

# Making Choices in a Postwar World: The Portrayal of Holocaust Survivors in the Fiction of Aharon Appelfeld

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Towards the end of an interview with Aharon Appelfeld, Philip Roth asked Appelfeld, 'From what you observed as a homeless youngster wandering in Europe after the war, and from what you've learned during four decades in Israel, do you discern distinguishing patterns in the experience of those whose lives were saved?'<sup>1</sup> Appelfeld responded, in part: 'The survivors have undergone experiences that no one else has undergone, and others expect some message from them, some key to understanding the human world – a human example. But they, of course, cannot begin to fulfill the great tasks imposed upon them, so theirs are clandestine lives of flight and hiding.'<sup>2</sup>

Of all the fictional Holocaust survivors created by Appelfeld, the two most highly developed characters are Bartfuss in *Bartfuss the Immortal* (which had recently been published in English at the time of the interview) and Erwin Siegelbaum in *The Iron Tracks*.<sup>3</sup> On one level both fictional characters are the products of Appelfeld's own experiences as a survivor. As Appelfeld has noted, 'One does not need to be a great psychologist to understand that [in my fiction] I deal with the inner parts of my soul... Even when I present other characters, in the final analysis it is I.'<sup>4</sup> There are, however, a number of biographical discrepancies between Appelfeld and these two characters. They were adolescents during the war, while Appelfeld was a child and spent most of his adolescence in Israel. Siegelbaum's parents were murdered during the war, and although they are not mentioned, we can assume that the same was true of Bartfuss's parents. While Appelfeld's mother was murdered in the Czernowitz

1. The interview originally appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* 28 Feb. 1988; repr. as 'A Conversation with Philip Roth,' in Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth* (New York 1994), 59–80; this ref. 79.

2. *Ibid.* 79–80.

3. Aharon Appelfeld, *Bartfuss ben almavet*, published with *Haqetonet vehapassim* in Aharon Appelfeld, *Haqetonet vehapassim* (Tel Aviv 1983). All quotations are from Aharon Appelfeld, *The Immortal Bartfuss*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York 1988). Aharon Appelfeld, *Mesillat barzel* (Jerusalem 1991). All quotations are

from Aharon Appelfeld, *The Iron Tracks*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York 1998).

4. Aharon Appelfeld, interview by Shulamit Gingold-Gilboa, *Yediot Aharanot*, 13 January 1984, cited in Yigal Schwartz, 'Hatamah basipporet shel Aharon Appelfeld', *Mehqerei yerushalayim besifrut ivrit* 9 (1986) 201.

5. This approach draws in part on the application of possible worlds theory to literary analysis in Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge 1994).

ghetto, he was reunited with his father in Israel after the war. Bartfuss and Siegelbaum engage in forms of illegal and legal trade, while Appelfeld's livelihood has been based on teaching and writing. Neither fictional character is part of a loving family unit: Bartfuss has a troubled relationship with his wife and daughters; Siegelbaum has no family. In contrast, Appelfeld's relationships with his wife, adult sons and daughter and his granddaughter are known to all who are friendly with him as loving and fulfilling. These discrepancies lead to the assumption that in part these characters are based not only on his own life, but also on his observation of other Holocaust survivors whose war experiences and life choices after the war differed from his.

At the heart of the fictional world is the *fabula*, the chronological sequence of events, which is largely driven by the choices that characters make out of the possibilities presented to them in the circumstances in which they find themselves.<sup>5</sup> The notion of the *fabula* as a product of choices made by characters is central to both of these novels. Indeed, throughout Appelfeld repeatedly calls attention to the alternatives available to each survivor and the consequences of the choices he makes among those alternatives. In so doing Appelfeld conveys a central aspect of the Holocaust survivor experience: the necessity of making choices in the postwar world and dealing with the ways those choices shape one's quality of life. As Appelfeld notes in the interview conducted by Roth, at times survivors are driven by a need to act in an unusually exemplary manner and at other times they are driven by a desperate attempt to hide from the necessity to make any choices in life.

