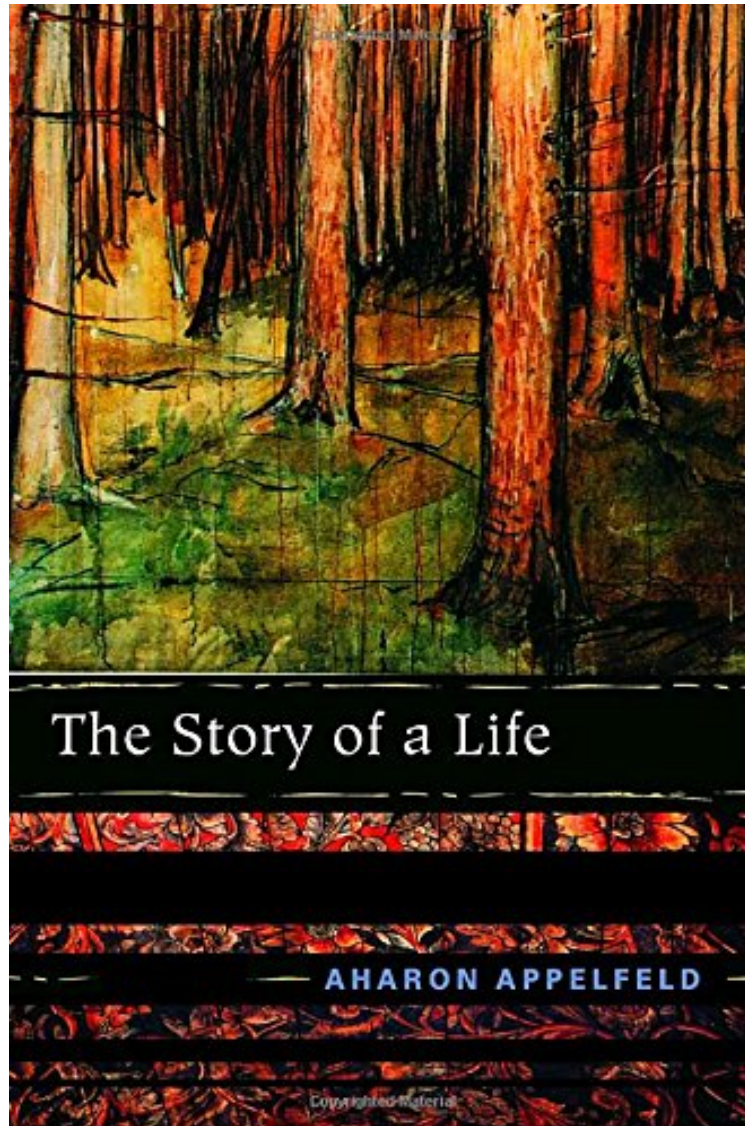


The Story of a Life

Aharon Appelfeld

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Aharon Appelfeld : The Story of a Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Story of a Life:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Another amazing read....By Deb DLove everything he's ever written, he takes you by the hand and leads you right into the heart of the story.....0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. the memories that make us who we areBy RockyApplefeld is one of the humblest and honest writers I have read, his recollections of his past help one truly have a belief in the power of man as an individual whether it is good

or evil. 0 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Seeing the Holocaust from a helicopter By Aviva Dankner Appelfeld, a truly great writer somehow missed the point of the most catastrophic event of the 20th century, that is the Holocaust. He never gives the reader a picture of the horrors, he the author, Appelfeld endured. There is no continuation to the story of his life, he hovers above, giving us bits and pieces, never joining them together. Perhaps the book was better in Hebrew, it was a great disappointment.

When Aharon Appelfeld was seven years old the Nazis occupied Czernowitz, his hometown. They penned the Jews into a ghetto and eventually sent whoever had not been shot or starved to death on a forced march across the Ukraine to a labor camp. As men, women, and children fall away around them, Aharon and his father miraculously survive, and Aharon, even more miraculously, escapes from the camp shortly after he arrives there. The next few years of Aharon's life are both harrowing and heartrending: he hides, alone, in the Ukrainian forests from peasants who are only too happy to turn Jewish children over to the Nazis; he has the presence of mind to pass himself off as an orphaned gentile when he emerges from the forest to seek work; and, at war's end, he joins the stream of refugees as they cross Europe on their way to displaced persons camps that have been set up for the survivors. Aharon eventually makes his way to Palestine; once there, he attempts to build a new life while struggling to retain the barely remembered fragments of his old life, and he takes his first, tentative steps as a writer. As he begins to receive national attention, Aharon realizes his life's calling: to bear witness to the unfathomable. In this unforgettable work of memory, Aharon Appelfeld offers personal glimpses into the experiences that resonate throughout his fiction.

