A Mother and Son on a Journey to Annihilation

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In an interview with Stewart Kellerman, Aharon Appelfeld revealed that even though his mother was murdered more than 70 years before he penned *To the Land of the Cattails*, she "still casts a spell over his novels",[1] particularly this one. He reflected that the text is at once "a love story between a mother and a son" and about the chal-lenges assimilated European Jews faced in coming to grips with their Jewishness: "They have a depth because of their soul-searching. My book is also a kind of soul-searching for one's Jewishness, a kind of going home."[2] In another conversation about the novel, he noted that "People who lose their parents when they are young are permanently in love with them."[3]

To the Land of the Cattails[4] is another fable in Appelfeld's fictional universe that places helpless protagonists as they are gradually enclosed by an escalating antisemitic climate and encircled by enemies from which they cannot escape. And though the Jews of this dark fairytale gradually learn and recognise the hateful sentiment building around them, they are incapable of grasping the larger meaning and actuality of the "Final Solution". As such, they continue about their everyday lives, never comprehending the unspeakable horrors that await them.

Toni Strauss is a beautiful 34-year-old Jewish woman living in

[1] Stewart Kellerman. "Like Looking at the Naked Sun." *The New York Times*, November 2, 1986, B34.
[2] Ibid., B34.
[3] Mitgang Herbert. "Writing Holocaust Memories" *The New York Times*, 15 November 1986, 1.
[4] Aharon Appelfeld. *To the Land of the Cattails*. Harper& Row, Publishers: New York, 1986.

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Vienna. It is the summer of 1938, on the eve of the outbreak of the World War II. She was once married to August, a non-Jewish engineer who physically abused her after they moved to the city of Schoenburg. After the birth of her son, Rudi, she leaves August, and what follows are many lovers and hired nannies who look after the child who deeply misses his mother's care.

As the book opens, the winsome divorcee, ridden by remorse, guilt and anger, is seized by an ungovernable impulse to return home to her cherished town of Dratscincz, near the Prut River: "At the year's end she announced: 'We must go.' 'Where?' 'Home. The time has come to return home'."[5] And though it is never stated, Toni is most likely driven to flee Vienna because of the March 1938 Anschluss, the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany. The terms Nazis, Germans, and SS never materialise on the page, absences that are literary hallmarks of the Appelfeld oeuvre.

The recurring theme of assimilation is much to the fore in this novel. Here is a passage, undergirded by searing pathos and lament, that vividly demonstrates the price Toni had paid for marrying outside the fold and August's antisemitism, manifested as brute violence:

> That gloomy episode had lasted three years, and its traces still had not been erased. Because of him she had left her homeland, her father, her mother, her sisters, and like a fool had followed him to a foreign country. She had sought freedom and found a prison. All the way to Austria he had behaved like a gentleman. But when they came to the city, he removed the mask from his face: a gentile through and through. The handsome young engineer, the polite music lover, beat her roundly even while she was pregnant. Her pleas fell on deaf ears. She recited her pain to Rudi morning and night, in great detail, at the dinner table and at his bedside. Those descriptions imbued him with disgust for his father and pity for his mother. Afterward there was no lack of event and scandal in the mother's young life. Though she did not remarry, every year a new love bloomed, a new madness. He learned to observe her with tolerance. As if she were not his

[5] Ibid., 5.

> mother, but rather some capricious creature that had to be watched patiently. "Why are you looking at me?" She was sometimes alarmed by his stare, his narrowed eyes.[6]

Though nervous of rejection, "But I'm afraid." "What are you afraid of?" "My parents. They won't forgive me. You must stand by me." "Of course I'll stand by you",[7] she wants her pious parents, from whom she is estranged after eloping at the age of seventeen, to meet her half-gentile sixteen-year-old son and for him to discover parts of his heritage. She also wants to seek her parents' forgiveness for forsaking Judaism and running away with August. As an assimilated Jew, she is acutely aware of the increasing persecution of the Jewish community in Austria and is therefore seeking sanctuary in the region where she grew up. This is not simply a voyage. It foregrounds the perennial topos of the Appelfeld canvas – the attempted homecoming, back to the faith of one's people.

