

# HOLOCAUST LITERATURE



AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WRITERS AND THEIR WORK

Volume II  
Lerner to Zychlinsky  
Index

S. Lillian Kremer  
EDITOR

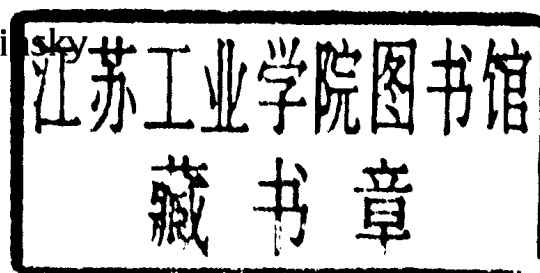


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S. Lillian Kremer

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# HOLOCAUST LITERATURE



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# MOTTI LERNER

(1949– )



MICHAEL TAUB

MOTTI LERNER WAS born on 16 September 1949 in Zichron Yaacov, Israel, into a family of secular, left-wing Zionists. He studied theater at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, in London, and in the United States. His major works include *Kastner* (1985), *Waiting for Messiah* (1987), *Exile in Jerusalem* (1990), *In the Dark* (1992), *Temporary Kingship* (1993), and *Pollard* (1995). Lerner has also written scripts for several successful television programs. Lerner was neither a first- nor a second-generation Holocaust survivor. His parents, Arie and Dvora, came to Palestine long before the war in Europe. Lerner married and he and his wife had three children.

## Israel (Rezso) Kastner

The play *Kastner* is a critical examination of the controversial Holocaust-era negotiations between Hungarian Jews and the Nazis. In 1943, Zionist organizations in Hungary established a “rescue committee” to save and aid thousands of refugees fleeing Nazi-occupied areas of Eastern and Central Europe. Otto Komoly, the head of the Hungarian Zionist organizations, was elected to head this committee. Joel Brand and Dr. Rudolph “Rezso” Kastner served as his deputies.

With the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944, Adolph Eichmann, head of Section 4-B of the Reich security main office (Jewish Affairs), arrived in Budapest to oversee the deportation from Hungary of Eastern Europe’s last sizable Jewish community. The ‘rescue committee’ responded on three separate fronts, negotiating with the Hungarian government (Komoly), with the Germans (Kastner), and with neutral governments such as Sweden and Switzerland (Moshe Kraus). Through Dieter Wisliceny, Eichmann’s deputy, the Germans offered to spare Jewish lives in return for dollars and military material. Until the middle of May

the rescue committee had transferred partial sums of money out of a total \$2 million the Germans had demanded to save the entire Jewish population of Hungary.

As transports to Auschwitz were pulling out of Budapest’s train station, by some estimates carrying between 10,000 to 12,000 deportees a day, Joel Brand and Israel Kastner continued their rescue efforts. Brand traveled to Istanbul to meet with Jewish leaders and arrange a deal involving trading Jews for military trucks. On 30 June 1944 a train with 1,684 people whom Kastner did manage to save left for Switzerland. Several times in 1944 Kastner had traveled to various European capitals (with a German passport), to negotiate “blood for money” arrangements with various German, Jewish, and other officials.

In the famous Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders after the war, Kastner served as a witness for the defense at the trial of Kurt Becher, a German officer with whom he had successfully negotiated the release of some Hungarian Jews. Kastner’s wartime activities became the subject of a trial in Israel, where he lived after the war, worked for the government, and was active in Mapai, a left-wing political party. In January 1954 Malkiel Grunwald, a member of a rival, right-wing organization, filed a lawsuit against Kastner, charging that he collaborated with the Nazis, that he rescued mainly friends and wealthy Jews, that he colluded with the Nazis in repressing the truth about Auschwitz, thus practically eliminating any possible resistance to what was to unfold in Hungary—the extermination of 70 percent of its Jewish population (Dawidowicz, pp. 515–517).

In June 1955 the Israeli courts concluded that “Kastner had sold his soul to the Devil,” but that he committed no crime. On 4 March 1957 three members of a right-wing political organization shot Kastner in front of his Tel Aviv home. He died eleven days later. The following year, the Israeli Supreme Court declared that

"Kastner did not collaborate with the Nazis." The historian Yehuda Bauer asserted in 1985 that Kastner was right to believe that his approach—negotiating with Eichmann, pressing for concessions, delaying transports, rejecting armed resistance—was the only one that under the circumstances had any chance of producing any positive results.

## The Political Aftermath

A great deal has happened between Kastner's trial and Motti Lerner's 1985 stage interpretation of the events. Only four years after Kastner's death, in 1961, Israel and the world revisited the *Shoah* horrors as the Eichmann trial unfolded in Jerusalem. Once again, as in the earlier Nuremberg trials, the key issues centered on responsibility for the atrocities committed. The most chilling line, and one that everyone who watched or listened to the trial remembers, was Eichmann's reply to the prosecution's charges of genocide: "I only followed orders."