Heartstopping. The New York Times Book Review Appelfeld is a writer of genuine distinction, who [has] transformed his own experience into literature of exceptional clarity and power. The Washington Post About the Author Aharon Appelfeld received the Prix Médicis étranger for *The Story of a Life*. The author of more than twenty acclaimed works of fiction and nonfiction, he lives in Jerusalem. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. At what point does my memory begin? It sometimes seems to me as if it began only when I was four, when we set off for the first time, Mother, Father, and I, for a vacation into the heart of the shadowy, moist forests of the Carpathians. But I sometimes think that memory began to bud from within me before that, in my room, next to the double-glazed window that was decorated with paper flowers. Snow is falling, and fleecy soft flakes are slowly coming down from the sky with a sound so faint that you cannot hear it. For hours I sit and gaze in wonder, until I merge with the white flow and drift off to sleep. A clearer memory is linked for me to one word, too long and rather hard to pronounce, Erdbeeren, which means strawberries in German. It is spring. Mother is standing at the open window. I am perched on a chair next to her, and suddenly, from a side alley, there appears a young Ruthenian girl. She is carrying a broad, circular wicker basket full of strawberries on her head. Erdbeeren! Mother calls out. Her call is not directed at the girl but at Father, who is in the back garden and very near the girl. Father stops her, she lifts the basket off her head, and they speak for a moment. Father laughs, draws out a banknote from the pocket of his jacket, and presents it to the girl, who, in exchange, gives him the basket with all the strawberries inside it. Father comes up the steps and enters the house. Now one can see it close up: the basket is not deep but extremely wide; the berries are tiny and red and still alive with the scent of the forest. I so want to put out my hand and take a handful from the basket, but I know that this is completely forbidden, and I restrain myself. Still, my mother understands me, and she takes a handful from the basket, rinses them, and serves me them in a small bowl. I'm so happy that I can hardly breathe. Here the ritual begins: Mother sprinkles powdered sugar on the tiny fruit, adds cream, and serves up the delicacy to each of us. There's no need to ask for another portion: Mother ladles it out, more and more, and we feast on it with great relish, as if we are about to finish the strawberries. But there is nothing to worry about, the basket is still full, and even if we go on eating all through the night, it won't get any emptier. A pity there are no guests, says Mother. Father laughs quietly, as if a partner to a conspiracy. And the following day, too, we eat more overflowing portions, though distractedly and no longer with a ravenous appetite. Mother puts the remaining strawberries in the pantry. Later I saw, with my very own eyes, how the glorious berries had turned grayish and had shriveled up; for the rest of the day, I felt sad whenever I remembered them. But the woven basket, made of simple twigs, remained in our home for many days, and every time I glanced at it, I would remember how it had looked like a red crown when it rested on the head of the Ruthenian peasant girl. . . . Clearer memories are the walks along the banks of the river, on the paths by the fields, and on the grassy meadows. I see us climb a hill, sit on top of it, and gaze around. Speaking little, my parents listen attentively. With Mother it is more obvious. When she listens, her large eyes are wide open, as if trying to take in everything around her. At home, too, there is more quiet than talking. Nothing spoken remains in my memory from those distant days, only Mother's gaze. It was filled with so much softness and tender solicitude that I feel it to this very day. Our house is spacious and has many rooms. One balcony faces the street, and the other one, the public park. The drapes are long, trailing on the parquet floor. When the maid changes them, a scent of starch fills the whole house. But even more than the drapes, I love the floor, rather, the carpet that covers the floor. On its floral patterns I construct streets and houses from wooden blocks and populate them with stuffed bears and tin dogs. The carpet is thick and soft, and I sink into it for hours, pretending that I'm traveling on a train, crossing continents, and eventually arriving at my