The paradigmatic biography of the Holocaust survivor is divided into three stages: first a pre-war life, secondly experiences during the war and thirdly a postwar life. While of the two novels only *Iron Tracks* conveys the pre-war life of the central survivor character, both novels convey the war experiences and postwar lives of the survivors. In the first postwar stage of each novel, in an effort to cope with the traumatic effects of the war each protagonist gradually transforms the experience of a life with a variety of possibilities after the war into a routine pattern of behavior which constitutes a life with limited possibilities. In the second postwar stage of each novel, each character chooses to break out of his routine pattern of behaviour with the purpose of creating a more meaningful life.

## The Survivors' War Experiences

The war experiences of Bartfuss and Siegelbaum are presented as memories and reflections about the past experienced by the protagonists during the postwar period. The content of each character's memories and reflections about the Holocaust are characterized by Appelfeld's tendency in his fiction to be sparing of graphic detail. One of the more detailed memories that Bartfuss experiences is his transport in a crowded railway car to a concentration camp: 'Starved, crushed into freight cars, the people had learned to ignore each other, to steal and push like beasts with the little strength remaining to them. One after another, feelings were numbed' (p. 48). In contrast to the animal-like response of their fellow victims, Bartfuss and a woman he meets in the railway car, Theresa, engage in a discussion of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. For the most part, however, Bartfuss's consciousness of the Holocaust is evoked by the way others characterize him, much to his chagrin, as a legendary figure – 'the immortal Bartfuss' – who cheated death and survived in a truly miraculous manner. 'There are fifty bullets in his body', people would say in awe. 'How can a man live with fifty bullets in his body?' (p. 62). Bartfuss's thoughts about the Holocaust are also dominated by his obsession with what he imagines to have been the way that his wife Rosa survived the war, granting sexual favors to the Gentile peasants who hid her from the Nazis. He condemns the way that he believes she survived. 'Life isn't everything', he declares to her. 'There's a limit to humiliation' (p. 11).

Siegelbaum's Holocaust memories focus on his experiences with his father and mother in the concentration camp run by a Nazi officer named Nachtigel, who eventually murdered both Siegelbaum's parents: 'It was a small, brutal labor camp', he relates, 'where people died from cold and hard work... The Germans and Ukrainians beat people without making distinctions. Nachtigel executed people daily... I worked, loading coal like a trained laborer... One morning Nachtigel shot [father] because he came late to the lineup... One night [mother], too, was shot, near the fence' (p. 144).

Each character's thoughts about the Holocaust are connected to an underlying drive that pushes each of them to break out of the routine life he had devised for himself after the war. Bartfuss's memory of discussing Dostoevsky's great novel of the psychological, moral and

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theological dimensions of human existence, the references by other to Bartfuss's heroism and his obsession with what he considers to be the compromised way his wife survived, all contribute to his eventual conviction that he must play the role of moral hero in the world. Siegelbaum's focus on the cruelty of Nachtigel and the fact that Nachtigel murdered his parents eventually fuels his drive to avenge their death by assassinating the Nazi officer.

## The Postwar Transition that leads to Routine

As was generally true for Holocaust survivors, for both Bartfuss (whose story is told by a third-person narrator) and Siegelbaum (whose story is told in first person), liberation at the end of the war opens up a much wider range of possibilities than they had experienced since the beginning of the war. Of particular significance, however, is the process in which each character makes choices that eventually lead to him to a self-imposed, circumscribed, routine life in which his choices are once again limited. Bartfuss's first major choice after the war is to throw himself into an intoxicating life of smuggling in Italy, to which he had traveled at the conclusion of the war. He is particularly drawn to the opportunity he has as a smuggler to be involved in the illegal immigration of Jews to Palestine in defiance of the British Mandate quotas, because it allows him to live the kind of adventurous life he had experienced as he tried to survive during the war: 'He lived for the strong taste of action on others' behalf, like in the forest [during the war]' (p. 20).

It is the relationship he begins with Rosa, whom he meets on the shores of Italy, that leads Bartfuss to the more circumscribed life that he comes to live. At first he has a sexual liaison with Rosa that appears to him to be no different from the casual sexual relations he had begun to have with other women he met after the liberation. As the narrator captures Bartfuss's memories of the early stages of his relationship with Rosa, hints of what attracts him to Rosa emerge as she evokes an unconscious response that causes him to remain loyal to her, even while he generally feels 'that all the things that were happening to him weren't things that he wanted to have happen' (p. 22). The fact that Rosa stays quietly in one place, refraining from making demands of Bartfuss, encourages him to stay attached to her. 'He knew that he would always find her by the sea... Rosa didn't ask "Who are you and what do you do?"... Rosa wasn't a bother' (pp.

