Anita Susan Grossman

An Interview with Aharon Appelfeld

The recipient of the State of Israel Prize for Literature 1983

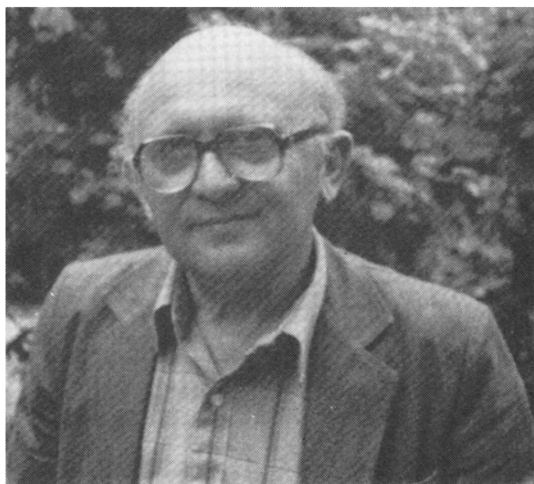
AHARON APPELFELD has only recently become known to English readers with the publication of his highly acclaimed novels, *Badenheim 1939* and *The Age of Wonders*. In Israel, however, he has long been one of the country's leading novelists. Twenty volumes of his short story collections and novels have appeared over the past two decades, winning him such literary awards as the Prime Minister's Prize (1969), the Brenner Prize (1973), the Bialik Prize (1979), the Memorial Prize (1982), and more recently the State of Israel Prize for Literature (1983).

Readers of *Badenheim 1939** may recall that the story described the gradual approach of the Nazi menace in a Jewish spa whose inhabitants appeared utterly unaware of the fate about to engulf them. The more sober *Age of Wonders* describes, in the first half, the case of a writer's family in pre-war Austria set against a climate of growing antisemitism, and in the second half, the grown-up son's return to his hometown to find a trace of his past life.

If, in his stories, Appelfeld seems particularly concerned with the plight of children, that is only natural considering the horrifying circumstances of his own early life. Born in 1932 in Czernowitz (then Rumania, now in the USSR), he lost both parents during the Nazi occupation. His mother was shot, and he and his father were deported to the Transnistria concentration camp in the Ukraine. The ten-year-old boy escaped from the camp and lived on his own in the countryside, wandering from place to place, not daring to reveal his Jewish identity. During this time he picked up a number of languages, but, as he was later to say, he had no real language of his own. He finally arrived in Israel in 1947, where he has lived ever since.

As a young man he served in the armed forces and studied Yiddish literature at the Hebrew University. Appelfeld's first story was published in 1959, and his first collection of stories, *Ashan* ("Smoke"), appeared in 1962. He has taught Hebrew literature at various institutions, most recently at Ben-Gurion University, Be'er Sheba.

The Age of Wonders ("Tor Hapelaot"), published in 1978 and now available in English translation, was widely acclaimed. Among his other recent works that have appeared in Israel are *Mikhvat ha-ur* ("Scalding Fire"), a novel about adolescent boys rescued from the Holocaust who cannot easily make the transition to kibbutz life; *Masot be-guf rishon* ("Essays in the First Person") (1979); and *Ke-me'ah 'edim* ("Like One Hundred Witnesses") (1975).



Aharon Appelfeld

The following interview took place last year in Brookline, Massachusetts, where Appelfeld was living during his stay as a visiting lecturer at Harvard University's Center for Jewish Studies. Although one naturally expects a writer to be articulate (he speaks fluent English, although with an accent), his easy flow of conversation seemed something of a shock to one familiar with his work, where the predominant narrative technique is reticence, silence, and the refusal to make connections between things for the reader. Moreover, the bleak landscape of his fictional world, with its dreamlike lack of particularity and alienated characters, contrasts sharply with the charm and friendliness of a man firmly rooted in this world, with a happy marriage, three children, and a lively interest in those around him. Nor does his writing prepare one for the playfulness and gentle teasing I encountered occasionally. At the same time, he remained evasive on questions of literary technique, tending to recast them into questions of Jewish identity, as though that could somehow explain the uniqueness of his writing and his literary vision. At the end I came away both enlightened and puzzled, feeling that the more I learned about his writing from him, the more there was that needed explaining.