While Eichmann's guilt was easy to ascertain, the situation of some surviving Jewish officials, mainly members of the *Judenrat* (the Jewish councils), was much more problematic. Was their work with the Germans in the ghettos an act of cooperation for the sake of the common good, or was it collaboration with the enemy? Did these officials (some appointed by the Germans) help the Nazis carry out their murderous designs in order to save their own skins? Did their involvement actually diminish suffering and slow down the Nazi death machine? In Israel, some of these difficult, and often controversial, questions were tackled by Ben Zion Tomer's 1963 play *Yaldey Hatzel* (*Children of the Shadows*). Except for Tomer's moderately popular play, the Israeli national narrative during the early decades of statehood featured the enemy (Germans and their helpers) on one side and Jewish victims on the other, as prominence was given to armed Jewish resistance—the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Jewish partisans, and Hanna Senesh's martyrdom.

Lerner's play, based on Kastner's activities during the *Shoah*, reflects not only an artistic interpretation of his role in the Hungarian rescue efforts, but the dynamics of contemporary Israeli-Palestinian tensions. The 1967 Six Day War ushered in several years of national euphoria. However, the occupation of a large Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank gradually began to chip away at the Israeli self-image of a morally upright people engaged in a constant struggle for survival, protecting itself against external mortal dangers. A gradual change from an unblamable

people to a self-doubting one was reflected in literature and drama. Israeli Holocaust drama of the 1980s has in large part been shaped by a series of traumatic events that took place a few years earlier: the disastrous 1973 Yom Kippur War, the controversial Lebanon invasion of 1982 (Israel's "Vietnam"), and the Intifada, the uprising of Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza in the mid 1980s (Taub, 1997, p. 133). The accumulated effect of these events has been, among others, the loss of confidence in military power, a reexamination of claims of moral superiority in the Palestinian crisis, and a reevaluation of the *Shoah* and the events leading up to the formation of the state in 1948.

This, then, is the political background against which Lerner's 1985 play *Kastner* is to be understood. In earlier decades, as the state was forging an identity, it was necessary, perhaps even desirable, to "make national heroes out of brave soldiers like the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising rather than of morally ambiguous ghetto leaders like Jacob Gens (in Vilna), and negotiators like Kastner in Budapest" (Michael Taub, quoted in Abramson, p. 167). In 1985, however, the new realities in Israel had prepared the ground for a reevaluation of hitherto controversial or much maligned figures ("collaborators") like Kastner. The topic of "collaboration" and the *Judenrat*, plays about heroes who never held a gun in their hand, imperfect heroes, became popular on the Israeli stage within a short span of seven years (1984–1991). Lerner's *Kastner* shared the spotlight with three other plays on the same subject, namely Joshua Sobol's well-known Vilna ghetto trilogy *Ghetto* (1984), *Adam* (1990), and *Underground* (1991).

As Dan Laor points out, Lerner's play about Kastner is the culmination of several other, earlier works about this prominent Hungarian Jew. In 1982 Israeli television commissioned Yehuda Kaveh to produce a documentary about Kastner, and in 1984, David Levine, then director of Habima, Israel's National Theater, collaborated on a trial drama named *Reszo*, "which challenged the previously accepted notion about Kastner and called for his rehabilitation" (Laor, 1998, pp. 103–104). But it was Lerner's 1985 drama, and the subsequent television series (1994), that drew the most attention to Kastner, his actions during the Holocaust, his trial in the 1950s, and his reputation as a "Nazi collaborator."

## *Kastner*

Lerner's protagonist is an ambitious man, an activist determined to save as many lives as possible. He works



tirelessly to convince Jewish leaders that resistance to the Nazis means suicide, all along pressing Eichmann and his deputies to spare lives in return for money and the promise of legal assistance if and when the Nazis face the wrath of the Allies' courts. While it is true that Kastner enjoys the night life, extramarital affairs, and dining in fine restaurants with Eichmann's deputies, in the end what counts is the fact that his actions, including fraternizing with the devil, result in the rescue of 1,684 people. It is not clear how many thousands more escape death as a result of his efforts. While some in the *Judenrat* question his work, Kastner believes that when lives are involved all else is immaterial. In short, Lerner's hero is obsessed with saving lives. He is a flawed individual. He confronts the Germans head on and the Germans tolerate his chutzpa because they believe he can be of use to them, especially in helping them quell rumors about a mass deportation to Auschwitz. While no one disputes Kastner's role in saving hundreds of lives, the historical figure was far from the elegant, eloquent, worldly, lady killer presented in this particular stage version. Kastner's reliance on Eichmann's word (his promise to spare a certain number of Jews) may seem naïve in retrospect; however, in the context of the times—the Russians fast approaching Hungary and divisions within the highest German ranks as to the wisdom of a "Final Solution" with the end in sight—there is no doubt that his assessment of the situation was valid.

In one of the play's typical dramatic exchanges with Freudiger (of the *Judenrat*), Kastner reacts to the charges of immorality in dealing with the devil: "I am the one who is contaminated with his (the devil's) slime when I come to offer you things in his name. I am doing all that, not you! But when he offers to release Jews, I'm willing to do business with him, even for a single Jew. And when he offers me a chance to save a million Jews, who am I to say 'no more deals with the devil'? You, who are supposed to be the leaders of these Jews, who gives you the right to say a thing like that?" (*Kastner*, p. 250). It is through such exchanges that the viewer becomes familiar with the various antagonists and their views on how best to deal with the Germans and the Hungarian fascists.