The dean of Hebrew scholars, the late Gerson Shaked, discerned a thematic vector that suffuses the Appelfeld canvas, noting that a substantive number of the author's assimilated protagonists pursue "… redemption in the Jewish faith (the redemptive space is to be found in the Carpathian mountains) … they clamour for a 'return' that can be seen a kind of a belated acknowledgment of the identity that tried to deny."[8]

Yigal Schwartz catalogues *To the Land of the Cattails* as belonging to Appelfeld's third phase, which he terms: "The period of the late religious return" which began in the late 1980s.[9] That literary node, Schwartz explains, encompassed a religious motion by the Appelfeld protagonists back to their home, to a harbour of innocence. Yet, they return to a "home" that no longer exists, and to a moribund culture with a museum-like corporeality. In fact, that imagined safe mooring, which the heroes yearn to reach, endures only in their delusional

[6] Ibid., 4.
[7] Ibid., 9-10.
[8] Gershon Shaked. *Hasiporet Ha'ivrit*: *1880-1980 Volume 5*. Tel Aviv: Hakibuytz Hameuchad and Keter Publishing House, 1988, 242.
[9] Yigal Schwartz. *Ma-amin Bli Knesiyah: Arba Masot al Aharon Appelfeld*. 2009. Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2009, 105.

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minds.[10] This analysis chimes with a lecture Appelfed delivered at a 1994 conference devoted to his canon. He concluded his presentation with the following remarks: "This is how I set out on my wanderings. You can locate the traces of my searchings and explorations in the books that I have written, and I am still standing at the entrance of passages and tunnels. The return home is not short nor simple."[11] Doubtless, as Feldman cogently argues, Appelfeld's trek to his "… pre Holocaust *assimilated* childhood is not a nostalgic, approving return; it is a critical look back, full of apprehension and disapproval. This posture is possible (and makes sense) only from within the Jewish tradition."[12]

And so begins the surreal and fatal journey eastwards, first by train and then a carriage, to a distant province, away from cities and civilisation, head-on into the belly of a growing cauldron of antisemitism. On horseback, mother and son are on their way to Bukovina, to Toni's birthplace and, literally and figuratively, to the land of the cattails. A coming of age for the young man, it is an odyssey into their soul as this dyad traverses the bleak countryside, reclaiming and reconstructing their Jewish identity. Here is how Appelfeld paints the rustic region, an idyllic portrayal laced with pastoral pleasantness: "… where there are plains and woods and cattails, windmills and sawmills, and on its great river, the Prut, barges sail to the great sea. In that vast region there is a little village full of light, and its name is Dratscincz …"[13] The autobiographical and the imaginary meld and are woven throughout the text – the name of Toni's village is the real hometown of the author's maternal grandparents.

Those au courant with the Jewish scriptures will recognise the Biblical allusions enclosed within the Hebrew title of the novel *El Eretz Ha-gome*. The word *Gome* translates as "Reed", which appears in the Exodus story of Moses. As an infant, Moses is placed by his mother,

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[10] Ibid., 113.

[11] Aharon Appelfeld. "Fifty years after the Great War" in the Culture, Literature and Art supplement of *Yediot Ahronot* (April 20, 1995): 28-9. Quoted in Chaya Shaham. *Bedek Bayit.* Israel: Machon BenGurion, 2012: 73.

[12] Yael Feldman. "Whose story is it, anyway? Ideology and Psychology in the Representation of the Shoah in Israeli Literature", in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation*; *Nazsim and the "Final Solution",* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 230-231.

[13] Appelfeld. *To the Land of the Cattails*, 21.

