

PRIMO LEVI AND THE GERMANS

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In an interview published in *La Stampa* in July 1986, some nine months before his death, Primo Levi responded to a series of questions prompted by the appearance of his latest book, *I sommersi e i salvati* [The drowned and the saved]. Some of these questions had to do with the relationship between ‘understanding’ and ‘forgiving’ and were of a kind that Levi was frequently asked. His replies were always more or less the same: he did not hate the Germans, but he was in no position to offer them absolution for their terrible crimes. What he wanted most of all was to come to clarity about who they were and why they did what they did. Here, in English translation, are Levi’s precise words: ‘I have been trying for forty years to understand the Germans. To understand how what happened could have happened has been one of my life’s goals. But in a wider sense, for I am interested in understanding other things, too. I am a chemist. I want to understand the world around me.’ [1]

Two things strike me as significant in the way Levi formulated his reply: (i) he is probably not exaggerating when he remarks that his quest to understand the Germans has preoccupied him for virtually his entire post-war existence and, indeed, has become one of his life’s primary aims; and (ii) he is characteristically broad-minded, but also slightly evasive, in stating that his desire to understand the Germans is really part of a larger quest to understand the world in its widest dimensions.

I want to try to clarify Levi’s lifelong desire to understand the Germans and, at the same time, question his inclination to situate such understanding within a broader context of worldly knowledge. Levi, always the rationalist, placed primary stress on the cognitive grasp of phenomena of all sorts, but I suspect that his need to come to clarity about the Germans was not, in fact, simply a function of his scientific curiosity about the world at large. Rather, it more likely involved intense and unresolved feelings that Levi usually could not bring himself to readily express. We would do well, therefore, to at least consider the possibility that, contrary to his repeated claims that he bore no lasting hostility towards the Germans, Levi might, in fact, have hated them or at least have carried a deep grievance against them. Like countless others, he had been cruelly victimised by the German crimes against the Jews and had reason enough to feel aggrieved. Denying these feelings would have done him no good. On the other hand, it was not part of Levi’s temperament to encourage retributive passion or revenge. He called for justice, yet he well knew that no human act could undo the damaging effects of a grievous crime. I want to examine some of the key stages in Levi’s decades-long quest to understand his former persecutors and see what we may learn about him as a man and a writer facing Germany and the Germans.

What precisely did Levi mean by ‘understanding’? There are times when he associates ‘understanding’ the Germans with ‘answering’ them; other times when he links such a need to ‘judging’ them; and still others when it is clear that what he most wanted was to confront the Germans and thereby bring them to a greater level of self-understanding about their crimes. Whatever he meant by the term, ‘understanding’ was a moral as well as a cognitive act and was intended to right the balance between him and those who had imprisoned, punished, and cruelly reduced him. In short, Levi was in quest of justice, but would ‘understanding’ the Germans suffice to bring about the quality of justice he required? Could Levi truly have regained the dignity that had been taken from him in Auschwitz by better comprehending the people who had shamed and degraded him?

Answers to these questions are set forth in his first book, *Se questo è un uomo* [Survival in Auschwitz], [2] which might usefully be taken, among other ways of reading it, as a Cartesian nightmare. Through a series of encounters with what Levi quickly grasps is an absurd universe, he apprehends a fundamental fact of the Lager: it is altogether resistant to reason. The prisoners arrive at the camp suffering from extreme thirst, discover a water tap in front of them, but then see a sign that declares ‘*Wassertrinken Verboten*’. Levi’s comment is telling: this is ‘nonsense’. (22) They are ordered to undress and put their shoes neatly in a corner, only to watch as a man comes

into the room with a broom and mixes them all up. (23) 'He is crazy', Levi remarks. Still tormented by thirst, Levi spies an icicle outside the window and breaks it off, only to have it brutally snatched away from him. To his astonished question 'Warum?' Levi receives an answer that is as incapacitating as it is definitive: 'Hier ist kein warum'. (29) Levi's first book is replete with episodes of this kind, all of them written in the vocabulary of the absurd. Indeed, among the book's most frequently encountered words are 'senseless', 'mad', 'crazy', 'illogical', 'grotesque', 'incomprehensible'. Absurdity, in short, was a defining principle of the Lager, and the best defence against it, Levi comes to learn, is conveyed by a few words scratched on the bottom of a veteran prisoner's bowl: 'Ne pas chercher à comprendre'. (103)

To Levi, who refers to himself in the opening paragraph of *Survival in Auschwitz* as someone who previously occupied a world 'inhabited by civilized Cartesian phantoms', the Lager, a place that discourages understanding and defeats thought, is hell. 'What can one think about?' Levi asks. 'One cannot think any more, it is like being already dead.' (22) To be sure, Levi came to know other, more cruel forms of dehumanisation, but the defeat of reason was among the harshest deprivations he faced as a camp inmate.

