

## Primo Levi and the Italian Memory of the Shoah

by Anna Baldini

### Abstract

*By drawing on the literary and intellectual trajectory of the writer Primo Levi, the essay underlines the most relevant turning points in the shaping of an Italian memory of the Shoah. A contextualization of Levi's work puts into evidence the intermingling of national and international factors in this process, as well as the role a single individual can play in the shaping of a collective memory.*

### - Introduction

- 1947: *Se questo è un uomo* rejected
- From 1955 to the Eichmann Trial
- At the Theatre
- The “voice of the deportation”
- Stereotypes
- NBC's Holocaust: The Witness and the Fiction
- Bearing Witness after Levi's Death

---

### Introduction

Over the past twenty years, memorializing the Nazi persecution and extermination of Jews and other minority groups has become in many countries a civic duty supported by governmental institutions.<sup>1</sup> In parallel, historians have begun to interrogate the conditions that made possible the consolidation of so peculiar a cultural formation, namely a “collective memory.” The Israeli data analyzed by Tom Segev, the French data analyzed by Annette Wieviorka, and the United States data analyzed by Peter Novick<sup>2</sup>—to cite only the seminal works of this historical trend—have shown how, in each of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This process of institutionalization results in the proclamation of the “Holocaust memorial days,” whose chronology varies from country to country: for example, in Israel (1953), the United States (1980), Germany (1996), France and Italy (2000), Great Britain (2001), and the UN and EU (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See Tom Segev, *Ha-Milyon ha-shevi'i: ha-Yisre'elim veba-Sho'ah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1991). Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon 1998). Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). The British edition of the book is identical to the American one, but bears a different title: *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: the American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

different case studies, this process has evolved along two parallel trajectories. On the one side, the memory of the Shoah focuses on some “objects” or global cultural “events,” which spread out contemporaneously in diverse national backgrounds and whose success alternated or was integrated according to common patterns; on the other hand, the modalities of importation or exportation of these same objects varies according to national frameworks, while their meanings are connoted with specific details.<sup>3</sup> The national particularities depend on many factors: the refashioning of World War Two memories, which vary from country to country, woven within the international ideological conflicts and their local manifestations; the relationship that each national context builds with its Jewish community, and both their relationships with the State of Israel; public, especially legislative and educational, initiatives, and the contributions of mass media, which perform a variety of roles in forging public opinion in different countries and periods.

The same object — cultural product or historical event — thus occasions distinct resonances, depending on the field of political, social, and cultural forces containing it. The television miniseries *Holocaust* is not the same when moving American audiences in 1978 and disturbing the Germans in 1979 – just as obvious are the differences, starting with their very names, between the museums constructed in the USA and German capitals: the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, opened in 1993, and the exhibition on the bottom level of the Jüdisches Museum in Berlin, opened in 2001. Likewise, the presence of Giorgio Perlasca in the Garden of the Just in Yad Vashem has a function that does not coincide with that of the same figure when he is “discovered” in Italy; reading *Se questo è un uomo* in a high school in the 1970s is different from reading the same book in a university classroom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and its author, Primo Levi, did not receive in the 1980s the same unconditional approval in Italy and in the United States, where the dominant interpretation of the survivor-witness was the mystical-theological one given by Elie Wiesel.

Actually, although within complex social dynamics, the imprint of the choices, culture and personalities of some individuals can be decisive for the specific characteristics of a national memory. “What would talk of the Holocaust be like in America,” Peter Novick asked, “if a skeptical rationalist like Primo Levi, rather than a religious mystic like Wiesel, had been its principal interpreter?”<sup>4</sup> History, as we well known, is not made from this

---

<sup>3</sup> To designate this field of globalized objects, the most common “label” employed in an international context is *Holocaust Field* or *Holocaust Discourse*, “Holocaust” being the term most widely used in the English speaking area to designate the Nazi racial exterminations. In Italy, instead, the term “Shoah” has predominated over the last two decades: Robert Gordon analyses the reasons for this distinction in *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 176-180. The use of one or the other terms constitutes an important chapter in the history of memory: see Anna-Vera Sullam Calimani, *I nomi dello sterminio* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 351. Novick does not make too much of an effort to hide his own predilection for this counterfactual hypothesis. About the success of Levi’s work among the liberal

kind of hypotheses; what a historical investigation can do, instead, is reverse the question: what cultural traits characterize the memory of the Shoah in Italy, where the figure and work of Levi have indeed been so crucial? The first person who has tried to respond to this question is a British scholar, Robert Gordon, in a 2006 essay, now followed by a detailed and exhaustive book, which joins the already cited case studies by Segev, Wieviorka, and Novick: *The Holocaust in Italian Culture (1944-2010)*.<sup>5</sup> I certainly cannot, in the brief space of this essay, give an account of the entire panorama reconstructed by Gordon. I will instead aim to go over the most important focal points of this history, using as a underlying theme the intellectual trajectory of Primo Levi, who has been, for 40 years, both filter and litmus test for the Italian memory of the Shoah.<sup>6</sup>

### 1947: *Se questo è un uomo* rejected

Let us start from the beginning, that is the first edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, published in 1947 by De Silva, a small Turinese publishing house, run by Franco Antonicelli. Before ending up at Antonicelli's desk, the book had been declined by various publishers, among which certainly Einaudi.<sup>7</sup>

This episode is doubly significant. On the one hand, it is an example of a larger spectrum of editorial trajectories: stories of failure and hostility met by similar testimonies in the first decade after the end of the Second World War. This phenomenon do not characterize exclusively the Italian panorama, and draws attention to the turbulence of the journey that transformed the narration of the Shoah from an individual into a public memory. From another point of view, the case of *Se questo è un uomo* is an example of what happens to a cultural "object" (in this case, to the relationship between a book and

---

American *elite*, often used in explicit juxtaposition to the testimonial pedagogy of Wiesel, see Jonathan Druker, Michael Rothberg, "A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi's Place in American Holocaust Discourse," *Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 28/1 (2009): 104-126.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gordon, "Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy," *Italian Studies*, 61/1 (2006), 85-113. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*. The book has been recently translated in Italian: *Scolpitelo nei cuori. L'Olocausto nella cultura italiana (1944-2010)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013) and has been generally praised by the Italian academy.

<sup>6</sup> In this essay I will draw on my recent bibliographic census, whose results are rendered in graphical form in Anna Baldini, "La memoria italiana della Shoah (1944-2009)," *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, III, *Dal Romanticismo a oggi*, eds. Sergio Luzzatto, Gabriele Pedullà, Domenico Scarpa (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), 758-763. The chronology of the texts and the criteria with which it was constructed are downloadable from the webpage <http://www.einaudi.it/speciali/Atlante-della-letteratura-italiana-Vol.III>: "Cronologia. Le testimonianze della persecuzione e dello sterminio pubblicate in Italia (1944-2009)." I chose to select my corpus with restrictive criteria, to offer a base of homogenous data for analysis. the material of my census therefore corresponds only partially to the one utilized by Gordon.

<sup>7</sup> See Gian Carlo Ferretti, *Siamo spiacenti di* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2012).

the editorial field of its debut) when it becomes appropriated beyond its original context. Let us start from here.

In the second half of the 1980s, the “discovery” of Levi by the American cultural world introduced the work of the writer into the narrative canon of *Holocaust Discourse*, and in a preeminent position. His writings thus began to attract the interest of scholars who were not necessarily experts in Italian social and literary history. A significant example of the misunderstandings produced by this reception out of sync in time and space was the first biography of Levi, published in 1996 by a French journalist-writer, Myriam Anissimov.<sup>8</sup> If the thoroughness of her research is undeniable, the material gathered is however interpreted on the basis of a crude and shallow knowledge of twentieth-century Italian history; above all, the particular topic of Italian Judaism, and its specific features, was badly understood.<sup>9</sup>

But it was another aspect of Anissimov’s reconstruction that provoked in Italy, between 1996 and 1997, a vivacious polemic (occasionally resumed afterwards).<sup>10</sup> In Anissimov’s biography, the failed recognition in 1947 of the excellence of *Se questo è un uomo* by the publishing world – and, above all, by the editors of Einaudi, the writers Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese – became an accusation against the entire Italian culture, guilty of not being able for forty years to appreciate how great a writer Primo Levi was.

