Primo Levi Now

by Peter Graham (September 2015)

On the morning of December 15, 1943, in the tiny alpine village of Amay, south of the Swiss border, an Italian Jew by the name of Primo Levi awoke to the sound of troops bursting into the mountain inn where he was staying. The soldiers brandished rifles and machine guns and shouted, "Nobody move!" Levi had a gun, a revolver that he shared with a friend, but managed to slip it secretly into a wood stove, hoping that none of the bullets would discharge in the embers. He had spent the previous ten weeks with a band of partisans who had taken up arms against the Nazis and their Italian collaborators. Jews had been racially persecuted in Italy for years, although not until that month did Mussolini start funneling them into concentration camps for the Final Solution. Faced with the decision of fleeing, hiding, or fighting, Levi chose to fight. At age 24, however, he wasn't up to the task of soldiering. One friend said that he and Levi played at being partisans. "We were foolish kids. Well-intentioned ones, all right, but still kids." Levi called his partisan days the most "obscure" of his life and probably "best forgotten." He was betrayed in the end by a spy who had infiltrated the group and tipped off the fascist authorities. Now, prodded in the back with jabs from a machine gun, Levi was marched down to the city of Aosta to be interrogated. There he gave an assumed name and said that he had been up in the mountains on a hiking trip, but his captors jeered at his show of innocence. Finally, broken down from fatigue and hunger and given the likelihood of either being shot as a partisan or imprisoned as a Jew, Levi admitted his Jewishness.

Thus began a tragic journey that would land Levi, two months later, on the outskirts of an obscure town in southwest Poland where millions of Jews would be put to death. Levi would chronicle his experiences here in *If This Is a Man*—or, as it was re-titled in America, *Survival at Auschwitz*. In spare and precise prose, remarkable for its lack of self-pity, Levi described Nazism's largest concentration camp: the beastly hunger, the constant if casual beatings, the never-ending petty larceny, and of course the periodic "selections" when the old and infirm were shuttled off in silence to the gas chambers. Ironically,

Auschwitz would also be the great adventure of Primo Levi's life. Like Heracles and Odysseus, the classical heroes he studied as a boy, Levi escaped from hell—albeit a hell of man's own making. In a death camp where the average life expectancy was just three months, Levi hung on at Auschwitz for almost a year until liberated by Russian troops. He suffered intense guilt for his survival, later saying that all the best prisoners at Auschwitz died—only the "worst survived." These survivors might have been the fittest, he said, but they were also the most mercenary. In fact, Levi claimed the greatest evil of his jailers was implicating prisoners in Nazi crimes, reducing everybody at the camp into cynics, thieves, and killers. Levi had expected the Germans to be brutal to him, but he hadn't counted on the lack of solidarity among his fellow inmates. Auschwitz confirmed to Levi that man indeed was a "wolf to man." Of the 650 Italians sent to the camp with him, only 24 made it out alive. Luck had a lot to do with Levi's survival. He had been sent to Auschwitz at a time when Nazis needed workers, so healthy Jews weren't immediately gassed upon arrival. He also got sick with scarlet fever at precisely the right time—just before the Soviets liberated the camp—and so instead of being forced on a death march in brutal cold weather, he was left to die in the lager's infirmary. But he somehow pulled through. Curiosity fueled his will to live. The world was "upside down," he said, and he had a terrible need to figure out why. As well, Levi had a terrible need to tell his story. To testify. To teach, especially to the young, "whose souls were still malleable," what had happened—and why. For years Levi made a point of wearing short-sleeved shirts that revealed the blue grey tattoo branded to his forearm: "*Haftling*"—prisoner—"174517". He felt no shame in the tattoo. On the contrary, it was source of pride—and a lesson: to always, always remember. Otherwise, what happened once could happen again.

Last year marked the 70th year of Levi's imprisonment. Were he alive today, the writer might well have made another pilgrimage back to Auschwitz, as he had done twice before, to mark the sad anniversary. As it is, we have his classic memoir, which has gone through multiple printings, been translated into more than a dozen languages, and shows no sign of going out of print. I read *If This Is a Man* in New York in the 1990s. I wasn't a Jew—I'd been brought up a Catholic—but had always been fascinated by Hitler and Nazism and the sheer scale of killings at the death camps. Like Levi, I was curious. How could people be so vicious? How could they kill so casually and obediently? I'd had a comfortable upbringing similar to Levi's, and my education taught me that man was rational and

reasonable. My American optimism interpreted history as a march of progress: the world was getting better—and so were human beings. Slaughtering people on the basis of their religion or race was unfathomable to me—just as it had once been to Levi, who considered it "the height of inequity and unreason." And yet inequity and unreason had taken over.