Several things are observable from this brief account of the crisis of cognition in Levi's first book. First, the Lager's successful subversion of the rational faculties was radically disarming and brought Levi face to face with something like a living death. As a result of his professional training, personal inclinations, and basic moral and intellectual values, he was deeply committed to a life of clarity and reason. It is significant that when he drew attention to the prisoners who were most completely exhausted by the camp – the *Musselmänner*, or the walking dead – he described them as people 'in whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen'. (90) Simply put, not to think was not to be.

Secondly, to the extent that he could understand a plan behind such human destruction, Levi saw it as part of some mad and inherently Germanic project. Its agents are referred to time and again as 'the Germans', and the cruel, indecipherable rituals that took place each day in Auschwitz are regarded as 'a colossal farce in Teutonic taste'. (30) It is 'the Germans' who ordered the inmates of the Lager to stand for hours in punishing roll-calls (16) and screamed at them in a language described as the 'curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command' (19). After witnessing a particularly painful hanging, Levi registers the following bitter comment: 'To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one: it has not been easy, nor quick, but you Germans have succeeded.' (150) The Lager, as Levi understood it, existed 'in the bosom of the German social organism', (83) and exemplified the Germans' love of 'order, systems, bureaucracy'. In describing the people who built and ran the place in these ways, Levi has recourse to a language that is almost anthropological in character:

The Germans are deaf and blind, enclosed in an armor of obstinacy and willful ignorance. . . . They construct shelters and trenches, they repair the damage, they build, they fight, they command, they organize, and they kill. What else could they do? They are Germans. This way of behavior is not meditated and deliberate, but follows from their nature and from the destiny they have chosen. They could not act differently. . . . (141)

These words plainly reveal that, at least in his first book, Levi's efforts to understand his tormentors drew him to focus on the Germans as such. Dr Pannwitz, his examiner for the strange chemistry examination he underwent in Auschwitz and the most vividly drawn of his persecutors, is not just any examiner but a 'blond, Aryan doctor' (102). He has 'eyes, hair and nose as all Germans ought to have them', (105) and the inhuman look he fixes on the pathetic Jewish prisoner before him, were it to be decipherable, would explain the 'essence of the great insanity of the third Germany'. (106)

In sum, what we find here is a piece of cultural and psychological analysis that is conspicuously ethnographic, even essentialist, in character. To be sure, Levi was interested in observing human behaviour in its broadest dimensions, but as he pondered the crimes of the Third Reich and sought to understand and assess those who were responsible for them, he was strongly tempted to think along the lines of what he called 'the Germanic genius for destruction'. [3]

In some of his later writings, Levi expressed unease over such thinking, which he realised was unfair if it was directed collectively at an entire ethnic group or nation, and he sought to mitigate some of its particularist strains and temper its emotional charge. In his early books, however, he felt far less restrained. In *La tregua* [The reawakening], the sequel to Levi's first Auschwitz memoir, he described how German soldiers had ruthlessly

destroyed a large Soviet military camp, and he spoke with disdain of their 'Teutonically methodical devastation and plundering'. More than a sack, the utter emptiness of the place expressed to him something more fearsome: the Germanic 'genius of destruction, of anti-creation . . . the mystique of barrenness, beyond all demands of war or impulse for booty' (123). [4] It is little wonder, then, that when Levi first stepped foot in Germany upon his return to Italy, he was furious and determined to have it out with any and all Germans who might cross his path:

We felt we had something to say, enormous things to say, to every single German, and we felt that every German should have something to say to us; we felt an urgent need to settle our accounts, to ask, explain, and comment. . . . Did 'they' know about Auschwitz, about the silent daily massacre, a step away from their doors? If they did, how could they walk about, return home and look at their children, cross the threshold of a church? If they did not, they ought, as a sacred duty, to listen, to learn everything, immediately, from us, from me; I felt the tattooed number on my arm burning like a sore. . . .