SG: Why the title *The Age of Wonders?*
AA: It's very close to the Hebrew title (*Tor hapelaot*)—the age of miracles, of many catastrophes mixed with wonders. And in Hebrew it has a kind of tone between disaster and hope. It was a kind of compromise.

SG: Does it refer particularly to the first half of the novel or the second half, or the whole book?
AA: The whole book.

SG: Did you feel that the critics responded well to this second book of yours in English?
AA: It was a bit difficult for them because the book is not what we call a *Bildungsroman.* And I wasn't talking directly about the Holocaust. My feeling, writing the book, was that this is an area that I was not sure that aesthetic means would help me to understand. So I "surrounded" the Holocaust, before and after, with a white sheet of paper between part one and part two of the book. I felt it would be a desecration dealing otherwise with the Holocaust because somehow even for those people who have been there, it is beyond their ability to understand. And then it was important for me to have the first part of the story in the "I"-form and the second part in the "he"-form—it's more objective.

SG: Is there any autobiographical element in *The Age of Wonders?*
AA: Yes, there is some—every fiction, I believe, has some autobiography in it—but I don't write fiction as autobiography. A lot of the details are from my life, but the construction itself is fiction.

SG: Why were the two books that we've seen in America—*The Age of Wonders* and *Badenheim 1939*—set in Austria?
AA: Because, you see, I was born in Czernowitz. It was a very Jewish town, but very assimilated, too. It had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Jews deeply identified with German culture. (My native language is German, not Yiddish.) Even though Czernowitz was part of Rumania by the time I was born, the Jews still deeply identified themselves with German culture. Vienna was not only the capital, it was the Holy Capital, and to go to Vienna was a kind of pilgrimage.

SG: You left Czernowitz at the age of eight and were on your own. How did you manage?
AA: We were transported by the Nazis to concentration camps in the Ukraine. My mother was killed when I was seven, my father and I were separated. Later I escaped because I was very hungry and I thought that I was going to die if I remained there in the camp. For a while I worked as a shepherd.

SG: Did anyone want to keep you or adopt you?
AA: No, because I was a child with a dubious background. It was mainly the marginal peasants who kept me in their villages in the mountains, away from the cities. My face was not Jewish, so we could manage, but I was very careful. Then in 1944 the Russians liberated us, and I was brought to work in the kitchens of the army.

SG: So how did you get to the DP camp in Italy?
AA: I came from Russia and went to Bessarabia, Bukovina, Rumania.

SG: They let you go?
AA: The borders were open. So I wandered from place to place, and came to Italy.

SG: Two stories of yours that appeared in *Present Tense,* "1945" and "The Big Woman", describe Jewish refugees sailing to Israel in a ship commanded by a Swedish religious fanatic who goes insane. Did you make that up or did that really happen?
AA: No, that was imaginary. Those two stories are chapters of a longer work of fiction I have published in Israel.

SG: It would have been nice if that had been mentioned in the magazine. Have you been back to your home town?
AA: No, I have never been back, although I passed through just after the war. I'm not really interested in going back because I left when I was so young.

SG: Are the two books that we have in English so far, *Badenheim* and *The Age of Wonders,* typical or representative of your writing as a whole?
AA: In terms of style, craftsmanship, aesthetic values, yes. But I have written a lot in Israel—twenty books—and every one is different. Still I imagine that you can see a writer through two books and sense what kind of writer he is.

SG: There seems to be a number of similarities between the two books.
AA: Yes, first of all, they're both set in Austria and are about assimilated Jews in Austria between the two wars. But they're written in different tones: in *Badenheim* I attempted to have a light tone, while *The Age of Wonders* has a somewhat different tone. Am I wrong?

