at night and they do not tell me what to do. Tzila, I want to cry with all my might. If you knew how many crimes we committed against our language you would push me to contribute more. Without Yiddish we are cripples, hobbling around on

crutches. How long can a man hobble around on crutches? I love Hebrew, but it cannot take the place of a mother. Hebrew is not a language you can hug. God forgive me, it's as cold as ice. What demon provoked us to exchange our mother tongue for a tongue of stone? Who needs eternity? One hour of human warmth is an eternity.⁵⁴

It is interesting that Manfred feels guilt about forgetting his hometown as well as his "mother tongue," which he regards as a "crime." But what is his mother tongue? This is far from clear. Manfred speaks about his love and a new found dedication for Yiddish, but he and most of the characters in the novel are, like Appelfeld himself, Central European Jews whose mother tongue was not exclusively Yiddish. Yiddish was only one of the languages of their childhood, of their world. Still, in the Jerusalem of the 1960s, these refugees regard Yiddish as "a holy language," as well as a language of human warmth (as opposed to the "cold" Hebrew) that can give them comfort and "hug" them. For the first-person narrator Manfred, as for Appelfeld the writer, this recognition expresses not so much nostalgia for language that was forgotten and abandoned, but an attempt to reconstruct a partially imaginary past that became lost in World War II and subsequent years.⁵⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.)
- 2 Chana Kronfeld, "Likrat: Towards a New Poetics and Politics of the Statehood Generation," National Association of Professors of Hebrew Conference, Stanford University, June 19, 2005, 4.
- 3 Kronfeld, "Likrat," 12.
- 4 The journal and publishing house *Achshav* was initially edited by Natan Zach and Gavriel Moked, and maintained continuity with the short-lived *Likrat*. Both of these are credited with the radical changes of what became known as "The Statehood Generation." On *Likrat* and its links with the Yiddish group *Yung Yisroel*, see Shachar Pinsker, "Choosing Yiddish in Israel: *Yung Yisroel* between Home and Exile, Margins and Centers," in *Choosing Yiddish: Studies on Yiddish Literature, Culture, and History*, eds., Shiri Goren, Hannah Pressman, and Lara Rabinovitch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 277–294.; and "That Yiddish Has Spoken to Me: Yiddish in Early Israeli Literature," *Poetics Today* (forthcoming.)
- 5 Critics such as Dan Miron, Shimon Zandbank, and Ada Tzemach wrote very positive reviews of these stories. For a complete list of the reviews in the Hebrew press and an analysis of the reception, see Avner Holtzman, "Darko shel aharon appelfeld el ha-kovetz Ashan," in *Beyn Kfor le-Ashan*, eds., Yitzhak Ben Mordehai and Iris Parush (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 1997), 79–83.
- 6 Leyb Rokhman, "Aharon appelfeld, nayer shtern in hebreisher literature," *Forverts*, January 12, 1964.
- 7 Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot be-guf rishon* (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1979), 157.
- 8 More on the idiosyncrasies of Appelfeld's Hebrew literary style, see Sidra Ezrahi, "Aharon Appelfeld: The Search for Language," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 1 (1984): 366–380; Beracha Fischler, "Le-hachrish el kola shel ha-lashon" in *Beyn Kfor le-Ashan*, 213–236; Jeffrey Green, "Omanut ha-ktiva shel appelfeld mi-zavit ha-re'iya shel metargem" in *Beyn Kfor le-Ashan*, 2; Naomi Sokolof, "Aharon Appelfeld and the Translingual Imagination," *Mikan* 5 (2005): 91–100.
- 9 Aharon Appelfeld, "Yedid Nefesh", *Di Goldene Keyt*, 99, 15–20. Emphasis added. The essay was first published in Hebrew in *Yediot Aharonot* and in Yiddish in *Di Goldene Keyt* in 1979.
- 10 Aharon Appelfeld, *Sipur Hayim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1999), 11.
- 11 Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 229–230.
- 12 Appelfeld changed his name from Erwin to Aharon when he arrived in Israel.
- 13 Aharon Appelfeld, *Adney ha-nahar* (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1971), 12.
- 14 Aharon Appelfeld, *Ke-ishon ha-ayin* (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Haemuchad, 1972), 69.
- 15 Zelda Kahan-Newman, "Yiddish Haunts: The Yiddish Underpinnings of Appelfeld's *Laylah ve'od layla*," *Mikan* 5 (2005): 81–90.
- 16 Kahan-Newman, "Yiddish Haunts," 81–86.
- 17 Neil Jacobs, *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.)
- 18 Aharon Appelfeld, *Ba-derech el atzmi, Moznym* 22, (June–November, 1966): 364–365.
- 19 Holtzman, "The Path of Aharon Appelfeld to the Book Smoke," 83.
- 20 Arnold Band, "The Paradox of the Missing Intertext," *Mikan* 5 (2005): 11.
- 21 Appelfeld, *A Story of My Life*, 104–105.
- 22 On Rokhman's house as a center for Yiddish literature in this period, see Aharon Appelfeld, *Od ha-yom gadol* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), 22, and David Roskies, *Yiddishlands: A Memoir* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2008), 147–153.
- 23 The letter from December 19, 1954 is in Appelfeld's archive currently housed at Heksherim Institute at Ben Gurion University. I wish to acknowledge the help I received from Heksherim in this project.
- 24 Aharon Appelfeld, Personal Interview, July 2010.
- 25 Appelfeld, *Kfor al ha-aretz* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1965.)
- 26 Appelfeld, *Adney ha-nahar*.
- 27 Lamed Shapiro, *Di yidishe melukhe un andere zakhn* (New York: Yidishe Lebn, 1919), 165.
- 28 Shapiro, *Di yidishe melukhe un andere*, 169.