I felt that everybody should interrogate us, read in our faces who we were, and listen to our tale in humility. But no one looked us in the eyes, no one accepted the challenge; they were deaf, blind and dumb, imprisoned in their ruins, as in a fortress of willful ignorance, still strong, still capable of hatred and contempt, still prisoners of their old tangle of pride and guilt. (204-5)

In notable contrast to Levi's more typical preference for adopting a strategy of restraint in writing about his experiences, he is here open and forceful in registering unchecked anger, bitterness, tension, and determination. For understandable reasons, Levi was in a confrontational mood and needed and wanted to set things straight with the Germans. What he discovered, however, was the opposite of what he sought – silence, evasiveness, cowardice – and the effects on him were not good. Here is how the passage concludes: 'I found myself searching among them . . . [for] someone who could not but know, remember, reply; who had commanded and obeyed, killed, humiliated, corrupted. A vain and foolish search. . . .' (205)

These are downcast, sobering conclusions and foreshadow frustrations and disappointments that Levi was to experience at other moments in his life when his desire for a significant meeting of minds with Germans similarly went unsatisfied. What is it that he sought in these hoped-for encounters, and what might their failure to develop tell us about him? I shall venture some answers shortly, but first I want to briefly look at a few other matters that involved Levi intimately and revealingly with the Germans.

One of these is language. Levi loved word books, had a special fascination with the etymological origins and social function of words, and made it a point to learn several foreign languages. One of these was German, a language that he took on in different ways and employed for different purposes at various stages of his life. [5] According to his own account, Levi knew little German prior to his incarceration in the Lager, but the German he did possess contributed significantly to his survival. Not to know German meant not to understand the language of command, and that could be perilous. Most Italian Jews found themselves seriously disadvantaged in this respect, but as a trained chemist, Levi had some scientific German and brought the rudiments of the language with him to Auschwitz. To improve his linguistic competency, he took private lessons in German from a fellow prisoner from Alsace in exchange for a portion of his daily food rations. While his knowledge of the language remained limited during his time in the Lager, it proved sufficient to help him get by. And, most importantly, it enabled him to impress upon Dr Pannwitz that he was capable of serving in the camp's chemical laboratory, a position of substantial advantage. In these respects, Levi's connection to German was not only helpful but critical.

All of this is self-evident from a reading of his books. As he himself put it years later, 'knowing German meant life'. [6] Of at least equal interest is Levi's pursuit of German in the post-war period and his professed reasons for deepening his knowledge of the language. As a representative of his business firm, he visited Germany on numerous occasions and regularly dealt with German associates. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Levi laboured to improve his German in the first place for professional reasons. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case: the German he used in his commercial dealings was the German he learned in the Lager – a crude, vulgar tongue, which he evidently enjoyed putting on display when he met with German colleagues. It embarrassed and shocked them to hear Levi speak such a German, reactions that their Italian visitor did not mind provoking. Levi knew that his German was a low form of the language and even described it as the equivalent of the kind of Italian one might learn in a whorehouse. He deliberately did not try to make it more genteel, and for the same reason that he never sought to have the tattoo removed from his left arm. [7] Both were emblematic signs from the Lager, vivid markers

from a painful time in his life, which he felt the public at large, and especially the German public, needed to be aware of.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to understand Levi's post-war connection to German primarily in functional or utilitarian terms. The language had important symbolic value for him. In his post-war business dealings, as well as in his writings, he used what German he had picked up – barracks German, or 'the German of the SS and the Wehrmacht', as he referred to it – both to convey and to validate his experiences at the hands of the Germans. In the later years of his life, however, Levi devoted himself to a more serious study of German and even enrolled in a local Goethe Institute, where he took language classes for six years. In a little essay first published in 1985 in *L'Altrui Mestiere* (and later collected in *Other People's Trades*), Levi explained his motives for 'going back to school' in these terms:

At the age of sixty I have registered for courses at a very serious institution where a foreign language which I know very badly is being taught. I wanted to know it better, out of pure intellectual curiosity: I had learned its elements by ear under conditions of hardship and had then used it for years because of my work, interested only in practicalities, that is, to understand and to make myself understood, and neglecting its singularities, its grammar and syntax. [8]

On the face of it, this seems a reasonable explanation, but two things about Levi's account of his return to German strike me as odd: (i) although we can readily surmise its identity, Levi never refers to the language he is learning by name, and (ii) he asks his readers to believe that his desire to better know this unnamed tongue was purely intellectual. To be sure, Levi was an intellectual of the best kind, endlessly curious about all kinds of things, including the distinctive properties of languages, and there is no reason to discount his professed motives for deepening his knowledge of German. And yet there is reason to doubt that it was 'pure intellectual curiosity' alone that brought Levi to the Goethe Institute for six years. Is it not more likely the case that his wish to better understand German was closely tied to his wish to better understand the Germans, a project that he pursued over the course of his last forty years and that surely had a more complex dynamic than pure intellectual interest?

