

# Memory and Identity in *Sipur hayim* by Aharon Appelfeld

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In this paper I would like to examine Appelfeld's painful search for the childhood roots he lost during the Holocaust, and his struggle to forge for himself an identity in his newly adopted homeland, as represented in *Sipur hayim* ('Story of a Life').<sup>1</sup> This will entail two different, though ultimately connected, directions of examination: the role of memory in the construction of private and collective identity, and the nature of the identity being sought.

1. Aharon Appelfeld, *Sipur hayim* ('Story of a Life') (Jerusalem 1999).

Recent years have seen an unprecedented explosion in the writing of biographies, autobiographies and memoirs both in Israel and elsewhere. One of the reasons for this literary phenomenon is the blur in the postmodern era between factual and fictional narration. The traditional distinctions of biography, autobiography, personal history (diary/confession) and novel are coming to be questioned. Since biography and autobiography serve as a catalyst in the shaping of personal and collective identities, for many contemporary writers – Appelfeld included – autobiography is not merely a device for summing up the accumulated wisdom of a lifetime but a means of defining identity. Writing about lives is an ancient practice. Biographies have been important in the form of genealogical, religious and didactic texts since the start of recorded literature. Autobiography as such, including diaries and personal letters, began to appear in the sixteenth century and became widespread in Europe by the eighteenth century. Autobiographical writing includes both autobiography and memoirs, two distinct modes of writing, although they are often thought interchangeable. Memoirs customarily give some prominence to personalities and actions other than the writer's own; some are accounts of historical events that have been directly witnessed by those recording them. Autobiography, on the other hand, is a connected narrative of the author's life, stressing introspection

2. Alan Mintz, *Banished from their Fathers' Tables: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington, Ind. 1989), and Risa Domb, 'Israeli and Modern Hebrew Life Writing' in Margaretta Jolly (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (London and Chicago 2002), 9-477.

and the significance of one's life against a wider background. It is artistically shaped and coherent. However, not all biographical works fall into these classifications. In an attempt to reflect this, the term 'life writing' has gained wide academic acceptance since the 1980s, both because of its openness and inclusiveness across the genre and because it encompasses the writing of one's own or another's life as well as memoirs.

Autobiography and biography were alien to traditional Jewish Hebrew culture because of the secondary status given to the individual in Judaism. There are relatively few autobiographies in classical Hebrew and medieval Jewish writing, and the arrival of autobiographical writing during the Haskalah period can be seen, as Alan Mintz pointed out, as an aberration in the development of Hebrew literature.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of religious cultural hegemony at the turn of the twentieth century prompted the creation of autobiographies, some of which crossed over into fiction, such as in the works of the writers Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg (*Whither?*, 1899), and Joseph Hayyim Brenner (*In The Winter*, 1903), who developed the genre of fictional autobiography in Hebrew writing. Although these works are not strictly speaking autobiographies, they reflect the individual's ordeal, considered significant because it was representative of a collective crisis. Similarly, Zionist leaders in particular wrote autobiographies which were deemed acceptable since they seemed to be part of the Zionist national enterprise, in which public events took precedence over the private life of the individual. In the fictional autobiographies which appeared in Hebrew writing after 1948, the names of the narrators may not be those of the authors, but persons and events are authentic and the documentary and historical data accurate. Like the Haskalah writers, those of the 'Generation of the State' portrayed through the individual the life of a generation in crisis. The collective is central rather than the individual, and themes concerning the War of Independence and commitment to the newly established Israel and its ideology were paramount. In the 1960s, writers of the so-called New Wave Generation brought marginalized individuals into the limelight, and consequently many writers of the preceding 'Generation of the State' have recently turned to writing documentary-style autobiographies, in which they themselves are protagonists albeit under assumed names. These narratives contain extracts from journals, letters and memoirs, all of which reinforce the concrete and historical elements and weaken the fictional aspects of

