

TZILI

The Story of a Life

Author: Aharon Appelfeld (1932-)

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalya Bilu

Publisher: E. P. Dutton (New York). 185 pp. 812.95

Type of work: Novel

Time: 1941-1945

Locale: Southeastern Europe

A short novel which portrays the growth of a Jewish teenager through years of wandering as a fugitive from Nazi-controlled society during the Holocaust

Principal characters:

TZILI adolescent and the, central figure, of the book

MARK, a fellow fugitive and her lover

LINDA, a cabaret singer and companion to Tzili

KATERINA, a former prostitute

A dominant theme of Jewish religious speculation through the centuries has been the meaning and purpose of suffering of the individual and of the people as a whole. It is the regnant issue of discourse, particularly in the past several decades, following the systematic destruction of one-third of world Jewry during World War II. In his short novel *Tzili*, the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, has addressed this problem in a tale of an adolescent coming of age in a warped world.

Appelfeld, born in Czernovitz, Bukovina (now Chernovtsy, U.S.S.R.) in 1932, was the child of a family no longer steeped in Jewish piety. At the outbreak of World War II, the author, age eight at the time, was placed in a concentration camp from which he escaped. He hid in the countryside for three years; afterward, he settled in Palestine. He has been a respected writer in Israel since 1959. In 1983, he was awarded the Israel Prize for Fine Literature; he is now achieving recognition in the United States.

The events of Appelfeld's youth have shaped the themes of his later writings: assimilation and identity; Jew and Gentile; Western secularism and Eastern European faith; the morality of survivors' behavior; maturity in a world of cruelty. He has expressed these themes in two other works, recently translated into English, *Tor-ha-pela'ot* (1978; *The Age of Wonders*, 1981) and *Badenheim 'ir nofesh* (1980; *Badenheim 1939*, 1980) and in his memoir, *Essays in the First Person* (1979). Appelfeld's outlook is summarized in one of those essays, "Beyond the Tragic":

With abysmal suffering as with death itself, the approach to it is in fleeing from it. But what can we do when every flight restores us in the end to ourselves, to our childhood, to the camps, and the ghettos? Our sensibility fluctuates in this circle of flight and return, and until we exhaust it totally, we will not be free men.

In the original Hebrew version, published in 1983, the novel is entitled *Haketonet Ve'hapassim* (the coat and the colors), which is a play on the Bible's *ketones hapassim* (a coat of many colors). The disjunction of construct nouns indicates an inversion of the story of Joseph. Joseph is hated by his brothers because of his cunning and beauty; Tzili is despised because of her dull and homely appearance. Joseph rises to the pinnacle of society because of his genius; Tzili survives on the margin of society because of her simplicity. Joseph is the paradigm of the Jew who successfully assimilates into high society; Tzili is the failed human being who lives in a society into which it is not worth assimilating.

What approaches can there be to the problem of human suffering? Following the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem, the accepted Jewish explanation was collective punishment for collective sin. Following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, a new response arose—suffering had meaning because it was the price the Jew paid as redeemer of a flawed universe.

Following the Enlightenment, new solutions to Jewish suffering were posed—assimilation into European society, political revolution, Zionism. *Tzili* addresses the solutions, theological and social.

Theologians such as Martin Buber would speak of the hiding of God. A survivor of Hasidic background, such as Elie Wiesel, could speak of religious mystery. Appelfeld presents a void. God is left behind, like the teachings of the old tutor, which remain for Tzili as part of vague memories of the past.

There is no mystery, no grappling with ultimate reality or the ground of all being. One survivor becomes overwhelmed by thoughts of sins and repentance and calls out, "Jews repent, return to your Father in Heaven." The rest of the company sends him on his way to find others to whom he might preach. They are not capable of theologizing at such a moment.

Secular salvations, too, are discounted. Assimilation to non-Jewish culture is depicted as a failure, yet Zionism, the counterpart, is dismissed by the survivors as a practical goal at best, not a salvation. Thus, Linda, the cabaret singer, shouts down one of the Zionist preachers, "We've had enough words. No more words. . . . It's time for silence now." Finally, some survivors find a solution only in death; one of the company of Tzili's companions throws himself into a river to drown.

Ultimately, one *vae* stands. Tzili is free of hate and revenge; she is above fear of death and teaches that to her lover, Mark. She survives because ordinary people, survivors like her, forget their own immediate needs and tend to her. If there is hope, it is the banality of good defeating the banality of evil.

A second motif in the book is the identity of the Jew. This is a prime issue in two of Appelfeld's other works, *The Age of Wonders* and *Badenheim 1939*. These reflect the dilemma of the enlightened Jew of Europe, who sought to enter society by assimilating to Western European mores. The more that the

Appelfeld writes a very sparse and terse Hebrew, the flavor of which has been preserved by the translator, Dalya Bilu. He keeps the details of events leWn, allowing the reader only those details vital for the story and for penetrAing the mind of Tzili. Indeed, Appelfeld echoes the style of ancient biblical narrative, which intentionally leaves much to the reader's imagination.