SG: No, no. I was going to ask you about the ending of *The Age of Wonders.* What were you trying to do in that novel?
AA: It is always very difficult to summarize in one sentence the book you have written, but, if you want, it is the lot of the assimilated Jew and the symbiosis between German culture and Jewish culture.

SG: The beginning of the book is mainly about the father's experience as seen by the son; the second half of the book is the son's experience.

AA: From different ages, also. The first part is the child's viewpoint—though probably a sophisticated child's; the other part is an adult's. Yes, it's a different way of seeing things. The first part is more lyrical, the second part more chilly, cold, I think. But mainly I'm interested in the phenomenon of the assimilated Jew.

SG: The hero seems to be searching for something when he goes back to Austria from Israel, but he doesn't seem to find it—or, if he gets an answer, it's not the answer he was looking for.
AA: No, he cannot find an answer. But still, there are indirect answers. For sometimes the unspoken is more important than the spoken. We have the calmness of the place—Jews do not exist, but the place still exists, and the petit bourgeois—the German petit bourgeois—still exists. There was, I would say, a very delicate surgery: no Jews.

SG: It wasn't that delicate.
AA: But in this town you cannot see it. And then this diabolic person called Brum somehow suppressed his Jewishness so deeply he became a devil.

SG: I was amused by a comic section in the first half of the book, where the father goes to the Jewish hospital or almshouse to see his friend who has just been circumcised. All the people there are complaining about mistreatment, and he gets very angry at this apparent injustice. Yet as soon as he starts complaining to the management, all the patients jump on him, saying, "Why are you bothering our rabbi?" I've had experiences like that.
AA: It's the same, you know, with the liberals in America.

SG: Can you explain that?
AA: I've met a lot of people in America who complain about Begin and Israeli policy. But they make no mention of the great miracle of a Jewish country: the survival of the Jewish language, a Jewish state, Jewish children attending Jewish schools. All these are miracles, but no one can see the miracles. They only see Begin.

SG: Tell me about the circumstances of the publication of *Badenheim 1939.* In this country a short story version of it came out some years before the longer version, and was frequently anthologized. The long version, published by David Godine in hardcover and Pocket Books in paperback, has everything that the short version has, but in addition has many inserted passages, some of them quite long. Was *Badenheim* originally a short story which you later expanded, or was it originally written as a novel and then cut for its first publication?
AA: The full story was published in Israel in 1972. I had written it first as a short story, and then extended and changed it. I have written seven versions of it, all told. I felt that the short story probably conveyed the notion, but that it lacked details. And then there was another question in those years. I was in transition from the short form to the novella.

SG: What problems do you have with the longer narrative that you don't have with the short story?
AA: With the longer narrative, it's a question of how to balance it. The short story is an episode, and has to be very concentrated in five or ten pages. Every form of fiction has limitations—the long because it's long, the short because it's short. A novel gives you the time to create an atmosphere. A short story can be—how do you say?—like a prayer, like a lyric.

SG: I notice that in *The Age of Wonders* each chapter has a certain theme that was almost self-contained, and had you wanted to publish them separately, you might have been able to do so, because each chapter focused on one particular thing.
AA: It was important to me—and still is important for me—that a chapter be a link in a chain; it could be treated independently, but it would still be connected.

SG: You seem to have written a lot of non-fiction that has not yet been translated into English. What kind of non-fiction do you write?
AA: Literary criticism about Jewish writers, but of a very personal kind. It doesn't pretend to be objective.

SG: Do you mean that you write about people you've known personally, or just give your personal response to them as writers?
AA: Both. First, I write about people I know personally, and then people I came to as writers in Hebrew and Yiddish.

SG: What Yiddish writers have you been interested in or have influenced you?
AA: Many. At the Hebrew University (by the way, it's interesting, I never attended a school in my life, but I attended the university), my major studies were in Yiddish, not Hebrew. So I'm very familiar with Yiddish writers and have been deeply interested in them—for example, Dovid Bergelson, Lamed Shapiro, Leyb Rokhman. Rokhman was a very close friend of mine. He was older than I by fourteen years, and I was deeply impressed by his writing, by his personality. I was less influenced by Bashevis Singer.

