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Special issue for the Library of Congress National Book Festival

Archives

The publication of Primo Levi's *Complete Works* welcomes readers to a maze of different worlds, cultures, and historical references. Italy and Italian history, Piedmont and Piedmontese Jewry, science, literature, language and fascism as a ideology and a form of social interaction and individual response.

Below is a list of archives and research for those who want to learn more about Primo Levi's worlds.

[Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi](#)

[Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea](#)

[Istituto Piemontese per la Storia della Resistenza/ Archivio Serafino](#)

[Polo del Novecento Torino](#)

[Archivi Ebraici del Piemonte](#)

[Archivio Ebraico Terracini](#)

[Fondazione Fossoli](#)

[Archivio Franco Antonicelli](#)

[The Shoah in Italy](#)



Primo Levi. A Chronology.

Primo Levi's biography and selection of quotes by Ernesto Ferrero.

Primo Levi's life span, Turin 1919-Turin 1987, extended from the end of World War I, to the years leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

All of his formative experiences — growing up in Fascist Italy within a middle class, liberal Jewish family, the ignominy of the Racial Laws, participating to the Resistance, his study of chemistry, his love for the Classics and mountaineering, his arrest and deportation to Auschwitz, his writing, — contributed to distill one of the most acute, intransigent and far reaching reflections on the human condition.

As a scientist, witness, writer of memoirs, fiction, poetry and essays and as a public intellectual, Levi's attention was focused on the relationship between the powerful and the powerless and



Cesare and Ester Levi with Primo and Anna Maria Levi. Biblioteca Digitale CDEC, Milan



Piedmontese Ketubà. Ricca di Meir David Le-bet Barukh e Mošeh di 'Avraham Le-bet Barukh, Cherasco 1846, Archivio Ebraico Terracini

on the corruptibility of the individual and collective moral fiber.

Primo Michele Levi was born in Corso Re Umberto 75, in Turin, in the very house he inhabited his whole life, on July 31, 1919.

His father, Cesare, graduated in electrical engineering in 1901, and was employed by Ganz, a manufacturing company based in Budapest. Levi recalled his father as an outgoing person, someone modern for his times and a lover of good living and good reading who paid scarce attention to family affairs. In 1918 he married Ester Luzzati, known as Rina, an avid reader and amateur pianist who spoke impeccable French.

Levi's ancestors were Piedmontese Jews who had come from Spain and Provence. He described their customs, lifestyles, and ways of speaking in the first chapter of *The Periodic Table*, but he did not have any personal memories of anyone before his grandparents. His paternal grandfather was a civil engineer who lived in Bene Vagienna in the Province of Cuneo, where he owned a house and a little farm. His maternal grandfather was a cloth merchant.

Primo's sister, Anna Maria, to whom he had a strong bond throughout his life, was born in 1921.

1919 The Fascist Movement is founded

1922 March on Rome. Mussolini is nominated Prime Minister of the Kingdom and Duce of Fascism

By the time Levi entered elementary school Italy and its educational system were run by a full-fledged dictatorship. In 1934, Levi enrolled in the prestigious Ginnasio-Liceo D'Azeglio, a school famous for its illustrious teachers and students, many of whom were opponents of Fascism (Augusto Monti, Franco Antonicelli, Umberto Cosmo, Zino Zini, Norberto Bobbio, and many others). The D'Azeglio school had already been "purged" and came across as politically neutral. Levi was a timid and hard-working student. He was interested in chemistry and biology, more than history and literature. During his third year at the D'Azeglio, Levi had Cesare Pavese as a teacher for several months.



Map of Acqui with the area of the ghetto, Archivio Ebraico Terracini



Elementary school in fascist Italy.



Primo Levi at the University, 1940
Centro Internazionale di Studi
 Primo Levi, Torino

Levi made friendships that would last for life. He went on vacation in Torre Pellice, Bardonecchia, and Cogne and discovered his love for mountaineering.