16–17). Bartfuss remains loyal to Rosa through the births of their two daughters, despite the fact that fatherhood is one of the last things on his mind following his liberation. Eventually Bartfuss does run away from Rosa. When some of the members of his smuggling ring are arrested, he escapes by ship to Palestine, only to discover that Rosa and the children have followed him on the sea voyage.

Although Bartfuss had been ready to leave Rosa and their daughters behind in Italy, he chooses to remain with them after they all arrive in Israel and settle in Jaffa. This choice is quite puzzling since once they are in Israel, Rosa becomes distrustful of Bartfuss and she keeps their daughters distant from him. The narrator suggests that Bartfuss does not flee his family perhaps because he cannot tolerate the thought that Rosa would tell their daughters that he was guilty of abandoning them, or perhaps because ‘he also harbored a secret hope that the girls might return to him’ (p. 12). As times goes on, Bartfuss becomes increasingly emotionally distant from Rosa and their daughters, and he preserves a treasure which he carefully hides from them. His life in general becomes ‘introverted and friendless’ (p. 30) and he settles into a highly regular daily routine.

Some of Siegelbaum’s postwar experiences resemble those of Bartfuss but a number of the choices he makes are very different. Like Bartfuss, Siegelbaum becomes caught up in the excitement of smuggling. While for Bartfuss smuggling represents a return to the adventures of surviving the war, for Siegelbaum it represents an attempt to forget his past suffering and also to liberate himself from the limitations of the war: ‘We forgot ourselves in all that activity’, he relates. ‘What we didn’t do during the years of the war, we did now: we moved rapidly’ (pp.5-24).

Unlike Bartfuss who stays with Rosa, Siegelbaum eventually leaves his first lover, Bella. After liberation Siegelbaum and Bella settle in the village of Prachtov. When Bella then falls into a prolonged deep sleep, Siegelbaum is tempted to abandon her, but as he informs us, ‘something within me, perhaps fear, wouldn’t let me, and I stayed with her’ (p. 19). When she finally awakens, Siegelbaum tries to learn more about her, but she tells him little. After he runs out of money, he decides, like Bartfuss, to join the smugglers, but Bella refuses to go with him and insists on staying in Prachtov. Over time Siegelbaum becomes increasingly afraid of Bella’s reluctance to speak, as if

‘madness was trapped within her’ (p. 25), and so he leaves her for good. Although Bartfuss and Siegelbaum make opposite choices in relationship to their first lovers after the war, each regrets his decision: Bartfuss because of the limited and alienated life he comes to lead in his marriage with Rosa, and Siegelbaum because he eventually realizes, as he puts it, ‘that no woman has ever known my soul as [Bella] has’ (pp.2-21).

After three years of smuggling, Siegelbaum recounts, he suddenly runs out of energy and decides to join a group of Communists, headed by a man named Rollman. This serves to reconnect Siegelbaum with his dead parents, who had been Communists before the war. His connection with this group is disrupted, however, by the assassination of Rollman by an anti-Communist survivor. It is this murder, from which he flees by train, that leads Siegelbaum to seek refuge in the routine of an annual circular train journey.

### **Routine Existence**

At the beginning of *The Immortal Bartfuss* the reader learns of the routine existence into which Bartfuss has settled in Israel. His day is highly structured: he rises at 4:45 a.m., drinks a cup of coffee, and smokes a cigarette. At 6:00 he smokes his second cigarette. At 7:00 he leaves his house and walks near the ocean, and from about 8:00 to 10:00 he sits in a café and drinks his second cup of coffee. He then wanders along the sea shore and smokes some more until he goes to a restaurant to have lunch, sometimes staying there until 3:00. After lunch he goes to a place where he engages in trading. While his choice of activities through the morning and lunch are apparently designed to help him control his inner anger and anxiety, he becomes tense as he goes to his business dealings, for which he has only contempt. He returns home (sometimes after a bus ride to the north) late at night when the rest of the household is asleep. As the narrator summarizes, ‘That’s how it’s been for years, day after day, at an ever-faster pace, but without any great changes’ (p. 8).