As the play indicates, this Jewish leader puts life before anything else. Lerner's subtext suggests that while true that heroic, armed resistance helps preserve Jewish pride and that morally pure fighters who died "*al kidush hashem*" (sanctifying God's name) must be honored, in the final analysis, one must consider how many Jews live because of heroic actions and how many because of the less-than-honorable actions of Kastner and others like him. In the political environment of 1985 Israel, Lerner's challenge to conventional

narratives' glorifying only the fighters of the resistance resonated with the viewing public. In an Israel torn by a controversial Vietnam-like war in Lebanon, a Palestinian uprising in the making, and deep divisions over the fate of the occupied territories, Kastner's call for pragmatism and respect for human life over idealism and nationalism found many listening with great interest.

## Reactions to *Kastner*

The Israeli public had mixed reactions to Lerner's play. The more liberal among them delighted in Lerner's rehabilitation of this rather controversial figure in Israeli society. Kastner's family was equally pleased with the play's sanctioning of Kastner's actions. Some reviews pointed to the implicit parallel between Kastner's dealing with the devil and Israel's need to deal with its own devil for the sake of peace, namely the PLO leadership. Many on the right side of the political spectrum denounced Lerner and voiced displeasure with what they felt was a disgraceful glorification of the activities of a self-serving collaborator. Theater critics praised the importance of the play for historical reasons and for daring to revisit some of the more controversial issues related to the *Shoah*. They were almost unanimous in criticizing Lerner's didactic tone, the play's excessive length, and its lack of sufficient tension and drama. The play is written in realistic style like a documentary, with scenes rapidly following each other and is reminiscent of Brecht's "Epic Theater" style of the 1930s. The issues raised in *Kastner* were hotly debated across the pages of Israel's newspapers, featuring famous historians, survivors, Kastner's children, and others. If nothing else it surely rehabilitated Kastner in the eyes of most Israelis, who were taught that collaborators were "cowards" and "traitors."

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# PRIMO LEVI

(1919–1987)



ROBERT S. C. GORDON

PRIMO LEVI'S WORKS of testimony, narrative, poetry, and essays about his time in Auschwitz are among the most widely read and lauded of all writing on the Holocaust. Perhaps no other survivor wrote of these unbearable events with such accessible economy, elegant wit, and humane power over such a long period of time. And if he started as one of many survivors who turned to writing in the immediate aftermath of the outrage they had endured, only to be ignored by most around them, the literary quality of his work has meant that he has increasingly come to be regarded as one of the essential voices of twentieth-century literature.

In an oeuvre forged over four decades—between 1946 and his death in 1987—Levi demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to confront, with directness and persistence, the complexities of human cruelty and human suffering he had learned firsthand in Auschwitz. His readers consistently found in him a sane, if troubled, voice to guide them through the quagmire of moral and historical dilemmas posed by the Final Solution. They also found in him a builder of bridges between the horrors of the camps and the fragile values of the liberal, modern, secular world to which he belonged, and which had been pushed so close to annihilation by National Socialism. Through him, many readers—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—could see themselves living and thinking through the events he described. This won him not only praise, but also an intense, even intimate engagement with his readers. At his death—presumed by almost everyone who knew him, including his close family, to have been by suicide—many wrote of a sense of bereavement, of the loss of a friend or companion as much as of a great writer.

## Life

Primo Levi was born on 31 July 1919 on the Corso Re Umberto, in Turin, northwest Italy, in the apartment

where he was to live his entire life, except for the period immediately before, during, and immediately after Auschwitz. He was the first child of Cesare Levi and Ester (née Luzzati). His sister, Anna Maria, was born two years later. The family belonged to the small and largely assimilated Jewish community of Turin, with roots back into the Sephardic communities of Spain and southern France that had moved into Piedmont in the sixteenth century (Levi describes some of his eccentric extended family in the “Argon” section of *The Periodic Table*).

Levi attended the Liceo Massimo d’Azeglio, a school once famous as a seedbed of liberal antifascist views, although somewhat tamed by the time of Levi’s arrival in 1934. His father, an electrical engineer, had been close to the positivist circles of the city’s intelligentsia (which included the criminologist Cesare Lombroso), and Primo followed him in his voracious, eclectic reading and in his rejection of the humanist education on offer at the *liceo*. He also acquired a taste for mountaineering as another way out of the stultifying school curriculum. He opted to study chemistry at Turin University. Despite the obstacles set in his path by the antisemitic 1938 Race Laws—modeled on the Nuremberg Laws but in certain respects even more repressive—he managed to graduate in 1941 in the physics faculty. In the same year, his father died.

Levi then spent a period working in Milan and frequenting a lively group of friends, but with the fall of fascism in July 1943 and Italy’s armistice with the Allies in September, everything changed. He joined the armed resistance against the rump Fascists and the Nazi occupiers of northern Italy, but he was betrayed and captured almost immediately. Preferring to declare himself a Jew rather than to risk execution as a partisan, he was sent from the Valle d’Aosta to a holding camp at Fossoli where, in February 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz. On arrival there he was selected as fit to work and sent to the satellite camp Auschwitz III-

Monowitz, where he remained until liberation by the Red Army in January 1945, having been left behind by the evacuating Germans to die of scarlet fever. His first book, *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*, also published as *Survival in Auschwitz*, 1947)—perhaps the greatest single work of Holocaust testimony—is an account of his eleven months in the camp. He reached Turin again in October 1945 after a long, halting journey home described in *La tregua* (*The Truce*, 1963).

