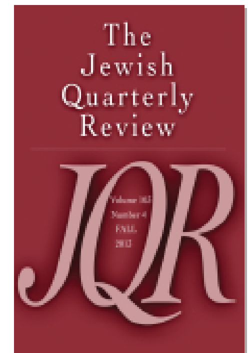
Editorâ€™s Introduction

David N. Myers



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FORUM

Editor's Introduction
Finding a Voice: Aharon Appelfeld between Czernowitz and Jerusalem

As part of our ongoing interest in Jewish literature, the *Jewish Quarterly Review* is pleased to dedicate the following forum to the renowned Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld. Appelfeld stands at the juncture of two important currents in contemporary Jewish fiction: Holocaust literature and modern Hebrew literature. He has developed a unique voice in the Hebrew language, in which he creates a darkly surreal world that, through a sordid cast of orphans, miscreants, and murderers, evokes the horrors of the Nazi-sponsored genocide—and tracks his own life as a young boy on the run in the Carpathian countryside.

Aharon Appelfeld was born in 1932 in Romania in the multiethnic city once known as Czernowitz—site of the famous 1908 conference on Yiddish. He grew up in an assimilated, German-speaking family whose quiet and stable life was shattered by the German military invasion of 1939. Having completed only first grade, Appelfeld became a child nomad during the war years. His mother was murdered in Czernowitz, and he and his father were deported to a concentration camp in Transnistria from which he, at age eight, escaped. Remarkably, he would reunite with his father in Israel thirteen years after the war. But it was his childhood years on the run—during which he was rendered mute by the terrifying experiences he underwent—that became the font of his extraordinary literary imagination.

I first encountered Appelfeld's work in 1981 as an undergraduate at Yale in a course on Jewish literature taught by Arnold Band, who was visiting from UCLA. We read *Badenheim 1939*, Appelfeld's first novel to be translated into English. The book was jarring and unforgettable. The fictitious Badenheim, somewhat akin to Appelfeld's Czernowitz, was an Austrian town with a prominent, assimilated, and largely unsuspecting Jewish population. Appelfeld depicts the unraveling of the lives of Jews there as the Nazis began to close in and prepare for the process of deportation. Incredulous, Badenheim's Jews alternatively refuse to believe and

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lapse into depression and recrimination against one another. Appelfeld's great skill lies in recreating that world of incredulity and panic as he attends to both the dramatically altered life circumstances and the inner worlds of his protagonists.

What makes Appelfeld's achievement even more impressive is that he writes in Hebrew, a language he mastered relatively late in life, as a traumatized teenager who came to pre-State Palestine with no education or, for that matter, spoken tongue of his own. Discovering his voice, indeed a voice in Hebrew, was a gradual process. But it has since become a distinctive and distinguished voice in both Jewish and world literature, capable of reaching as deeply into the dark recesses of the human psyche as any living writer today.

Borne of the searing wounds of his own childhood and preoccupied, as the author himself has observed, with the larger existential question of Jewish fate, Appelfeld's work merits the probing inquiries of leading literary scholars. This is the task of our forum, which draws on the contributions of four scholars who participated in a conference on Appelfeld at the University of Pennsylvania in October 2011. We begin with an illuminating interview conducted with Appelfeld by Nili Gold, one of the conference organizers. In this interview Appelfeld recalls the lost world of Czernowitz and the haunted universe, populated by peasants, burglars, and prostitutes, in which he dwelt while on the run. He also relates the unlikely circumstances in which he became a published author—and then was reunited with his father—in Israel.

From this glimpse into Appelfeld's life, we shift to a rare tour of Appelfeld's atelier. The tour is offered by Yigal Schwartz, the well-known scholar of Hebrew literature and editor of Appelfeld's work for the past twenty-five years. Schwartz offers fascinating insights into the workings of a very productive and idiosyncratic writer, and he sheds light on the complex dynamics of the relationship between a writer and his editor. Schwartz provides an example of this dynamic by highlighting two occasions on which he, as the editor, persuaded Appefeld on key word choices.

The next two essays address Appelfeld's literary work in directly thematic ways. Iris Milner situates Appelfeld within a tradition of Jewish and Hebrew literature framed by the early twentieth-century Yosef Hayim Brenner. In particular, she presents Appelfeld as the heir of Brenner's "nomadic urge." Milner argues that Appelfeld's fiction projects detachment from a fixed sense of place, yielding a diasporic orientation premised on the permanence of exile.

Finally, Arnold Band discusses Appelfeld's relationship to the great

Israeli author S. Y. Agnon. Band fills in a number of important years (1946–55) in Appelfeld's biography, years in which Appelfeld engaged in the "struggle to become a Hebrew author." He notes the formative years Appelfeld spent at the Hebrew University under the tutelage of Dov Sadan, and others, but Band is even more interested in Agnon's influence on Appelfeld. Appelfeld once averred that he learned "everything and nothing" (*ha-kol velo kelum*) from Agnon. Like Agnon, Appelfeld chose to look back at a lost world in his writing. But unlike him, he arrived in Palestine broken and unformed.

Milner and Band hint at an important and perhaps underappreciated diasporist strand in modern Hebrew letters, especially after 1948. Along with the two other contributors in this forum, they offer an important new platform for consideration of Aharon Appelfeld, revealing the ways in which he is, at once, an Israeli, Hebrew, and Jewish writer of great distinction, perhaps in ascending order of significance.

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