As part of this pursuit, Levi carried on extensive correspondence with people in Germany, used his many business visits to the country (by his own admission, he travelled to Germany at least fifteen times) to further investigate the nature of German society, closely followed German political developments, read German books, and did occasional translations from German. In an interview broadcast by Westdeutscher Rundfunk, in September 1986, he stated, 'I know German literature well [and] in my own way am interested in if not in love with German culture.' In his late interviews with Ferdinando Camon, he restated his interest in German culture, found himself in the odd position of defending the Germans against some of Camon's broad indictments against them, and made a point of reiterating what had become almost his signature line on this subject, 'The lasting curiosity I feel about the Germany of then and now excludes hatred.' [9]

No doubt there is substance to his claims, and yet it would be a mistake not to investigate them a bit further. If, for instance, one seeks to evaluate which works of German literature Levi not only knew well but may have mattered to him most, what one discovers is curious. In 1981, he published a personal anthology of selections from world literature whose purpose was to show which writings had had an important impact on his intellectual and artistic development. Of the thirty works excerpted in this book, *La ricerca delle radici* [The search for roots], four were originally written in German: Ludwig Gattermann, *Die Praxis des organischen Chemikers*, Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder*, Paul Celan, 'Todesfuge', and Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz*. The first of these books, a non-literary text which he refers to as 'the father's voice', was crucial for Levi's early education as a chemist. The second, Thomas Mann's retelling of the biblical Joseph saga, which Levi praised as 'the finest literary product of this century', was an extensive reworking of central stories in the Hebrew Bible. As such, it might loosely be taken as a kind of 'Jewish' book, or at least a work deeply dependent upon early Hebrew narrative. Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge', the most famous of Holocaust poems, about which Levi wrote, 'I carry it within me like a grafting', evoked horrors from the war years that remained alive in Levi to the end of his life (lines from the poem echo in *Se non ora, quando?* [If not now, when?] and elsewhere). And Langbein's book on Auschwitz would have similarly returned him to vivid memories of his sufferings in the Lager.

Obviously, it would be a mistake to measure Levi's entire appreciation of German culture by this short list of titles. And yet it is telling that it is these four German-language works and no others that make their way into his

anthology. No Goethe, no Schiller, no Kleist, no Brecht, appear on his list. I do not know whether books by these and other classic German authors were in his library at home, but at the time when he came to compile his selections for *La ricerca delle radici*, they were clearly not as alive to his imagination as were the four works cited above. And, with the exception of Gattermann's chemistry book, all of the German-language texts that entered his anthology are linked by a common thread of victimisation.

At about the same time Levi was compiling his anthology and also improving his knowledge of German at the Goethe Institute, he was also undertaking some other projects that involved him with German-language literature. Although not a major part of his literary production, these projects are likewise revealing. In the summer of 1982, Levi began to translate Kafka's *Der Prozess*, a novel that drew him by its near-hallucinatory portrait of gratuitous suffering and inescapable shame. Although he stated in print that he did not feel much affinity for Kafka, Levi confessed that, 'as a survivor of Auschwitz', he well understood the plight of Joseph K. before 'the occult, corrupt tribunal that pervades everything surrounding him'. [10] It takes no special stretch of the imagination to understand that Levi would have closely felt the anguish and absurdity of Joseph K.'s situation, which was also one of undeserved victimisation.

Not long after his Kafka translation, Levi became involved with two other German-language projects that more explicitly linked him to his time in the Lager. One of these was *Menschen in Auschwitz*, an important historical source for Levi and one that he first read in 1972. He had personally done the translations from Hermann Langbein's book that appeared in *La ricerca delle radici* and, in 1984, undertook to write a foreword to the full Italian translation of *Menschen in Auschwitz*. In a similar vein, early in 1985 Levi wrote the introduction to the second edition of the Italian translation of the memoirs of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz who 'improved' the camp's mass killing capacity by introducing Zyklon B into the process. It was no tribute to the man when Levi called him 'murder's finest technician'. [11] Two years later, he was asked to write the introduction to the Italian translation of Jean Améry's *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, a book that he knew well and had referred to at length in his chapter on 'The Intellectual in Auschwitz' in *The Drowned and the Saved*. By this time in his life, however, Levi was close to exhaustion and declined the invitation. [12]

What one sees in this cursory review of his involvements with German and German-language books in the 1980s does not invalidate Levi's claim that he undertook intensive study of German for purely intellectual reasons, but it does tend to moderate it and also perhaps to shift the accent elsewhere. For whatever his other motives for participating in German classes at the Goethe Institute, it is clear that he used his growing command of the language to continue his decades-long mission to better understand 'how what happened could have happened'. I do not want to present a picture of him as obsessed or narrowly fixated in this respect, for Levi was a many-sided figure with lively and diverse interests. He translated some of the poetry of Heine and Rilke, evidence enough that his relationship to German was a rich one and had more than a single dimension. Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted to ignore the obvious, namely, that Levi learned much of his early German 'down there' and that forever after it echoed for him with resonances of the worst, if also the most formative, experiences of his life. Language is always revelatory and, as Myriam Anissimov puts it in her biography of the author, Levi knew that 'the language in which death was administered was German'. [13] That is a more-than-linguistic fact, and Levi could not forget it and would not have wanted his readers to overlook it.