The relatively marginal position of Levi in the Italian literary field, at least during his lifetime, is a fact, which should however be explained with more refined instruments of analysis – those, for example, of a sociology of literature capable of avoiding the risk, implicit in every canonization, of forgetting the historical and literary context in which a

---

<sup>8</sup> See Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi, ou la tragédie d’un optimiste* (Paris: Lattès, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Levi already had to deal with similar misunderstandings, owing to the effects of the transplant of his work in a different cultural *humus*. In 1985, a detailed essay-review, closing with an attack on the Jewish identity incarnated by Levi, appeared in *Commentary*, a conservative Jewish New York magazine. This attack was absurd, from the point of view of Levi, who wrote back explaining how his manner of being a Jew was the product of a history, his own and that of the Italian Jewry (see Fernanda Eberstadt, “Reading Primo Levi,” *Commentary* (October, 1985): 41-47. Levi responded with a letter to the editor, *Commentary* (February, 1986), 6-7. The misunderstanding was, however, inevitable: a cultural object of recent importation is always interpreted according to the criteria of perception, conflict, and judgment of the field in which it lands. Eberstadt’s article reveals an “implicit agenda [...] of Jewish particularism” (Rothberg, Druker, “A Secular Alternative,” 110), in other words, she uses Levi to take a position on a specific problem of the American Jewish world.

<sup>10</sup> Among the book reviews that discuss Einaudi’s refusal to publish *Se questo è un uomo* are Ernesto Ferrero, “Primo Levi, l’ora dei veleni,” *La Stampa*, December 7, 1996. Ferdinando Camon, “Primo Levi, l’incubo del rifiuto,” *La Stampa*, December 23, 1996. Cesare Cases, “Ma gli italiani fanno biografare?,” *La Stampa*, January 17, 1997. Domenico Scarpa, “Un Levi improbabile,” *La rivista dei libri*, VII/4 (1997): 41-43. Tony Judt, “The Courage of the Elementary,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 20, 1999, 31-38. Marco Belpoliti, “Levi: il falso scandalo,” *La rivista dei libri*, X/1 (2000): 25-27.

particular text is created and circulated. Canons, however, are made precisely for this: in order to universalize works, that is to withdraw them from their original contexts. It is, however, historically and also ethically wrong to judge the behavior of writers, literary critics or editors, coming into contact with a specific text for the first time, on the basis of present-day criteria. Let us then try to reconstruct the significance a book like *Se questo è un uomo* could have had in 1947, beginning with its most striking trait, namely its content: the story of a Jew who survived his deportation to a Nazi concentration camp.

If Primo Levi is an author known today in the entire world, it is above all because in the last thirty years he has entered into the global canon of *Holocaust Discourse*. Now, not only in 1947 that canon, and the criteria that nowadays structure it, did not exist, but not even the concept of the Holocaust/Shoah existed. Between 1941 and 1945, Novick writes, “For the overwhelming majority of Americans,” and the same can be said of Europeans, “what we now call the Holocaust [...] was not “the Holocaust;” it was simply the (underestimated) Jewish fraction of the holocaust then engulfing the world.”<sup>11</sup> And, successively, after 1945, the figure of the deportee returning to his country, although so characteristic of post-war Europe, was almost exclusively perceived from a political perspective: if the *Lager* had been created to stamp out the opponents of Nazism, all of the internees were therefore “resistant.”<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this simplification are comprehensible: it was too early for the nature, the functions, and the internal distinctions of the Nazi concentrationary universe to be clear; besides, and above all, the greater part of returning deportees came from, and *pour cause*, concentration camps, not death camps.<sup>13</sup> In the Italy of those years, the symbol of Nazi terror was the barbed wire of Mauthausen, not yet the cremation ovens of Auschwitz; immediately after the war, both the accounting of the victims and their division into categories were still too difficult operations.

---

<sup>11</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> This “resistance” interpretation of the deportation will have a long life, and some definitions of “resistance literature” in the 1970s include texts by political *and racial* internees: see Carlo Annoni, “La narrativa della resistenza: probabile catalogo,” *Vita e Pensiero*, June-July (1970): 27-42. Mario Saccenti, “Letteratura della Resistenza,” *Dizionario critico di letteratura italiana*, ed. Vittore Branca (Turin: Utet, 1973), 598-606. The literary anthology *Resistenza italiana e impegno letterario*, ed. Delmo Maestri (Turin: Paravia, 1975).

<sup>13</sup> “Numbers are more important than interpretations. For one thing, if one thinks of the small Italian communities, the deported Jews are already few in comparison with the political deportees, and many fewer of them will return:” Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla, “Una misura onesta,” Introduction to *Una misura onesta. Gli scritti di memoria della deportazione dall’Italia 1944-1993*, ed. Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994), 61. A few pages before, Bravo and Jalla had quoted an analogous reflection by Pierre Vidal-Naquet: “If you take the first eyewitnesses of the post-war, you see that in France as in Italy, the symbol was not even Auschwitz, it was Buchenwald for the men and Ravensbrück for the women. And for a clear reason: because more men had returned from Buchenwald and women from Ravensbrück than had returned from Auschwitz” (“L’uso perverso della storia,” Pierre Vidal-Naquet interviewed by Gianni Saporetti and Sulamit Schneider, *Una città*, June 23, 1993, 10-11.

We must not forget that the deportees' stories, Jews and non-Jews, were also mingled in a chorus of other losses, tragedies and heroic deeds: a chorus that emerged after the war from that "obsession of telling" of which Calvino speaks in 1964, in the *Preface* to a new edition of his debut novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, published for the first time precisely in 1947. 17 years later, the writer mentioned that in those months, "we were [...] bursting with stories to tell: everyone had experienced their own drama, had lived a chaotic, exciting, adventurous existence; we took the words from each other's mouth."<sup>14</sup> And these painful stories, set in the background of the recently ended war, accumulated on the desks of publishing houses.

Owing to this bitter competition, the stories of deportees met in general with little attention. And when they found it, namely when they achieved publication, it was thanks to small publishing houses, often heirs to the activities of clandestine printing set about during the Resistance, or in any case characterized by a strong political motivation. Only fifteen or twenty years later, with the original publisher dead or gone, and by now the first editions out of print, some of these books would be recuperated by more prestigious publishers. Playing a role in the initial refusals were the economic difficulties of the first post-war years, particularly felt by the publishing world, which certainly did not encourage the publication of unpleasant and painful memoirs, for which there was not anticipated a numerous public; certainly, as well, the very throng of proposals for memoirs played a role. At small publishers, instead, personal relationships were decisive, and the case of *Se questo è un uomo* is once more emblematic: the book arrived at De Silva, that is, at the doorstep of Franco Antonicelli, former president of the Piedmont Committee of National Liberation (CLN), thanks to Alessandro Galante Garrone, former partisan and representative of the Action Party in the regional CLN, who had in turn received the manuscript from Anna Maria Levi, Primo's sister, who herself had served as a courier in the Action Party's brigades.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*, transl. Archibald Colquhoun, revis. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Ecco Press, 2000). "Si era [...] carichi di storie da raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua, ognuno aveva vissuto vite irregolari drammatiche avventurose, ci si strappava la parola di bocca." Italo Calvino, "Prefazione 1964 al 'Sentiero dei nidi di ragno,' *Romanzi e racconti*, eds. Mario Barenghi, Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), vol. I, 1185-1186. The memories of many ex-deportees suggest that Calvino's phrase "we took the words from each other's mouth" should be interpreted literally: "And when I went to the café, the others told me immediately: 'When I was in Greece... When I was in Albania...'" "Maybe at a certain point they interrupted me, they preferred to speak of their own business" (testimonies by Rinaldo Botto and Angelo Travaglia, in *La vita offesa. Storia e memoria dei Lager nazisti nei racconti di duecento sopravvissuti* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986), 340-341; 346).

