

# 'A SMALL, OLD JEW WITH GLASSES'

Aharon Appelfeld in conversation with Michael March

*Aharon Appelfeld was born in Czernovitz, Bukovina (now Ukraine) in 1932. In 1941 he was deported to a concentration camp in Transnistria (Ukraine) and was separated from his father (his mother was killed at the beginning of the war). In 1944 he was liberated by the Russian army. In 1945 he emigrated to Israel (then Palestine). He has published twenty books including novels, short stories and essays. His work has been widely translated and has won many national and international awards. He describes himself as 'a small, old Jew with glasses', with a voice that has the tenderness and wisdom of the Torah. His prose has a rare clarity, a profound delicacy redolent of the sadness of life. We met over lunch in London, hunched over visions of 'small Jews walking in the streets of New York—self-critical Jews, devoured by ideas, but alive'. Primo Levi wrote: 'Among us, the writer survivors, Aharon Appelfeld's voice has a unique, unmistakable tone, eloquent through reticence.' When we left, he wrote: 'For a new friend, Aharon'.*

**MM: When Moses went to the mountain, what did he really say?**

AA: I have never thought about that. I have never dealt with such mythological figures as Moses. For me it is enough to have Bartfuss, who is walking from café to café. He is my hero. I find myself more at home, closer to people who lived their lives, their small lives, their sadness and their small happiness—not among people who are statues like Moses.

**How should a stranger read your work?**

As a saga of Jewish sadness—long, Jewish sadness that had different variations. And I am trying to pick up the last chapters.

**What is the origin of this sadness?**

It comes out of a strong feeling that it is difficult to change the world—it's difficult to change yourself, it's difficult to change your surroundings—it's difficult to change the world. And therefore—the sadness. Jews are very critical people, highly critical. And if you are critical, first of all with yourself, it saddens you. I am speaking about a kind of sensitive Jew—the people who were living in Europe, who absorbed Europe and who tried to change Europe. They became communists to change Europe, they became liberals to change Europe—and finally were killed.

**Can you trace your sadness?**

I was born into a very Jewish, highly assimilated family—in a town named Czernovitz that was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. My first language was German. So German was not only culture, it was a religion which was highly appreciated. I still remember as a child going to Berlin or Prague. It was a kind of pilgrimage—it was not like going to temple. We saw ourselves as citizens of Europe—not only equal citizens, but probably we wished to be better citizens. And suddenly came the Germans who put us into the ghetto and then a labour camp and then a concentration camp. And they said to you: it doesn't matter what you think, or what you feel, or what you believe—the blood in your veins condemns you, condemns you to death.

This is the baggage, the cultural baggage that I brought with me to Israel. I came to Israel when I was fourteen years old, and I brought with me the experience of an eighty-five-year-old. I went through all the camps, through all the hidings, being involved with all kinds of people. And it was difficult to express. To find the proper words for it. To speak in an honest way, in a proper way—not too high and not too low.

**What brought you to write in Hebrew?**

I left my home when I was eight years old. So my education was first grade—this is my formal

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**Aharon Appelfeld** read at the Prague Writers' Festival at the Franz Kafka Centre, Prague, 23–28 June 1997. His novel, *Badenheim 1939* (published in paperback by Quartet), will be published in Czech translation by Archangel.

education, I finished one grade. And then came the camps and all that happened to me. So Hebrew became my first written language. It became my language, my adopted language if you wish. And I started to write mainly because I came alone to Israel as an orphan and paper became my friend.

**I first discovered you in *Badenheim 1939*.**

It was not called Badenheim, it had another name. I remember as a child my parents and I were always looking for a non-Jewish pension, a non-Jewish resort. And we always found ourselves with the same people. Every year the same irony. We wanted to escape the noisy Jews, and we always found ourselves among them. This is the emotional basis of the book: wonderful people, middle-class Jews who thought themselves European—who cheated themselves by believing that no one knew they were Jewish. They were sure that Jewishness didn't mean anything to the surroundings. This was a self-deception, a great self-deception which I wanted to explore.

**You explore in a most delicate manner, an almost Japanese manner, for self-deception is terrifying.**

No question about it. There is reality, a very strong reality, and you are denying it, you are denying it permanently and saying it doesn't exist at all. This is very painful. Because Jews, at the beginning of the book at the end of the 1930s, were on the way to being integrated into Europe. This was the main trend—assimilation was the main trend, not nationalism.