In his conversations with Ferdinando Camon, Levi mentions the language barrier that he and other non-German-speaking prisoners in Auschwitz had to contend with and pointed out that such linguistic isolation could be fatal. In this same context, he also said something that I find to be extraordinarily revealing: 'I'm a talker. If you stop up my mouth, I die. And there [in the Lager] they stopped up my mouth'. [14]

This remark is worth pondering. It was pointed out earlier that, to Levi the rationalist, not to think was not to be. It was his habit – more than that, it was his drive, his need, a fundamental part of his life's purpose – to interrogate everything around him. To be imprisoned in a place where the mind was forcibly shut down – where the prevailing ethos is summed up by the silencing power of '*Hier ist kein warum*' – is to be trapped in a near-death state. Closely allied to this deprivation of mind was the deprivation of speech, which Levi experienced in part owing to his lack of fluent German but more critically to the Lager's tyrannous suppression of anything remotely like free will and the expressive powers that accompany and give voice to such freedom. Dignity resides in having some measure of

independent say over one's life, and when that say is thwarted – when one is systematically deprived of the opportunity to ask 'Warum?' – the human being is rendered altogether abject – broken, conquered, a slave. [15]

It is a condition that he struggled against in Auschwitz and also afterwards. During his time in the Lager, there were two memorable moments in particular when Levi was successful in rising above his lowly state. The first occurs in his encounter with Dr Pannwitz, when he experiences a sense of lucid elation as he feels the return of his rational faculties, reconnects to the precious sources of his former knowledge, regains his voice as a chemist and, despite his prison rags, is once more a man in his own eyes. Interestingly and importantly, it is the German that comes to his mouth at this moment – Gattermann's German and not that of the SS – that enables him to meet his SS interlocutor on almost equal terms. His second experience of this kind occurs during the episode with Jean, the Pikolo of his Kommando, when he suddenly begins to recite lines of verse from *The Divine Comedy* and experiences a similar elation, which he describes as being 'like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God'. (113) This time the voice speaks in Dante's Italian, a language that Levi loved and could summon by heart. Both are transcendent moments, which, at least for a short time, enabled Levi to forget who and where he was. What distinguishes them more than anything else is his ability to overcome his enforced dumbness and open his mouth again.

In his post-Auschwitz existence, Levi retained a strong need to talk, and especially to talk about his ordeals in the Lager. Such talk can be liberating, but it can only work its good effects if the talker has listeners. As is clear from his writings, Levi felt continually let down – in the immediate post-war period by those closest to him, including family and friends at home, and in later years by others. Like the figure of the Ancient Mariner, whose urgencies of voice he adopted as his own, Levi had a strong need to tell his tale. His sense that his efforts were futile, that his was an unlistened-to story, saddened and frustrated him.

This frustration shows up especially in his writings about his post-war encounters with Germans or, more accurately, with the absence of such encounters. There was hardly anything that Levi desired more than a meaningful colloquy with the Germans, but he was never successful in finding such talking partners. At the same time, his need to be listened to by those who most needed to hear him never waned. Here is how Levi puts the matter in his important 'Vanadium' chapter in *Il sistema periodico* [The periodic table]:

To find myself, man to man, having a reckoning with one of the 'others' had been my keenest and most constant desire since I had left the concentration camp. . . . The encounter I looked forward to with so much intensity as to dream of it (in German) at night, was an encounter with one of them down there, who had disposed of us, who had not looked into our eyes, as though we didn't have eyes. Not to take my revenge. . . [but] only to re-establish the right proportions, and to say, 'Well?' [16]