Siegelbaum’s routine consists of a circular train route that he undertakes every year from spring to winter. On this journey he devotes himself to two main activities: buying and selling antique Judaica ritual objects, books and manuscripts, and searching for Nachtigel, the Nazi murderer of his parents. The train journeys serve

additional purposes. For one, they provide him with a welcome alternative to the settled married life that Bartfuss had chosen, in which he fears he would end up as '[a]n insect, a mindless clerk, or, at best, a shopkeeper, a kind of human snail, getting up early, working eight or nine hours, and in the evening, with the remains of his strength, locking up and going home to what? A disgruntled wife, an overgrown, ungrateful son, a stack of bills' (p. 5). Also, having been traumatized by the forward thrust of history, Siegelbaum is comforted by the circular nature of his annual train journey: 'And in this repetition lies a strange hopefulness', he declares. 'As if our end were not extinction but a sort of constant renewal' (p. 5). The steady movement of the trains has a calming effect that relieves him of much anxiety: 'True, a drink and a few cigarettes can banish fear from my heart for a short while,' he states, 'but only the train, it alone, can tranquilize me completely' (p. 31).

Siegelbaum also derives some measure of reassurance and comfort from people he meets in the course of his journeys and from physical pleasures that become available to him, either on the trains or in towns at which he stops. Such experiences neutralize the emotionally debilitating effect of his pain. 'My nightmares...', he relates, 'are neither fleeting nor few... and only certain places and particular foods have the power to quiet them' (p. 47). Siegelbaum tries to influence the train conductor to play classical music over the loudspeaker, and he is drawn to places with a friendly driver who picks him up at the train every year, a bathtub that perfectly fits his body, an innkeeper who tells him about his life or who seems to understand Siegelbaum, a Communist who reconnects him to the political passions of his dead parents, and buffets and inns with food that appeals to him. Yet, the very fact that he typically spends short periods of time at each stop allows him to maintain a safe emotional distance from any prolonged attachment to people or places. His intimate relations with women, sometimes on the train and sometimes in the hotels and inns where he stays, are also kept to a bare minimum of duration. As he puts it, 'Fleeting loves are beneficial and never painful. Love for a station or two is love without pretense and soon forgotten. Any contact beyond that pollutes the emotions and threatens to leave behind recriminations' (p. 9). The train journeys, however, cannot heal the painful memories of all that he experienced in the war. 'My memory is my downfall', he declares. 'Nothing can deplete it. My memory is a powerful machine that stores and constantly discharges

lost years and faces. In the past I believed that travel would blunt my memory; I was wrong' (p. 9).

Siegelbaum always begins his journey on 27 March in Wirblbahn, the date and place of his liberation from the Nazis; in the course of his journey he always heads north and then eventually turns back towards the south. It is as if he is enacting the reality that he has made no progress towards establishing a life after the war and so must retrace his steps over and over again. Many of the people with whom he interacts represent a variety of aspects of Jewish identity which are of central importance to Siegelbaum. Gizi the innkeeper – who had converted to Christianity to please his wife but now that they are separated no longer practises Christianity – amazes Siegelbaum for he has been able to transform his appearance into that of 'an Austrian in every respect' (39). Mrs Groton, a Gentile innkeeper, is even warmer towards him after he tells her he is Jewish, and she reveals to him her hatred of the Austrians. Mrs Braun, whose father had been Jewish, and Mr Druschik, the Gentile owner of a buffet, both try to help him to track down Nachtigel. Max Rauch, a Jew, delights in purchasing from Siegelbaum Hebrew and Yiddish books he has collected. Stark is the Jewish Communist who reconnects him with the world of his Communist parents. 'I sink into [Stark's company]', he declares, 'as if into a drugged slumber' (p. 41). Siegelbaum shares the rare Jewish books and manuscripts he finds in his travels with Rabbi Zimmel, with whom he also studies Judaism.