the works. Examples of such writings, which include autobiographical descriptions of the writer's youth in Europe or in Israel, are Matti Megged's *Mem* (1985), Nathan Shaham's *Sefer Hatum* ('Sealed Scrolls' 1988), S. Yizhar's *Mikdamot* (1992), *Tsalhabim* (1993), *Tsdadiyim* ('Asides' 1996) and *Etsel hayam* ('By the Sea' 1996), and Nurit Zarhi's *Mishkei bedidu* ('Childhood Games' 1998). Haim Be'er's *Havalim* ('The Pure Element of Time' 1998) marks a departure, since his autobiography reveals his intimate life and uses his real name. Works such as Yoram Kaniuk's 'Post Mortem' (1992), Natan Zach's 'Death of My Mother' (1997) and Amos Oz's 'A Tale of Love and Darkness' (2002) contribute to this new development. It is in this context that we should view Appelfeld's *Sipur hayim*. However, I wish to suggest that whereas in the works mentioned above the use of unmasked autobiographical details departs dramatically from the authors' previous fictional writings, in Appelfeld this is not quite the case. To my mind, all of Appelfeld's work can be regarded as 'life writing', since his fictional narratives contain autobiographical elements which are not difficult to detect as such and which have become merely more transparent in this work. These elements can be traced more easily here than in other writings, possibly because they all allude specifically to the Holocaust, an event inherent in the shaping of Appelfeld's life as well as in his poetics. Although *Sipur hayim* presents fragmented chapters of Appelfeld's life, and despite the author's insistence that it should be regarded neither as autobiography nor as a chronological narration of life, but as chapters of memory and observation<sup>3</sup> or as an 'inner tale' (p. 8), nevertheless *Sipur hayim* can be considered to be 'life writing'.

Memory is one of the most important components of life writing, its preservation being an important component of identity. As mentioned in my introductory words, I propose to examine the process of the formation of Appelfeld's identity, as an immigrant striving to link his past and his present through memory. In the modern world, individual memories acquire significance as the guarantors of social continuity. 'Memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual', as the French historian Pierre Nora has put it.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that "through "identity", the singularity and permanence of the self (or group) are asserted; in "memory", the repertoire of representations of an individual or collective past is embraced as the distinctive repository and resource of a present consciousness.' Seen in this way, the preservation of memory has an important

3. It seems to me, therefore, that G. Shaked's accusation of omissions and selectivity in Appelfeld's life is not justified; 'Haberaha mehametsiut' (Escape from reality) *Ha'aretz*, 20 April 1999.

4. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989) 9.

5. Michal Goldvicht, 'Bifnim bahashekhah rohashim hayenu habilti muvanim' (Inside in the darkness our inexplicable life is whispering) *Ha'aretz*, 20 February 2002.

6. On the indoctrination of Zionist ideology with reference to Appelfeld's work see Yigal Schwartz, *Kinat hayahid ve-netzah hashevet: Aharon Appelfeld: Tmunat 'olam* ('Individual Lament and Tribal Eternity: Aharon Appelfeld: Picture of his World') (Jerusalem 1996) 6-45, and Sidra Ezrahi, 'Revisioning the Past: The Changing Legacy of the Holocaust in Hebrew Literature' *Salmagundi* (Fall/Winter 1985-6) 70-245, and Alan Mintz, *Hurban, Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York 1984), 39-203. See also Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York 2000), esp. the Introduction, 1-10.

7. Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London 1996).

function and, as Michal Goldvicht noted, the pains of memory of the Diaspora, of being a refugee and of assimilation secretly nurture the here and now.<sup>5</sup> In *Sipur hayim* Appelfeld strives to make sense of the chaos of life in general and of his own personal experience in particular. He presents different chapters and episodes in an attempt to reach the roots of his life and to reconnect with them (p. 8). The trauma of his experience of the Holocaust required his memories to be banished into 'the inner cellars of the soul' (p. 7). A great deal has been written about the prevailing Zionist ideology which insisted on the suppression of survivors' memories,<sup>6</sup> but Appelfeld examines also the personal, self-imposed suppression of memory. It seems that only while serving in the army did his suppressed memories surface and lead him to his past, to the world in which he grew up and to which he felt connected (p. 128). Appelfeld's memories of the war years are of a specific kind: they are memories of a child, not an adult. It is not surprising, then, that he describes them as if they are imprinted in the cells of his body and instinctive sensations rather than as clear images (p. 83) or clear memories, as others perceive them to be. Smell, damp shoes or a sudden noise can take him back into himself. 'I do not invent, I draw from the inner depths of my body sensations and thoughts that I absorbed during my blindness' (p. 169, also p. 49).