Yocheved, in a basket made of reeds and is set afloat in the Nile River, after the Pharoah rules that all firstborn male Hebrews are to be killed. The child is spared death by the ark and is then found by the Pharoah's daughter, who rescues him. Here, in the chaotic and apocalyptic universe of the Holocaust, the pilgrimage to the Land of Reeds or Cattails proffers no rescue or protection to the mother and son. The author has affirmed such an interpretation, noting that, "'The land of the cattails' means, in old traditions, 'the land of the paradise'.'I'm going to take you to the paradise'. But then you have the irony."[14]

Note that Appelfeld foregrounds the child's gaze in the narrative, addressing the dearth of such viewpoints in other Holocaust tales. Here is a literary nod to readers that the young were also victims and that their accounts were important wells to draw from. To be sure, the author has repeatedly guyed his fiction through the child-survivor perspective and lens, opening an essential window to their psyches and memories that have often been neglected.

Raised as a non-Jew, the attractive and popular student, who is at first oblivious to the simmering enmity of the present, is reminded of his vulnerability during a high school dance, "One evening, while the ball was at its height, a boy turned on him and hit him in the face. Rudi moved to respond, but the other, in his rage, brought the shame out into the open: Jew! Rudi looked around. He sought help not against the attacker, but against his calumny. Strangely, no one came to his assistance."[15] Rudi is often confused about the antisemitism that he witnesses, posing the question that has often been found in the Appelfeld diegesis, and one that becomes increasingly palpable as mother and son near Toni's homeland. Here is Rudi's bewilderment at the causes of the ancient prejudice, transmitted through his observation of guests at an inn: "At first he had not liked them. They seemed clumsy to him, ill-mannered and corrupt. But in the course of time, he found that while they were not particularly pleasant, they were not unbearable. They had a sense of humor, were frivolous and extravagant. Even their complaints were just a form of humor. If that

[14] Philip Walzer. "Focusing on Jewish Life– at the fringes of war: Aharon Appelfeld writes vividly of the European experience without directly telling of the death camps." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. December 26, 1986, C1.

[15] Appelfeld. *To the Land of the Cattails*, 37.

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is how Jews are, why do people hate them so much?"[16]

Trudging through mountains and ghostlike vistas, Toni and Rudi encounter salesmen and peasants, and stop at a cavalcade of taverns managed by other Jews that function as sanctuaries within a closing circle of Christian animus. In essence, it is a forgotten landscape dotted with fragile enclaves that elicit a mystifying sense of terror: "While the carriage sped on, a kind of dread descended upon Toni's shoulders. There was no apparent reason for it. She was not hungry, fearful, or angry – just a feeling of dread, plain and simple. She trembled. 'Stop the horses, darling,' she whispered. 'What's the matter, Mother?' 'I don't know. I feel dizzy.'"[17] Typical of Appelfeld, a foreshadowing of the inexorable genocide abounds in the text, depicted through the gallery of fugitives they run across whose fate is the harbinger of the dark chapter of history that is about to unfold: "On their way they met lame and blind people, peasants, stripped of their land by nobles, drunks, and vagabonds, and, here and there, like a shadow, a fearful Jewish peddler."[18] As they are about to reach their destination, the menacing threat of violence from the hostile local population becomes more evident, as Toni admits to Rudi, "They are many, and we are few," Toni tried to make him understand. "Does that mean they can do whatever they want?" "Deep inside herself she knew he wouldn't understand. Perhaps it was good that he didn't understand. The suffering of the Jews was far from glorious. That night the word goy rose up from within her. She smiled as if hearing a distant memory. Her father would sometimes, though only occasionally, use that word to indicate hopeless obtuseness."[19] The expedition is specked with ominous fore-boding and teeming portents about the impending obliteration of the Jewish community, with Appelfeld tipping his metaphorical hand writ large. As with other allegories that Appelfeld has penned, the reader is profoundly aware of the tragic outcome, while the characters, bereft of historical perspicuity, are, tragically, on an unstoppable route to oblivion.

[16] Ibid., 60.
[17] Ibid.,103.
[18] Ibid., 86-7.
[19] Ibid., 101-2.