On his return, he immediately began writing stories and poems about his time in Auschwitz. With the doctor and fellow deportee Leonardo De Benedetti, he completed a medical report on the sanitary conditions in Monowitz that they had drafted for the Russians while in the holding camps at Katowice. The paper appeared in a prestigious medical journal, *Minerva medica*, in 1946, and is significant as Levi's first piece of published work. Several of his stories were published at the time in small journals, and they gradually came together to form a book, published as *Se questo è un uomo* in 1947 by a small, short-lived publishing house, De Silva, run by a well-known antifascist activist Franco Antonicelli. This book had been rejected by several more prestigious publishers, including Einaudi in Turin, where the writers Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese were editorial consultants. It was praised by a small number of reviewers (including the young Italo Calvino) and won a certain reputation within Turin, but had little wider impact.

Levi meanwhile started a career as an industrial chemist and manager, mostly in a paint factory outside Turin, where he worked for thirty years. He also settled into domestic life with his wife, Lucia (née Morpurgo), whom he married in 1947. They had a daughter, Lisa, in 1948 and a son, Renzo, in 1957. Levi stopped writing with regularity, although he continued to conceive and sketch out stories and poems throughout this phase of apparent silence. He traveled occasionally for work, and, from the mid-1950s onwards, spoke constantly in public about his Holocaust experiences and about his books. His life was to remain remarkably stable from the late 1940s onward.

In 1955, with interest in the Holocaust growing, Einaudi reconsidered their original verdict and offered Levi a contract for a second edition of *Se questo è un uomo*. He made a small but significant number of changes, polishing the style and adding several new sequences. After a delay, the book was republished in 1958 and was well received. The 1958 edition, the one read today (with certain additions), was the foundation for Levi's extraordinary subsequent reputation. It was almost immediately translated into English, appearing in 1959–1960 in Britain in the powerful version of the

young British historian Stuart Woolf, who worked with Levi on the translation in a series of visits to his apartment on the Corso Re Umberto. In Italy, this and other books (beginning with *La tregua*) were soon adopted as set texts in high schools, of immense importance in explaining the depth of contact between Levi and Italian readers over the following decades, despite the slightly faint praise of the literary elite. The success of *Se questo è un uomo* and the encouragement of friends persuaded Levi to write more assiduously, and in 1963 he completed and published *La tregua*, which won a literary prize and launched him into a career as a writer *per se* for the first time. In 1966 and 1971 respectively, he published two collections of science-fiction stories, *Storie naturali* (*Natural Histories*; initially under a pseudonym, Damiano Malabaila, as he feared alienating readers who expected only solemn, Holocaust-related work from him) and *Vizio di forma* (*Formal Defect*).

In 1975 he published *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*), an autobiography loosely structured around the chemical elements. Each chapter centers on a real, fictional, or metaphorical encounter with an element at a certain time of Levi's life. His next work, *La chiave a stella* (*The Wrench*, 1978), was, by contrast, very local in its style and theme (although not in geographical setting): it consisted of stories of an industrial rigger, Liberto Fausone, who, in an odd mixture of Piedmontese dialect and technical jargon, tells of his epic and intimate struggles with bridges, dams, and the like. And yet, as several interviews show, Levi saw *The Wrench* as closely related to *The Periodic Table*, and incorporated his most cherished values into both books.

*The Wrench*, set in an unnamed Soviet town (in reality based on Togliattigrad, which Levi had visited for work), also stands as a farewell meditation on his working career: as he was composing it he was also going into retirement to become, finally, a full-time writer. His only full-fledged work of fiction, *Se non ora, quando?* (*If Not Now, When?*), the story of a Jewish partisan band in World War II, followed in 1982, winning two prestigious prizes but also some criticism for its "over-researched" reconstruction of the Ashkenazic culture of Eastern Europe.

By the 1980s, Levi already had a devoted but relatively small following abroad, but when *The Periodic Table* was translated in the mid-1980s, it was hailed in America especially—Saul Bellow called it "a necessary book"—and it was responsible for propelling Levi's international reputation to new levels. All his work was rapidly translated in the following years, and he made a number of trips abroad, including to America and Britain. Back in Italy, his fame and his retire-

ment facilitated a stream of publications of collected and new essays, stories, poems, and articles. The year 1981 saw *Lilít e altri racconti*, containing essays, camp stories, and science-fiction stories, and *La ricerca delle radici* (*The Search for Roots*), a fascinating annotated anthology of his favorite and formative books. He was more a public figure now, writing for the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* and turning out prefaces to a whole series of important books and exhibitions about the Holocaust (including work by Yitzhak Katzenelson, Leon Poliakov, Edith Bruck, Hermann Langbein, Rudolf Höss and the television series *Holocaust*), an activity that made him a key figure in encouraging the translation and dissemination of Holocaust-related material in Italy. Between 1983 and 1985 translations of Kafka's *The Trial* and two books by Claude Lévi-Strauss appeared. His collected poems appeared in 1984 under the Coleridgean title *Ad ora incerta* (*At an Uncertain Hour*) and in the following year came his most characteristically eclectic and curious volume of essays, *L'altrui mestiere* (*Other People's Trades*). More of his articles for *La Stampa* were collected for the 1986 volume *Racconti e saggi* (*Stories and essays*).