- 29 Aharon Appelfeld, *Ashan* (Jerusalem: Achshav, 1962), 135–136.
- 30 Lamed Shapiro's "Bertha" was translated into English by Golda Werman and published in *Fiction* 12 (1994): 147–155. Appelfeld's "Bertha" was translated into English by Tirza Zandbank and published in *Hebrew Short Stories*, ed. S.Y. Penueli and A. Ukhmani (Tel Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1965), 344–356. References are to the English translations.
- 31 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 148.
- 32 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 148.
- 33 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 150.
- 34 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 149.
- 35 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 150.
- 36 Shapiro, "Bertha," *Fiction*, 154.
- 37 Appelfeld, "Bertha," *Hebrew Short Stories*, 146.
- 38 Appelfeld, "Bertha," *Hebrew Short Stories*, 152.
- 39 Appelfeld, "Bertha," *Hebrew Short Stories*, 154.
- 40 Appelfeld, "Bertha," *Hebrew Short Stories*, 159.
- 41 Appelfeld, "Bertha," *Hebrew Short Stories*, 175.
- 42 Leah Garrett, "Introduction," in *The Cross and other Jewish Stories*, ed. Lamed Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xxiii.
- 43 Aharon Appelfeld, "Le-kinusa shel sifrut Yiddish," *Ha-oved ha-tziyoni*, July 1957, 35–36.
- 44 Aharon Appelfeld, "Foreword," in David Bergelson, *The Stories of David Bergelson: Yiddish Short Fiction from Russia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), ix.
- 45 Kronfeld, "Likrat," and Pinsker, "That Yiddish Has Spoken to Me: Yiddish in Early Israeli Literature."
- 46 Leyb Rokhman, *Un in dayn blut zolstu lebn* (Paris: Frennd fun Minsk-Mazowietzk, 1949) and *Mit blinde t'rit iber der erd* (Tel Aviv: Menorah, 1968.)
- 47 These writers published their work in the journals *Yung Yisroel* (1954–1957) and in *Di Goldene Keyt*. For more information about the journal and an analysis of the texts and their reception see Pinsker, "Choosing Yiddish in Israel."
- 48 Zvi Eizenman, "Der karshn-boym" *Yung Yisroel*, 2 (1956), 14–19.
- 49 Aharon Appelfeld, *Mesilat Barzel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991) and *Layish* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1994.)
- 50 On the journey model see Sidra Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 179–199; and Shachar Pinsker, "Ha-rakevet ha-doheret pnima: tavint ha-masa ve-shikuf ha-matzav ha-yehudi be-novela *Mesilat Barzel*," *Mikan* 5 (2005): 77–88.
- 51 Aharon Appelfeld, *Layla ve'od layla* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), 6.
- 52 Appelfeld, *Layla ve'od layla*, 32.
- 53 Appelfeld, *Layla ve'od layla*, 55.
- 54 Appelfeld, *Layla ve'od layla*, 120.
- 55 See Sokolof, "Aharon Appelfeld and the Translingual Imagination," 98–99.