In the town of Ozrin, Toni tells her son of his lineage and identity: "You, too, my darling, are a Jew. True, your father was a Christian. But according to our faith you are a Jew. Because your mother is a Jewess. You understand." "Clearly," he adopted a neutral tone. "The Jews, you should know, are a noble race. None of them would beat his wife, remember that."[20] When the young man reassures his mother that they have nothing to fear and that his loyalties are with her since he is "a Jew like you"[21], she informs him of the perpetual fate of her people and his true origins, "True. You're right, but nevertheless Jews are persecuted. It has been their destiny from ancient days. You're fortunate, for you were born a Christian."[22] Repeatedly, Toni reminds her son of his Jewishness, as evidenced in this revelatory exchange. "I also have a strong wish for you to be Jewish." "I am a Jew, am I not?" "Certainly you are a Jew, but you need a few more things, not many, not difficult." "What?" "I wish you had a Jewish face." "How?" "A Jewish face is a long one. You are laughing." "No, I am listening." "I was an utter simpleton. I was attracted to the gentiles like a moth to the flame. An utter simpleton. It is hard for me to forgive myself. But you are a Jew in every fibre of your being. And here, in these regions, you will learn the secret easily."[23]

Again and again, she endeavours to convince those they come across that her son is Jewish and schools the teenager about the proper comportment of a Jew. However, Rudi's concealed and suppressed Christian heritage becomes visible during their wandering as his behaviour, from one roadside stop to the next, grows more crass, loud and loutish. He progressively drinks more, expresses antisemitic slogans he imbibed at school, and his demeanour turns more coarse, mimicking the boorish appearance of the non-Jews they chance upon. Nonetheless, as they arrive at their final inn, mother and son conciliate, and in the end, he chooses the path of Judaism and follows her to the death camps. It is small wonder that Feldman has labelled *To the Land of the Cattails* a text that focalises a family "… split between the allure of gentile culture and the almost mystical and the almost mystical attraction of the old tradition."[24]

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[20] Ibid., 60.
[21] Ibid.,83.
[22] Ibid.,83.
[23] Ibid., 23.
[24] Feldman. "Whose story is it, anyway? Ideology and Psychology in the Representation of the Shoah in Israeli Literature",231-2.

Three months into their wandering, Toni is afflicted with typhus, which forces the two to stay in a single place until she heals. The tremors of ruination are everywhere. In the spring, they stop at a Jewish inn on a mountain summit. People stand at the windows watching the pair enter into a whirlpool of shock, which we discover is connected to the cherished landlady, Rosemarie, who has been killed because she was Jewish. Elsewhere, Toni and Rudi come across a house from which Jews have been removed, the remaining few religious books the only sign of its former inhabitants, as well as a deserted synagogue that has been desecrated.

At the beginning, Toni envisaged the landscape of her childhood as a quilt woven of nature and tranquillity. The irony of that imagined space surfaces at the end as her arrival leads to deportation to the Nazi killing centres. At one point, we read, "She, in her nostalgia, had painted her native land in rosy shades: a mild climate, man and nature dwelling in harmony."[25] Yet, as they approach the hometown, she is pervaded by a gnawing realisation of the enveloping ring of doom, "Fear gripped her narrow shoulders – not of what her parents might say, and not what she might answer, but of the feeling of closeness, with nowhere else to turn, like a brick thrown from a roof, wavering for a moment but finally lying flat against the earth."[26]

David K. Danow argues that the motif of the diaspora and the ostensibly never-ending wandering of damaged souls is a repeated theme in the Appelfeld corpus in which the "reality of the daily struggle to survive in a hostile environment becomes the sole, single-minded drive within that reality. In curiously meek fashion, certain of Appelfeld's characters, although maimed, actually manage to take advantage of such meager opportunities as might present themselves, and survive. The sense of diaspora – of being torn from one's place – all the same remains profound."[27]

The futile quest home, in effect, becomes their terminus. As mother and son arrive at an inn near the home of the grandparents, Toni persuades Rudi to remain behind while she goes to see them, explaining that her unexpected appearance will frighten the elderly couple.

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[25] Ibid., 82.
[26] Ibid., 88.
[27] David K. Danow. "Epiphany and Apocalypse in Holocaust Writing: Aharon Appelfeld." *Religion & Literature*, Summer, 1997, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), 72.