A year before his death, he drew together his reflections on Auschwitz in his most considered, but also most troubled book, *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*). These essays, prepared over a period of several years, revisit many of the moral and historical questions raised by the Holocaust that had concerned him for so long, and are models in humane, ethical meditation. At the same time, they contain moments of genuine anguish, anger, and ambivalence. Indeed, the acceleration in publishing and growth in public profile in the 1980s was by no means without pressures and anxieties for Levi. He was vexed by periods of writer's block, frustrated by the distortions in his reception abroad (especially in America, where he felt he was being lionized but also absorbed into a conception of the European Jewish writer that he knew he did not fit, only then to be criticized for not fitting it), and deeply concerned by pernicious negationist and "revisionist" accounts of the Holocaust appearing in France and Germany. He was also increasingly disillusioned with speaking to the young: he felt they no longer understood why what he had to say was important. Finally, he was depressed by his own state of health and that of his aging mother and mother-in-law. Nevertheless, he remained active, talking, writing, and planning future work (including a new novel, tentatively entitled *Il doppio legame* (*The Double Bind*), until his presumed suicide on 11 April 1987 at the age of sixty-seven.

## *If This Is a Man*

*If This Is a Man* was written by a young man of twenty-seven, struggling to come to terms with his deportation and his survival. He was unsure of the future and strangely alienated from those around him at home, who had lived through equally dramatic but profoundly different experiences of war and civil war during his absence. He immediately felt the impulse to tell stories to family, friends, and strangers, and to write them down (as he had at Monowitz, where he scribbled notes even though he knew they would be lost and could easily cost him his life). His resonant lifelong identification with Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, forced to tell his "ghastly tale" to all who pass before him, begins here. During 1946 and 1947, however, as he told and retold the stories that were to become *If This Is a Man*, there occurred in his relation to his writing a change that was to be fundamental to his future oeuvre, a move from catharsis and memorial to articulate reflection and a careful search for understanding. He describes the process in *The Periodic Table*:

[At first] what I had seen and suffered burnt within me; I felt nearer to the dead than the living and guilty simply for being a man, because men had built Auschwitz and Auschwitz had swallowed up millions of human beings . . . I thought I could cleanse myself by telling the story . . . [Gradually, however] the writing itself turned into something different, no longer a painful journey of convalescence, no longer a way of begging for compassion and friendly faces from my solitude, but rather a lucid work of construction. I was like the chemist who weighs and separates, measures and judges by certain indices, and works hard to answer questions why (*Opere*, i, 870, 872–873) translated by Robert S. C. Gordon).

Clearheaded analysis never quite eliminates the anger and pain in Levi, however, pace too many descriptions of him as the epitome of the calm, rational eye. Both sides run throughout his work and through *If This Is a Man* in particular. This and other internal conflicts led Levi more than once to compare himself to the figure of a centaur. The book's two prefatory texts—its poem-epigraph and preface—neatly illustrate the split. In the former—a paraphrase of the *Shema* prayer—Levi's anger is Mosaic, auguring those who do not heed him "that your house might crumble, / that illness might impede you / that your children might turn their faces from you." (*Opere*, i, 3) In the latter, by contrast, he offers his work modestly as "a set of materials for the calm study of certain aspects of the human mind."

The main body of *If This Is a Man* comprises seventeen chapters. It does not offer a detailed, sequential chronicle of events in the camp. Chapters are instead



episodic and largely self-contained (one of Levi's instinctive talents was for the resonant closing off of a chapter or episode). They are shaped principally around either sketches of people he encountered or around meditations on fear, humiliation, violence, shame, happiness, survival, and the like. In neither case is Levi's testimony notably introspective; indeed, his other-centered style of storytelling is one of his most distinctive characteristics. Thus "A Good Day" relates a rare set of circumstances that led to Levi's work group having time to rest and eat, and in moving through those precious hours of calm, the chapter turns into an ironic meditation on the nature of happiness and freedom ("... for a few hours, then, we can be unhappy, just like free men"). The chapter that gave Levi the title of his last book, "The Drowned and the Saved," uses a series of character vignettes to pose the tricky moral-ethological question whether certain character types were predisposed to survive or not.

The timeless quality of the book is no accident: By dulling or localizing the sense of narrative sequence or suspense, the book takes a turn toward a range of ethical, psychological, political (in a loose sense), or anthropological issues that are veiled behind that phrase from the preface, "a calm study of certain aspects of the human mind" (*Opere*, i, 5). But timelessness was also an essential and alienating reality of camp life itself: the sense of repetitiveness and stasis engendered by a system of oppression where every day brought the same struggle for food and rest, the same crushing work, the same fear of random assault, and a regimentation bordering on the absurd. This is perhaps best encapsulated in a passage from "The Events of the Summer": "[H]ours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past, always too slowly, a valueless and superfluous material, of which we sought to rid ourselves as soon as possible. . . . For us, history had stopped" (*Opere*, i, 113).