SG: You don't seem to write like him at all.
AA: No, he's very different. I enjoy his writing, especially his language, because his Yiddish idiom is so good. I enjoy less his theory of art. The emphasis of my writing is on the structure of the sentence

and in creating a kind of atmosphere rather than in giving detailed characteristics or soul-searchings. In creating atmosphere you create life.

SG: I've noticed in some of your short stories you shift from first to third person, so that the audience's relationship to the narrator changes. I was thinking especially of the stories in the English-language collection entitled *In the Wilderness* (published in Jerusalem in 1971), and another story, "The Road From Drova to Drovich", which is written both in the first and third person at the same time. The narrator speaks of "we" and "us", but he also speaks of "the boy" in referring to himself.
AA: Let me put it this way. I'll try to explain to you psychologically, and then you'll understand what happened to me. I came to Israel so very unfunctional. I came when I was fourteen years old with no language, no education, nothing. There were years that I was totally alienated from myself, not knowing who I was. I knew that I was Jewish because I suffered as a Jew; I knew that I was an Israeli because I lived in a Jewish country, but more than that was not clear. It would take me years to clarify, to identify myself with the Jewish people. So the problem of "I" and "we" was a problem for me for many years. And I did not come from a deeply Jewish background; I was very assimilated.

SG: But there was also the question of "we" and "he" in your work.
AA: From all ends there are technical problems, but they are not really technical problems. They are mainly problems of identification—to find myself first of all as a human being. I was a child without a home, without a feeling of belonging to someone, so Hebrew—Israel—Jewishness became a part of my identity.

SG: I'm curious about the autobiographical piece entitled "Witness" that appeared in the *Jerusalem Quarterly* in 1980, in which you discuss this very problem in your life. What was the occasion that prompted the essay? It sounded like a speech.
AA: It was when I received a very important literary prize.

SG: Well, anyway, in that piece you spoke of "we" there, as in "we grew up", and I wondered who your audience was.
AA: Yes, this was an attempt to characterize my generation of children who came to Israel. But also, I was too shy to speak in the "I"-form all the time. I've not been able to . . . to emphasize myself too much.

SG: Do you see any differences between your writing and that of other Israeli writers?
AA: Yes, it's very clear. I wasn't born in this country. I came to Israel with a heavy baggage—a very heavy Jewish baggage. And Hebrew was not my native language.

SG: Do you have an accent in Hebrew?
AA: No, we do not have accents at all, because people came to Israel from seventy countries. So we can speak in Hebrew stuttering, and it will be accepted as natural. But Hebrew really became my mother language, although I speak a lot of languages.

SG: Do you speak Rumanian too?
AA: I understand a bit. I also know Russian, German—a long list.

SG: In the "Witness" essay you mentioned how attracted you were to Kafka's writing because of the sense of absurdity he described. Do you feel any other affinities with Kafka?
AA: My feeling is that he is a deeply Jewish writer, a hidden Jewish writer. There is a talmudical brain with talmud, there is also a talmudical brain without talmud. He is very Jewish in the way he argues with himself and in his guilt feelings.

SG: Of course, the impersonal bureaucracy he describes also appears in your work. And I thought that perhaps there was an element of fantasy, too in your writing; at least the two novels in English don't seem to be strictly realistic. It's a very closed world: names don't appear—in *Badenheim* you don't hear the words "Nazi" or "Hitler"—and that aspect is blocked out. It seems . . . not allegorical, but hardly realistic either.
AA: I'm very happy that you say it's not allegorical because I feel that allegory is a lower literary form. First of all, a story has to be located somewhere in place and time; that is very important to me. I'm not a realistic writer in this way, but I am very selective in choosing details.