When she fails to return after a few days, Rudi panics and begins to question the townspeople about his mother's whereabouts. Eventually, he becomes aware of the roundups and is joined at the deportation point by Arna, a Jewish girl who has lost contact with her mother after she was sent to fetch some water. A central aspect of that relationship is that Arna assumes the role of a surrogate mother. She cares for Rudi when he is sick and teaches him about the Jewish tradition and customs as they roam the landscape as he did with Toni. Not surprisingly, he gifts her his mother's necklace. At some point, the prospect of escape is inferred, but this odd couple – an obvious gentile with a manifestly looking Jewish girl who draws the ire of those who see them – ignores that possibility, fuelled by the yearning to find their loved ones.

Reaching the railroad station, Rudi and Arna wait for the train to take them to where their mothers have gone. The transportations have, of course, begun, though Rudi has no way of knowing that the Shoah has been set on its course. The cruel irony here is unmistakable: "The spiritual awakening (first of the mother, and, at the very end, also of her son, the scion of a gentile) is perforce entwined with physical annihilation. Toni brings her son back to her Jewish hometown, only to be swallowed by the maelstrom."[28]

The elliptical style of previous novels is knotted throughout the pages. The omniscient narrator reveals that the boy is too late: "The deportees had already been sent on. In the tavern they told him that during the day the Jews from the entire surrounding area had been gathered, and toward evening they had been moved to the railroad station. Several peasants, two policemen, and a woman who spoke a servant's German joined in the explanation."[29] There is an uneasy and tense incongruity between the knowledge that we possess about the inexpressible horrors that are about to be unleashed and the characters' naiveté.

Toni, we learn, has been placed on a train with the local Jews and dispatched to her death. The remaining flock are imbued with anxiety and fear about the unknown. Earlier, their brothers and sisters were shoved into a cattle car, and now, with a heightened twist, they have congregated on the platform, keen to rejoin their families that have

[28] Feldman. "Whose story is it, anyway? Ideology and Psychology in the Representation of the Shoah in Israeli Literature", 232.
[29] *Appelfeld. To the Land of the Cattails, 119.*

already been transported to their extermination. “No one rose to greet them. The people were sitting next to their bundles. A kind of gray chill left over from winter stood in the air. It turned out that two days before, the police had tried to crowd them all into a railroad car, but the car was full, and they were ejected. Since then, they had been here, separated from their loved ones, forgotten, waiting for a train to come and take them.”[30]

The book’s coda is reminiscent of *Badenheim 1939* as the crowd of Jewish innocents, including Rudi, gather at a railroad station, unaware of the sinister catastrophe that awaits them. *“*Where will we be brought together?” a woman asked a man who was leaning against the wall. “Not far,” answered the man in complete distraction. “If so, why aren’t they coming to pick us up?” “They’ll come,” said the man. “Don’t worry.” “We haven’t been forgotten? Are you sure?”[31]

In one scene, Rudi thanks an old man who brews coffee for those in the remote station, his words entombing the nightmarish and surreal duality of the situation, “The coffee had inspired optimism in him. Now he wanted to get up, to go over to the old man and express his thanks. His legs felt heavy, but he overcame it, rose, and went over. The old man was sitting in his place next to the hissing primus stove. “I wanted to thank you,” Rudi said. “Your coffee brought us all back to life again.”[32]

> The final images do not evoke the familiar symbology of the Shoah and are not dappled with packed boxcars and Nazi soldiers armed with whips, shoving men, women and children. There is no mention of Auschwitz. Rather, what emerges is an aged and creaky vehicle that bears no mark of the lethal violence it represents: “The man was about to answer when a long whistle was heard, a festive whistle, and they all stood up and shouted at once, “It came. At last it came!” … It was an old locomotive, drawing two old cars – the local, apparently. It went from station to station, scrupulously gathering up the remainder.”[33]

[30] Ibid., 139.
[31] Ibid., 148.
[32] Ibid., 147.
[33] Ibid., 148.