

# My Friend, Aharon Appelfeld

## Avraham Holtz

Having observed the way each participant in the conference on Aharon Appelfeld was greeted by him, I was certain that each could compose a story about how their friendship began and how it has developed over the course of the years.

Very early on, Aharon and I met regularly in various cafés in Jerusalem. At our meetings we began with conversations concerning current topics but soon, on a regular basis, devoted part of our get-togethers to the study of the works of the Hasidic master, Reb Nachman of Bratzlav (1772–1810), who is famous for teaching by means of storytelling. In the introduction to the written collection of his tales the editor notes that, upon realizing that all other forms of learning were futile, Reb Nachman is reported to have declared, 'Yetzt vell ich onfangen meises derzählen' And so now it is time to tell stories.

My friendship with Aharon began some time during the first months of 1969, soon after I arrived in Jerusalem for a year's sabbatical. The late Professor Uri Tal had taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in the early 1960s, at which time we became acquainted. In Jerusalem, I met Uri in the Judaica Reading Room at the Hebrew University National Library at Givat Ram. During a coffee break, we had an opportunity to chat in the basement cafeteria. In the course of the conversation Uri asked me, 'I'm a historian. What does it mean to teach literature?' I am not quite certain that I succeeded in convincing him that indeed there are intrinsic approaches to the study of literature.

However, subsequently, Uri asked me which contemporary Israeli writers I teach. The first name that came to mind was that of Aharon Appelfeld, to which Uri replied, 'Would you like to meet him?' 'Not

necessarily,' I was quick to respond, 'since sometimes familiarity with the author may prejudice the way in which one reads and interprets the author's works, both positively and negatively. I certainly would not call Aharon Appelfeld on the telephone and say "I teach your works, and I would like to meet you." Moreover, in the case of a deceased author, one does not have this opportunity at all. Why do you ask if I want to meet Appelfeld?' Uri replied, 'Both he and I have young children and small living quarters, so we both do our work in the same café, Café Peter. There is an unwritten agreement between us that neither of us disturbs the other while we're writing. However, during coffee breaks we sit together and share small talk, and we have become close friends who admire each other's work.'

At that time, Jules Harlow was also in Jerusalem on sabbatical, and Uri said he would arrange a mutually convenient time for all of us to meet at his home at Rehov Shmuel Klein. I do not remember the subjects of our conversation when we did meet one evening. When we went home Jules Harlow, who had a car, volunteered to drive me back to Neve Schechter, where I lived, near the Israel Museum, and to take Aharon home to Kiryat Moshe. As I got out of the car, Aharon turned to me and said, 'L'hitraot mahar ba'erev', which I took to mean, 'See you sometime in the future.' The following evening, while I was studying in my room at Neve Schechter, I received a telephone call from Aharon, inquiring why I had not yet arrived at his home at Rehov Ben Zion in Kiryat Moshe. Surprised by the call, I said, 'I wasn't invited to your home.' Aharon replied, 'If I recall correctly, I said "L'hitraot mahar ba'erev".' I agreed to come to his home that evening, as fast as I could. This was the first of many visits with Aharon and Yehudit and their children in Kiryat Moshe.

Eventually Aharon invited me to meet him at various times of the day. In the mornings we would meet at Café Tuv Taam. If we met in the late afternoon it was at Café Navah. Occasionally we went for walks in various neighbourhoods in Jerusalem. It became customary for us to introduce each other to our acquaintances whom we met along the way. One incident stands out in my mind. We were walking southwards on Rehov King George and abruptly Aharon left me and ran to greet someone. I stopped and waited. Aharon returned and we continued our walk and our conversation. In due course he commented as to why I had not inquired who the person was to whom he had spoken. I said, 'Had you wanted me to meet him, you

would have introduced us.' He replied, 'You're better off not making his acquaintance.' To this day, I still do not know who that person was but I am certain that Aharon had good reasons for not introducing us.