SG: What are you working on now?
AA: I am working on a novel. A writer doesn't have a degree—a writer is a writer only when he is writing. He has to renew every year his degree. Imagine yourself having to renew every year your doctoral thesis. I brought the book with me from Israel. I'm mainly, rewriting it—it's the second stage, or, I hope, up the third stage.

SG: Does it have any relation to the Holocaust theme, or have you gone away from that in your recent writing?
AA: I cannot get away from it because it is the central event of my life. It is more than a personal event; it is very central to the Jewish people, and I am first of all a Jewish writer. My interests are Jewish fates, Jewish philosophy, Jewish distortions, all kinds of Jewish hallucinations, dreams—good dreams, bad dreams—what we call the modern Jew. What does

it mean? This is my passion: to understand the phenomenon.

SG: When you say "modern", do you mean 1982?
AA: I mean not only 1982, but the 19th-century Jew who grew up deeply rooted in his tradition and suddenly found himself uprooted. Jews were partly the creators of modern civilization, but it had a very high price for them.

SG: So most of your stories have to do somehow with the Holocaust, either before or after?
AA: Some relationship to the Holocaust. The Holocaust all the time happened to Jews in smaller versions, so it is not something unique in Jewish history. Jews were expelled or killed because they were Jews. I'm not dealing with the Holocaust in the sense that it has been done in America, which is mainly through documentary or vulgarization.

SG: Would you consider, say, Elie Wiesel's writing a vulgarization?
AA: No, this is a kind of theological approach. But there are others,—I don't want to mention names.

SG: Do you read any English or American writers?
AA: A lot, but I'm mainly fascinated by the nineteenth-century writers and Jewish writers.

SG: You mean Jewish-American?
AA: That's very often the problem. They call themselves American, but I call them Jewish-American.

SG: Do you think that you will write anything about America once you get back? Will you have picked up enough material in your six months here?
AA: No, I cannot write something that doesn't come from my deepest experience, something flattering or artificial. America was to me very important because I am exploring the nature of the assimilated Jew . . .

SG: We've got lots of them here—
AA: . . . But still, the prototype of the assimilated Jew for me will never be the American. It is a different kind of assimilation than that which occurred in Europe where I was born.

SG: Do you think that there's any chance of survival of Jewish life in the long run outside of Israel?
AA: It's painful to say so, but I must say that I cannot see it. I am meeting so many people that I really adore as individuals, but when it comes to their Jewishness . . . it's more than disappointing, it's painful to see that so many of them could not find themselves within the frame of Jewishness. They do not hate it; it's simply meaningless to them.

SG: Where have you been in this country?
AA: I've been in many places: Los Angeles, Yale University, Harvard University, Columbus, Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Detroit.

SG: Has anyone talked to you about making a movie out of *Badenheim*?
AA: Two people wanted me to give them the rights if they do with it what they want. I would not agree to it, and they told me that in America this is impossible. I don't want them to write orgy scenes into the book.

SG: Some writers don't care as long as they sell the rights.
AA: For me what they do to the book is very important. Actually, my impression is that my fiction would make a good film rather than a stage play, which would require more direct dialogue.

SG: I understand that you've been teaching at Ben-Gurion University at Be'er Sheba for six years and before that were teaching in Jerusalem.
AA: In different institutions—in the university, out of the university.

SG: How do you juggle teaching and writing? Is there any connection between the two activities?
AA: No. I think writing is a kind of addiction; I'm an addicted person, and I write every day, even when I am teaching. Teaching is something more social.

SG: Is academic life reflected in any of your stories? In *The Age of Wonders* you do have an intellectual, the father, but the short stories of yours that I've seen were not about people of that milieu.
AA: In America people write about academic life; in Europe, in Israel it's only a small part of your life . . . You see, Jewish society up until the nineteenth century had no real middle class. Jews had an aristocracy—I don't mean in terms of possessing land but in having a religious quality.