I had always wanted to re-read Levi's Auschwitz chronicle—to figure out how he had done it, how he had put together such a true-life horror story without resorting to angry rhetoric or anguished cries from the heart. His voice always came across as so calm and measured. His sentences so clear and exact. The inevitable effect was of a witness speaking the truth, simply and urgently. Wisdom seemed to emanate from every page. I wanted to follow Primo Levi everywhere—to gather up all the manna of his learning. I also wanted to learn more about his life. What happened to him after Auschwitz? Did he marry and have kids? What other books did he write? And were these works standing up to the test of time? In the spring of 1987, when he died, Levi had become famous—especially outside Italy. His fight for literary recognition at home had been harder won, yet even here, said biographer Ian Thomson, he had become a "national monument." But that was then. Did all this still hold true today? Did Levi's literary star still burn as bright? More than twenty-five years after his death, what was the reputation of Primo Levi now?

If the map of Italy is a pair of jeans with a boot kicking out from one of the cuffs, the city of Turin—Primo Levi's home for most of his life—is buried all the way northwest in the front left pocket. The city is surrounded on three sides by mountains—in what geologists call the western arch of the Alps—and the icy Po River cuts through the downtown. Winters here are cold and dark. People in Rome and other points south call Turin the "refrigerator" of Italy, and its denizens have the same chilly reputation. Correct, polite, and discrete, the *Torinese* nevertheless keep strangers at a distance. If you are on the make in Italy, you go to Milan or Rome. Not Turin. Never mind its population of close to a million, the city has a small town feel. It's said that everybody here knows each other—and their business. That gossip is the sixth food group. No wonder the *Torinese* guard their secrets. Primo Levi guarded his. He was a writer of extreme scruples, a model of integrity and grace, what the Italians call *un bel uomo*—a beautiful man—but he still had things to hide.

Primo Levi's family came to Piedmont in about 1500 when his ancestors fled anti-

Semitic Spain. For nearly three centuries they lived in the small town of Beni Vagienna, 30 miles south of Turin, and the business of the family had been banking. When Napoleon de-ghettoized the Jews in the early nineteenth century, the family began a long period of prosperity. But in 1888 an economic panic caused a run on the banks—and Primo's grandfather Michele lost everything. The distraught Michele made his way to Turin where he jumped from the fourth-floor of an apartment building. Police listed his cause of death as "*precipitazione dall'alto*"—falling from a great height. Primo's family rarely spoke about the suicide—it was considered too shameful—although the incident must have made an impression on him. Almost 100 years later, Primo would also die in a fall from the fourth story of a Turin apartment building. Eerily, his death certificate would have the exact wording as his grandfather's—falling from a great height. Was it an accident? Was it suicide? His family and friends weren't talking. So others began talking instead. Reporters asked questions. Biographers showed up looking for clues. The gossip mill cranked into full gear. But nobody knew anything for certain.

Before his death, journalists, scholars, and literary pilgrims journeyed to Turin to seek interviews with Levi. Many people found his presence "spiritual" or "holy." Others commented on his beautiful and expressive eyes or his grey-white goatee and tweed sport coats that gave him the appearance of a professor or an Italian don. Still others found Levi effeminate or childlike—a man much younger than his years. Philip Roth, in a 1986 interview, described Levi as a "little quicksilver woodland creature" and "youthfully Pan-like, even perhaps a little girlish." Roth also picked up on Levi's "pathos" or depression—which Levi battled in the last decades of his life. With strangers, he didn't discuss such personal matters. He was formal and private in the *Turinese* manner, and shied away from attention. At least one journalist found him haughty and "impatient of any kind of vulgarity or stupidity." He certainly didn't suffer fools gladly. On his only visit to the United States in 1985, he became irritated with reporters who didn't know his work, and later refused interviews to journalists who hadn't read at least one of his books. As well, Levi avoided any kind of rhetoric. When a blurb to his memoir, *The Periodic Table*, described the book as "mysterious," he demanded it be changed. The word smacked of irrationality, which he found disturbing. It offended his empirical sensibilities. It might as well have been voodoo or religion.

Primo Levi's first dream was to be an astro-physicist. He loved to look into the sky, losing himself in the silence and mystery of the stars. Even as a boy, he had an intense curiosity. He wanted to figure out life—to gaze into the universe and discover if God existed, if there really was a "driver" of the cosmos. Later, when the Jewish racial laws took effect in Italy, narrowing his career choices, Levi decided to study chemistry. Becoming a writer didn't even cross his mind back then. Not till Auschwitz did he really begin to chronicle his thoughts and crave writing sentences. Then, as Sam Magavern, another biographer noted, "denied the chance to study the stars, he became the master chronicler of hell on earth."

