

## On Hebrew Holocaust Literature

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--- It is astonishing to note how persistently Hebrew literature has avoided the subject of the Holocaust, particularly during the decade after the war. This was the working of a simple, brutal defence mechanism. Writers like Agnon, Hazaz, Berkowitz and others who were well acquainted with that doomed Jewish world, continued to write about it from afar, but avoided dealing with the period of its destruction. At the very height of the Holocaust the two major Hebrew writers, Agnon and Hazaz, wrote their most ideologically problematic stories: Hazaz's 'The Sermon' (1942) levels a grave accusation at the Jewish people for thriving on suffering - and this at the darkest moment in Jewish history; and Agnon's 'The Lady and the Pedlar' describes the dubious, almost perverted relationship between the Jew and the outside world.

Alterman and Shlonsky touch on the Holocaust obliquely and indirectly after the war. Only Uri Zvi Greenberg confronts it full face and deals with the experience of Israel and his conflicting feeling about it in his wonderful collection of poems, 'Roads of the River'.

The literature of the War of Independence generation approached the subject of the Holocaust in the decade after the war with all the wariness of one scrutinizing an unfamiliar reptile. This caution was prompted by an overwhelming lack of comprehension, a sense of shame and guilt. Nothing could have been further from the experience of the War of Independence than that of the Holocaust.

The writings of the Holocaust survivors themselves, such as Katzetnik, were isolated and enclosed in their own ghetto.

Only with the appearance of Aharon Appelfeld, at the end of the 1950s, did Holocaust literature begin to acquire depth and direction. He brought it out of the ghetto where Hebrew literature had placed it. I remember Appelfeld reading us his first stories in his little room in Jerusalem. Instantly we all felt: here is a new artistic code that lets us grasp this experience through its own creative merit. We need not make allowances or accommodations for it; it stands up to artistic criteria like any other true work of creation.

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\* Yehoshua's latest work, *The Lover*, is available in English.