<sup>15</sup> The series in which *Se questo è un uomo* was published, the *Biblioteca Leone Ginzburg* is in fact remembered by Renzo Zorzi, then working at De Silva, as "the most directly political" of the publishing house: Renzo Zorzi, "Insieme alla De Silva e oltre," *Franco Antonicelli: dell'impegno culturale* (Pavia: Provincia di Pavia, 1995), 58.

Let us return therefore to the “false scandal” of Levi’s book, turned down by Einaudi: this refusal fits into a coherent editorial profile, because *Se questo è un uomo* was not the sole text dealing with the Nazi camps that Einaudi turned down – nor was it the only one rerouted to De Silva.<sup>16</sup> Not even the insistence of Elio Vittorini, who after 1945 was one of the most important consultants for the publishing house, could convince Einaudi to have Robert Antelme’s *L’Espèce humaine* [*The Human Race*] translated. Moreover, another important French eyewitness account about the concentration camps, David Rousset’s *L’Univers concentrationnaire* [*The Other Kingdom*], published in France in 1946, was let go too, because the moment was not considered right for publication.<sup>17</sup> The marketing estimation carried out by the Einaudi publishing house can be shown to be anything other than unfounded, as the destiny of *Se questo è un uomo* itself demonstrated: of the 2,500 published copies, more than a thousand went unsold. For other memoirs by deportees, we can imagine a similar fate, if not even less successful: “lacking data about the print runs, the difficulty of locating the texts [in libraries or on the remainders market] is a reliable indicator about their effective circulation.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, of the eight memoirs published in Italy between 1945 and 1947 by Jews who survived death camps,<sup>19</sup> only *Se questo è un uomo* and *Il fumo di Birkenau* [*Smoke over Birkenau*] by Liana Millu had a second chance as early as the 50s;<sup>20</sup> the other texts remain confined to their first, unique appearance, or else they needed to wait 35, 40, 50, or 60 years before returning to circulate in a new editorial

---

<sup>16</sup> See Pavese’s letter (February 9, 1948) about a manuscript dealing with the camps by Egon Berger: “In general we turn down every book about this topic. The volume *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi, published by De Silva Editore, had been refused by us. We advise you in fact to turn to De Silva” (the letter is quoted by Luisa Mangoni, *Pensare i libri. La casa editrice Einaudi dagli anni trenta agli anni sessanta* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), 319). See also Natalia Ginzburg’s letter to Sergio Antonielli on July 9, 1948, in which *Il campo 29* was turned down and the author encouraged to speak with De Silva (the letter is referred to in Walter Barberis, “Primo Levi e “un libro fatale,” *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, III, 754).

<sup>17</sup> See Mangoni, *Pensare i libri*, 319. About the publishing vicissitudes of Antelme’s book, see also Domenico Scarpa, “Storie di libri necessari. Antelme, Duras, Vittorini,” *Storie avventurose di libri necessari* (Rome: Alberto Gaffi, 2010), 165-202. Rousset’s book was published in Italian in 1947 by Leo Longanesi, a right-wing publisher who was interested in importing into Italy the book of an author who in France had launched a debate about the totalitarian aspects of communist regimes.

<sup>18</sup> Bravo and Jalla, “Una misura onesta,” 52.

<sup>19</sup> Lazzaro Levi, “Nei campi della morte. Diario di un giovane deportato,” *La Prora* (December 1945-January 1946). *I campi della morte in Germania nel racconto di una sopravvissuta*, ed. Alberto Cavaliere (Milan: Sonzogno, 1945) (Cavaliere publishes the memories of his sister-in-law Sofia Schafranov). Freda Misul, *Fra gli artigli del mostro nazista: la più romanzesca delle realtà, il più realistico dei romanzi* (Livorno: Stabilimento Poligrafico Belforte, 1946). [Luciana Nissim,] “Ricordi della casa dei morti,” *Donne contro il mostro* (Turin: Ramella, 1946) (Luciana Nissim’s testimony appears anonymously). Giuliana Tedeschi, *Questo povero corpo* (Milan: Editrice Italiana, 1946). Alba Valech Capozzi, *A 24029* (Siena: Poligrafica, 1946). Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: De Silva, 1947). Liana Millu, *Il fumo di Birkenau* (Milan: La Prora, 1947).

<sup>20</sup> Respectively in 1958 (Einaudi) and 1957 (Mondadori).

format.<sup>21</sup> All of them, however, without exception, encountered a brief and scarce echo in the immediate post-war period, in accordance with a dynamic characterizing literature about concentration and death camps in every language and in every national context.

### From 1955 to the Eichmann Trial

In 1955, on the occasion of the first decade of Liberation, in an article which appeared in *Torino. Rivista mensile della città*, the author of one of those forgotten books, the chemist Primo Levi, took stock of a desolate situation: “Ten years from the liberation of the concentration camps, it is both distressing and deeply indicative to note that in Italy at least, far from being an important part of our history, the subject of the extermination camps is in the process of being completely forgotten.”<sup>22</sup> Whoever reads today this article in the collection of Levi’s *Opere* needs only to turn a few pages to jump ahead five years, coming upon a completely different *incipit* and cultural climate: “The Deportation Exhibition, which opened in Turin in a seemingly minor key, has been an unexpected success. Each and every day a close-packed crowd stood, deeply moved, before those terrible images; the closing date had to be postponed not once, but twice. Equally surprising was the welcome given by the Turin public to two talks aimed at young people, given in the Cultural Union in Palazzo Carignano to an attentive, thoughtful and packed public.”<sup>23</sup>

Between the two texts—between 1955 and 1960—something changed. The nexus instituted between deportation and Resistance made the public celebrations of the first decade of the Liberation stimulate the survivors of the camps to exhume again their stories. It was right in 1955 that Primo Levi newly proposed his book to the Einaudi publishing house, and this time with success: the book was published in a new edition

---

<sup>21</sup> Frida Misul, *Deportazione. Il mio diario* (Livorno: Ufficio Storico della Resistenza del Comune di Livorno, 1980). Giuliana Tedeschi, *C’è un punto della terra... Una donna nel lager di Birkenau* (Florence: La Giuntina, 1988). Alba Capozzi Valech, *A 24029* (Siena: Nuova Immagine, 1995). Luciana Nissim, *Ricordi dalla casa dei morti* (Florence: La Giuntina, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Primo Levi, “Deportees. Anniversary,” *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, ed. Marco Belpoliti, transl. Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 3. “A dieci anni dalla liberazione dei Lager, è triste e significativo dover constatare che, almeno in Italia, l’argomento dei campi di sterminio, lungi dall’essere diventato storia, si avvia alla più completa dimenticanza.” Primo Levi, “Deportati. Anniversario,” *Torino*, XXXI/4 (1955) Now, Primo Levi, *Opere*, ed. Marco Belpoliti (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), vol. I, 1113.