Certain places and certain people, however, bring back the pain of the past to him. At one stop, he recalls, he stays one day longer than usual. 'That was a mistake,' he informs the reader, 'though not one I will ever repeat. For hours memory flooded into my head, as if seeking to drown me. My distant childhood, lost sights, appeared before me like a melting sea of ice' (p. 36). Siegelbaum discovers at some locations a degree of postwar residual anti-Semitism which greatly disturbs him. In connection with one village he states, 'I could stay on, but the people here are rude. Since they discovered that I'm a Jew, they treat me with obvious coolness' (p. 47).

### **Breaking out of the Routine**

The event that shakes Bartfuss out of his routine is a sudden illness that causes him to be rushed to hospital. His hospitalization draws Rosa



and the daughters to interact with him more directly than they had in years, although Bartfuss suspects they are doing so only because they are afraid he will die before he reveals to them the location of the hidden treasure. The illness opens up the floodgates of memory that he had successfully maintained: 'He had invested a lot of energy into blocking up the openings through which thoughts could push out. In recent years he had managed to seal them off almost completely. Now he felt he didn't have the power to stop them anymore' (p. 36). Although once he returns home he finds Rosa as suspicious of him as ever, surviving the attack provides Bartfuss with a kind of death and rebirth experience that induces a rush of vitality and an impulse for self-assertion that he had not experienced since his days as a smuggler in Italy: 'The modicum of his egotism, which he had never dared to release,' states the narrator, 'throbbed in him like fanfares of victory' (p. 37).

Throughout this new period in his life, Bartfuss believes he has discovered the most meaningful way possible to live as a Holocaust survivor. To one fellow survivor he declares, 'I should have been more generous. People who went through the Holocaust should be generous' (p. 73). Right after that conversation Bartfuss recovers the drive to perform great deeds which had once gripped him in Italy: 'Now he would devote himself to the general welfare... He would no longer think of himself, his agony, but would work for the general good' (p. 75). To his friend Sylvia's ex-husband he declares: 'I expect greatness of soul from people who underwent the Holocaust' (p. 107).

It is only now that Bartfuss is oriented towards interacting with individuals and sharing his humanity with them. From this point until the end of the novel, Bartfuss experiences a series of encounters with other Holocaust survivors and with his daughter Bridget, in which he tries out his new-found interest in the world and develops the beginning of a sense of purpose. This is clearly a new Bartfuss, and yet in part because of the nature of the people with whom he seeks to interact and in part due to his own personal limitations, each encounter with the world proves to be disappointing, and he never achieves the 'greatness of soul' for which he had come to believe all Holocaust survivors should strive. He tries to breathe new life into the work of a Holocaust memorial, but it eventually closes down. Dorf, with whom he had survived the war, quotes clichés about

Zionist productivity to him with the clear implication that Bartfuss's involvement in business is not making a constructive contribution to Israel. When he comes across Theresa, the woman with whom he had discussed Dostoevsky on the way to the concentration camp, she refuses to acknowledge their past connection. 'You've come to the wrong woman', she informs him. 'Memories don't interest me. I live in the present, the present tense' (p. 57) When an old dealer asks him for a loan, Bartfuss is eager to respond, but in the course of the conversation the dealer withdraws his request because of the emotional implications of taking a loan. In talking with Schmugler, the aptly named fellow smuggler from Bartfuss's days in Italy, Bartfuss 'conjure[s] up some forbidden feelings' (p. 85) and causes Schmugler to become distant and unresponsive, to which Bartfuss reacts by hitting him, although later they do meet and are reconciled. His most positive interaction is with Sylvia, a fellow survivor who, the narrator relates, 'made Bartfuss feel she had words to draw him out of the mire into which he had sunk' (p. 97), but unfortunately she dies. He has two awkward and inconclusive encounters with his retarded daughter Bridget, the second with erotic overtones. His final interaction is with a survivor named Marian, whom he seeks to instruct in how not to be taken advantage of, and when she seems not to understand him, he hits her.