1924-1925 Mussolini's rule becomes a dictatorship

He read the Italian translation of Sir William Bragg's *Concerning the Nature of Things*.

"I was captivated by the clear and simple things that it said, and I decided I would become a chemist. Between the lines I divined a great hope: the models on a human scale, the concepts of structures and measurement, reach very far, towards the minute world of atoms, and towards the immense world of the stars; perhaps infinitely far? If so, we live in a comprehensible universe, one accessible to our imagination, and the anguish of the dark recedes before the rapid spread of research." (Levi, *The Search for Roots*, 2003)

1929-1931 Following the Lateran Pacts, Catholicism becomes the State religion. The Jewish communities are centralized under government control.

1935-36 Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Levi graduated from secondary school, in 1937 and enrolled as chemistry major at the University of Turin's School of Sciences.

"For me, too, the university experience was liberating. I still remember Professor Ponzio's first chemistry lesson, from which I got clear, precise, verifiable information, without useless words, expressed in a language that I liked enormously, also from a literary point of view: a definite language, essential. And then the laboratory: every year he included a laboratory session. We spent five hours there; it was a big commitment. An extraordinary experience. In the first place because you worked with your hands, literally, and it was the first time this had happened to me, never mind if you scalded your hands or cut them. It was a return to the origins. The hand is a noble organ, but school, all taken up with the brain, had neglected it. And besides, the laboratory was collegial, a center of socialization where one really made friends. As a matter of fact, I remained friends with all my laboratory colleagues [...].

Making mistakes together is a fundamental experience. One participated fully in the mutual victories and defeats. Quantitative analysis, for example, in which they gave you a bit of powder and were supposed to tell what was in it: not to realize that there was bismuth or to find chrome that wasn't there were adventures. We gave each other advice, we sympathized with each other. It was also a school of patience, of objectivity, of ingenuity, because the methods they suggested to you to perform an analysis could be improved." (Interview by Tullio Regge, 1989)

1938 The Regime promulgates the Racial Laws against the Jews, counter signed by King Vittorio Emanuele III.

The Fascist government passed its first racial laws, which, among many repressive measures, prevented Jews from attending schools. However, they allowed students who had already enrolled in the university to finish their studies. Levi associated with groups of anti-Fascist students, both Jewish and non-Jewish. He read Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, Laurence Sterne, Franz Werfel, Charles Darwin, and Lev Tolstoy.

"I have read a great deal because I came from a family for whom reading was an innocent and traditional vice, a gratifying habit, a mental exercise, an obligatory and compulsive way of killing time, and a sort of fairy wand bestowing wisdom. My father was always reading three books simultaneously; he read 'when he sat at home, when he walked by the way, when he lay down and when he got up' (Deut. 6.7); he ordered from his tailor jackets with large and deep pockets each one of which could hold a book. He had two brothers just as interested in indiscriminate reading". (Levi, *The Search for Roots*, 2003)

"The racial laws were a God-send for me, but for others too – the reduction to absurdity of the stupidity of Fascism. By then, the criminal face of Fascism had been forgotten – that of the Matteotti assassination, to make myself clear. What remained to be seen was its silly face [...]. In my family Fascism was accepted with some impatience. My father had joined the party unwillingly, yet he put on the black shirt. And I was a balilla and then an avanguardista [a boy (8-14 years old) and then a youth in Fascist paramilitary organizations]. I could very well say that the racial laws gave me my free will back, as it did to others." (Interview by De Rienzo, 1975)

1940 In June, Italy enters World War II.

Levi graduated cum laude from Turin University in 1941. His diploma bears the annotation: "of the Jewish race."

Under pressure because of his family financial straits, he began looking for work, while his father was dying of cancer. He eventually found a job working off the books in an asbestos mine near Turin. He was assigned to the chemistry laboratory to isolate to isolate nickel, an element that occurs in in very small quantities in the scrap materials. (See "Nickel," a chapter in *The Periodic Table*.) In 1942 he found a better job in Milan at a Swiss pharmaceutical company researching a new drug for diabetes. When Levi moved to Milan, he took only a few things that he thought were indispensable – "My bicycle, Rabelais, the

Macaroneae, Moby Dick translated by Pavese, a few other books, my pickax, climbing rope, logarithmic ruler and recorder.” (Levi, *The Periodic Table*)

He socialized with a group of friends from Turin.