Before the death camps, though, there had been wonder—and almost contentment. Despite an early stint with Mussolini's Black Shirts at age 7—most Italian children back then joined fascist youth groups, even Jews—Levi's childhood had been happy. He did well at school—and would eventually skip a grade—but preferred curling up with books at home or building toy houses with his Meccano erector set. He also enjoyed biking around Turin with his younger sister and taking trips up to the Alps to hike with friends. More importantly, he had the support of loving parents. His mother Ester doted on him, although she never showered him with affection. Levi once said that he couldn't remember a single time that his mother kissed or caressed him. Nevertheless, he remained devoted to Ester, and lived in the same house with her until the day she died. Philip Roth described this devotion as having "a pathetic edge," saying, "I've known some Jewish sons, but Levi's filial duty and devotion was stronger than anything I'd ever seen." Certainly, the attachment wasn't without drawbacks. As Ester aged and Primo became her primary care giver, he found it difficult to leave the house for extended periods without feeling pangs of guilt and depression. Still, when a friend suggested that he put Ester in a nursing home Levi exploded. The idea disgusted him.

Levi's relationship with his father, Cesare, was less close. An engineer by training, Cesare Levi worked most of his life selling Hungarian machinery to Italian engineering companies. What he really loved, though, was reading books and newspapers, smoking good cigars, drinking fine wines, and flirting with pretty women. He was a man-about-town, an amiable *flaneur* who, for a long time, carried on an affair with a secretary at his company. Even after his father died in 1943, Primo nursed a quiet disappointment with him. For his philandering,

sure, but also for his other failings as a father. In *The Periodic Table*, Levi takes a subtle jab at Cesare—and the other men in his family—for being so ineffectual. “What were we able to do with our hands? Nothing, or almost nothing. The women, yes—our mothers and grandmothers had lively, agile hands, they knew how to sew and cook, some even played the piano, painted with watercolors, embroidered, braided their hair. But we, and our fathers?”

When Cesare’s affair created a crisis in his marriage, Primo sided with his mother. In explaining his attachment to her, one relative said: “In a way, Primo felt he had to provide Ester with the love she didn’t have as a wife.” Could be true. Could also explain why Levi had such a hard time establishing intimate relationships with other women, whom he often felt shy around. “All his life,” said a woman friend, “Primo was terrified of us women.” His slow physical development didn’t help matters. Levi was a scrawny kid, short and skinny and often ill. In adolescence he was also subject to racial baiting from his peers. “I have never seriously tried to analyze this shyness of mine (with women),” he said, “but no doubt Mussolini’s racial laws played an important role. Other Jewish friends suffered from it, some ‘Aryan’ schoolmates jeered at us, saying that circumcision was nothing but castration, and we, at least at an unconscious level, tended to believe it, with the help of our puritanical families.”

Not surprisingly, Levi had a late sexual awakening. He would go into Auschwitz a virgin and leave as one. His ideas of sex were complicated and painful. His parents’ marriage had been compromised by infidelity, and sex struck him as dirty and destructive. Like many young men in similar situations, Primo yearned for heroic purity. At the same time, in his late teens and early 20s, Levi had started developing crushes on women. Sam Magavern captures Levi’s sexual ambivalence at the time: “Something in Levi wants to overcome his virginal horror of sexuality, his sense of it as dirty and excremental; he wants the sordidness canceled out by the vital energy. But another part of him remains repulsed by the bestial Noah, with his ‘filthy and stinking’ troop.”

Even as an older man, Levi felt ambivalent about sex. When people tried to probe his thoughts on the matter, Levi would change the subject. He demonstrated a similar sexual ambivalence in his stories. In *Lilith*, written when he was in his 60s, Levi describes a strange, quasi-sexual encounter he had at Auschwitz during an air-raid. He and another inmate had scrambled to find cover in an industrial pipe where they discovered a woman with a laughing face and an inviting manner.

“She scratched herself with provocative indolence under her jacket, then undid her hair, combed it unhurriedly, and began braiding it again. In those days it rarely happened that one saw a woman close up, an experience both tender and savage that left you shattered.” Levi stared at the woman, both attracted and repelled. Although still a virgin, he couldn’t admit this, for being celibate in Auschwitz and in his twenties was considered a “sin.” Levi’s companion, a man named Tischler, called the woman Lilith, after the medieval legend of Adam’s first wife. Levi wasn’t familiar with the story, so Tischler explained that Lilith was a seductress. She not only sinned with Adam but also had sex with God—and continued to be God’s mistress. And as long as God kept sinning with Lilith, there would be evil in the world—and horrible human suffering.