grandfathers village. In summer we will travel to Grandfathers village, and just thinking of it induces a sort of drowsiness, as memories of the previous visit surface. But the images I see in my memory have become so hazy since then that they are more like a dream. All the same, one word remains, and that is *mestameh* presumably. The word is strange and incomprehensible, yet Grandmother repeats it several times a day. Many times I was about to ask what this strange word meant, but I didnt. Mother and I speak German. Sometimes it seems to me that the way Grandfather and Grandmother talk makes Mother uncomfortable, and that shed prefer for me not to hear their language. All the same, I summon up the courage and ask, Whats the language that Grandfather and Grandmother are speaking? Yiddish, Mother whispers in my ear. Days in the village are long, stretching deep into the white night. In the village there are no carpets, only mats. Even the guest room has a mat. At the touch of a foot, the mat makes a dry rustling sound. Mother sits next to me and carves into a watermelon. In the village there are no restaurants and no cinema; we sit out in the yard till late, watching the sunset that goes on till the middle of the night. I try hard not to doze off, but eventually I fall asleep. Here the days are full of small enchantments. A band of three Gypsies suddenly enters the yard and bursts into the sad strains of violin music. Grandmother doesnt lose her temper; she knows them well and lets them go on. Their playing makes me sadder and sadder, and I want to cry. Mother helps out and asks the Gypsies to stop playing, but they wont. Dont stop us! This is the way we Gypsies pray! But its frightening for the child, Mother implores. Theres nothing to fear were not devils. Eventually Mother gives them a banknote, and they stop playing. One of the Gypsies tries to come up and be nice to me, but Mother keeps him at a distance. Just as the Gypsies have left the back yard, a chimney sweep appears. A tall man, with black cables wound completely around his torso, he sets to work without delay. His face is all sooty, and when he stands by the chimney flue he looks like one of those demons from the tales of the Brothers Grimm that Mother reads me before I go to sleep. I want to let Mother in on this secret, but I hesitate. Toward evening, the cows come back from the pasture. The lowing and mooing and the dust fill the air with melancholy, but this is soon dispelled by the nightly ritual of boiling up preserves. Plum jam, pear-and-plum jam, ripe-cherry jameach jam has its appointed hour of the night. Grandmother takes a large copper pot from the kitchen and puts it on the garden bonfire, which has been kindled since twilight. Now the copper pot is gleaming golden. The boiling goes on for most of the night. Grandmother tastes and stirs, adds laurel leaves, and eventually serves me a dish of warm jam. The sweetness, for which I have waited so eagerly, brings me no happiness this time. The fear that the night will end and that in the morning we will have to climb into a carriage to return to the city this fear now grips me, stealthily spoiling my happiness. I take Mothers hand and kiss it, kiss it again and again, until, intoxicated with all the night scents, I fall asleep on the rush mat. In the country, Im with Mother. Father remains in the city to run the business, and when he suddenly appears, he seems alien to me. With Mother I go out to the meadows by the river, or, rather, by one of the streams of the River Prut. The waters flow slowly, the clearness is dazzling, and ones feet sink into the soft ground. In the summer, days stretch out slowly and without end. I know how to count up to forty, to draw flowers, and in another day or two Ill know how to write my name in block letters. Mother doesnt leave me for a moment. Her closeness is so wonderful that even a moment without her makes me sad. Sometimes, unexpectedly, I ask her about God, or about when I was born. Mother is embarrassed by these questions, and it seems to me that she blushes. On one occasion she tells me, God is in the sky, and He knows everything. The answer delights me as much as if I had been presented with an enchanted gift. But for the most part her answers are short, as if she simply has to discharge a duty. Sometimes I keep on asking, but it doesnt make her talk more. Unlike Mother, Grandmother is a large and sturdy woman, and when she places her two hands on the broad wooden table, they fill it. As she talks, she describes things, and you can tell that she loves what shes describing: the vegetables in the garden, for example, or the orchard behind the cowshed. Its hard to understand how Grandmother can be my mothers mother. Next to her, Mother looks like a pale shadow. Grandmother frequently scolds her daughter for leaving some of her soup in the bowl, or a piece of vegetable pie on her plate. Grandmother has firm views on everything: how to grow vegetables, when to pick plums, who is an honest man and who is not. When it comes to children, her convictions are even firmer: children should go to bed before dark, and not at 9 p.m. Mother, on the other hand, doesnt see any harm in a child falling asleep on the straw matting. Grandmother isnt always in a decisive mood. Sometimes she closes her eyes tight, seems to sink into her large body, and tells Mother about bygone days. I understand nothing of what she says, and yet I enjoy listening to her. When she picks me up and lifts me high above her head, I feel as weak as if I were still a baby. Grandfather is tall and thin and seldom speaks. He leaves for prayers early in the morning, and when he returns, the table is laden with vegetables, cheeses, and fried eggs. Grandfathers presence imparts silence to us all. He does not look at us and we do not look at him, but on the Sabbath eve his face softens. Grandmother irons a white shirt for him, and we set out for the synagogue. The walk to the synagogue is long and full of wonders. A horse stands in astonishment, and there is a small girl next to it, about my height. She also stands and stares. Not far from them, a foal is rolling on the grass. The strong, barrel-like creature is stretched on its back, waving its legs in the air as if it has been toppled and is thrashing about, as I sometimes do. Then, just to show everyone that it wasnt knocked down, it gets back up. There is astonishment in the dozens of pairs of eyes of the horses, sheep, and goats who are all following the foals movements, happy that its back on its feet. Grandfather walks in silence, but his silence is not frightening. We move along fast but stop every few minutes. And for a moment it seems to me that he wants to show me something

