

PRIMO LEVI (1919- 1987)

In the March bulletin, we look at the life of another great Italian author of the 20th Century—Primo Levi. I've always been fascinated by Levi's creative genius at work in his writings, and they have always been some of my favorite "reads." They are just different enough in their presentation of subject matter (who else but Levi would use some elements in the Periodic Table of Elements to serve as a basis for reflections on his life?) in order to move the reader to consider life's greatest challenges and rewards. Levi is one of the few great writers who can force the reader to consider great questions of life while still enjoying the story he is writing.



Primo Michele Levi (July 31, 1919–April 11, 1987) was an Italian-Jewish chemist, writer, and Holocaust survivor. He was born in Turin, Italy at Corso Re Umberto 75. His father, Cesare, worked for the manufacturing firm Ganz and spent much of his time working abroad in Hungary, where Ganz was based. Primo's family was a liberal Jewish family that was part of an assimilated, educated Jewish-Italian world. There were around 50 thousand Italian Jews at that time, and most of them were supporters of the Fascist government (at least until the race legislation of 1938 [see below] that announced a newly aggressive anti-Semitism). Cesare was a member of the party, though more out of convenience than commitment.

Cesare was an avid reader and self-taught. Levi's mother, Ester, known to everyone as Rina, was well educated, having attended the Istituto Maria Letizia. She too was an avid reader, played the piano, and spoke fluent French.

In 1921 Anna Maria, Levi's sister, was born. She was someone that he was to remain close to all his life. In 1925, at the age of 6, Levi entered the Felice Rignon primary school in Turin. In class he was the youngest, the shortest, and the cleverest, as well as being the only Jew. For these reasons, he was often bullied and his health deteriorated. He was a thin and delicate child, shy, and thought he was ugly. While at school during these years, he excelled academically; he was top of his class (his schoolmates cheered him on with a play on his name: "*Primo Levi Primo!*"). From this early age, he appears to have possessed many of the qualities that would appear in his later prose—meticulousness, curiosity, furious discretion, orderliness to the point of priggishness. Because of his poor health, he was often absent from school for long periods of time. During these absences, he was fortunate to be tutored at home by excellent tutors. Primo and his sister spent summers with their mother in the Waldensian valleys southwest of Turin, where Rina usually rented a farmhouse. He enjoyed the outdoors, engaging in strenuous play and activity that helped him build up his strength and stamina. His father remained in the city, partly because of his dislike for the rural life, but also because of the romantic affairs he was engaged in.



In August 1932, following two years at the Talmud Torah school in Turin, he sang in the local synagogue for his Bar Mitzvah. In 1933, as was expected of all young Italian schoolboys, he joined the *Avanguardisti* movement for young Fascists. He avoided rifle drill by joining the ski division, and spent every Saturday during the season on the ski slopes above Turin. Levi was plagued by chest infections so he was keen on participating in strenuous physical activity.

In July 1934, just before his 15th birthday, he took the exams for the *Massimo d'Azeglio Liceo Classico* (Turin's leading academy specializing in the classics) and that autumn, he was admitted to the school, a year ahead of normal entrance. Levi continued to be bullied during his time at the Lyceum, although six other Jewish boys were in his class. It was while he was at the Lyceum that he read Sir William Bragg's *Concerning the Nature of Things*, and decided he wanted to be a chemist.



Hitler youth and Italian Fascists: dressing the part

In 1937 Levi was summoned before the War Ministry and accused of ignoring a draft notice from the Italian Royal Navy—one day before he was to write a final examination essay on Italy's participation in the Spanish Civil War. Distracted and terrified by the draft accusation, he failed the exam—the first poor grade of his life—and was devastated. His father was able to keep him out of the Navy, however, by enrolling him in the Fascist militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*). He remained a member through his first year of university, until passage of the Italian Racial Laws of 1938 that forced his expulsion from the militia. At the end of the summer, he retook and passed his final examinations, and in October 1937 he enrolled at the University of Turin to study chemistry. As one of 80 candidates, he spent three months attending lectures, and in February, after passing his oral examination, he was selected as one of twenty students to advance to the full-time chemistry curriculum.