Thus Appelfeld claims that it was senses that informed him of his experience, not words, and insists that words are false, that they 'cannot confront big catastrophes' (p. 96). Undoubtedly this is the source of Appelfeld's 'poetics of silence'. A similar view on the role of words and silence in literary texts was expressed by the Holocaust survivor in Anne Michaels's book *Fugitive Pieces*: 'I listened to these dark shapes as if they were black spaces in music, a musician learning the silences of a piece. I felt this was my truth. That my life could not be sorted in any language but only in silence.'<sup>7</sup> Appelfeld needed to find again the silence of the war years and to revive it so that he could find himself. But with what words and in what way? These are the very same questions that Primo Levi had asked. Not surprisingly, when Appelfeld tried to describe the story of the forest, all words 'evaporated' (p. 164), seeming banal and unable to convey the experience itself. Yet it is paradoxically through words that Appelfeld sought his rehabilitation and searched for the reconstruction of memory and the self.

In the process of reconstruction of the self, 'the acquisition of the new language was the greatest challenge.'<sup>8</sup> When Appelfeld arrived in Palestine in 1946 at the age of fourteen he found he had no language at all. 'What can I do with no language?' he asked (p. 102). This handicap affected his whole existence. The Hebrew language, exotic though it sounded, was difficult for him to pronounce (p. 100). The loss of his mother tongue represented the loss of his home, his parents and the world to which he belonged. After the lonely war years, the long and formative period of time during which he had hardly used words (p. 111) and had had to work hard on learning to pronounce them (p. 49), he found it difficult to communicate, was short in speech and became capable of narrating with the utmost brevity (p. 113). In order to overcome his stuttering he read German and Hebrew and learnt whole sentences by heart so that he could learn how to speak again. Between 1946 and 1950, while working in the fields of the agricultural college at Nahalal, Appelfeld struggled to learn Hebrew, the Bible and Bialik's poetry (p. 101). The Zionist written and unwritten slogan for new male immigrants at the time was: 'Forget, integrate, speak Hebrew, improve your appearance and nurture your manliness' (p. 126). Whoever spoke in their mother tongue was sternly rebuked, and he hated those who forced him to speak Hebrew (p. 101). Appelfeld's mother tongue died away, and at the age of eighteen he could not write properly in any language. He finally wrote in a language that he had initially resisted. One of the first steps towards integration in a new society is to adopt the native language. However, Appelfeld recalls that it sounded to him like a language of soldiers imposed on him by force. Hebrew was a stepmother to him (p. 103). This reaction resembles that of Kafka, a writer whose style influenced Appelfeld's writing. Kafka, a Czech writing in German, created a language that like Appelfeld's was distinguished by its economy and by the fact that its syntax was different from the dominant German of Prague. Both writers de-territorialized the language, to use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's terminology.<sup>9</sup> A recent study reveals that a similar process can be detected in the poetry of Amichai, Zach and Dan Pagis.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is the reason why Appelfeld is seen as, in the linguistic sense, in exile. As Sidra Ezrahi pointed out, for Appelfeld 'the Hebrew language seems to provide neither a bridge nor a window onto the past.'<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that the role of the Hebrew language is an all-encompassing issue in the debate on the identity of the Jewish people, their roots, their religion and the way forward in every aspect

8. Gila Ramras-Rauch, *Aharon Appelfeld: The Holocaust and Beyond* (Bloomington, Ind. 1994) 14.

9. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?' *Mikan* (May 2000) 43-134.