However one chooses to hear that 'Well?' inflected, it is pregnant with meanings of the most potent kind. The best gloss of it I know is found in the chapter in *I sommersi e i salvati* entitled 'Letters from Germans', in which Levi reflects on the forthcoming appearance of the German translation of his first book. When he first learned that *Se questo è un uomo* was being translated into German, he had felt uneasy; but then he welcomed the prospect of a German edition, for at last, as he put it, he would be reaching 'them', his work's 'true recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun'. As a result of the translation, he wrote, 'Now the gun was loaded'. This is an unusual, powerfully aggressive metaphor, and hardly in accord with Levi's professed denial of harbouring any lingering feelings of hostility towards the Germans. Here is how the passage continues: 'The hour had come to settle accounts, to put the cards on the table. Above all, the hour of colloquy.' [17] The forcefulness, decisiveness, and determination that resonate through these words all come together in Levi's utterance of that 'Well?', which, far from being posed as a casual question, is shot out like a bullet. Levi had his quarry in sight. But just as his anticipated meeting with the German chemist from Auschwitz, whom he refers to in 'Vanadium' as Dr Lothar Müller, never materialises, so, too, was Levi largely disappointed in his hopes for a significant encounter with a German readership. In both cases, he declared, he harboured no hatred for the Germans and was not looking to exact revenge. All he wanted to do was 'understand the Germans'. 'Understanding' in such instances, however, was hardly a simple or a dispassionate matter. Rather, it was driven by confrontational energies and was meant to help clarify the lines of injury and responsibility, to sort out motives, to force an acknowledgement of moral debts still to be paid. In sum, to settle scores.

In the Lager, not to know German was to be 'reduced to the condition of deaf-mutes'. [18] Through the German translation of his book about Auschwitz, Levi now had an opportunity to recover his voice and have it projected in the native language of those who most needed to hear him. As he wrote to Heinz Riedt, the German translator of *Se questo è un uomo*:

Today I, prisoner no. 174517, by your help, can speak to the German people, remind them of what they have done, and say to them: 'I am alive, and I would like to understand you in order to judge you.'

I do not believe that man's life necessarily has a definite purpose; but if I think of my life and the aims I have until now set for myself, I recognize only one of them as well defined and conscious, and it is precisely this, to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to 'answer' the *Kapo* who cleaned his hand on my shoulder, Dr Pannwitz, and those who hung Ultimo ['the last one'] and their heirs.

Levi concluded his letter to Riedt, which was printed as an author's preface to the German translation of his book, by expressing the hope that *Ist das ein Mensch?* 'will have some echo in Germany . . . [and] that this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to better understand the Germans'. [19]

*Ist das ein Mensch?* appeared in Germany in 1961, and over the next three years, Levi received about forty letters from German readers. His review of this correspondence in the 'Letters from Germans' chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved* brings him to the sorrowful conclusion that, by and large, he had failed. His book had a minor resonance within Germany, but it did not provoke the kind of response he had hoped for. Those who wrote to him, he came to realise, were the innocent ones, the ones who least needed to read him; as for the others, the guilty ones, they were silent. Moreover, as one of his correspondents told him, Levi should not expect to understand the Germans, for they are hardly able to understand themselves.

For a writer who had staked so much on telling his story, these disappointments were heavy ones. The last lines of Primo Levi's last book are about Germany and the Germans and are among the most bitter he ever wrote. If one takes them as a final, summarising statement of Levi's thoughts, they constitute an unusually strong indictment of the people and the country he had been trying for so long to understand. 'Germany', he notes, 'has become "respectable", and in fact holds the destiny of Europe in its hands.' He then reflects on the origins of the Nazi madness, recalls Hitler's popularity with the German masses, and reminds his readers that Hitler was hardly alone:

Let it be clear that to a greater or lesser degree all were responsible, but it must be just as clear that behind their responsibility stands that great majority of Germans who accepted in the beginning, out of mental laziness, myopic calculation, stupidity, and national pride the 'beautiful words' of Corporal Hitler, followed him as long as luck and lack of scruples favored him, were swept away by his ruin, afflicted by death, misery, and remorse, and rehabilitated a few years later as the result of an unprincipled political game. [20]

On the evidence of these words, one would have to conclude that Levi had more or less given up on the Germans. His earlier hope to reach them, stir them, get them to acknowledge moral responsibility for the Nazi crimes had proven futile. For all that remained unacknowledged and unresolved, however, the German nation proved uncommonly resilient and was back at the centre of European power. Because Levi understood the country's successful economic and political recovery as unaccompanied by anything like a fundamental spiritual transformation, though, he continued to look upon it as morally unrehabilitated.

Evidence of Germany's lingering ambivalence about the past surfaced in some prominent ways in the two years leading up to Primo Levi's death. The Bitburg affair in spring 1985 was something that Levi looked upon as an affront to the victims of Nazism as well as a national scandal.[21] He regarded the German *Historikerstreit*, which began soon after, as a troubling form of historical revisionism and sharply criticised it in print. Far from the Nazi crimes being an 'imitation of "Asiatic" methods', as argued by the German historian Ernst Nolte, Levi insisted that they were 'perfectly European' and, moreover, recognisably German:

The gas was produced by illustrious German chemical plants; and to other German plants went the hair of the massacred women; and to German banks went the gold of the teeth extracted from the corpses. All of this is specifically German, and no German ought to forget it; nor ought he to forget that in Nazi Germany, and only there, even children and the moribund were led to an atrocious death, in the name of an abstract and ferocious radicalism that has no equal in modern times.