In the liberal period following World War I as well as in the first decade of the Fascist regime, Jews held many public positions, and were prominent in literature, science, and politics. In 1929 Mussolini signed the Lateran Treaty with the Catholic Church, which recognized the Vatican as a separate sovereign state outside of Italian sovereignty. In addition, it also established Catholicism as the



*Coat of Arms
of Vatican City*

State religion in Italy, allowed the Church to influence many sectors of education and public life, and relegated other religions to the status of “tolerated cults.” A year later, Mussolini's regime promulgated legislation that defined the relations between the State and the Italian Jewish communities. In 1936 Italy's conquest of Ethiopia and the expansion of what the regime regarded as the Italian “colonial empire” brought the question of “race” to the forefront for the first time in the post-unification political narrative. Within the context set by these two events, and the 1940 alliance with Hitler's Germany, the situation of the Jews in Italy changed dramatically.

In July 1938 a group of prominent Italian scientists and intellectuals published the *Manifesto della razza* (“Manifesto of Race”), a mixture of racial and ideological anti-Semitic theories from ancient and modern sources. This treatise formed the basis for the Italian Racial Laws of October 1938. Before the Racial Laws, Levi had not felt that Jewishness was central to his identity. Although he had suffered being bullied in school, he had simply thought that this was from



being a physically small and sickly child. Like most Italian Jews, his family had long been assimilated with little to distinguish them from other Italians. After enactment of the Italian anti-Jewish legislation, Italian Jews lost their basic civil rights, their positions in public offices, and their assets. Their books were prohibited and Jewish writers could not publish in magazines owned by Aryans. Jewish students who had begun their courses of study were permitted to continue, but new

Jewish students were barred from entering university. Since Primo had matriculated a year earlier (1937), he was able to continue his studies and ultimately to earn a degree in chemistry.

In June 1940 Italy declared war on Britain and France as an ally of Germany, and the first Allied air raids on Turin began two days later. Levi's studies continued during the bombardments, although the family suffered additional strain because his father became bedridden with bowel cancer.

Because of the new Racial Laws and the increasing intensity of prevalent Fascism, Levi had difficulty finding a supervisor for his graduation thesis. Dr. Nicolò Dallaporta eventually accepted him as his student and he became Levi's thesis advisor. Levi graduated in the summer of 1941 with full marks and merit. His degree certificate, however, bore the remark: "of Jewish race." This combined with the racial laws prevented him from finding a suitable permanent job after he graduated.

In December 1941 Levi was clandestinely offered a job at an asbestos mine at San Vittore. The project was to extract nickel from the mine spoilage, a challenge he accepted with pleasure. Levi understood that, if successful, he would be aiding the German war effort, which was suffering nickel shortages in the production of armaments. The job required Levi to work under a false name with false papers because he was a Jew. In June 1942, due to the deteriorating situation in Turin, Levi left the mine and went to work in Milan. He had been recruited through a fellow student he had known at Turin University, who was then working for the Swiss firm of A. Wander Ltd. on a project to extract an anti-diabetic serum from vegetable matter. He was able to take the job because the Italian racial laws did not apply to Swiss companies. However, it soon became clear to him that the project had no chance of success, but he kept this fact to himself because he needed the job.

In July 1943 King Victor Emmanuel III deposed Mussolini and appointed a new government under Marshal Pietro Badoglio as premier, who signed the Armistice of Cassibile with the Allies. When the armistice was made public on September 8, the Germans were occupying Northern and Central Italy. They liberated Mussolini from imprisonment and appointed him as head of the Italian Social Republic, a puppet state in German-occupied northern Italy.

The introduction of the Race Laws had created a predicament for Levi that went far beyond the problem of completing his degree in chemistry and



Mussolini and Hitler

finding a job. The Race Laws were a threat to his identity. Who was he if not an ordinary Italian like his fellow students? This question “what is a man?” that would echo throughout his literary works was never an abstract consideration for him, but a matter of personal urgency. Until September 1943, it had been possible for Levi to live in “willful blindness” to his Jewishness. He was able to get around the rules, graduate, and find work unofficially; but with the Italian capitulation to the Allies and the German occupation of Italy, this was no longer an option. Jews were being rounded up. Many were fleeing to the Americas. Levi’s insecurity at this time was compounded by the death of his father in March 1942, which made him, at twenty-three, responsible for the well-being of his mother and younger sister.