Several months later, Aharon invited me to join him and his family for Shabbat dinner on Friday night. Without hesitation I accepted. I came to his house and found the table set for a traditional Shabbat meal. After the meal Yehudit left us to put the children to bed. I heard her singing Yiddish lullabies. I whispered to Aharon that, with his permission, we should not talk so that I might listen to the *zemirot* (songs sung at the Sabbath table) in his house. In response to his surprise at the term that I used, I remarked that Yehudit's songs were as *zemirot* to my ears. When Yehudit joined us again Aharon mentioned my comments to her and added, 'I was amazed that, when I invited you to our home for dinner, you accepted immediately, without asking about the *kashrut* [observance of the rules of kosher food] of our home.' My response was, 'I assumed that, after these several months of getting to know each other, Aharon Appelfeld would not invite Avraham Holtz to his house to feed him *trayfus* [non-kosher food], especially on Friday night, *lehakhis* [for spite, on purpose].' Aharon responded, 'Finally, now, I understand what Conservative Judaism is all about.' I said, 'That generalization is far beyond what I intended.' At all odds, from that point on our friendship was cemented.

About two years later Aharon came to visit the United States for the first time. The Jewish Agency had arranged for him to give a series of lectures in various cities and universities. I understood that, were Aharon to begin his trip with a stay in a hotel, he would not have been able to complete his lecture tour, particularly since at that time the Jewish Agency warned all its lecturers that they must not venture outside the New York hotels alone lest harm befall them. At that time I was unmarried and living with my mother, who had heard about Aharon and his family from me. She was most pleased to welcome him to our home in Queens. They communicated in Yiddish and she related to him as if he were a magical survivor, one of her five nephews who perished in the Holocaust.

While Aharon was in New York we took trips to see the sights. On one of our trips to Manhattan, we were walking on Fifth Avenue during the Christmas shopping season. Aharon was overwhelmed by

the extravagant decorations and holiday displays. When we came to the windows of F. A. O. Schwarz, the famous toy store, Aharon was mesmerized by the electric trains circling the scene in the window display. I tried several times to suggest that we should move on and continue to our next stop but he remained transfixed. Several minutes later he remarked, 'As a child, I had a set of electric trains similar to these at my house in Czernowitz. I'd like to go inside and buy a set for my children.' Before I tell you my answer to Aharon's surprising wish, I want to ask for the forgiveness of the Appelfeld children. If they grew up without electric trains, it was my fault. In retrospect I realize that my response was entirely out of order. I asked Aharon, 'Where would you be able to set up the trains and tracks in your apartment?' Silently and resignedly he left the window, without entering the store.

On another excursion we visited the American Museum of Natural History. Each room and exhibition fascinated and excited Aharon. He commented that this kind of museum is one of the benefits of a large city that can afford the luxury of building and maintaining such magnificent cultural and educational institutions. He expressed interest in visiting the Planetarium adjacent to the museum. As we passed through the exhibition room on our way to the Planetarium Aharon shouted, 'Eileh hen hazipporim!' (These are the birds!) He was certain that I would recognize immediately that he was referring to his stories in which birds of these species figure as potential adversaries, because they lead the enemy soldiers to the people hiding in the forest. I realized then how every event is a potential trigger for memories of his childhood experiences. It took a while for Aharon to compose himself at the bird exhibit before we were able to continue on our way to the Planetarium, where he was overwhelmed by the grandeur of the 'Sky Show'.

During his stay in the United States Aharon accompanied me to Niagara Falls where I spoke before a group of college students. Aharon agreed to say a few words to them. He spoke about the need for 'Jewish hands, Jewish feet, Jewish eyes and ears, in addition to the proverbial Jewish heart.' He and I were both certain that not all the students understood the subtleties of his thoughts, but we felt that they sensed his deep concern for the future of the Jewish people.

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in late 1973 the pervasive

mood in Israel was one of national depression. Aharon sent me a letter that said, 'Ata hayyav lavo' (You must come). I showed this letter to the late Gerson Cohen, who was then the chancellor of JTS. His reaction was, 'If Aharon Appelfeld says that you must be there, then go.' I made travel arrangements and Aharon and Yehudit insisted that I stay with them. Since it was a few weeks before Hanukkah, I thought that the best gift for Aharon's children would be dreidels (four-sided Hanukkah tops engraved with a Hebrew letter on each side, *nun*, *gimmel*, *he*, *shin*). Each letter stands for a word in the Hebrew phrase 'New gadol haya sham', meaning 'a great miracle happened there', that is, in Israel). When I gave them to the children, they seemed puzzled because one letter on these dreidels was different from what is written on all the dreidels they had seen. I had forgotten that dreidels in Israel have the letter *peh* for the word *poh* (here), while the dreidels from abroad have a *shin* for *sham* (there). I tried to explain to the children that *shin* in the U.S. refers to Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, which clearly is right here, *poh*. All attempts to simplify this conundrum were in vain. Finally Aharon, who had been listening to this discussion, said, 'The "there" there really is the "here" here. Dod [Uncle] Avraham is trying to teach you a lesson in Jewish geography, a very complicated subject, which you will eventually come to understand.'