<sup>23</sup> Primo Levi, “The Time of Swastikas,” *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 9. “La Mostra della deportazione, che era stata aperta a Torino (si può dire) in tono minore, ha conseguito un inaspettato successo. Per tutti i giorni di apertura, a tutte le ore, davanti a quelle terribili immagini ha sostato una folla serrata e commossa. la data della chiusura ha dovuto essere rinviata per ben due volte. Altrettanto sorprendente è stata l’accoglienza del pubblico torinese ai due successivi colloqui destinati ai giovani, che hanno avuto luogo nei locali dell’Unione Culturale a Palazzo Carignano: un pubblico fittissimo, attento, pensoso.” Primo Levi, “Il tempo delle svastiche,” *Il giornale dei genitori*, January 15, 1960. Now, *Opere*, vol. I, 1122.



(amply revised by the author) in 1958. This is the same year, it is worth mentioning, when Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit* [*Night*] was published in French by Seuil (its longer Yiddish version having been published in Buenos Aires three years previously), a translation that marks the beginning of the successful international parabola of its author. The English translation of *La Nuit* would come two years later.

The new edition of *Se questo è un uomo* presented numerous variants.<sup>24</sup> The most conspicuous one is the addition of an entire chapter, *Iniziazione* [*Initiation*], where the encounter with sergeant Steinlauf is related. Steinlauf is the first character in the book to make an explicit connection between survival and testimony: “even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness.”<sup>25</sup> It is probably not coincidental that such a vibrant affirmation is found in a chapter added between 1955 and 1958: the past decade had most likely matured in Levi the awareness both of the meaning of what he had experienced as well as of how writing could be an instrument of communication and knowledge.

Again in 1955, and on the occasion of the ten-year celebration of Liberation, a national exhibition about the Nazi camps had gone on tour: it is the same exhibition mentioned by Levi in the 1960 article above cited.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition had been inaugurated December 8<sup>th</sup> at Carpi, near Fossoli, the location of the main Italian transit camp, where the greatest part of Jews rounded up were temporarily interned before being sent off to Auschwitz. Subsequently, the exhibition began a long trip through Italy: in five years it passed through Ferrara (January 22 – February 20, 1956), Bologna (March 17-31 1956), Verona (January 18-February 2, 1958), Rome (June 26-July 15, 1959), Turin (November 14-December 8, 1959) and Cuneo (December 1959). In Turin, at the Unione Culturale presided over by Franco Antonicelli, the National Association of Ex-Deportees (*ANED, Associazione Nazionale Ex Deportati*) organized two evenings where historians, illustrious figures of the Resistance and ex-deportees conversed with the public. On the first evening, 1,300 people attended; 1,500 attended the second meeting. Among others, Primo Levi spoke there in public for the first time.

---

<sup>24</sup> The first scholar to study this topic was Giovanni Tesio, “Su alcune giunte e varianti di “Se questo è un uomo,” *Studi piemontesi*, VI/2 (1977): 270-279. Now, *Piemonte letterario dell’Otto-Novecento (da G. Faldella a Levi)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), 173-196. See also Alberto Cavaglion, *Primo Levi e “Se questo è un uomo”* (Turin: Loescher, 1993) and the commentary of Levi’s book by the same scholar: Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, ed. Alberto Cavaglion (Turin: Einaudi, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, transl. Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 36. “Anche in questo luogo si può sopravvivere, e perciò si deve voler sopravvivere, per raccontare, per portare testimonianza.” Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, *Opere*, vol. I, 35.

<sup>26</sup> See *Immagini dal silenzio. La prima mostra nazionale dei lager nazisti attraverso l’Italia 1955-1960*, ed. Marzia Luppi, Elisabetta Ruffini and Alberto Cavaglion (Carpi: Nuovagrafica, 2005). Elisabetta Ruffini, *Un lapsus di Primo Levi. Il testimone e la ragazzina* (Bergamo: Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Bergamo, 2006).

The Primo Levi that spoke at the Unione Culturale in December, 1959, was no longer an unknown writer, but the author of a successful book: the second edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, under the aegis of Einaudi, had already gone out of print by the end of 1958, and the first reissue would be at the end of the following year. On the back cover, the book was compared to Antelme's *The Human Race*, which Einaudi had published in 1954. The following title of the series where *Se questo è un uomo* and *The Human Race* had appeared was *Ricordati che cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* [Remember what Amalek did to you], one of the first historical accounts which appeared in Italian about the events of the Warsaw ghetto; the author, Alberto Nirenstajn, was a Polish scholar who resided in Italy. The editorial line of Einaudi was once again consistent: beginning in 1954, the year of the translation of Antelme's book, but also of Anne Frank's diary, a book that had already achieved world fame, the publishing house began to explore the subject of Nazi camps, recovering (literally, since often they were dealing with book proposals declined less than a decade ago) diverse eyewitness accounts, as well as bringing into Italian the first historiographical works that made the "final solution" a specific object of analysis, distinct from other tragic events tied to the second world war. The book of Nirenstajn followed the translation in 1955 of Léon Poliakov's *Bréviaire de la haine. Le III<sup>e</sup> Reich et les juifs* as *Il nazismo e lo sterminio degli ebrei*,<sup>27</sup> and preceded Renzo De Felice's *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* [*Jews in Fascist Italy: A History*]. Einaudi was not the only one exploring this new field of research. In 1962, Il Saggiatore, the publishing house founded by Alberto Mondadori in 1958 to compete with Einaudi and Laterza in the area of quality nonfiction, published *La soluzione finale. Il tentativo di sterminio degli ebrei d'Europa, 1939-1945* [*The Final Solution. The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945*] by the British historian Gerald Reitlinger. This text was originally published in English in 1953 and promptly discussed—in a long serialized review in the journal *Comunità*—by Luigi Meneghello, a scholar of Italian literature living in the UK, not yet a writer himself, and husband of a survivor of the death camps.<sup>28</sup> But it was above all Feltrinelli, the publishing house opened in 1955 and aiming to supersede Einaudi in its predominance in cultural publishing, which entered into competition with the Turin publishing house in this specific area. In 1955, Feltrinelli published *Il flagello della svastica* [*The Scourge of the Swastika*] by Lord Edward Russell (one of the legal counsellors of the Nuremberg trials); in 1956 the eyewitness account of an Italian Jew (Bruno Piazza's *Perché gli altri dimenticano* [Why the Others Forget]); in 1961 the translation of the winner of the 1959 *Premio Goncourt*, André Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes* [*The Last of the Just*] as *L'ultimo dei giusti*; and in 1964, only one year after the original edition, the translation of a text that had provoked much

---

<sup>27</sup> The original edition (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1951) is prefaced by François Mauriac, who will also introduce the first French translation of Wiesel's *Night*.

<sup>28</sup> Meneghello's articles were republished forty years later: Luigi Meneghello, *Promemoria. Lo sterminio degli ebrei d'Europa, 1939-45* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1994).

argument in the United States, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the reportage written by Hannah Arendt for the *New Yorker* during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which took place in Jerusalem between April and August of 1961.

The Eichmann trial was a key event in the history of the memory of the Shoah. Many elements contributed to make it an event that attracted the attention of global media: the adventurous matter of the Mossad's kidnapping of the defendant in Argentina, which raised a complex debate in international law; the transmission of the trial by United States television; the reflections drawn by an intellectual of international prestige such as Hannah Arendt, summed up in such an effective and overwhelming formula as "the banality of evil." But, as Annette Wieviorka has shown, the Eichmann trial marked above all the birth of the public figure of "witness."<sup>29</sup> The trial was cleverly orchestrated by Attorney General Gideon Hausner around aims remote to those more strictly juridical. What was most important for the Israeli ruling class, represented by the Attorney General, who called dozens and dozens of survivors of the ghettos and death camps to testify against the defendant, was not so much the ascertainment of Eichmann's guilt and individual responsibility as much as to create an opportunity to stage the story of the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people during Nazism. An event that, although playing a part in the foundation mythology of the State, had been in fact shrouded in a silence, also and perhaps above all in Israel, weighed down with reserve and shame.