10. Nilly Sharf-Gold, "'A Boat Carrying Longings': The Big Journey in the Sea and its Imprints in the Poetry of Amichai' *Mikan* (December 2002) 86-100.

11. Sidra D. Ezrahi, *By Words Alone* (Chicago 1982) 370.

12. Y. Bronowski expressed concern regarding the loss of the homogeneity of the Hebrew language as an important component of Israeli identity with the recent Russian immigration in Israel; 'Marak hatarbut shel 'akeret habayit' (The cultural soup of a housewife) *Ha'aretz* 10 April 1998, p. 13B.

13. For an interesting comparison between Bergner's painting and Appelfeld's prose in the presentation of the destroyed world of their European childhood see Dror Burstein, 'Mikarov' *Yediot Ahronot* 7 (Winter 2001) 86–101.

14. See Schwartz, *Kinat hayahid ve-netzah hashevet* 83–4.

15. Burstein, 'Mikarov' 94, noted that both Bergner and Appelfeld represent the Jewish European world on the eve of its destruction. Both artists paint it as a perfect, self-contained world which resembles a coloured bubble, unaware how thin its skin is.

16. As in S. Yizhar *Mikdamot* (1992) and *Tsalhabim* (1993).

17. As in A. Megged *Ha-hai 'al hamet* (1965).

of their being. For many, their language is inseparable from their identity.<sup>12</sup>

Appelfeld experienced the sense of not belonging and forever asked himself: 'Who am I and what am I in this country?' (p. 125). He felt he belonged neither 'here' nor 'there'. Survivors were forced to dissociate themselves not only from their mother tongue but altogether from the world of their past, to forget it and to integrate into what was for them an artificial world (p. 154). They had to become Jewish farmers and fighters, were accused when they failed to do so, and had to defend themselves from unfair attacks. While Appelfeld envied survivors who were able to forget and to integrate, he could not do so. He could not submerge himself and assimilate into a Palestinian/Israeli existence (p. 138), perhaps because he refused to obliterate his past in order to build a new life on its ruins.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, memory was central in his struggle to shape or reshape his own self. He strove to connect his new life to his childhood, which might have contributed to his decision to become a writer, since he was afraid that the story of his childhood and of his parents and grandparents might be lost for ever (p. 165). The world of S. Yizhar and Moshe Shamir, the popular writers of the 1950s in Israel, was not his world, however. Their innocence and idealization was alien to him and stood in stark contrast with his earlier life and experiences (p. 105). Their negation of the Diaspora led them to be disconnected from the long history of Jewish life in Europe. Yigal Schwartz has pointed out that Appelfeld is closer to older Hebrew and Yiddish writers who represented the *shtetl* than to Israeli writers.<sup>14</sup> They were connected to Jewish life in Europe, to the world Appelfeld lost. Dror Burstein draws interesting parallels between Appelfeld and the painter Yossel Bergner and suggests that because both view Israeli reality through the lenses of the ruins of the European world, both are regarded as exilic, alien and non-Israeli artists who do not belong and who represent a world which has died.<sup>15</sup> Against this view I would like to argue strongly that the European world which died is an inherent part of Israel and that both artists do represent Israeli experience. Israeli identity, shaped by the early Zionist founders of Israeli nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has passed through repeated processes of change. In the 1920s the model of the 'New Jew' became the 'New Hebrew'. In the late 1930s and in the 1940s, it transmuted into the native 'Sabra'.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1950s the model has been transformed into the 'Israeli',<sup>17</sup> and during the 1960s and 1970s

into Jewish/Israeli.<sup>18</sup> A. B. Yehoshua regards this 'neo-Judaism' as a process of reconciliation between early Zionism and Judaism.<sup>19</sup> The effects of the Shoah on all aspects of Israeli life, the increased ethnic awareness and the new phenomenon of the 'born-again' Jew brought about a Judaization of secular society. Having previously identified themselves as Israelis, many writers have become Israeli Jews, and that is often reflected in the representation of their characters.

