

## THE IRON TRACKS

by Aharon Appelfeld

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The trains of Eastern Europe, those monstrous vehicles that once led millions of Jews to their deaths, have been re-routed in Aharon Appelfeld's deceptively simple novel, *THE IRON TRACKS*. They no longer lead to a deadly destination, but for a Holocaust survivor like the narrator, Erwin Siegelbaum --- as for the author, a concentration camp survivor himself --- trains still carry the burden of memory.

In *THE IRON TRACKS*, the tension between past and present is palpable. For the past forty years, Erwin Siegelbaum, the son of Jewish-Communist organizers murdered during the war, has made a giant loop by train around modern Austria. He visits his friends: the people who run the station buffets, inns and bars of his travels, and the communist sympathizers of his youth. He collects artifacts of a lost Jewish world: books, heirlooms, liturgical objects. "One mustn't yearn for a city that murdered its sons and daughters," a girlfriend once warned Siegelbaum. "I have to wrench such yearnings from my heart and accept that I no longer have a permanent place in the world."

But yearning and memory are part of the Holocaust's legacy. Siegelbaum finds it hard to forget his childhood memories, though he wards them off through the particulars of his annual trip --- in alcohol, in the motion of the train, in quick and loveless sex, in old friends. And if memory is part of Siegelbaum's legacy, then so are the Jewish objects he gathers. Though the recovery and sale of these Passover dishes and wine cups are his "business," they represent one of his last links to his prewar life. These objects are the pitiful remains of a lost way of life. I was nearly overwhelmed by Siegelbaum's fervent but pointless discoveries.

*THE IRON TRACKS* is not a book of Holocaust testimony, nor is it a grim catalogue of atrocities. It's a haunting, fascinating look at one assimilated Jew's attempt to create an identity amid the landscape of scraps and half-remembered memories. Appelfeld renders his strange story in a simple style, reminiscent of the dark, helpless nature of Kafka's hallucinatory tales. It's one of this novel's significant accomplishments that we learn Siegelbaum's secret purpose --- to find the man who murdered his parents --- only bit by bit. This delay helps confirm what we suspect all along: the narrator is so busy avoiding memory that he's not always aware of his own choices.

The quiet, simple tone of the novel is effective in other ways. It helps the small ironies, ones any survivor might face daily, rise effortlessly to the surface of the story. When Siegelbaum says he likes the trains because "[they] make me free," we recall the chilling double-speak emblazoned over the entrance of the Auschwitz concentration camp: *ARBEIT MACHT FREI* --- "Work makes you free." Even the classical music that Siegelbaum requests the train waiters to play ("the music soothes my nerves"), reminds us of the music which the Nazis played in the death camps.

In *THE IRON TRACKS*, the train is no longer an emblem of destruction. It's been transformed into something more ambivalent, a purgatory for a lost Jewish soul. If the iron tracks of the title recall the treacherous journey of Siegelbaum's youth, they also suggest the unyielding quality of his present life. He can no more control his compulsion to revisit, again and again, the villages of his childhood, than he can forget what happened to him there. Memory itself becomes a kind of iron track.

When Siegelbaum says that it's only on trains that he feels free, we sense the bitter paradox of the survivor. The tracks of his future bear him relentlessly toward his past.

Reviewed by Paul Zakrzewski

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