The hanging of Eichmann thus turned out to be the least relevant of the results of the trial. After 1961, the perception of the "Shoah"—the term adopted by the Jewish state in its own documents from the 1940s onwards—was not transformed solely in Israel: the attention given to the trial by media of the entire world provoked much more widespread effects: "It was the first time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented [...] as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general," Novick summed up.<sup>30</sup> Hausner's use of eyewitness reports decontextualized from legal necessities transformed, moreover, the survivor-witness into a sort of guarantor of truth and historical authenticity: "[The witness] was not there to deliver any evidence of the guilt of the accused [...]. Instead, [the witness] told a story with a double aim: to recount [his] own survival, but, above all, to remember the dead and how they were murdered," commented Wieviorka.<sup>31</sup> All western societies would end up granting the survivor this specific function of "bearer" and "pedagogue" of history.

---

<sup>29</sup> See Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin*, above all the chapter "L'avènement du témoin."

<sup>30</sup> Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 78. "Le témoin n'est pas là pour administrer une quelconque preuve de la culpabilité du prévenu [...], mais pour faire un récit dont la finalité est double: conter sa propre survie, mais surtout, évoquer ceux qui sont morts et comment ils ont été assassinés" (Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin*, 106-107).

### At the Theatre

Eichmann's was not the only trial held in the 1960s against those responsible for the mass murders. In Frankfurt, between 1963 and 1965, the *Auschwitz Process* took place, a series of trials against *Kapos*, officers of the SS and the Gestapo who had worked at Auschwitz. The playwright Peter Weiss drew on trial records to construct a theatrical work, *Die Ermittlung. Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* [*The Investigation. Oratorio in 11 Cantos*], which debuted simultaneously on October 19, 1965 in fourteen German theatres (both West and East), and in the production by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London. In Italy, *L'istruttoria* was staged the next year, in the 1966-1967 season, by the most important experimental theatre, the Piccolo Teatro in Milan; the play was directed by Virginio Puecher. After a national *tournée*, the play was transmitted by RAI 2 on June 9, 1967, and a translation of the work was published the same year by Einaudi.

Two years before the *Ermittlung*, another German theatrical work had caused a sensation, not only in Germany, but in all the countries where it had exported: Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter. Ein christliches Trauerspiel* [*The Deputy. A Christian Tragedy*]. Differently from the *Ermittlung*, constructed around a montage of the most significant of the nearly 360 witnesses of the *Auschwitz Prozess*, Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* is a drama with fictional characters. The author indicts the Church, and Pope Pius XII in particular, for having done little or nothing to obstruct the genocide. In Germany, *Der Stellvertreter* debuted on February 20, 1963, and immediately caused animated arguments. Already by 1964 Feltrinelli had published a translation of it; however, just as in the United States, the play could not be staged in Italy. A semiprivate production was attempted in Rome on February 13, 1965, but the following evening the police, on a mere pretext, closed the area where the drama had taken place. In the subsequent days, the Prefect of Rome forbade the performance as damaging to the principles of the Concordat between the State and the Church. The protests by Italian and foreign intellectuals and journalists were in vain.

*Die Ermittlung* and *Der Stellvertreter* are examples of documentary theatre, one of the means with which German intellectuals tried to come to terms with their nation's past. The social function and self-perception of those working in experimental Italian theatre were not very different, as the rapid translations and productions of both plays showed. Even if the first play was censored, the second was able to demonstrate, with an extraordinary success crowned by the passage to television, how the most problematic subjects of contemporary history attracted the Italian public in the 1960s.

Primo Levi was not foreign to this new shaping of the memory of the genocide in Italy, although in this case his role was marginal. In the same theatrical season when Il Piccolo

put on *L'istruttoria*, the Teatro Stabile in Turin produced a drama, edited by Levi himself and the actor Pieralberto Marché, based on *Se questo è un uomo*.<sup>32</sup> This theatrical reduction was the result of a rather singular chain of events: Levi's book had been dramatized once before by the Canadian radio station CBC, which sent the script and a recording of the transmission to the author. Fascinated by the Canadian production, and above all by its multilingual fabric, deliberately alienating for the spectator, Levi proposed a similar operation to the RAI, which then transmitted the radio version of the book on April 24, 1964. One of the actors who had participated in this production, Pieralberto Marché, convinced the writer to newly rework his own book, this time for the stage.

The performance did not get off to an auspicious start: the writing of the screenplay and the staging by the Stabile were laborious, complicated by tardiness and incomprehension between Levi and the members of the theatrical company.<sup>33</sup> The first performance should have taken place in Prato on November 12, during an international festival in Florence, but the flood that paralyzed Tuscany caused the event to be cancelled. The debut was postponed to November 19, 1966, and moved to Teatro Carignano in Turin, but the performance had a mainly local, and brief, success: after a short *tournee* out of town, the show returned to Turin and ran a couple of months. The critical reception was rather tepid: theatrical experts, evidently, preferred Puecher's *Istruttoria*.

### The “voice of the deportation”

As we have seen, Primo Levi's career as “witness” began before 1961, the year of the Eichmann trial, the event that for Annette Wieviorka inaugurated the “era of the witness.”<sup>34</sup> The beginning of Levi's “third vocation” – namely, as “presenter and commentator of *himself*”<sup>35</sup> – should be backdated to the two evenings organized in

<sup>32</sup> In 1967 Einaudi published the text in its series *Collezione di teatro*.

<sup>33</sup> See Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Hutchinson, 2002), 316-319. Carole Angier, *The Double Bond. Primo Levi. A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 561-564.

<sup>34</sup> Levi was asked to publicly comment on the Eichmann trial in June 1961, when he was invited by the journal *Storia illustrata* to discuss the topic in a round table with the philosopher Remo Cantoni, the psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti, and the jurist Francesco Carnelutti: see *La vacanza morale del fascismo. Intorno a Primo Levi*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Pisa: ETS, 2009). We also possess a private testimony of Levi's emotions and reflections the day after the capture of the SS officer in the poem *Per Adolf Eichmann* (July 20, 1960). Now, *Opere*, vol. II, 540.

<sup>35</sup> See the *Appendix* added in 1976 to the scholastic edition of *Se questo è un uomo*: “ai miei due mestieri ne ho volentieri aggiunto un terzo, quello di presentatore e commentatore di me stesso, o meglio di quel lontano me stesso che aveva vissuto l'avventura di Auschwitz e l'aveva raccontata” (Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*, *Opere*, vol. I, 174) [to my two vocations I have now gladly added a third, that of presenter and commentator of myself, or better of that remote self of mine who had lived the adventure of Auschwitz and had told it].

December, 1959, by ANED and Antonicelli, when Levi volunteered to satisfy the desire exhibited by many visitors that someone might illustrate in depth the exhibition on the camps, and maybe even help them overcome the shock provoked by those images.

The format of the event, which envisaged the simultaneous presence of historians and witnesses, was reoffered the following year by Antonicelli in a series of lectures on “Thirty years of Italian history (1915-1945),” which took place between April and June. Similar initiatives, centered on the history of fascism and antifascism, with experts and protagonists confronting the questions of the public, also took place in those years in Rome (May-June 1959), Milan (January-June 1961), and Bologna (1961; on this occasion, Primo Levi and Giorgio Bassani were invited to discuss the persecution of Jews).<sup>36</sup> The news articles published by papers of that epoch underlined how the public of these lecture-debates was composed principally by young people, who in those years seemed more than curious, indeed almost hungry for contemporary history. In July 1960, the exact center of this two year period, these “boys and girls with striped t-shirts,” as they would be called by the newspapers, although they were too young to have lived through the Second World War, filled up the squares of many Italian cities, along with former partisans, to protest against the entrance of the Neo-Fascists of the MSI (Movimento Sociale Italiano) in the Tambroni government. Around July 1960, “antifascism” and “Resistance” became contemporary words once more, and the memory of the years of the regime and the war forcefully reappeared in public discourse.