Levi intends for the story to be a sort of tongue-and-cheek critique of religion, poking fun at the imaginative way believers use narrative to explain the inexplicable problem of evil. Levi is an unbeliever—How could there be a God, he says, after Auschwitz?—and yet there is something in this biblical tale that clearly fascinates him. He amps up the language and imagery until what resonates in the story isn’t the question of God’s existence or not but the depiction of the vulgar seductress, the red- and wet-faced Lilith preening in an industrial pipe. Unwittingly, Levi communicates in “Lilith” some of the same distaste and fear of women that the patriarchal writers of the Old Testament demonstrated. The message: women can be dangerous—and corrupting.

And yet Primo Levi loved women as much as he feared them. Throughout his life, he craved and sought out women’s company. Soon after returning to Turin from Auschwitz, he married and had two children. His marriage to Lucia Morpurgo, the daughter of a schoolteacher, was happy at first. She listened intently to Primo’s stories about Auschwitz, and tried to assuage his deep and psychic wounds. Later, their marriage would erode. Some said that Lucia wasn’t his intellectual equal; others insisted that she didn’t like his friends, who monopolized his time. Maybe. Maybe an even greater friction, though, was their living situation in Turin—at 75 Re Umberto—in the house of Primo’s mother. Intended as a temporary measure until they had a firmer financial footing, Lucia and Primo moved into Ester’s apartment right after their wedding—and never left. The two women competed for Primo’s attention, and even after Lucia gave birth to two children, Ester didn’t cozy up to her daughter-in-law. Still, the Levis’ marriage endured for almost 40 years, even as it withered from a lack of

passion.

The love of Levi's life turned out to be a young Jewish chemistry student from his college days at the University of Turin. Her name was Vanda Maestro. One year his senior, Maestro enjoyed Levi's wit and companionship, although never reciprocated the passionate feelings he had for her. Nevertheless, in late 1943, she and another friend fled with Levi into the Alps to escape the Nazis. All of them were captured in Amay, at the same mountain inn, and wound up together in the internment camp at Fossoli. Here Levi and Maestro became much closer, but still not intimate. In fact, on the night before their transport train left for Auschwitz, while other men and women prisoners in the camp made love to each other, Maestro, in a bid to win her freedom, slept with Fossili's commandant. Levi makes a cryptic reference to this episode in *If This Is a Man* when he sketches the night before their deportation: "Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory." Levi spent the next five days and nights with Maestro in a cattle car, comforting her. When Maestro tried to take her life by slitting her wrists, Levi nursed her, cleaning up the blood and bandaging her wounds. At the train terminal at Auschwitz, while guards shouted "Everybody out!" and Doberman pinchers on leases lunged at the new prisoners on the platform, Levi and Maestro finally separated, never to see each other again. Eight months later, in October 1944, Maestro was gassed in Birkenau.

Levi depicts these horrors and plenty more in *If This Is a Man*. The Nazis had been beastly to their prisoners—or "units," as they called them—and in their awful fear and desperation, the prisoners had often turned beastly themselves. Levi had done his best to stay human, but he too had lied and tricked and stolen to survive. "Man is a mixed up creature," he liked to say, quoting Thomas Mann. And he becomes all the more confused, Levi added, when subjected to great tension and stress. Levi documents this sad confusion in *If This Is a Man*, and yet he also manages a positive message. There is the lovely moment in "The Canto of Ulysses" section when Levi teaches Italian to the young Alsatian prisoner Pikolo, introducing him to the poetry of Dante. Sure, the prisoners had to slog around in the Auschwitz mud, within smelling distance of the gas chambers at Birkinau, but Dante lifted them with beauty and knowledge. Another upbeat moment occurs in the book's final chapter, "The Story of Ten Days," when Levi and eleven other sick men bond together in the infirmary to help each other survive.

No longer does the beastly code of selfishness rule them, but a renewed sense of *esprit d' corps*. Together they can help each other survive. Together they can become men again. The message isn't one of hate but of hope. And although Levi never goes so far to forgive his captors—that was "not his duty," he said—Levi takes pains to not demonize them. He didn't hate Germans; he sought to understand them, to figure out why they acted as they did. Levi wants to learn, not to blame. Even Hitler's savage secret police, the SS, he described not as monsters, but as "frightfully uncultivated." The fault lay not in the brutes, but in their bad education.