Levi was angry and felt no need to restrain himself in writing against those who would downplay the Nazi slaughter of the Jews by relativising it. His last words are an admonitory reminder that 'if today's Germany sets store by the place to which she is entitled among European nations, she cannot and must not whitewash her past'. [22]

These tendencies and others like them undermined Levi's earlier hope of having some kind of honest encounter with the Germans. In fact, though, he was ambivalent all along about the prospect of such meetings, both wanting them and dreading the thought of actually coming face to face with his former persecutors. These eagerly anticipated but never realised conversations mirror Levi's general inability to resolve his conflicted feelings about the Germans. He claimed that he wanted to know them in order to judge them, but it is difficult to imagine what kind of justice ever would have satisfied him. Like Jean Améry, with whom he famously quarrelled over questions of understanding and forgiving the Germans, Levi knew that the offence committed against him was irreparable. The tortured remained tortured, while most of the torturers went free, refusing to acknowledge, let alone repent of, their crimes. Worse still, the history of these crimes was being called into question and their memory steadily attenuated while those against whom these very crimes had been committed were still alive to suffer the insult.

Levi's position was a difficult one, perhaps even an impossible one. A rationalist by nature and conviction, he preferred clarity to confusion, but in his connections to Germany and the Germans, he never achieved full clarity, either cognitively or emotionally. A keen analyst of the sociology of the Lager, he has taught us much about the human makeup of the Nazi camp system, but the Nazi mind and Nazi motives ultimately eluded him. Nowhere in Levi's writings, for instance, does one ever find anything like a fully-drawn portrait of a perpetrator. His sketch of Dr Pannwitz is lucid and memorable, but it occupies no more than a few paragraphs. And beyond this sketch there is little else – the character of Müller in 'Vanadium' is drawn at a distance from the man himself and never truly emerges into the foreground; Mertens, a more weakly imagined version of Müller, is thinner still; [23] and the well-known poem on Adolf Eichmann is less an effort to portray Eichmann than to project a survivor's curse on him. Apart from these few attempts to bring the killers to life on the page, one finds almost nothing.

Why is that so? For all that Levi felt driven to 'understand the Germans', he was reluctant to imagine them at their worst. He no doubt held to this position because, as a writer, he knew that to understand human beings one had to become imaginatively involved with them, and he feared the contaminating effects of too close an intimacy with the killers. He also evidently believed that to understand them on these terms necessitated identifying with them in some manner and that to take this step is almost to justify and forgive them. 'No normal human being will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others', he insisted. 'The Nazi hatred is a hate that is not in us; it is outside man. . . . We cannot understand it.' [24] On the other hand, Levi knew that such men, for all of their monstrosity, were not monsters but, more or less, average men. One sees the complexity, even the contradictions, in Levi's position: it was one of his life's most ardent goals to understand the Germans, yet he clearly put restraints on his willingness to represent them at their most extreme, that is to say, as he had known them in the Lager. Without seeing them in these terms, though, how could he ever hope to understand them?

Through frequent citations of German speech, almost all of it barbaric, one is aware of a German presence in Levi's writings, but the owners of these brutal voices rarely come into view. At the same time, and for good reason, he could not let them go. Had Levi been a religious person, as he remarked on more than one occasion, he might have found a way to make his peace with the Germans. Some of his German correspondents even looked to him for a kind of absolution, and at least one seemed to perceive in his writing 'an overcoming of Judaism, a fulfilment of the Christian precept to love one's enemies'. [25] Levi registers but does not bother to deal with the insult. As he put it in an interview with Risa Sodi, 'I'm not a believer, I really don't know what forgiveness is. It's a concept that's outside my world. If I were a rabbi, maybe I would; if I were a judge, perhaps. . . . [But] the authority does not rest with me.' [26]

In the end, Levi was stuck with the Germans and was unable to set himself free. He badly wanted to understand them, needed to hold them accountable, refused to hate them, could not forgive them. He took it as a personal duty to reflect continually on 'what had happened,' but he was not able, finally, to figure out the people who had made what happened happen. Like any good scientist, he believed that the truth could be discovered by those talented enough and persistent enough to go in search of it, but at the end of a forty-year search, diligently and painfully pursued, it is doubtful that he ever really found what he had been looking for.