Despite all this, Levi crafts a loose sense of progress through the months and the seasons in *If This Is a Man*. The first three chapters—"The Journey," "On the Bottom," and "Initiation" (the latter added for the 1958 edition)—are transitional, taking us on the terrible physical and psychological journey from Italy to the camps, by way of the cattle trucks, the rituals of selection and initiation, the continual and total bewilderment of Levi and his companions, through to an ambivalent first lesson in moral survival given by the Austrian officer Steinlauf:

that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want

to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilisation (*Opere*, i, 35).

It is a moving moment, but also one that Levi questions, seeing in Steinlauf's noble stance at least a hint of the Teutonic rigidity of pure principle that, in perverted form, subtended the *Lager* itself. This nuanced self-positioning and openness to doubt is characteristic of Levi's mode of inquiry throughout his work.

If the first three chapters frame *If This Is a Man* at one end, it is framed at the close by its two final chapters, "The Last One" and "The Story of Ten Days." The former, with its story of the hanging of the last resister in the camp in front of the massed ranks of prisoners, including Primo and his close companion Alberto, is self-consciously eschatological, as its title suggests. It marks the nearing collapse of the Nazi regime, but also the darkest depths of abjection felt by Levi and his fellows, stripped of all will to resist. Immediately following, "The Story of Ten Days" describes in diary form the days of appalling limbo—"the world of death and phantoms,"—between the Germans' departure and the arrival of the Red Army, when Levi and a small number of sick inmates are left behind to die rather than forced, like thousands of others, onto the death marches toward Germany. The sequence is terrifying and grotesque, as Levi and his companions are forced to choose between sharing what little food they have among themselves or dying by sharing it with the many clamoring at their ward door. Thus "the work of bestial degradation" (*Opere*, i, 168) continues with a sort of awful momentum even after the Germans have gone. At the same time, infinitesimal signs of rebirth take on momentous symbolic significance: after Levi and his French friends manage to construct a makeshift stove, for example, he comments exultantly (and ironically), "we were broken by tiredness, but we seemed to have finally accomplished something useful—perhaps like God after the first day of creation" (*Opere*, i, 157).

The layered combination of stasis and sequence in *If This Is a Man* also points to fundamental features of Levi's attitude toward the Holocaust and the task of his testimonial work. In particular it works to strengthen a thread running through much of the book: its focus on sites or moments of fragile reprieve, when a residual human consciousness resurfaces, when Levi and his fellows see themselves. This applies not only to the chapters at the beginning and end of the book, but also to the passages on dreams (a dream is a reprieve, a moment of rest, but also often one of excruciating, tantalizing suffering); to the chapter on the

camp hospital ("Ka Be"), hardly a place of caring, but just tranquil enough for feelings of shame and memories of home to resurface; to the chapters set in the Buna chemical laboratory, where encountering some local girls only serves to remind Levi how physically repugnant he now is, and how unthinkingly guilty of passive collaboration most "on the outside" are.

No other writer has mapped these strange, temporary, or metaphorical nonplaces—"gray zones" neither wholly within nor wholly outside the camp system, where he is both victim and observer at once—with more acuity than Levi. In such "no man's lands" between "there" and "here," his vision of the sense and the nonsense of the concentration camps is at its sharpest. It is a pattern repeated later in his work also, reaching a zenith in perhaps the very darkest page he ever wrote, at the end of *The Truce*, when he describes his occasional fear that nothing, not even his refound family, friends, and home, is wholly outside the *Lager*, that in an instant, all could be revealed as another tantalizing dream, that "nothing is true outside the Lager" (*Opere*, i, 395).

Describing and redescribing the moments of partial reprieve and transition pulls Levi toward certain key themes that mark out his unique contribution to the literature of the Holocaust. Three of these, key themes in *If This Is a Man*, are of special and sustained importance for his oeuvre as a whole: language, friendship, and culture.

The fascination with language—idiom, translation, symbols, and so forth, is perhaps the dominant pure intellectual pleasure of Levi's career after chemistry. In *If This Is a Man*, language plays a role of immense importance, in part for the very practical reason that Levi, as an Italian, was one of very few Jewish inmates of Auschwitz not to speak Yiddish, even if he was fortunate to have a smattering of scientific German. The risk of neither understanding fellow prisoners nor German guards heightened his sensitivity to the life-or-death importance of language and communication, to the strange Babel of languages in the camps, which merged to form jargons unique to that place and time, degrading other languages and displacing communication onto other "signs of meaning," such as punches, kicks, and blows. It also sensitized Levi from an early stage to the obstacles he would meet in using language afterward to represent Auschwitz, a defining problem of writing on the notion of testimony as it later developed: "Then for the first time we realised that our language has no words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (*Opere*, i, 20).

Parallel to his focus on language is Levi's running concern with human relations, with the reciprocity and

humane acknowledgment of friendship, even in the violently hostile, systematically divisive universe of the concentration camps. Levi's friendships with Alberto, his camp "twin," and with the Italian laborer Lorenzo, whose selfless favors help him survive, are the strongest human links running through the book, and the strongest links to a continued sense of human worth. They are also indicative of another element of careful ethical (perhaps even political) positioning by Levi, who chooses such bonds of companionship, of the local and contingent, over either the atomized isolation or the indistinct massification that were encouraged by the Nazi system at one and the same time. Of course, Levi has no illusions about the capacity of friendship to challenge violence: Alberto disappears on the death march after Auschwitz's evacuation; Lorenzo, as a later essay reveals, returns to Italy a broken man.

