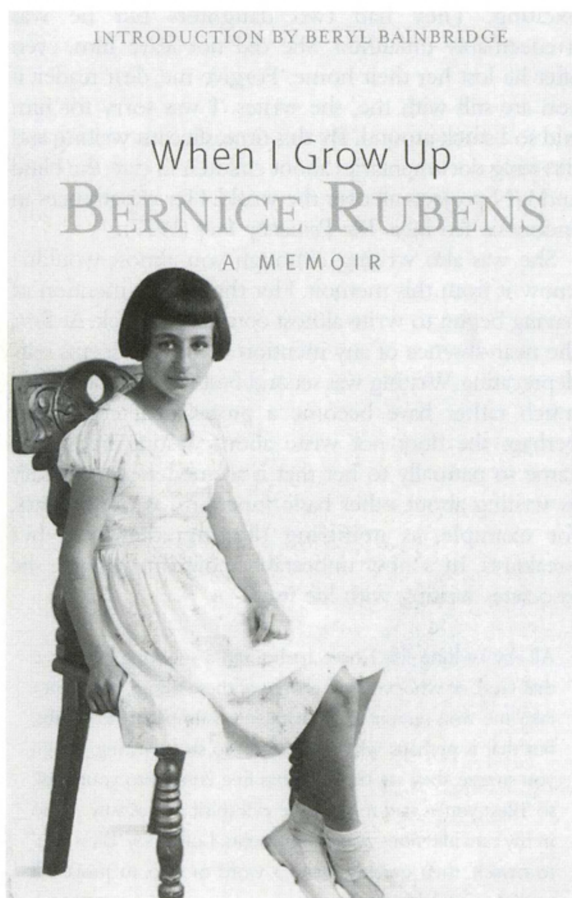
Nassauer was eventually the one to leave – for a woman Rubens is uncharacteristically vitriolic about, describing her as 'ugly, thick and sublimely boring'. Even after their split, she welcomed Rudi to her *seders* (Pesach, unsurprisingly for this most history-obsessed writer, seems to have been her favourite festival). She writes that she had planned to end the memoir with the death of her brother Cyril, but she continues for a few painful pages about the death of Nassauer, the love of her life.

She does not say much about loneliness – a theme she explored so powerfully in *I Sent a Letter to My Love* (1975) and *A Five Year Sentence* (1978) – but she does describe herself as 'the sort of person who gets deeply on my own nerves' and there is a sense, in this book, that writing is another way of keeping talking, of not allowing silence to prevail. A writer is by his or her nature *un*quiet, in all senses of the word. Rubens's novels are garrulous, unfettered, disturbing, hilarious, perspicacious; barring a few isolated outbursts (the one against the late Elias Canetti is particularly violent), this memoir is quieter and mellower in tone.

She begins with an incident from early childhood; greeted by a neighbour who asks how her parents are, Rubens tells an outright lie: 'They've gone to South Africa.' Even then, she says, 'I was happily at home with mendacity. It was less boring than the truth. My natural home lay in fiction.' Later, reviewing her doubts about autobiography, she concludes that 'truth can be told only when cloaked in fiction'. Indeed, some of her gaps in this book are filled by her fiction; both *Mate in Three* (1966) and *Go Tell the Lemming* (1973) excavate troubled marriages that echo her own, while *Brothers* (1983), the book she often cited as her best, borrows details and stories from her family history to follow four generations of Russian Jews. Compared to that novel, this memoir seems slight and evasive. Certainly it lacks the wild, untrammelled absurdities of her fiction. But to write a memoir is no easy thing, and Rubens's decision to seed hers with uneasiness is both brave and – despite her protestations – truthful in a way more tell-all memoirs are not.



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Memories of wild strawberries

Aharon Appelfeld, ***The Story of a Life***
(translated by Aloma Halter; London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, £14.99)

Sue Vice

Aharon Appelfeld's memoir *The Story of a Life* is fascinating and difficult at the same time. Its title suggests this duality, as its apparent generality is used to introduce a story we learn to be quite extraordinary. Appelfeld was born in 1932 in Czernowitz – then in Romania – to German-speaking parents. In many respects his early life resembles that of the Holocaust poet Paul Celan, who shared Appelfeld's birthplace and later chose to write in German as an ambivalent memorial to his German-speaking mother. But Appelfeld writes in Hebrew, and describes his pain at losing his early mother-tongue and adopting a new one. His description of struggling with written Hebrew must possess extra irony in the Hebrew original.