We can read these events as the response to similar needs to those that had led the Israeli ruling class to design the Eichmann trial in a form that exceeded the most immediate legal objectives. Just like the trial in Jerusalem, the series of lectures on fascism and antifascism were motivated by a pedagogical fervor, and the desire to transmit and reformulate, in a moment of crisis or transition, the significance and memory of foundational historical events: on the one hand, of the State of Israel; on the other hand, of the Italian Republic. The witnesses (the survivors summoned by Hausner; the protagonists of the “thirty years of Italian history” called to assist the historians in their lectures in Turin, Rome, Milan, and Bologna) were the guarantors of the intergenerational transmission of memory, and contributed to making it more reliable and incisive. If in Israel the intention was to modify the perception that native Israelis had of their parents’ and grandparents’ pasts, in Italy the passing of the baton revitalized the idea of the “Republic born from the Resistance.”

---

<sup>36</sup> These series of lectures were subsequently published: *Lezioni sull'antifascismo*, ed. Piergiovanni Pericoli (Bari: Laterza, 1960) (Rome lectures). *Trent'anni di storia italiana (1915-1945)*, ed. Franco Antonicelli (Turin: Einaudi, 1961) (Turin lectures). *Fascismo e antifascismo (1918-36). Lezioni e testimonianze* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962) (Milan lectures). *Storia dell'antifascismo italiano*, ed. Luigi Arbizzani and Alberto Caltabiano, vol. I, *Lezioni*, vol. II, *Testimonianze* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1964) (Bologna lectures).

It cannot be surprising that Primo Levi, “born” as a witness in this context, adopted the nexus of fascism/antifascism as a privileged frame of reference in his work as interlocutor for the collectivity.<sup>37</sup> The writer assumed this function in the course of the 1960s, and for almost thirty years his would be the “voice of deportation” in Italy, as another witness, the political deportee Lidia Rolfi, called him.<sup>38</sup> It was Levi that composed the words addressing the visitors to the Italian monument at Auschwitz, Block 21, which was inaugurated April 13, 1980, and to which some major protagonists of the shaping of the Italian memory of the Shoah also contributed. The ANED had managed the project, entrusting the architectural conception to the Milanese studio BBPR, which in 1946 had drafted the first Italian memorial of the Shoah, the *Monumento ai caduti dei campi di sterminio nazisti* [Monument to the victims of the Nazi death camps] in the Milanese *Cimitero Monumentale* [Monumental Cemetery]. The visit to Block 21 was accompanied by a reworking of *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto ad Auschwitz* [Remember what they did to you in Auschwitz], the scenic music the composer Luigi Nono had created for the Berlin production, directed by Erwin Piscator, of Weiss’s *Die Ermittlung*; finally, the “script” of the visit to the Block 21 had been produced by the film director Nelo Risi, husband of another important writer-witness in Italian, Edith Bruck.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the 70s, thus, Levi’s role as public interlocutor was practically an official role. But how did the writer come to occupy such a position? It is worth calling on Lidia Rolfi again: “Almost automatically, Primo would be invited, because Primo in that moment was the voice of deportation. There were no other texts with the space, and quote unquote, the success of *Se questo è un uomo*. It had become almost the sole text of the deportation at that moment and it remains so still now.”<sup>40</sup> The presence of Levi in schools is certainly the factor that most contributed to making him the principal mediator of the memory of the genocide in Italy: both his presence in the flesh in front of students, and that of his first book, whose reading in the course of the academic year is still a widespread practice in Italian high schools.

---

<sup>37</sup> See the conclusions drawn by Gordon in *Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the Field of Holocaust Memory in Post-War Italy*, then discussed again in the chapter “Primo Levi” of the 2012 book. Gordon takes into consideration not so much Levi’s writings as much as “a low-level, “public” Levi:” “To get a sense of Levi’s particular configuration of the Holocaust, as transmitted in schools and other public arenas, we need to set aside the nuanced detail and compelling power of his own testimonial writings per se and concentrate instead on his occasional and pedagogical writings” (Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 68).

<sup>38</sup> Lidia Rolfi interviewed by Federico Cereja, *Primo Levi: il presente del passato*, ed. Alberto Cavaglion (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1993), 224.

<sup>39</sup> Levi’s text is also published in *Opere*, vol. I, 1335-36 and translated in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 71-73. About the events of Auschwitz Block 21, see Elisabetta Ruffini, Sandro Scarrocchia, “Il Blocco 21 di Auschwitz,” *Studi e ricerche di storia contemporanea*, 37/69 (2008): 9-29. Elisabetta Ruffini, “Lavoro di squadra, intelligenza e fantasia: storia del memoriale italiano,” *Quaderni d’Ananke*, 1 (2009): 13-23.

<sup>40</sup> Lidia Rolfi interviewed by Federico Cereja, *Primo Levi: il presente del passato*, 224.

## Stereotypes

For generations of Italian students, *Se questo è un uomo* was, and still is, the first approach to the concentrationary universe. Einaudi had it republished in a scholastic edition in 1973, with footnotes composed by Levi himself, eight years after *La tregua* [*The Truce*], which already in 1965, a mere two years after its first edition, had entered the publisher's series *Lecture per la scuola media* [Readings for middle school]. In 1976, Levi decided to add an appendix to the scholastic edition of *Se questo è un uomo*, where he responded to the most frequent questions the students asked him.<sup>41</sup> The same questions also recurred in the majority of interviews with Levi in newspapers, radio, or television: what feelings might he feel vis-à-vis the Germans, who knew of the project of extermination, why did the Jews not flee, what were the differences and analogies between the camps and the Gulag, what were the most recent and most distant origins of Nazi antisemitism?

These themes reemerged in *I Sommersi e i salvati* [*The Drowned and the Saved*], the book that Levi published in 1986 and which constitutes the *summa* of a forty-year reflection on the experience of himself and others in the camps. In particular, the seventh chapter, entitled *Stereotipi* [*Stereotypes*], was inspired by the questions which Levi answered with greatest frequency in lectures, debates, or interviews, just like ten years previously the *Appendix* above mentioned. About half way through the chapter, the writer stopped to analyze the significance of the insistent recurrence of the same questions; the reflection is marked by a touch of bitterness: "Within its limits, it seems to me that this episode"—the one Levi had just narrated, of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy showing him a "plan for escape from Auschwitz" to be used "the next time"—"illustrates well the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were "down there" and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximate books, films, and myths. It slides fatally toward simplification and stereotype, a trend against which I would like here to erect a dike."<sup>42</sup> As is typical of his argumentative method, Levi immediately softens the affirmation ("At the same time, however, I would like to point out that this phenomenon is not confined to the perception of the near an historical tragedies"<sup>43</sup>): there remains, however, the impression of a certain weariness of the "witness" towards his own "public." Above all the confrontation with the students

---

<sup>41</sup> This *Appendix* is now reprinted in all of the editions, both scholastic and non-scholastic, as an integral part of the book.

<sup>42</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, transl. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 157. "Nei suoi limiti, mi pare che l'episodio illustri bene la spaccatura che esiste, e che si va allargando di anno in anno, fra le cose com'erano "laggiù" e le cose quali vengono rappresentate dalla immaginazione corrente, alimentata da libri, film e miti approssimativi. Essa, fatalmente, slitta verso la semplificazione e lo stereotipo. vorrei porre qui un argine contro questa deriva" (Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, *Opere*, vol. II, 1116).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.



turned out to be quite taxing: the biographers Ian Thomson and Carole Angier have calculated that Levi visited about 150 schools in less than twenty years: a period during which, at least until 1976, the writer was working as the director of a paint factory in Settimo Torinese. At the end of the 1970s, Levi almost completely stopped accepting school invitations.