Finally, *If This Is a Man* shows Levi as, in at least two ways, an analyst of culture and its role in the camps. First, as critics like Marco Belpoliti have consistently pointed out, Levi in all his writings is instinctively an "anthropologist," interested in human behavior, rituals, perceptions, and symbols, and what happens when these are torn away:

consider how much value and meaning there is in the smallest of our everyday habits, in the hundred objects that even the humblest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a loved one. . . . And now imagine a man who, along with his dearest, is deprived of his home, his habits, his clothes, in short of literally everything he possesses: he will be a shell of a man . . . (*Opere*, i, 20).

Levi was also drawn to culture in the narrower, "higher" sense, as the most famous episode of all in *If This Is a Man* testifies. In the chapter "The Canto of Ulysses," as Levi slowly carries some soup with his French companion Jean (another rare, brief moment of respite), he takes up the crazy project of reciting from memory and translating into French the great Ulysses canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* XXVI). The evocation of the canto, the school-learned verses, Ulysses' speech urging his men on to "virtue and knowledge" in the face of adversity, the landscape that reminds Levi of his home, the delirium of exhaustion and fear, and the human contact with Jean, all come together in a heady sequence in which Levi thinks he intuits for an instant "the very reason for our fate, for our being here today . . ." (*Opere*, ii, III). It is typical of Levi that this oblique episode, in itself strangely detached from the horrendous place and time in which it occurs, should produce the moment of high-

est clarity about the Holocaust and the human condition anywhere in his work.

### From *If This Is a Man* to *The Drowned and the Saved*

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, published in 1986, Levi looks back at *If This Is a Man* and describes it as “a nomadic animal which has for forty years now left behind it a long and intricate trail,” suggesting that his later work might be read as what Alberto Cavaglion has called an extended series of glosses on that first book (*Opere*, ii, 1124). This is not to say that his work is repetitive (although one of the tasks of any survivor-witness is to find ways of repeating him- or herself). Levi shapes his testimony into many forms over the forty years of his literary and public career, including essays, poems, short stories, science fiction, fiction, autobiography, journalism, occasional writings, legal depositions, interviews, lectures and discussions at schools and public meetings. His style changes also over the decades, perhaps most notably in the thinning out of what several critics have identified as the rather formal, antiquated rhetorical touches in *If This Is a Man*, which include doses of Old Testament and Dantesque calques, in favor of a growing lightness and rhythmic fluidity of style. But there are also strong lines of continuity from first to last.

There is, first of all, a thin line of evolution that connects the writing and substance of *If This Is a Man* to that of *The Drowned and the Saved*. As noted above, the title of the latter derives from the former (indeed, it was Levi's title for his first book until Franco Antonicelli intervened). As also noted, there is a prehistory to *If This Is a Man*, in the medical report for *Minerva medica* and in the poems Levi wrote in 1946–1947, eight of which would appear in his collected poems, *Ad ora incerta*, in 1984. The medical report is a sort of “degree zero” of Levi's clinical, analytical writing style, which he later liked to compare to a weekly factory report. The poetry, by contrast, shows a more intense, emotive, angry Levi, as in “Shemà.” This use of poetry as an escape valve for anger, even sarcasm, continued in his later occasional bursts of verse writing, as in a 1960 poem “Per Adolf Eichmann”: Oh son of death, we do not wish you death. / May you live longer than anyone ever lived, / May you live sleepless five million nights.

In the mid-1950s, Levi rewrote parts of *If This Is a Man*, adding several important passages. The book was adapted for radio in 1964 and for the stage in 1966,

with his collaboration. In 1961 and 1979, he wrote important prefaces for the German editions of the book, and in doing so, as he confessed later in *The Drowned and the Saved*, realized that his ideal audience, the reader he had subconsciously intended as he wrote the book, was a German, one of those who had stood by in so-called ignorance. In 1973, he wrote an introduction and explanatory notes for a school edition of the book. In 1976, he added a lengthy appendix, in which he selected and answered the most common questions he had been asked over the years. This appendix became an integral part of later editions of the book, and is also the seedbed of the essays that over the following decade would coalesce into *The Drowned and the Saved*. This direct line to *The Drowned and the Saved* is paralleled by another line of work in the intervening years that took Levi's testimonial concerns in indirect and often more literary directions. There are four key moments in this line: *The Truce*, parts of *The Periodic Table*, the Holocaust-related short stories in collections of the 1980s, and *If Not Now, When?*