Apropos our correspondence spanning more than three decades, I take this unique opportunity to give Aharon his letters to me, which I have saved all these years. He should feel free to do whatever he wishes with our letters.

While he was living with us in Queens Aharon had met some of my friends and neighbours. He was particularly befriended by a family whom he still refers to as 'hamishpacha hamusicalit' (the musical family) because they all played instruments and were involved in various aspects of the music world. At the beginning of 1975, soon after my marriage, my wife Toby and I came to Israel on sabbatical. The parents of the 'musical family' made their first trip to Israel at the same time. Having befriended Aharon in New York, they wanted to spend time with him in Jerusalem. They invited us to dinner at a restaurant (now defunct), which was a special treat for all of us. During the meal Aharon suddenly left the table. When he did not return Yehudit went to look for him. She told us that he would wait outside while we finished the meal. Yehudit later said that he had

left the restaurant when he noticed that the owner had entered. The owner had been a passenger on the same ship as Aharon on the way from Europe to Eretz Yisrael. During a storm at sea the man had been one of those who wanted to lighten the ship's load by trying to toss some of the orphan children passengers overboard. Aharon had been one of them. Since that terrifying experience he could not abide being in the presence of that man. I realized once again how close to the surface Aharon's wartime and postwar experiences are and how it is impossible for him to forget. Every encounter in everyday life is a potential source of anxiety, deeply rooted in the past.

Although, as I mentioned, I had taught Aharon's fiction before we met, after I returned to the U.S. in 1970 I hesitated to teach his stories lest my knowledge of his past and my familiarity with his present life colour my understanding of his work. In addition, I was privileged to have known Aharon's father, Michael Appelfeld, and to have observed the special relationship between the father and son who had lost each other and then were reunited. One must be very cautious when reading about Aharon's fictional father characters, who are certainly not to be understood as representations of his own father. When I finally decided to give a course on Aharon's works I solved my dilemma, in introductory remarks to the students, by mentioning our friendship and requesting that the students alert me to any personal comments that had no bearing on the literary merit of the works at hand. I have developed the following format, which may prove useful to other teachers. Given the limitations of time during a single semester, there is no possibility for students to read the entire corpus of Aharon's short stories and novellas. I select twelve short stories, one story for each week of the term. The students are required to read the assigned story from beginning to end every day of the week and to record in a log their reactions, questions and comments each time they read the story. This method often leads the students to discoveries and fresh insights in the second and subsequent readings and allows them the time and opportunities for close readings of each story. In addition the students are required to write a term paper, ten to fifteen pages in length, devoted exclusively to one novella, which they are strongly urged to start reading at the beginning of the semester, so that they can read and re-read the novella at least two or three times during the course of the term. The final one or two class sessions are devoted to Aharon's essays, *Masot beguf rishon* (Essays in the First Person Singular; Jerusalem 1979). I do this so that the

students arrive at their own understanding of Aharon's literary works before they encounter his own account of his personal feelings, attitudes and recollections. Incidentally, some of Aharon's splendid personal reflections are available in English in *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth* (translated by Jeffrey M. Green, New York 1994).

In 1980 Aharon's novella *Badenheim 1939* appeared in English translation, to resounding critical acclaim, including a title-page feature and extensive review essay in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*. The Monday morning after this review appeared, when I arrived at JTS, the chancellor, my colleague and a recognized historian, greeted me most warmly and exclaimed, 'Holtz, you picked a winner!' I was delighted by his remark but something disturbed me. Later on, that afternoon, I went to his office and told him that I was both elated and uneasy because of his remark. I asked him a rhetorical question. 'Would you need to wait for the acclaim of the *New York Times* for you to determine who is a great historian?' He understood full well the import of my comment. For me, a consequence of the prominent and favourable reviews of this and other books by Aharon was an interest in his work and student requests for a course dealing with his writings. I gave such a course in Hebrew almost every other year since the appearance of that review in the U.S. press. A few years later Aharon received an honorary doctorate from JTS, joining the ranks of other great Jewish writers, scholars and intellectuals who have been recognized in this way.

I take this opportunity to thank Aharon again, publicly, for these many years of friendship that we have shared and enjoyed.