and to name it, the way Father does. I am wrong. Grandfather continues in silence, and what escapes from his mouth is swallowed up and not comprehensible, but then he lets some words escape that I can understand. God, he says, is in the sky and there is nothing to fear. The gestures that go with the words are even clearer than the words themselves. Grandfather's synagogue is small and made of wood. By the light of day it resembles a roadside chapel, but it is longer and has no statues or objects on the shelves. The entrance is low, and Grandfather has to stoop to enter. I follow. Here a surprise awaits us: many golden candles are stuck into two troughs of sand and radiate a diffused light along with the scent of beeswax. The prayers are almost silent. Grandfather prays with his eyes closed, and the candlelight flickers on his forehead. All those praying are absorbed in their prayer. Not me. For some reason I have suddenly remembered the city, the damp streets after the rain. In the summer, sudden showers fall, and Father drags me after him, down narrow alleys, from one square to another. Father doesn't go to synagogue; he is passionate about natural beauty, and he also loves unusual buildings, churches, chapels, and cafes where they serve coffee in fine cups. Grandfather breaks into my imaginings. He bends down and shows me the prayer book, the yellow pages with the large black letters leaping out from within it. All the movements here are careful and secretive. I don't understand anything. For a moment it seems to me that the lions that are above the Holy Ark are about to stir and leap down. The prayers are conducted in whispers. Sometimes a louder voice rises on the swell, dragging the whisperers after it. This is the home of God, and people come here in order to sense His presence. Only I don't know how to talk to Him. If I knew how to read the prayer book, I would also be able to see the wonders and the secrets, but for right now I have to hide myself away so that God won't see my ignorance. The man leading the prayers reads and embellishes and reads as he does, he skips over some passages, bowing to the right and to the left. He is nearest to the Holy Ark and tries to influence God; all the others also raise their heads, subjugating their will to the will of God. While this is going on, the candles stuck in the sand troughs burn out, and then the men take off their prayer shawls and a kind of quiet wonderment shines in their eyes, as if they understand something they didn't understand before. Leaving the synagogue takes a long time. The elderly leave first, and only then do all the others file out. I already want to be outside, where the air is clear and people talk to one another, not to God. Once again, we're on our way. Grandfather hums a prayer, but it's a different kind of prayer, not strained, and with a more casual melody. The sky is full of stars; their light spills onto our heads. Grandfather says that one should hurry toward the synagogue but walk slowly away from it. I don't understand why, but I don't ask. I've already noticed: Grandfather doesn't like questions and explanations. Whenever I ask a question, silence descends, answers are slow in coming, and even when they do, they're extremely brief. That no longer bothers me now. I have also learned to remain silent and listen to the subtle sounds that surround me. The sounds here, unlike those in the city, are frequent but low, even if sometimes the darkness is torn by the screeching of a bird. We walk on for about an hour, and when we approach the house, Grandmother meets us; she's also dressed in white. Mother and I are wearing our usual clothes. The Kiddush and the festive meal are quiet, like a prayer; only the four of us are about to receive God and the Sabbath. Mother, for some reason, is always melancholy at the Sabbath table. Sometimes it seems to me that she once knew how to talk to God in her language, like Grandfather and Grandmother, but because of some misunderstanding, she has forgotten that language. On the Sabbath eve, this sorrow weighs on her. After the Sabbath meal, we take a stroll to the stream. Grandfather and Grandmother walk ahead, and we follow behind them. At night this branch of the river looks wider. The darkness sinks, and white skies open above us, flowing slowly. I stretch out my hands and feel the white flow coming straight into my palms. From the Hardcover edition.