He nursed his lack of self-esteem with adventurous chemistry experiments and arduous mountain climbing in the Alps above Turin. It was to the mountains that he fled with his mother and sister in September 1943. The three left for Saint-Vincent in the Aosta Valley, where they could hide. Since they were pursued as Jews, many of whom had already been interned by the authorities, the three moved up the hillside to Aosta. Aosta was on the route to Switzerland that was followed by Allied prisoners of war and refugees trying to escape the Germans. Here the three rented rooms in a small resort hotel near the Swiss border.

Levi was still haunted by the question was he a “Jew on the run” or a partisan. The Swiss border was closed; German forces were approaching. The Italian resistance movement became increasingly active in the German-occupied zone. Levi and a number of comrades took to the foothills of the Alps, and in October formed a partisan resistance group. These would-be rebels were poorly organized and were quickly infiltrated by a Fascist spy; they put forward no real resistance to the Germans. In addition to intrigue within the partisan band, to Levi’s dismay on December 1 his sister had taken his mother from the hotel to find refuge back in Piedmont. By the time Levi and his companions were arrested on December 13, 1943, he was utterly demoralized and disoriented. Warned that to confess to being a partisan would mean certain death, he opted for the lesser evil of admitting his Jewishness. He was sent to the internment camp at Fossoli, near Modena. He recalled later that as long as Fossoli was under the control of the Italian Social Republic, and not Nazi Germany, he was not harmed.

“We were given, on a regular basis, a food ration destined for the soldiers,” Levi’s testimony stated, “and at the end of January, 1944, we were taken to Fossoli on a passenger train. Our conditions in the camp were quite good. There was no talk of executions and the atmosphere was quite calm. We were allowed to keep the money we had brought with us and to receive money from the outside. We worked in the kitchen in turn and performed other services in the camp. We even prepared a dining room, a rather sparse one, I must admit.”



Campo di Fossoli

Fossoli was soon taken over by the Germans, who started arranging the deportations of the Jews to eastern European concentration and death camps. On the second

of these transports, on February 21, 1944, Levi and other inmates were transported in twelve cramped cattle trucks to Monowitz, one of the three main camps in the Auschwitz concentration camp complex. Levi spent eleven months there before the camp was liberated by the Red Army on January 18, 1945. The average life expectancy of a new entrant at the camp was three months. Of the 650 Italian Jews in his transport, Levi was one of twenty who left the camps alive.

Levi knew some German from reading German publications on chemistry; he worked to orient quickly to life in the camp without attracting the attention of the privileged inmates. He used bread to pay a more experienced Italian prisoner for German lessons and orientation in Auschwitz. Levi's professional qualifications were useful: in mid-November 1944, he secured a position as an assistant in IG Farben's *Buna Werke* laboratory that produced synthetic rubber. His avoiding hard labor in freezing outdoor temperatures enabled him to survive. He was also able to steal materials from the laboratory and trade them for extra food. Shortly before the camp was liberated by the Red Army, he fell ill with scarlet fever and was placed in the camp's hospital. On January 18, 1945 the SS hurriedly evacuated the camp as the Red Army approached, forcing all but the gravely ill on a long death march to a site further from the front, which resulted in the deaths of the vast majority of the remaining prisoners on the march. Levi's illness spared him this fate.

Liberation for Levi came on January 27, 1945. After spending some time in a Soviet camp for former concentration camp inmates, he embarked on an arduous journey back to Turin in the company of former Italian prisoners of war who had been part of the Italian Army fighting in Russia. His long railway journey home took him on a circuitous route from Poland, through Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, Austria, and Germany. Levi finally reached Turin on October 19, 1945.