*The Truce* describes, with exuberant, picaresque energy, always underpinned by the raw memory of the Lager, Levi's meandering journey home after liberation. Although parts of it were already among the stories he had sketched out in the 1940s, most of it was written at a distance of a decade and more from the events it relates, and the book is more stylish, more literarily achieved, and more varied as a result. For all its lightness, however, *The Truce* shows Levi extending several of the techniques, motifs, and concerns already on display in *If This Is a Man*. First, the overarching conceit of the title image—the journey home as a truce, a pause between two realities: the camps and the everyday world—leads directly back to the spaces of transition so characteristic of *If This Is a Man*. In this transitional, contingent phase, the most acute moral reflections and intense human interactions seem to emerge from chance encounters and events. The capacity of Levi and others in *The Truce* (especially his two cunning, tricky companions Cesare the Roman and Mordo Nahum the Greek) to exploit the vagaries of fortune to their advantage brings out and develops a further thread already hinted at in the first book whose preface began with the bold irony: “It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz in February 1944 . . .” (*Opere*, i, 5). In the camps, the random arrival of death was so overwhelming that maneuvering for advantage and “organizing” (as camp jargon had it) all too often proved futile. *The Truce* also displays, greatly extended, Levi's penchant for the character vignette: the book is packed full of comic, vital, often caricatural presences. Levi's contacts with the characters he de-

scribes also echo his faith in friendship and human contact, here often glossed as a sort of commerce—the exchange of trust, goods, or human warmth for mutual advantage. Those same contacts also extend his fascination with language and communication, as shown in one of the book's comic set pieces, in which Levi and Cesare are forced to mime a chicken in order to ask for food from some local peasants.

In the chaos of colliding groups, nationalities, and rules of law in postwar Eastern Europe; in the long months stuck in holding camps or traveling east by train in order to go west—the sheer pointless disorder of it all works to rekindle a sense of life in Levi, after Auschwitz. But the book ends on a terrifying note of pessimism that underscores the closed, temporary pattern implied by the book's title, *The Truce* (a nuance lost in the other English title of the book, *The Reawakening*).

*The Periodic Table* has only two chapters directly related to Levi's time in the camps, although several of the early chapters include delicate and rich portraits of moments in his early life in Fascist Italy that, retrospectively, seem to foreshadow his later experiences (most eloquently, the chapter "Iron," on his mountaineering with his friend Sandro, who was driven by "an obscure need to prepare himself (and me) for an iron future which was getting nearer day by day") (*Opere*, i, 778). "Cerium," the only story set in the camps, expands on a moment of *If This Is a Man* to tell the full story of how Primo and Alberto used their chemistry and cunning, respectively, to manufacture cigarette lighters using cerium found in Levi's laboratory workplace. "Vanadium," set many years after the war, tells of Levi's chance contact through work correspondence with one of the German supervisors of that camp laboratory, Müller. Müller wants a form of absolution from Levi, and a meeting. Levi cannot give the former and is deeply troubled by the prospect of the latter. The German dies suddenly, before the meeting can take place.

"Cerium" is one of a kind with the dozen or so *Lager* stories in *Lilít* and another handful of stories and essays in *Racconti e saggi*. In this vein, Levi seems to project the lighter tone and adventurous qualities of *The Truce* back into the world of the concentration camp. He also develops a self-conscious interest in Yiddish culture and humor, giving hints of his reading of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Sholem Aleichem; this interest would bear fruit in his only work of pure fiction, *If Not Now, When?*

*If Not Now, When?* is a tragicomic, broad-canvas historical novel of the Jewish resistance to Nazism in Eastern Europe. It centers on Mendel, a wearied hero

whose village has been destroyed and wife killed. He joins up with the taciturn and enigmatic Russian Leonid, and they in turn join first a Russian partisan group and then—the true heroes of the piece—a motley Jewish partisan group, led by the violin-playing, Chagallian figure Gedale. As a map in the book shows, Mendel's travels crisscross the same terrain traveled by Levi in *The Truce*. And indeed, Mendel's character and responses make of him a sort of Levi without a home to go to (a contrast that serves to underline the importance of the motif of home in Levi). In interviews about the book, Levi spoke of his unease at attempting the novel form so late in his career, but also of how compelling he found the independent lives of the characters he had created. Mendel and his friends end up in Italy, waiting for passage to Israel, and the novel closes (perhaps too neatly) as the atomic bomb explodes at Hiroshima.

*The Drowned and the Saved* brings together the two strands of Levi's testimony discussed thus far: direct extensions of *If This Is a Man* and the freer adaptations of Levi's testimonial concerns in other literary forms and registers. It is a book of essays, but it retains the strong episodic, narrative texture of his other work. At certain points, it explodes into an anger that recalls moments of his poetry. Indeed, some have seen the tensions between the essay form (none of his earlier works contained essays of the substantial historical-moral kind attempted here) and Levi's more natural narrative impulse as signs of how problematic the practice of testimony had become for Levi decades after the Event.

There are eight essays in the book, as well as a preface and conclusion. The core themes of the essays are, respectively: memory and its deceptions in both the guilty and the innocent; the "gray zone" of moral ambiguity that lies between the simple stereotypes of victim and oppressor—a notion since taken up by many writers on Fascism and Nazism; shame, especially the paradoxical shame of the survivor; communication; Nazi violence, defined resonantly as "useless," by which Levi means something between redundant in its excess and solipsistic in its generation of further violence and nothing else in what he calls a "genealogy of violence" (*Opere*, i, 778); the benefits and dangers of being an intellectual in Auschwitz (this chapter is an extended response to the work of Jean Améry); stereotypes—their uses but also the dangers of applying them to complex and extreme situations such as the *Lager*; and, the role and responsibilities of German civilians, related in a powerful sequence of letters exchanged between Levi and German readers of *If This Is a Man*.