Unlike the sudden illness of Bartfuss which propels him on a renewed interaction with the world, the causes of Siegelbaum's decision to break the routine of the train journeys develop gradually. As he describes the places he visits on his route, it becomes clear that the stability of this routine has begun to break down in recent years, thereby weakening its hold on him and potentially freeing him to make new decisions. 'Until five years ago', he relates, 'I kept up this relentless pace, but since my ulcer was discovered, movement has become difficult for me. After a day of travel I need rest' (p. 24). Furthermore, many changes had occurred on his route the year before or occur during the year of this final journey. The circle round Stark had begun to disintegrate, and Siegelbaum senses during the year of the final journey that it would be the last time he saw this Communist activist. A year before, Mrs Groton, a Christian whose maternal grandmother was a Jewish convert to Christianity, had given him a mezuzah, and he fears that this year she has died; his lover Bertha had announced that she would return to her hometown; and when he had told one of his hosts, Gretchen, that he was Jewish,

he had sensed her aversion and realized she would not want him to return. Perhaps most devastating of all for Siegelbaum is the death of Rabbi Zimmel during the year of the final journey.

The immediate impulse to break the routine of his annual train journey and perform the dramatic deed of assassinating Nachtigel comes to Siegelbaum when Drutschik tells him that he knows exactly where Nachtigel's new house is located in the town of Weinberg and draws him a map of the route from the Weinberg train station to the house. 'When he handed me the paper', relates Siegelbaum, 'my hands trembled. I knew that the delay was coming to an end. The time of testing was approaching' (p. 102). Yet Siegelbaum does not travel directly to Weinberg. Reluctant to depart from the comfort of his routine, he continues on his regular journey, stopping to see a number of acquaintances, including Rabbi Zimmel, whose blessing he seeks. Siegelbaum develops a growing realization that it has been his destiny ever since the end of the war to assassinate Nachtigel. '[I]t seemed to me that I hadn't gotten here under my own power', he declares, 'but that a kind of nightmare had propelled me' (p. 159). He eventually makes his way to Weinberg and waits outside Nachtigel's house for the Nazi officer to return home.

It is not easy for Siegelbaum to assassinate Nachtigel. At first, upon seeing the Nazi officer, Siegelbaum engages him in conversation, pretending to be one of the locals. Siegelbaum offers Nachtigel praise for his war-time exploits, only to discover that Nachtigel is now an old, emotionally broken man: 'He was completely crushed by his misery, and it was clear that no compliment could rouse him from his depression' (p. 177). Siegelbaum cannot bring himself to shoot this pathetic old man until Nachtigel raises his hand to wave good-bye to him. '[T]hat gesture, more than anything he had said,' declares Siegelbaum, 'reminded me of Nachtigel's comradeship with his young subordinates in the camp, and the warm paternal care he used to shower on them. He treated them like a father, and within a short time he made them as cruel as he was' (p. 179). Nachtigel's dedication during the war to the de-humanization of self and of others is, in the final analysis, too much for Siegelbaum to countenance, and so, as Nachtigel turns away, Siegelbaum shoots him twice in the back, a particularly humiliating form of execution.

6. Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair* 80.

## Conclusion

The unresolved endings of these novels express Appelfeld's view of the immense difficulty facing the Holocaust survivor as she or he seeks to establish a satisfying relationship with the world. The escape from the heady days of adventurous activity immediately following the war into a self-numbing routine existence is a fully understandable response by people whose world had been turned upside down in the Holocaust. But clearly the routine adopted by each character is only a temporary escape that cannot fully deal with his internal anguish. As Appelfeld put it in his interview with Roth, 'The wound is too deep, and bandages won't help'.<sup>6</sup> Appelfeld makes clear, however, that survivors have a drive beneath the surface of their regular lives to re-engage with the world through acts that would grant meaning to their existence. The drive that impels Bartfuss is to serve as a moral model who will work to keep the world from descending again into the barbarity of the Holocaust. The drive that impels Siegelbaum is to bring justice to the world by punishing the perpetrators of genocide who escaped accountability after the war. It does appear that Appelfeld considers both of these drives to be highly problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it is beyond the capacity of any one survivor or even a group of survivors fully to restore morality to Western civilization in the aftermath of the Second World War. Neither resolving to be good-hearted nor executing an escaped Nazi will really accomplish this. Secondly, the key to each survivor's happiness is not the morally heroic act but the acquisition of exactly the ability that Bartfuss and Siegelbaum were not able to acquire: to interact with others intimately, openly and spontaneously.