In 1941 Appelfeld's mother was killed at her parents' house, while the young Aharon (then called Erwin – also the name of the protagonist of his recent novel *Iron Tracks*) and his father managed to flee. Father and son spent a year in a Ukrainian labour camp before being separated; Aharon escaped from the camp and never saw his father again. The most 'unbelievable' – to use Appelfeld's own word – period of his life then began: he spent two years, between the ages of ten and 12, roaming the Ukrainian steppe. At times he worked as a servant for local people but was often on his own, living in the forest. Of this period, when he lived among wild and domestic animals, Appelfeld recalls, 'Sometimes it seemed to me that what saved me were the animals I encountered along the way, not the human beings.' When the Russian army arrived in 1944, he worked for them until the war's end. In 1946 he emigrated to Palestine and has lived in Jerusalem ever since. Appelfeld

has published more than 25 works of Holocaust fiction since his short-story collection, *Smoke,* in 1962, of which the best-known among English-speaking audiences are *Badenheim 1939* (just reissued in Penguin Classics), *To the Land of the Reeds* and *Katerina.*

The details of Appelfeld's biography do not emerge from *The Story of a Life* as clearly as this summary suggests. Although it is broadly chronological, the memoir works by the logic of both memory and imagination so that certain details are only clarified later on, there are repetitions, and some material is missing. For instance, the time Appelfeld spent in the labour camp constitutes a gap in the text and is never formally described. Instead, we read a scrap of prose that Appelfeld has tried writing many times, about a two-month forced march he underwent with his father in the Ukrainian winter. During a pause in the march, he put his feet into the lining of his father's coat for comfort, but

> The slight warmth hurts me so much that I quickly pull them out. For some reason, this rapid movement makes him angry . . . If Father is angry, that means that I am going to die soon.

When the boy's father relents and rubs his son's feet with the lining of his coat, Aharon is reassured: 'for a moment it seems to me that not only my father is with me, but also my mother, whom I loved so much'. This is an extraordinary kind of writing. It recaptures an unbearable past in what seems like the only way possible: by absolutely plain, present-tense description, which places distorted domestic details within an apocalyptic setting.

Equally astonishing are Appelfeld's descriptions of his mental state as a child living on the run in the forest, which are characterized by a heart-rending lack of sentimentality or commentary:

> I knew that a dead person doesn't get back up on his feet and is eventually put in a pit. Yet I still didn't grasp death as an end. I continued to expect my parents to come and collect me. This expectation, this tense waiting, stayed with me throughout the war.

Here we see an effort to reproduce a state of mind that is doubly vanished: a child's conception of death and abandonment, at a time of historical extremity. *The Story of A Life* is both a memoir and commentary on the difficulty of remembering and writing, as Appelfeld's remarks on his own writing practice show: 'From my childhood I've hated pomposity, preferring instead small, quiet words that evoke scents and sounds.' No reader of his sparse, understated novels will be surprised to hear this, and this minimalism characterizes his memoir too.

As well as proceeding out of order, Appelfeld's memory reveals a logic that is almost that of dreams or fiction. For instance, he focuses on details of his pre-war childhood that often have to do with the riches of Romanian agriculture. He recalls his father buying all the wares of a Ruthenian peasant selling wild strawberries:

> We feast with great relish, as if we are about to finish the strawberries. But there is nothing to worry about, the basket is still full, and even if we go on eating all through the night, it won't get any emptier . . . Later I saw, with my own eyes, how the glorious berries had turned greyish and had shriveled up.

Clearly, the basket of strawberries hints at a deeper meaning: an apparently endless childhood sweetness that was horribly transmuted into loss and death.

A little later, Appelfeld describes in another present-tense narrative how his grandmother would make jam from local plums, pears and cherries at the end of summer visits to his grandparents' country house in Drohobycz. But as this house was later the scene of his mother's death, retrospective knowledge cannot help colouring the memory of a child tasting warm jam:

> The sweetness, for which I have waited so eagerly, brings me no happiness this time. The fear that the night will end and that in the morning we will have to return to the city grips me.

Only much later do we come upon Appelfeld's remarkable observation that 'My grandmother spoke Yiddish, and her language had a different ring or, rather, taste to it, for it always brought to my mind plum compote.' This is a child's associative and synaesthetic memory of a loved relation's language in terms of the jam she always made. Memory and reality are inextricably mingled together. The reader might wonder whether the author's surname, linking him to orchards and apples, is implicated in this association between the irretrievable past and sweet but transient fruit – not to mention the kabbalistic notion of entering an 'orchard' of deeper knowledge.

In his efforts to reconcile the different elements of his past, Appelfeld quotes from a diary he kept during his early days in Israel when he attended an agricultural school. These entries focus entirely on the present and deny, as he now writes, the reality of being 'a man who carries within him the child of war'. *The Story of a Life,* in its mixed and fragmentary way, *does* convey this reality. As Appelfeld puts it in his Preface,

> when I laid one piece [of memory] alongside another, I saw that not only have they been made whole by the years, but they have even achieved some level of meaning.

Sue Vice is Professor of English at the University of Sheffield. Her most recent book is *Children Writing the Holocaust* (Palgrave, 2004) and she is working on a study of the playwright Jack Rosenthal.