**This seems to parallel our self-deception of a united Europe.**

Self-deception is very human. In the 1930s it became a Jewish phenomenon. Now in the 1990s it's a universal phenomenon.

**Can there be a united Europe?**

I don't think there can be a united Europe because



**Aharon Appelfeld: 'I still have the voice of my parents'**

national feelings remain very strong. Why not pluralism? I would like a peaceful pluralism. But an artificial union is meaningless.

**What were your feelings when you returned to Europe?**

I have never returned to Europe. England is not the continent. I have never been to Germany, though my books are published in Germany. I've never been in Austria because it was difficult to face people who spoke my intimate language—German. Though I don't speak German, I still have the voice of my parents.

**What about coming to the Writers' Festival in Prague?**

Prague is different. You know, I used to come with my parents to Prague when I was a child. Prague, Vienna, Berlin were the capitals of my parents, and I remember the streets in a very childish way as I was only five or six. But as I was the only son, they took me. Prague remains in my imagination similar, though not so elegant, as the town where I was born. So I should feel myself at home. Actually, I knew all of Kafka's friends who emigrated to Israel, a number who studied with him, I knew all of them in Israel. Because I was crazy about Kafka and I was looking for every person who could give me something about his life.

**Why Kafka?**

When I became a writer and became conscious of my writing, I felt I could not write speech as written before. You cannot write about the Holocaust in a realistic way—you cannot speak about it in social terms, or economic terms, or political terms. You have to speak in a different language. And Kafka was the first who pointed in this direction. Kafka saved my writing.

**How was Kafka remembered by his close friends?**

They remember him as a humorist. This sad person,

his sadness was so profound, all of them remember him as a humorist.

### **As a stand-up comedian?**

As a person whose every chapter, every story read to them, was full of laughter, full of humour. Humour was the key word. And this was very interesting for me because when I read Kafka I felt the irony, but I had not felt that this could arise from deep laughter, from deep joy. None of them spoke about Kafka as a terrifying person who is conquered by demons.

### **Did they see Kafka as a ladies' man, as a lady-killer?**

A lady-killer—all of them treated him as a person who has been beloved by many women. He could not cope with them. He was actually too weak for them. Writing was his essence. I would not separate out his diaries, I would not separate out his letters. In very few people are creative work and actual work so close. Every paragraph in his diaries is actually a small masterpiece.

### **I sense your attachment to Beckett, the duality of Kafka and Beckett.**

Of course. Kafka brought a Jewish tradition, Beckett an ascetic tradition.

### **And both brought laughter in a tin drum.**

From Beckett I understood that the unspoken is more important than the spoken—that the silence between words is one of the most important things.

He was indirectly one of my teachers.

### **Precisely the quality of a poet—who lends a physical-spiritual space between words and sentences. Beckett was very much a poet.**

Beckett was a poet—relating to words and people. He created figures on a stage, a metaphysical arena.

### **How would you stage your work?**

I see myself as a European Jewish writer. And I am following the path of Kafka and Bruno Schulz, and in some way, Werfel, or with people who were affiliated with them. These are my roots, my spiritual roots. And I am very proud that my German is very similar to Kafka's—that we spoke the same German at home.

### **Yet in Israel you are seen as a Jewish writer, a writer who has felt a certain discomfort in the past.**

I suffered with pride. I am very proud of this European Jewish legacy that failed, that failed. It didn't fail in literature, but it failed in ideology.

### **What about the new ideology of blond, blue-eyed Jews?**

When I came to Israel, it was a very ideological country—with socialist, communist tendencies. Now, thank God, it's better. Now there is room for a person like me, who is coming from a Jewish European tradition, who still thinks that the Jewish European tradition was the peak of Jewish history in modern times. ♦

## **April**

### *Elaine Feinstein*

This friendship is new, and therefore  
delicate as the first chestnut leaves in the lane,  
which today are wet and limp from the bud  
but soon will draw  
moisture up from the earth  
to fill tall cones of blossom.

Drowsing in April sunshine,  
we tell each other what is tender  
has its own seasonal power.  
Elsewhere, there is fizz and fun  
and the applause of strangers,  
but friendship demands more energy.

**Elaine Feinstein's**  
most recent  
collection of poems,  
*Daylight*, was  
published this year  
by Carcanet.