The years when Levi started to reduce his scholastic engagements until finally breaking them off completely are those in which he began the long process of drafting *I sommersi e i salvati*. We can find first sign of the book in the preface written to Jacob Presser's *Notte dei girondini* [*Night of the Girondists*], a Dutch novel translated by Levi and published by Adelphi in 1976. In these introductory pages, the writer alluded for the first time to what would be the philosophical core of his final book, the subject of his most innovative and complex reflection: the "gray zone." If the necessity of an ethical exploration of the "space that separates [...] the victims from the persecutors"<sup>44</sup> constituted the most probable origin of the interior urgency that generated this book, it was the emergence of diverse waves of Holocaust denial and historical revisionism, first in rudimentary versions and then more refined ones, that formed one of the external motivations. Levi found himself on the front line in this new battle: he was the most well-known Italian intellectual to arm his pen against revisionism, both with his work gathered in *I sommersi e i salvati*, and his continual statements to the press, in interviews, and articles, the last of which, *Black Hole of Auschwitz*, appeared in *La Stampa* a couple of months before the writer's death.

Revisionism was also evidence that, at the end of the 1970s, the public memory of the Shoah, even if still not official, existed in Italy, as in the Western world in general.<sup>45</sup> And, in fact, *I sommersi e i salvati* is no longer a book about individual memory, as much as about how a collective memory is shaped and works. The concomitance between the writing of the book and the end of Levi's activity in schools surely depends on a plurality of reasons, but it must also suggest the idea that a certain mode of interpreting the witness's function, at least for him, had broken down.

### **NBC's *Holocaust*: The Witness and the Fiction**

Towards the end of the 1970s in Italy, not only did the debate about the theses of Faurisson, the least discredited among the so-called negationist "historians," arrive from France. Between May and June of 1979, the RAI showed another imported cultural

---

<sup>44</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 40. "lo spazio che separa [...] le vittime dai persecutori:" Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati*, *Opere*, vol. II, 1020.

<sup>45</sup> In Gordon's reconstruction, the 1970s are those in which "awareness of the Holocaust became a given across the Italian cultural sphere, part of the standard cultural baggage of everyone from intellectuals to schoolchildren" (Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 110).

product, this time coming from the United States: *Holocaust*, the television serial produced by NBC, which had been broadcast the previous year in the US, and ever since then had only achieved extraordinary success among the public, simultaneously raising intense debates in America as in Israel, France, and West Germany.

The Italian reception of the serial, which was followed by almost twenty million spectators, did not provoke a long term impact comparable to what happened in Germany, where the television event ended up marking a turning point in the tardy confrontation of German culture with Nazi genocide. The discussions in Italian newspapers and periodicals, when they did not divert the argument towards contemporary political interpretations (from terrorist violence to the situation in the Middle East), were limited to facing up to, but extremely superficially, the problem of the “trivialization of the Holocaust,” which had been brought up by Elie Wiesel in the United States.<sup>46</sup> The position taken by the author of the *Night* was surely extreme—the genocide was “a Holy Event that resisted profane representation”<sup>47</sup>—but Wiesel was not the sole witness-survivor either in the United States or in France who repudiated the NBC production as incapable of rendering the reality of lived experience. For the majority of the intellectual commentators in Italy, the problem of the appropriation of the genocide by the mass entertainment companies was, as it were, resolved at the outset by the prejudice that united in the same disrepute any televised program and any work labelled “Hollywood.” *Holocaust* was thus seen as an “American melodrama,” good at best in educating the illiterate masses. The serial truly had the characteristics of the *feuilleton*, but it also placed, for the first time simultaneously in diverse national cultures, the question of the shaping of events whose “enormity” had been “such as to make them unbelievable”<sup>48</sup> into fictional form and not that of eyewitness testimony. These were events for which it seemed almost impossible to make them worthy of belief without the authentication of those who had directly lived them.

As was predictable, Levi was called to pass judgment on the *Holocaust* adaptation and the novel of Gerald Green from which it had been drawn.<sup>49</sup> The position that Levi

---

<sup>46</sup> See Emiliano Perra, “Narratives of Innocence and Victimhood: The Reception of the Miniseries *Holocaust* in Italy,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 22/3 (2008): 411-440.

<sup>47</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, April 16, 1978.

<sup>48</sup> “enormità [...] tale da renderli incredibili.” Primo Levi, “Un Olocausto che pesa ancora sulla coscienza del mondo,” *Tutto libri*, April 28, 1979. Now *Opere*, vol. I, 1266.

<sup>49</sup> Levi, “Un Olocausto che pesa ancora sulla coscienza del mondo.” Primo Levi, “Perché non ritornino gli Olocausti di ieri (le stragi naziste, le folle e la tv),” *La Stampa*, May 20, 1979. Now, *Opere*, vol. I, 1268-71. Primo Levi, “Le immagini di “Olocausto,” *Le immagini di “Olocausto”—dalla realtà alla tv*, Special Issue of *Radio corriere Tv*, ed. Pier Giorgio Martinelli (Turin: Eri, 1979). Now, *Opere*, vol. I, 1272-80 (the last article has been translated in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, 59-66).

publicly assumed was equilibrated:<sup>50</sup> although not denying the imprecisions, simplifications or attenuation that united the novel and the televised story, he recognized that they guaranteed an at least perfunctory knowledge of what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945. “It is in short an ally: we would have preferred a less loquacious one, with greater historical sensibility, better oriented towards the goal: but even as it is, it still remains an ally.”<sup>51</sup> We are speaking of the months, it is good not to forget it, when the most authoritative leftwing French newspaper, *Le Monde*, was publishing articles about Faurisson’s Holocaust denial.

In his review of *Holocaust* which appeared in *La Stampa*, Levi also alluded to the fact that the “film was seen [...] not *although* it was a story, a novelized event, but *because* it is a story [...]. The two associated factors, the form of the novel and the medium of television, have fully shown their gigantic power of penetration.”<sup>52</sup> The review ended on a note of fear towards this “power of penetration,” which however, on this occasion, was used in an exclusively political way.<sup>53</sup> Instead, in the chapter *Stereotipi di I sommersi e i salvati*, a different unease is felt, this time in relation to the capacity of the cultural industry of giving voice and consolidating in less discerning minds a generic and imprecise representation of the past. Probably *Holocaust* also formed part of those “approximate books, films, and myths” at the origin of the “stereotypes” whose obstinacy Levi laments.

---

<sup>50</sup> The opinions Levi expressed in private seem to have been less indulgent: “I heartily disliked the series [he told Hety Schmitt-Maas]. It is superficial and untruthful. It lacks any historical explanation [...]. On the other hand the film *has* achieved his goal, both here and in Germany. People on the buses are talking about it, and also in the schools, which is good: it is, however, sad to think that in order to reach the man on the street, history has to be simplified and digested to such an extent” (Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 404).

<sup>51</sup> “È insomma un alleato: ne avremmo preferito uno meno loquace, di maggiore sensibilità storica, meglio commisurato allo scopo: ma, anche così com’è, rimane pur sempre un alleato.” Levi, “Un Olocausto che pesa ancora sulla coscienza del mondo,” 1267.

<sup>52</sup> “Il filmato è stato visto [...] non *benché* fosse una *story*, una vicenda romanzata, ma *perché* è una *story*. [...] I due fattori associati, la forma romanzesca ed il veicolo televisivo, hanno mostrato appieno il loro gigantesco potere di penetrazione” (Levi, “Perché non ritornino gli Olocausti di ieri (le stragi naziste, le folle e la TV),” 1270).

