Kafka, Modern Jewish Experience and the Holocaust

Excerpt from Interview with Professor Aharon Appelfeld
Author and Professor of Literature in Be'er Sheba University
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Interviewers: Amos Goldberg, Amos Morris-Reich
Translated from Hebrew by I.B.R.T.

Q- You said that the Holocaust is above all a Jewish experience. On the other hand, in Masot be-guf rishon ("First-Person Essays" [Heb.]) you write that the person who first helped you find the words to express your own personal experience in the Holocaust was Kafka, and he isn't considered an essentially Jewish writer. Shouldn't the Holocaust be thought of, then, as a universal case of suffering that transcends the Jewish experience?

A- Most of the people in the ghettos, the labor camps, and the extermination camps were Jewish, and therefore the Holocaust was a Jewish experience. But it was not a one-time Jewish experience and it was a modern Jewish experience, not a traditional Jewish experience. Kafka is a good way of illustrating this. Kafka was a Jew in his heart and soul. He learned Hebrew and Yiddish. He attended a beit midrash in Frankfurt and he wanted to settle in Palestine. He had lots of women, but most of them were Jewish. I don't mean that he proclaimed his Jewishness every morning, but that he was connected with Jewishness in every sense of the word. For example, the pounding at the castle — the desire to enter and understand this mystery — is a very Jewish longing. For good reason, authors such as his colleague Max Brod tried to find kabbalistic meaning in his works.Consider, for example, his two greatest works, The Trial and The Castle. He felt that he was a defendant who had done no wrong. A man is sitting at home or in a pension, looking forward to breakfast, and suddenly someone comes in and says, "You're under arrest! You are accused!" for no reason and no purpose. That's the classic Jewish situation, manifested most acutely during the Holocaust. It was a situation of total guilt with no sin. People were accused, taken from their homes, shut up in ghettos, led to railroad stations and from there to

extermination camps — not because they had done anything wrong but because Jewish blood flowed in their veins. Kafka illustrated the absurdity of Jewish life in Europe even before the Holocaust. In this sense Kafka grasped the lowly position Jews held in European civilization.

Q- Would you say, then, that the Holocaust sums up the absurdity of European civilization?

A- To a certain extent, yes. After all, Jews believed that if they abandoned their heritage, customs, way of life, and faith, and integrated into European civilization, assimilated into the fabric of European civilization, they would be doing the best thing for themselves and their surroundings. So they did it in Germany, France, even Poland. Most Jews between the two world wars were on the brink of abandoning their Jewishness en route to a Jewish universalism or cosmopolitanism of sorts. The tragedy is that at that very moment someone came and told them, “You can't do that. You're a stranger. Your thoughts, your mentality, and your nature are alien. You're not only alien; you're also dangerous, and we're going to obliterate you.” In other words, just as the Jew's every fiber leaned toward assimilation, there came a radical, satanic force that not only halted this trend but wiped out the people who were inclined to pursue this process. That's the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Q- In fact, however, Kafka largely represented that assimilationist trend.

A- Kafka performed a psychic analysis of the defendant. Although he refrained from mentioning the Jew explicitly in order to give this absurd situation a much broader meaning, this, in essence, is Jewish psychology. A Jewish fate, if you will. Interestingly, this analysis led him indirectly to Zionism, and he even wanted to settle in Palestine.

Q- In your fiction, the attitude toward the assimilating Jew is very ambivalent. You show real contempt, but you also recognize that he represents the near past of the Jewish people and that one can't dissociate from him or deny him. After all, without a past it's hard to construct an identity and a spiritual world in the present. How do you

deal with this problem in your works? And how can the Jewish people cope with the fact that not only has its past been rendered extinct by the Nazis, but it was also shown, as you claim, to be a failure?

A- I do not examine the issue of assimilation from the angle of Zionism and Judaism only. Assimilation created a Jewish type, a person who has uprooted himself and seeks his place with Western civilization. On the one hand, he feels the pain of severance from his heritage; on the other hand, European civilization has not given him a warm welcome. This created a rather complex type of person on the verge of neurosis. Otto Weininger, who committed suicide, and many others were genuinely neurotic. Nevertheless, this stimulating situation of life on the seam of two civilizations, actually induced new thoughts and feelings. It created a highly variegated literature of assimilated Jews.

It is interesting, for example, that even Joyce, seeking a main hero for his work Ulysses, created a Jew, Blum. This Jew, who lives in Dublin and is divorced from his roots but has no share in the other civilization, is emblematic of modernity. The assimilated Jews played such a central role in bringing modernity to the world, because they had extraordinary sensitivity and their thoughts blazed non-stop. Kafka, Marx, Husserl, Wittgenstein and others contributed to modernity at the highest levels, those of psychology and philosophy, precisely because of this stimulating position. Whereas modernity profited from the fact that the best Jewish brains were turning outward, for Jewish civilization, of course, it was a terrible loss.

Incidentally, even Herzl wanted to integrate the Jews into Western civilization. Before he came up with the Zionist solution and wrote Der Judenstaat, his plan had been to have the Jews convert to Christianity.

Q- So what is our past? Do we have roots?

A- Our past is complex. It takes a great deal of sensitivity and intelligence to address it correctly. In a crude sense, one may say that our past has two facets. One consists of the Jewish sources: the Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud, medieval literature, the Zohar,

Hasidism, and Maimonides, that is, our great religious edifice. The other consists of the secular Jewish works created in Europe in the past two hundred years. The two facets are inseparable; only a proper combination of them is our past..

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.