Appelfeld became a writer for refugees, rather than for ideological Zionists. This was not an easy path to choose since the reading public in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Appelfeld began to publish, was receptive to survivors' memoirs and authentic testimonies, but not to fiction which represented the Holocaust experience. Appelfeld, as an immigrant, a refugee, a person who carries inside him the child of the war, explains: 'fiction was regarded as provocation' (p. 97, also p. 141). Most of his teachers at the Hebrew University, however, who influenced him when he first started to write, such as Dov Sadan, Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, were born abroad and like him carried the pain of two homelands; from them he learnt that a homeland is not necessarily a geographical locus but can be transported (p. 138). He came to the conclusion that 'here' and 'there' are not as disconnected as Zionist slogans insisted, and in this respect Appelfeld stood apart from mainstream Israeli writers. He was attracted to Yiddish and Hasidic literature, both of them antithetical to the emerging Israeli culture, but it was precisely through Yiddish literature, even though it was looked down on, that Appelfeld hoped to rediscover his ancestors in the Carpathian Mountains and through it to reconstruct his identity. In the 'New Life' club, established in Jerusalem in 1950 for survivors from Galicia and Bukovina, he found a surrogate home (p. 166). There he heard familiar languages such as Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German and Romanian, and saw faces that reminded him of his lost life. His whole writing enterprise can be seen as a journey back home, in other words to Europe. Perhaps this has contributed to the frequent claim, or even accusation, that 'he is a Jew writing in Hebrew in Israel rather than a typically Israeli writer.'<sup>20</sup> I agree that 'typically Israeli writer' he is not, but an Israeli writer he is. Appelfeld was always aware of the distinction between these two identities and, as Gershon Shaked noted, he 'writes for the Jews of Israel, reminding them that, perhaps against their wishes, they are not only new Hebrews but also old Jews.'<sup>21</sup>

18. As in B. Tammuz's trilogy *Elyakum* and in N. Shaham's *Series*.

19. A. B. Yehoshua, *Hakir ve-hahar* (Tel Aviv 1989) 56.

20. Gershon Shaked, *Sifrut 'az kan ve-'akshav* ('Literature Then, Here and Now') (Tel Aviv 1993) 143; also many critics mentioned in Schwartz, *Kinat hayahid ve-netzah hashever* 195.

21. Gershon Shaked, 'Appelfeld and his Times: Transformations of Ahashveros, the Eternal Wandering Jew' *Hebrew Studies* 36 (Madison 1995) 100.

22. See Schwartz, *Kinat hayahid ve-netzah hashevet* 111.

23. Shaked, 'Haberihamehahatsiut', is unfairly critical of this post-assimilatory attitude, claiming that Appelfeld's escape from Israeliness to his European past brings him closer to radical Diaspora assimilated Jews than to those who claim to have an Israeli identity.

24. For further discussion on the subject see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge 1991) 1–9.

25. Yehoshua, *Hakir ve-hahar* 56.

Again and again Appelfeld focuses on one problem: the identity crisis of the modern Jew.<sup>22</sup> In *Sipur hayim* he testifies to his search for authentic Judaism, showing sympathy towards traditional Judaism which he terms 'post-assimilatory'.<sup>23</sup> Unlike in his earlier days, Appelfeld no longer stands apart from the concerns of the mainstream. Zionist ideology and Israeli identity are in a state of disorientation not least because this is typical of modernity and results from the openness and pluralization of social life, as well as from an increase of choices.<sup>24</sup> Amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities, one of the attractive choices for Israelis seems to be the reconciliation between early Zionism and Judaism.<sup>25</sup> Secular Israelis today may reopen their old 'Jewish Bookcase' and draw from it new meanings. 'Jewish' and 'Israeli' no longer seem antithetical, and this ongoing reconciliation will no doubt lead to new options. Appelfeld reached that conclusion long ago, for in his life writing the need to preserve memory, and to link the past with the present, guided him in shaping his own identity.