<sup>53</sup> “Non si riesce a reprimere un brivido di allarme di fronte all’ipotesi di quanto potrebbe accadere, se il tema scelto fosse diverso od opposto, in un paese in cui la televisione fosse voce esclusiva dello Stato, non sottoposta a controlli democratici né accessibile alle critiche degli spettatori” (Levi, “Perché non ritornino gli Olocausti di ieri (le stragi naziste, le folle e la TV),” 1270-71) [One cannot hold back a shiver of alarm faced with the hypothesis of what could happen if the chosen had been different or the contrary, in a country in which television would be the exclusive voice of the state, not subject to democratic controls or accessible to the critiques of viewers].

### Bearing Witness after Levi's Death

In the analysis conducted by Levi on *Holocaust* and in his reflection on “stereotypes” we can single out a precocious intuition of the features that characterize the memory of the genocide today. We live in a time in which the greatest danger is not so much forgetfulness, as much as simplification, if not even inurement to the memory of those past events. In the Western World, one can take for granted a widespread awareness of the systematic murder of millions of Jews carried out by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. This awareness often corresponds, however, to an ahistorical perception of events, attenuated and full of stereotypes, developed from stories that, like *Holocaust* as analyzed by Levi, function thanks to “characters from a textbook, with simplified mental mechanisms,” with plots fed by “the most harrowing episodes.”<sup>54</sup> Over the last twenty years, the mass media entertainment industry has been, in truth, the principal agent of the memorialization, in parallel with and often in alliance with a process of gradual institutionalization. It is not coincidental that scholars tend to single out a turning point in 1993, the year not only of the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, but also of the global success of Stephen Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*.

It would have been interesting to know Primo Levi's point of view of the “*Schindler's List* effect,”<sup>55</sup> but the writer did not have time to learn about this new phase of the global memory of the genocide. Levi died in 1987, a little less than a year after the appearance of his *I sommersi e i salvati*. The shadow of suicide, and the apparent circularity between his first and last book, greatly contributed to crystalize the image of the writer exclusively as the Auschwitz survivor. In fact, at least until December 1986, Levi was working on a new book, which seemed to have nothing to do with the concentrationary universe:<sup>56</sup> if *Il doppio legame* [The Double Bond] had been finished and published before his death, perhaps the recognition of the greatness of Levi as a writer *tout court*, and not only as a survivor-witness, would have been less late in coming.

Levi's death had a final effect on the history of the memory of the Shoah in Italy. In the 1990s, the publications of new memories became more frequent: memoirs often written by people who had kept silent about their camp experience, at least in public, for more

---

<sup>54</sup> Levi, “Un Olocausto che pesa ancora sulla coscienza del mondo,” 1265.

<sup>55</sup> See Michael André Bernstein, “The Schindler's List effect,” *The American Scholar*, 63, Summer (1997), 429-432.

<sup>56</sup> In her biography, Carole Angier speaks about this in detail.

than forty years.<sup>57</sup> Many factors contributed to this sudden taking up the pen—the investigations of oral history; the beginning of the process of the institutionalization of memory, which creates a social need to witness; the very shortening of the life of the survivors; the pressure of children or grandchildren—but some of these “tardy” witnesses declared that they felt themselves called upon by the death of Levi, “he who had spoken for everyone.”<sup>58</sup> These are the words of the psychoanalyst Luciana Nissim, who had been Levi’s friend and with him had gone through the brief partisan experience, the arrest, prison, and the deportation to Auschwitz; she too, after having refused for decades to speak publicly of the months spent in Auschwitz, began to do so after the death of her friend, almost as though gathering his inheritance.

Perhaps the most touching expression of feelings felt by many survivors upon the news of Levi’s death is the story *Mozzicone* [Pencil stub] by Liana Millu. The writer narrates here how, right before Christmas in 1986, she had sent Levi a gift: her pencil stub, conserved for more than forty years, with which she had written her memories.

I still had the pencil, reduced to a few centimeters, encrusted, gnawed on, the tip badly sharpened on both sides. Until I realized that I was lacking in my duties towards it: it would have to remain and carry on bearing witness also in the future. Primo Levi was several years younger than me. Thus, suddenly, I decided that I would entrust it to him [...] Briefly, I wrote him explaining the history of the pencil and the entire situation [...] This response came back to me: “Dear friend, I received the strange and precious gift, and I have appreciated it in all of its value. I will conserve it. The days are becoming short for me too, but I wish for you to conserve for a long time your serenity and the capacity of affection you have shown by sending me this “stub of Mecklenburg,” so full of memories for you (and for me). With affection, your Primo Levi.” “I will conserve it.” The date was January 7, 1987 [...] Primo Levi’s note had become his last one. As for the pencil I cared so much about, I never heard anything more about it.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> I refer the reader to the *Cronologia* published on the website of the *Atlante della letteratura italiana*: <http://www.einaudi.it/speciali/Atlante-della-letteratura-italiana-Vol.III>

<sup>58</sup> Anna Maria Guadagni, “La memoria del bene. Luciana Nissim,” *Diario*, February 8, 1997.

<sup>59</sup> “La matita, invece, la tenni ancora, ridotta a pochi centimetri, scrostata, mordicchiata, la punta maldestramente aguzzata da entrambi i lati. Finché mi resi conto che mancavo ai miei doveri nei suoi confronti: doveva rimanere e portare testimonianza anche nel futuro. Primo Levi aveva alcuni anni meno di me. Così, all’improvviso, decisi che gliel’avrei affidata. [...] Brevemente gli scrissi spiegandogli la storia della matita e tutta la situazione. [...] Mi giunse questa risposta: “Cara amica, ho ricevuto lo strano e prezioso dono e ne ho apprezzato tutto il valore. La conserverò. Anche per me i giorni si stanno facendo corti ma le auguro di conservare a lungo la Sua serenità e la capacità di affetto che ha testimoniato inviandomi quel “mozzicone del Mecklenburg” così carico di ricordi per Lei (e per me). Con affetto. Suo Primo Levi.” “La conserverò.” La data era quella del sette gennaio 1987. [...] Il biglietto di Primo Levi è diventato l’ultimo. Quanto alla matita che mi stava tanto a cuore, non ne ho saputo più niente.” Liana Millu, “Quel mozzicone di matita del Mecklenburg,” *Dopo il fumo. “Sono il n. A 5384 di Auschwitz Birkenau”* (Brescia:

The gift of the pencil is a recognition of the function of guardian, but also of midwife of other memories, which Levi had exercised for decades and which, in a certain sense, he has continued to exercise even after his death.

---

**Anna Baldini** graduated at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa (2001) and got a PhD in Italian Literature at the University of Siena (2005). In 2010 she received a Special Mention as Best Early Career Scholar at the first “Edinburgh Gadda Prize-900 in Saggio” for her book *Il comunista. Una storia letteraria dalla Resistenza agli anni Settanta* (2008), in which she reconstructs the history of Italian literature between the WWII and the Seventies through an analysis of the literary treatment of Communist characters. She pursues a long-term interest in Jewish Studies and in particular in the work of Primo Levi. She is currently Research Fellow at the Università per Stranieri di Siena and is working on a history of the XXth century Italian literary field. Her current research is part of the Firb project “History and Digital Maps of German Literature in Italy in the 20th Century: Publishing, Field Structure, Interference.”

**How to quote this article:**

Anna Baldini, *Primo Levi and the Italian Memory of the Shoah*, in “Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC,” n.7 July 2014  
*url*: [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=361](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=361)

---

Morcelliana, 1999), 75-78. Also reprinted in *Tagebuch. Il diario del ritorno dal Lager* (Florence: Giuntina, 2006), 23-26.