SG: You mean the rabbis among the *shtetl* Jews?
AA: The rabbis, but this was more: a way of speaking, of behaving, and thinking. And then there were the poor Jews, the lower class. There was just a very small middle class. What happens to the Jews in the nineteenth century? They become middle class. They didn't have the manners or the language of the aristocracy; they didn't have the bohemian life of the poor Jews, or the beauty of the poor Jews. They're just the petite bourgeoisie. And this is a very ugly class, lacking much. This means modern brick houses, all this furniture, all this space, all this emptiness.

SG: America is almost all middle class.
AA: I know. This has happened to the Jews who

immigrated from Russia and Poland, who came here as poor Jews and became middle-class Jews, with all the superficialities of the middle class. But this happened not only in America.

SG: Don't you think that this is just a transitional phase? I'm thinking of my own grandparents who wanted their children to get the secular education that they didn't get. They realized that they may have had deficiencies in "culture" perhaps, but they wanted their children to . . .
AA: Most of the Jews in America of your age or even my age were becoming part of the academic community, but the academic community is not an aristocracy.

SG: Certainly not financially.
AA: Not financially or any other way. Because this is merely a system of education, not a culture.

SG: To change the subject, in *Badenheim* and some of your other stories the narrator—or implied narrator, if you want to make a distinction here—is very far away from the characters. For one thing, we have the foreknowledge that the characters lack, so the audience is distanced from the characters—many characters, I might add, none of whom we focus on exclusively. What exactly is your relationship as a writer to your characters?
AA: A real artist has to keep a distance and not be too involved or emotional about them.

SG: But we are supposed to feel sympathetic toward them?
AA: Yes. I love Jews, even Jewish distortions.

SG: For example, in *Badenheim,* some of the people blame the Eastern European Jews, the *Ostjuden,* for their predicament. Clearly we're not supposed to sympathize with that; it's one of their delusions.
AA: They hate themselves. What does it mean? Somehow they feel that they are East Europeans. There is no question of this containing a pathological element, because one cannot imagine the Jewish fate without pathology. But I'm not dealing with pathology.

SG: Do all Israeli writers write about Jewish identity?
AA: Not exactly, because most of them were born in Israel and they became Israeli-oriented.

SG: But Yehuda Amichai was born in Germany.
AA: He's an exception. Most of them are Jewish, but first of all Israeli. They were born there, their roots are there. I'm a Jewish writer and am Jewish-oriented. I am located in Israel; still, I feel in my blood the Wandering Jew.

SG: Have you ever tried to find out more about your personal family background?
AA: I have done a lot of research about my town, Czernowitz, and my region and Austria, but not about my family origins; it was not possible.

SG: Critics have characterized your work as gloomy. Would you say that your vision as an artist is a pessimistic one?
AA: Not necessarily pessimistic, but also not optimistic, because I'm the product of the twentieth century. I am writing about the decline of a civilization; I am living this kind of decline.

SG: But not in your personal life. You are an Israeli, you have a Jewish family, your friends are Jews.
AA: But I know that there was an East European Jewish civilization which was destroyed totally. It was destroyed by inner forces—Jews themselves wanted to escape from it; it was destroyed by external forces. And this is not a joyful matter.

Little Jew-boy

Julian Tuwim (1894-1953)

He sings in the courtyard, the poor little lad
wrapped up in rags, a Jew-boy gone mad.

God unbalanced his mind and he's driven around,
ages and exile for his queer speech account.

He wriggles and dances, outstretching his hands,
and sobbing and singing his lot he laments.

The gentleman from the first floor looks down on the boy:
Look, my poor brother, at the one without joy!

Where has fate carried us, where have we strayed
in an alien world, unloved and afraid?

Gentleman from the first floor—your brother's insane,
dancing across the globe, his poor head aflame.

The gentleman from the first floor, who's a poet, alas!
will wrap up his heart like a coin and thus

throw it through the window and on to the street
to be trampled upon till it ceases to beat.

Thereafter we'll go on our different ways,
each one on his own, through sad and mad days.

We'll never find peace and a haven of rest,
we singing Jews, we Jews possessed.

Translated by Jacob Sonntag