With the publication of *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi became that rare thing: a moralist who is not a scold. Instead of a stick-in-the-mud schoolmarm, Levi adopted the voice of a wry and with-it storyteller. His tone is skeptical and almost playful, always ready to reveal some sly truth. And yet he also considered writing a sacred act. Hovering above the narrative is the age-old question: What is the best way to live a life? He all but shouted out his answer: Live it ethically, intelligently, creatively. His fellow Holocaust scribe Elie Wiesel claimed that he and Levi and others had developed a new kind of writing in the Lager: "if the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." The charge of these witnesses was to convey the horrors they lived through—horrors that otherwise might not be believed. Such an enormous distance existed between these writers and their readers that communication was essential. "A book," Levi said, "has to be a telephone that works."

In the fall of 1945, Levi returned home from Auschwitz. It had taken him ten long months, most of it spent in a Soviet re-location camp in Russia, but he finally arrived in Turin in October, almost two years after he'd been taken prisoner. Nobody expected him—his family didn't even know if he was alive. Not a soul recognized him on his walk from the train station. When he entered his apartment complex, his concierge stopped him, like she stopped all strangers, to ask curtly about his business. A long silence followed before the concierge turned and started running up the stairs, calling "Madame Levi! Madame Levi!"

In the next year, Levi wrote *If This Is a Man* in an almost super-human burst of energy. For hours a day, every day, he poured out his Auschwitz memories on paper. At the same time, he took a job as a chemist at a paint company. Somehow

he found the will to write during lunch breaks and at night, during weekends and on holidays. Like two other great storytellers, Alberto Moravia and Sherwood Anderson, Levi worked in a paint factory by day and wrote stories by night. He joked that he was a centaur—a "paranoiac split" of man and horse—one part pursuing the noble career of a writer, the other part toiling as a beast of burden. Still, he rarely disparaged his day job; it would enable him to raise two children and make a very good living—for the next thirty years. Besides, chemistry had saved his life. Levi never underestimated this fact. Thanks to passing a chemistry exam in the early winter of 1944, Levi had landed the incredibly plum job of working in an Auschwitz chemistry laboratory. Instead of slaving away outside in the bitter cold as a laborer and living on one or two bowls of gruel a day, he spent the rest of the winter in the warm lab, safe and secure, and having easy access to many coveted foods, including cookies, powdered milk, and even fresh, heavenly fruit.

Readers of *If This Is a Man* cheer on Levi for his luck and cunning, knowing that the author will defy all odds and escape Auschwitz with his life. Levi structures his book with this intention—making his quest quietly heroic. He is Dante back from the inferno—scarred but wiser, sadder but triumphant. Lucky, sure, but not blessed. Definitely not blessed. Federico Fellini once said, "Italy is a land full of ancient cults, rich in natural and supernatural powers. And so everyone feels its influence. After all, whoever seeks God, finds him…wherever he wants." Not so with Primo Levi. The more he searched for theological answers, the more he came up empty. Auschwitz, of course, killed Levi's belief in a higher power. He spent the rest of his life as a man without God, which allowed him, he said, "to live without illusions." At the same time, Levi hated to call himself an atheist. Instead he referred to himself as "a man in search of faith." He wished that he could believe in God, but couldn't. In fact, he envied believers. How good and calming it must be to have a father and judge and teacher all bundled into one! He couldn't, though, be dishonest with himself. He couldn't just invent a God for his own personal use. For Levi, the existence of evil rendered the existence of God impossible. He refused to accept an omnipotent God who was also blind and deaf to evil. In a 1983 interview, Levi said, "Either God is all-powerful or he is not God. But if he exists, and is thus omnipotent, why does he allow evil? Evil exists. Suffering is evil. Thus if god, at his bidding, can change good into evil or simply allow evil to spread on Earth, then God is Bad. And the hypothesis of a bad God repels me. So I hold on

to the simpler hypothesis: I deny him." Levi admitted the possibility of a supreme power, indifferent to mankind, but he dismissed this kind of God as "not someone to pray to."