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## Notes

1. 'Primo Levi: capire non e' perdonare' ['Primo Levi: to understand is not to forgive'] by Giorgio Calcagno, originally published in *La Stampa* (26 July 1986); collected in *Primo Levi. Conversazioni e Interviste 1963–1987*, ed. Marco Belpoliti (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), p. 144.
2. All pages references are to the following edition of this book: Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, translated by Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1993).
3. Primo Levi, *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), p. 168.
4. All page references are to the following edition of this book: Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, translated by Stuart Woolf (New York: Collier Books, 1993).
5. On the basis of the intermittent references that Levi makes throughout his writings to his knowledge of German, it is difficult to know with any degree of certainty how well he knew the language at any one stage of his life. As a student of chemistry, he had absorbed some scientific German from his reading of Gattermann's text. This could not have given him much in the way of the kind of German that one uses in everyday life, but all the same Levi claimed it afforded him at least a small advantage in the Lager. More than most Italian and Greek prisoners, he had a chance to understand the orders that were being shouted at him every day in German. Nevertheless, he evidently did not have much of the language, for in *Survival in Auschwitz* he refers to his 'poor German' (29) and remarks that his German vocabulary was 'very limited' (30). In *The Reawakening*, he writes that he spoke 'a little German' (56) but also that he found and was reading 'a curious Nazi propaganda novel, *Die Grosse Heimkehr*' (98). He told Ferdinando Camon that during his time in Auschwitz he knew only 'a few words of German', but that this little bit was 'precious' to him and that he consciously made efforts to 'absorb German from the air around me' (48). In the 'Vanadium' chapter of *The Periodic Table*, he notes that there were times in the Lager when he 'thought in German' and even dreamed in German (214). We know that by 1972 he read Herman Langbein's *Menschen in Auschwitz*, evidently in German, and in 1976 he used a German translation of Jacob Presser's Dutch novel about a transport of Dutch Jews to Auschwitz, *De nacht der Girondijnen* [The night of the Girondists], for his own translation of the book into Italian. Thus, well before Levi enrolled in the German classes at the Goethe Institute in Turin, he was familiar with the language to one degree or another and used it in a variety of ways.
6. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 95.
7. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 99; Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, translated by John Shepley (Marlboro, Vt.: The Marlboro Press, 1989), p. 48.
8. *Other People's Trades*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989), p. 182.
9. See 'Capire e far capire' ['To understand and to make others understand'] originally broadcast by Westdeutscher Rundfunk, September 1986, and collected in *Conversazioni e interviste*, pp. 248–49; see also Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, p. 11.
10. Primo Levi, 'Translating Kafka', *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), pp. 106–09.
11. Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1999), p. 375.
12. Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, p. 396.
13. Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*, p. 369.
14. Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, p. 47.
15. It is this condition that Levi describes at the close of 'The Last One', a crucial chapter in *Survival in Auschwitz*, when, following a public hanging, Levi and the other prisoners who had been forced to witness the gallows scene are pictured as being resigned to the point of docility. Their wordless submission to the 'raucous German voices' that resound all about them oppress them with shame and make them feel 'worthy of the unarmed death which awaits us'. (pp. 148–50). Other key scenes in Levi's writings likewise show the destructive effects of such enforced muteness. I think most of all of Hurbinek – 'a child of Auschwitz, a child of death' – who occupies no more than a few paragraphs at the beginning of *The Reawakening* but nevertheless is one of the haunting presences in Levi's work. An emblematic figure, this stunted, helpless, utterly needful child is described as being without name and without speech, entombed in his own dumbness. A creature of the camp reduced to the lowest human level, he can be taken as representing the condition of voicelessness that Levi found so pathetic, so perilous, and also so frighteningly familiar.
16. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), p. 215.
17. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 168.
18. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 135.
19. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 174.
20. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 198–203.
21. Primo Levi, 'Questions and Answers at Indiana University', *Midstream* 32 (April 1986), pp. 26–28.
22. Primo Levi, 'The Dispute among the Historians', in *The Mirror Maker*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), pp. 163–66. Levi's article, written on 22 January 1986 and originally entitled 'Buco nero di Auschwitz' ['The black hole of Auschwitz'], was one of the last articles he wrote.
23. Metens appears in 'The Quiet City', in *Moments of Reprieve*, translated by Ruth Feldman (New York: Summit Books, 1986), pp. 99–105.
24. Levi, 'Afterword' to *The Reawakening*, p. 227.
25. Levi, *The Periodic Table*, p. 221.
26. Risa Sodi, 'An Interview with Primo Levi', *Partisan Review*, Vol. LIX, 3 (1987), p. 364.