Levi was almost unrecognizable when he arrived in Turin. Malnutrition edema had bloated his face. Sporting a scrawny beard and wearing an old Red Army uniform, he returned to Corso Re Umberto. The next few months gave him an opportunity to recover physically, re-establish contact with surviving friends and family, and start looking for work. Levi also suffered from the psychological trauma of his Auschwitz experiences. Having been unable to find work in Turin, he started to look for work in Milan. On his train journeys, he began to tell people whom he met stories about his time at Auschwitz.

At a Jewish New Year party in 1946, he met Lucia Morpurgo, who offered to teach him to dance. Levi fell in love with Lucia. Also, at about this time, he started writing poetry about his experiences in Auschwitz. On January 21, 1946 he started work at DUCO, a Du Pont Company paint factory outside Turin. Because of the extremely limited train service, Levi stayed in the factory dormitory during the week. This gave him the opportunity to write undisturbed. He started to write the first draft of *If This Is a Man*. Every day he scribbled notes on train tickets and scraps of paper as memories came to him. At the end of February, he had ten pages detailing the last ten days between the German evacuation and the arrival of the Red Army. For the next ten months, the book took shape in his dormitory as he typed up his recollections each night.



*Primo Levi and Lucia Morpurgo
(date unknown)*

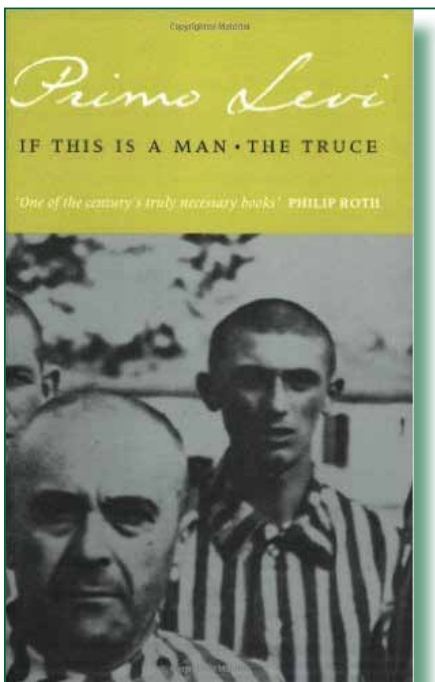
On December 22, 1946 the manuscript was complete. Lucia, who was now in love with Levi, helped him to edit it and to make the narrative flow more naturally. Eventually, in the spring of 1947, Levi found a publisher, Franco Antonicelli, through a friend of his sister's. Antonicelli was an amateur publisher, but as an active anti-Fascist, he supported the idea of the book.

At the end of June 1947, Levi suddenly left DUCO and teamed up with an old friend Alberto Salmoni to run a chemical consultancy from the top floor of Salmoni's parents' house. Levi married Lucia in September 1947 and a month later, on October 11, *If This Is a Man* was published. In April 1948, with Lucia pregnant with their first child, Levi decided that the life of an independent chemist was too precarious. He agreed to work for Accatti in the family paint business which traded under the name SIVA. In October 1948, his daughter Lisa was born.

During this period, his friend Lorenzo Perrone died. Lorenzo had been a civilian forced worker in Auschwitz, who for six months had given part of his ration and a piece of bread to Levi without asking anything in return. In his memoir, Levi contrasted Lorenzo with everyone else in the camp, prisoners and guards alike, as someone who managed to preserve his humanity. After the war, Lorenzo could not cope with the memories of what he had seen and descended into alcoholism. Levi made several trips to rescue his old friend from the streets, but he was unsuccessful.

In 1950, having demonstrated his chemical talents to Accatti, Levi was promoted to Technical Director at SIVA. As SIVA's principal chemist and troubleshooter, Levi travelled abroad. He made several trips to Germany and carefully engineered his contacts with senior German businessmen and scientists. Wearing short-sleeved shirts, he made sure they saw his prison camp number (174517) tattooed on his arm. He engaged them in talking about the depravity of the Nazis and the lack of redemption sought by most Germans, many of whom had been involved in the exploitation of slave labor from occupied countries during the war.