If This Is a Man was published in October 1947. Levi had wanted the book to be put out by the tony Italian publisher Einaudi—and he even knew one of the editors, Natalia Ginzburg, a family friend and novelist—but Ginzburg turned him down. It wasn't "quite right" for Einaudi, she said, trying to soften her rejection and save a friendship (which must have done the trick, for Ginzburg and Levi remained friends until his death). Luckily, Levi had another suitor, Franco Antonicelli, a small publisher who thought the book was masterful. Only a couple of reviewers agreed, including a young but little known writer, Italo Calvino, who called *If This Is a Man* "magnificent." It wasn't enough to sell many books. Just 1500 copies, or about half the print run, sold and soon the book went out of print. A war-weary public had little interest in swallowing any more tragic stories of death and sadness. Levi felt chastened. He had felt enormous pride birthing his book and getting his story out to the world, yet now he abandoned his writing career.

But not for long. Soon Levi started to work again at night and during weekends, writing poems, short stories, and science fiction. It was slow going. With factory and family responsibilities, Levi could never devote his full powers to his craft. In 1955, however, Levi got a lift: fickle Einaudi decided to re-publish *If This Is a Man* in its distinguished essay series. Levi was thrilled. And inspired. Almost at once he began another book—a sequel to his Auschwitz memoir—*The Truce*. It would document his adventures from the gates of Auschwitz and the steppes of Russia, to the swamps of Romania and finally back home. The theme of exile echoed through this second book, but it also struck an upbeat and picaresque tone. Levi's narrative was filled with loveable hustlers and other out-sized characters. One of his friends said that reading *The Truce* was like seeing a film in "Technicolor." The comment pleased Levi. He had worked hard to make the book more exciting and less self-consciously literary. He had also stretched some of the facts, adding amusing scenes and dialogue. Despite being based on truth—and later marketed as "history" and "autobiography"—*The Truce* was subtly fictionalized. For the first time, Levi began "rounding corners," as he called it, to entertain his audience. He started taking to heart the Tuscan proverb: "The tale is not beautiful if nothing is added to it."

Not all people liked this change, not even Levi, who would sometimes refer to himself as a "counterfeiter." Some readers were also puzzled. Scholar Marco Belpoliti said the hardest part about interpreting Primo Levi is figuring out "when he left off as witness and became a storyteller." As a witness, Levi felt compelled to be truthful, but as a writer he wanted to connect with his audience and keep them reading. To be a writer almost meant betraying the act of witnessing, and yet Levi fudged the facts in his nonfiction to be more convincing. In order to communicate more truths, he felt the need to manufacture more falsehoods.

When *The Truce* won Italy's first Campiello literary prize in 1963, Levi's star began to shine. He even flirted with quitting his factory job and devoting all his time and energy to writing, but he wouldn't make this leap for another dozen years. Fact is, Levi still hadn't reached a wide audience. Nor had he won over many of the critics. Italy's literary elite, the cultural taste-makers, dismissed Levi as a flash in the pan, a dabbler in memoir, a mere chemist who wrote about the concentration camps. "For a long time," said University of Florence professor Alberto Cavaglion, "the Italian literary community simply considered Primo Levi a witness to the Holocaust. He wasn't a writer with a capital 'W,' just a memoirist, which was a lower level of literature. Not an artist like a novelist or poet."

Outside Italy, it was another story. Levi collected kudos and readership in England, France, and even Germany, where *If This Is a Man* was widely read. His biggest splash came in America—with the publication of *The Periodic Table* in 1975. Saul Bellow gushed, "Nothing is superfluous" in Levi's writing and "Everything is essential." Later, in 1983, his novel *If Not Now, When?* became an American bestseller. Based on a true story of Jewish partisans who ambushed Nazis behind enemy lines, *If Not Now, When?* struck a deep and emotional chord with American audiences, especially Jews, who had tired of the constant references of the six million going docilely to the gas chambers. American Jewry hungered for stories about Jewish war heroes. So they celebrated Levi's novel and trumpeted his visit to the United States in 1985. But Levi didn't bask in the attention. He complained that he only met Jews in America and many of them just wanted to "pin the Star of David" on him. It was a pin Levi didn't want to wear. Although sympathetic with Israel, he condemned Menachem Begin and the recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon: it had portrayed Jews as bullies, he said.

Given Jews a bad name.

By the time he reached 60, Primo Levi had become a cult hero. People even began referring to him as a prophet—a title he hated. He had an intense suspicion of delivered wisdom and any sweet-talking gurus who sought to deliver people and their countries from unhappiness. Most prophets, he knew, were false ones—and thus dangerous. “To see the encounters between Hitler and the public on the newsreels is terrifying,” he said. “It is like a flash of lightning, a giving and receiving. That is why I fear charisma.” All it takes for a new massacre, he wrote, is a new buffoon. “It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchanters, those who speak and write ‘beautiful words’ unsupported by intelligent reasons.”