Tzili is the youngest daughter, dull and homely, disheveled and neglected, of a large, impoverished Jewish family. The father suffers from a debilitating illness, the mother struggles to support the family, and the other children strive to achieve success through study and examinations, their ticket of admission to better society. Jewish religion or culture plays no significant part in the home. Only as a last resort, when Tzili fails in secular studies, do the parents hire an elderly tutor to give her the rudiments of Judaism.

With the outbreak of war, the family deserts Tzili to her fate. She roams the countryside, learns by experience the basic elements of survival, and gradually matures into a teenager capable of reasoned thought and personal relationships. By luck, she is mistakenly identified as the bastard daughter of a local prostitute. By accepting that identity as a moral outcast of society, she escapes detection as a racial outcast.

Tzili's life is a constant wandering from one peasant home to another; she finds safety and shelter combined with persecution for her presumed sexual stain. She rooms with a former prostitute, Katerina, who had been the friend of the aforementioned harlot. Katerina both befriends and terrorizes Tzili because of her own memories of lost beauty and sexuality. Tzili meets Mark, another fugitive. They find common shelter in the woods; she provides for them both by bartering the clothes of his deserted wife and children for food and tobacco. She is loved for the first time in her life; he finds courage to live.

Mark disappears, and Tzili, now pregnant, continues to wander. She falls in with a column of survivors roving without aim. Gradually they realize that the war has ended, and they have survived; they march southward to seek a refuge. Tzili is befriended by a nameless merchant, who cares for her as she begins to have difficulties in her pregnancy. They arrive in Zagreb, and she is rushed to a hospital. Having lost her family, and then her lover, she now loses the baby. Even her newest friend is lost to her at the very same moment.

Tzili boards ship for the land of Palestine. She goes, not so much as a Zionist but as a pragmatic seeker of permanent refuge. She is befriended by a former cabaret singer who, like Tzili, is a lost soul. Tzili's one wish, as the boat sets sail for Palestine, is for nothing grander than a pear.

The simple desires of the survivors for a pear or a bottle of brandy bring to mind the ending of I. L. Peretz's metaphoric tale of Jewish survival, "Bontsha the Silent." Bontsha, like Tzili, suffers a tormented existence; never once does he curse his fate. In heaven, he is offered his heart's desire; he asks for no more than a hot roll with sweet butter.

Jews adopted German *kultur*—to the extent of becoming cultural trendsetters—the more they stood out in the public's eye as Jews. With the advent of Nazism, acculturated Jews were forced to confront their identity as Jews.

This theme is woven throughout *Tzili*. Tzili is the antithesis of the Westernized Jew; she alone, of her brothers and sisters, has had any form of Jewish religious training, and she is intellectually dull and incapable of attaining high culture. She is also antithetical to the *Ostjude*, the traditional Eastern European Jew, to the extent that her speech and behavior match that of the local peasantry. She passes among the peasantry as one of them, albeit as a social outcast of the lowest rung. She shocks the Jewish survivors, who envy the ease with which she blends into the native populace, with no trace of Jewish accent. Thus, Mark declares, "I envy you. . . . If you hadn't told me, I'd never have guessed that you were Jewish. How did you do it?" The Jew, in Appelfeld's writings, is forced to confront self-hatred and self-shame, the key problems in contemporary Jewish social history after anti-Semitism. It is a phenomenon common to many minority or immigrant groups, marginal people, envious of the status and security of the majority.

The Jew is the perpetual immigrant, the eternally marginal man; Tzili is the ultimate marginal. She has a marginally functioning intellect, she is marginal to both modern and traditional Jewish societies, she is marginal to the Gentile peasant world, and, as a woman, marginal to a male-dominated society ready to take advantage of her.

An intertwined theme is the contrast in traits of Jew and Gentile, of hunted and hunter. The Jew is far from saintly, yet one characteristic stands out. Katerina, the former prostitute, declares, "The Jews are gentle. The Jews are generous and kind. They know how to treat a woman properly. Not like our men, who don't know anything except how to beat us up." The sentiment is repeated by the Gentile nurse who treats Tzili in Zagreb.

Tzili is saved because she identifies with a prostitute; many survivors escaped only by staying on the outskirts of society. The hypocrisy of society is laid bare, as the criminal is more righteous than the society which is engaged in wholesale murder.

Tzili is, as its subtitle indicates, the story of a life. Appelfeld portrays the transition from child to adult with careful, select imagery. This theme is found frequently in the writings of survivors, who, for the most part, were in their teens during the Holocaust. Tzili learns the basics of life by trial and error. She comprehends for herself the first bloody show of puberty, she learns the relationship between man and woman from a prostitute, and she learns with Mark to love and care for another. In the end, the will to be takes command of her and moves her beyond suffering to renewed life.