He became involved in organizations pledged to remembering and recording the horror of the camps. In 1954 he visited Buchenwald to mark the ninth anniversary of the camp's liberation from the Nazis. Levi dutifully attended many such anniversary events over the years and recounted his own experiences. In July 1957 his son Renzo was born, almost certainly named after his camp savior and friend, Lorenzo Perrone.



In 1958, *If This Is a Man* was translated into English, and it was published in the UK in 1959 by Orion Press. Also in 1959 Heinz Riedt translated it into German. As one of Levi's primary reasons for writing the book was to get the German people to realize what had been done in their name, and to accept at least partial responsibility, this translation was perhaps the most important to him.

Levi began writing *The Truce* early in 1961; it was published in 1963, almost 16 years after his first book. That year it won the first annual *Premio Campiello* literary award. It covers his long return through Eastern Europe from Auschwitz. Levi's reputation was growing. He regularly contributed articles to *La Stampa*, the Turin newspaper. He also worked to gain a reputation as a writer about subjects other than survival of Auschwitz.

In 1963 he suffered his first major bout of depression. At the time he had two young children, a responsible job at a factory where accidents could and did have terrible consequences, he travelled, and he had become a

public figure. But the memory of what had happened less than twenty years earlier still burned in his mind. Doctors prescribed several different drugs over the years, but these had variable efficacy and side effects.

In 1966 he also published two volumes of science fiction short stories under the pen name of Damiano Malabaila, which explored ethical and philosophical questions. These imagined the effects on society of inventions which many would consider beneficial, but which, he saw, would have serious implications. Many of the stories from the two books *Storie Naturali (Natural Histories, 1966)* and *Vizio di Forma (Structural Defect, 1971)* were later collected and published in English as *The Sixth Day and Other Tales*.

In 1974 Levi arranged to go into semi-retirement from SIVA in order to have more time to write. He also wanted to escape the burden of responsibility for managing the paint plant. In 1975 a collection of Levi's poetry was published under the title *L'osteria di Brema (The Bremen Beer Hall)*, published in English as *'Shema: Collected Poems*.

He wrote two other highly praised memoirs, *Lilit e Altri Racconti (Lilith and Other Stories, 1978)* published in English as *Moments of Reprieve*, and *Il Sistema Periodico (The Periodic Table, 1975)*. *Moments of Reprieve* deals with characters he observed during imprisonment. *The Periodic Table* is a collection of short pieces, based in episodes from his life but including two short stories that he wrote before his time in Auschwitz. Each story was related in some way to one of the chemical elements in the Periodic Table. (At London's Royal Institution on October 19, 2006, *The Periodic Table* was voted onto the shortlist for the best science books ever written.)



In 1977 at the age of 58, Levi retired as a part-time consultant at the SIVA paint factory to devote himself full-time to writing. Like all his books, *La Chiave a Stella (1978)*, published in the US in 1986 as *The Monkey Wrench*, is difficult to categorize. Some reviews describe it as a collection of stories about work and workers told by a narrator who resembles Levi. Others have called it a novel, created by the linked stories and characters. Set in a FIAT-run company town in Russia called Togliattigrad, it portrays the engineer as a hero on whom others depend. The underlying philosophy is that pride in one's work is necessary for fulfillment. The Piedmontese

engineer Faussone travels the world as an expert in erecting cranes and bridges. Most of the stories involve the solution of industrial problems by the use of troubleshooting skills; many coming from Levi's personal experience. *The Monkey Wrench* won the *Strega Prize* in 1979.

In 1984 Levi published his only novel, *If Not Now, When?*— or his second novel, if *The Monkey Wrench* is counted as a novel. It traces the fortunes of a group of Jewish partisans behind German lines during World War II as they seek to survive and continue their fight against the Nazis. With the ultimate goal of reaching Palestine to take part in the development of a Jewish national home, the partisan band reaches Poland and then German territory. There the surviving members are officially received as displaced persons in territory held by the Western allies. Finally, they succeed in reaching Italy, on their way to Palestine. The novel won both the *Premio Campiello* and the *Premio Viareggio*.