As Levi’s fame grew, his work turned darker. Guilt and self-loathing crept into his writing. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, a collection of essays published the year before his death, Levi goes so far as to attack the privilege that kept him alive in Auschwitz. “The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unfailing phenomenon.” The great majority of Auschwitz survivors, Levi said, had privileged positions, and he quoted Alexander Solzhenitsyn who said much the same thing about Soviet concentration camps: “Almost all those who served a long sentence and whom you congratulate because they are survivors are unquestionably *pridurki*.” If the privileged had been kinder and more human, if they had more interest in helping the unprivileged survive, Levi might have had more sympathy for them. But that was not often the case. “Privilege, by definition,” he said, “defends and protects privilege.”

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi also indicted intellectuals. Yes, he deeply admired learning, but he could be suspicious of people who made their livings by simply thinking and writing. People who did nothing with their hands. Levi suspects many intellectuals of being either too soft or too effete. In the last forty years of his life, when meeting new acquaintances, Levi sized them up in an instant, always putting them in two distinct groups: those who would have survived the camps and those who would have “drowned.” Intellectuals had often “drowned” in the lager because they had never done any hard physical labor and couldn’t withstand the long and punishing workdays, from sunrise to sunset. And yet some intellectuals did make it out of the lager alive. One of Levi’s friends, the Frenchman Jean Amery, was incredibly cerebral and yet still

survived Auschwitz. Amery, who would go on to write his own memoirs of the death camp, had this down-to-earth definition of an intellectual: “a man who lives within a system of reference which is spiritual in the broadest sense” and whose “sphere of associations is essentially humanist and philosophical.” Levi warms to this definition—it is after all the definition of Levi himself—although it’s still not enough to rid him of his anti-intellectual bias. “The intellectual,” Levi wrote damningly, “tends to become an accomplice of Power.”

Not all people liked Levi’s later work and its increasing pessimism. Some blamed it on Levi’s relentless battle with depression. “He was ill and not himself at the end of his life,” said Alberto Cavaglion. “The Primo Levi of *If This Is a Man* and the Primo Levi of 40 years later when he wrote *The Drowned and the Saved*, is a very different man. He’s darker, even nihilistic. He becomes obsessed with ‘The Grey Zone.’”

“The Grey Zone”: One of Levi’s most controversial essays. A deeply pessimistic meditation on Nazi collaborators. In Auschwitz these collaborators included criminals and political prisoners, but also Jews who sought greater privilege to escape the gas chamber. Many of these collaborators became ruthless *Kapos* and members of the *Sonderkommandos* or “Special Squad” which ran the crematoria. The *Sonderkommandoes* also pulled gold teeth, cut hair, and sorted and classified the shoes and clothes of new arrivals. When the Jews were naked and stripped of all their possessions, the Special Squad ushered the unsuspecting prisoners into the gas chambers. Afterward they hauled the dead into the crematoria and oversaw the operation of the ovens, including the sweeping out of the bones and ashes. Like the Mafia, the Nazis extracted trust from their helpers by implicating them in their crimes. Burdened by guilt and covered with blood, the collaborators couldn’t turn back. Not that it saved them. Every few months, the Nazis staged a trick and murdered the *Sonderkommandoes*, whereby a new batch of henchmen took over—their first task being the disposal of their predecessors’ bodies. Levi tells us that twelve successive squads of *Sonderkommandoes*—numbering at any given time from 700 to 1000 men—operated at Auschwitz from 1941-1945. The last Special Squad finally revolted. They blew up the crematoria and tried to overwhelm their captors, but were slaughtered. The Nazis did everything they could, said Levi, to insure that no *Sonderkommandoes* survived, although a handful, by a whim of fate, did survive and told their awful tale to the world.

Primo Levi died on April 11, 1987. He had spent the last several years of his

life working on an uncompleted novel, but the work had not gone well. He complained that he was losing his memory, that great tool of a writer, and he worried about his work no longer connecting with a younger generation of readers. Levi was also shocked and saddened by the increasing number of Holocaust deniers who had gained traction in the Western media and even at universities. His bouts of depression intensified, becoming darker and lasting for longer periods. At home, he would often bury his head disturbingly in his hands. His wife Lucia hated to leave him alone in the apartment, even for short periods.

Ironically, the morning of his death was sunny and clear. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. At about 9:30 Lucia had stepped out to do some shopping, but two others remained in the apartment besides Primo: his mother, 92 and bedridden, and his mother's nurse. At 10 o'clock, the concierge climbed the four stories to his apartment, rang the front door, and delivered to Levi the mail and newspaper. He smiled and thanked her. Just minutes later, after asking his mother's nurse to stay by the phone while he went downstairs for a moment, Primo Levi opened his front door and fell over the inner-railing. He plunged head first, more than 45 feet, and landed with a thud on the marble floor of the lobby, crushing his brain and maiming his body. He probably died instantly. He was 67.

When his wife returned from her shopping and saw his bleeding and crumpled body, she shouted, "No! He's done what he's always said he'd do."

Many of Levi's friends had died by their own hands, including his fellow Auschwitz survivor Jean Amery, but Levi had never spoken out against their deaths. In fact, he almost considered suicide empowering—a liberating, if punishing, final act. "Suicide," he wrote, "is an act of man and not of the animal." This, he explained, was why so comparatively few people committed suicide at Auschwitz—because the Nazis had rendered their prisoners into beasts. Besides, he said, "There was no need to punish oneself by suicide (in the Lager) because of a (true or presumed) guilt: one was already expiating it by one's daily suffering."

Some reacted to Levi's death with shock and consternation. *The New Yorker* suggested that his suicide negated the power and glory of his work, that "the efficacy of all his words had somehow been canceled by his death – that his

hope, or faith, was no longer usable by the rest of us." Others weren't so shortsighted or rash. "We cannot judge Primo Levi by his last act," said Alberto Cavaglion. "We cannot judge him by his suicide. He was sick with depression and much less rational than we suppose." Levi might have agreed: "In my work," he once wrote, "I have portrayed myself variously as courageous, cowardly, prophetic or naïve, but always, I believe, well-balanced. However, I'm not well-balanced at all. I go through long periods of imbalance." At the very end, the imbalance was total.

In the wake of his death, biographers raced to interview Levi's friends and family while the memory of the writer was still fresh. Many people, of course, weren't talking. Lucia Levi said that although she would not impede biographers of her husband, she would not help them either. Her children and others followed suit. In the discrete *Torinese* manner, they continued to guard Levi's privacy. They considered biographers as intrusive and nosy. Suspicious strangers who didn't respect the dead. Perhaps, too, like many Italians, the *Torinese* judged biography a lesser literary genre. What mattered most about a writer wasn't his life, but his work—and who cared about the intersection of the two? Who cared if any secrets went to the grave with Primo Levi? It was his business, not ours. Significantly, more than 35 years after his death, an Italian biography of Levi has yet to appear.

Several others have, in English and in French. The first one by the Brit Carole Angier in 1990. It was called *The Double Bond*—taken from the title of Levi's last unfinished novel—and it caused an uproar. In a mix of fact and imaginative guesswork, Angier claimed that Levi, the great moralist, had engaged in at least two extra-marital affairs. She didn't name names, but identified one of the women as "Lilith" and said Levi carried on with her for five years. Lucia Levi and other family members denied the allegations and denounced Angier. Others wondered: could it be true? Could this wise man, this paragon of ethics, have been hiding something? Other biographers were split on the matter. Some thought Levi too scared of sex and women to have had secret lovers. Besides, there was no concrete evidence of them. Others weren't quite so sure. Sam Magavern seemed to side with Angier, citing the affairs and saying Levi "was not a model spouse." But still there is no certainty. Until now, no "Lilith" has come forward to confess.

What is more certain is the legacy of Primo Levi's work. Today, in Italy, his

stature continues to grow. Streets and plazas have been named after him, and a Primo Levi Institute has opened in his hometown of Turin. Thanks to the memory of Levi and thousands of other Italian Jews, a Holocaust Museum is on the way in Milan, and on January 27, 2014, a Day of Remembrance was instituted in Italy, marking the end of Auschwitz. Levi's books meanwhile have become set texts in Italian schools. A few years ago, the Italian national exam even featured a quote from Primo Levi that all secondary students had to interpret and write about. Past exams featured quotes from Dante, Pirandello, Petrarch, and other literary lions of Italy. Now, suddenly, Primo Levi had entered the pantheon.

Outside Italy, thousands of others read Primo Levi every year. *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce*, and *The Periodic Table* continue to inspire readers with their humanist pleas for rationality, decency, and intelligence. Levi reminds us that human beings are essentially fragile, that many of us are "as naked as eggs without shells." So we need to be mindful of each other. Be kind. We also need to be alert. How easily we can descend into beasts. How easily we can forget ourselves—and our past. Disaster can strike at any time and kill more and more millions. We must not let down our guards. We must not be seduced by sweet words or be dazzled by power and money. "We must not forget," Levi says, "that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stands the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting."

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