1942 In November, the Allies landed in North Africa. In December the Russians defended Stalingrad victoriously.



Leone Ginzburg with Franco Antonicelli and Cesare Pavese. Archivio Antonicelli

Levi and his friends made contact with several militant anti-fascists and rapidly become fully politicized. He joined the clandestine Action Party [Partito d’Azione].

1943 In July, the Fascist government falls and Mussolini is arrested.

On September 8 the government of Pietro Badoglio [Italian marshal who took charge of the country under Allied control] signed the armistice with the Allies. German armed forces occupied northern and central Italy. Levi joined a partisan band operating in the Valle d’Aosta, and was arrested soon after, along with two companions.



Resistance fighters in Val Chisone, Piedmont. Archivio Serafino

“My period as a partisan in the Valle d’Aosta was undoubtedly the most muddled in my career and I don’t like to talk about it on my own. It is a story of well-intentioned but stupid young people and it’s an episode that could very well be put on the shelf among other forgotten things. The allusions I made to this period in *The Periodic Table* are already enough if not too much.”

Levi was transported to the concentration camp at Fossoli di Carpi near Modena.



Primo Levi and Alberto Salmoni, 1942
Courtesy Fabrizio Salmoni

“We were being held by the Fascists, who did not treat us badly. They let us write letters, let us receive packages, and swore to us on their ‘Fascist faith’ that they’d keep us there till the end of the war.” (Interview by Camon, 1989)

In February 1944, the Italians passed the rule of the camp to the Germans maintaining some administrative duties. Levi and the other prisoners, including elderly, women and children, were loaded on a train destined to Auschwitz.

The trip lasted five days. Upon their arrival the men were separated from the women and children and sent to barrack number 30.



Concentration camp of Fossoli, 1943
Fondazione Fossoli

“The first days were terrible — for everyone. There is a 'shock', a trauma connected with entrance into a concentration camp which can last five, ten, twenty days. Nearly all the people who died, died during this first phase. Our way of life had changed totally in the space of a few days, especially in the case of us western Jews. Polish and Russian Jews had done some hard training for the Auschwitz experience in the ghettos beforehand, and the shock for them was less severe. For us, the Italian, French and Dutch Jews, it was as if we had been plucked straight from our houses to a concentration camp. But I could feel, along with fear and hunger and exhaustion, an extremely intense need to understand the world around me. To begin with, the

language. I know a little German, but I felt I had to know a lot more. I went so far as to take private lessons, paid for with part of my bread ration. I didn't know that I was learning a really vulgar kind of German”. (Interview by Greer in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)

“The contact I had with Eastern Judaism was traumatic and negative. We were rejected, as Sephardi or in any case as Italian Jews, because we didn't speak Yiddish, we were doubly foreign, both for the Germans of course because we were Jews and for the other Jews from the East because we were not part of their world, they had not the slightest idea that there was any other kind of Judaism.... As Italian Jews we felt especially defenseless. Along with the Greeks we were the lowest of the low, and in some way we were worse off than the Greeks because they were at least used to discrimination, there was a long history of anti-Semitism in Salonika [Thessaloniki], and many of them were old hands, had developed hard shells through their contacts with other Greeks. But the Italians, so used to being treated as equals of all other Italians, had no shield, we were as naked as eggs without shells.” (Interview by Bravo & Cereja in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)

In June, Levi was sent to work as manual laborer in a team of masons who had to build a wall. He met a mason from Fossano named Lorenzo Perrone, who worked for an Italian company with a branch at Auschwitz and who could move about with moderate freedom. Perrone took Levi under his wing, securing for him a bowl of soup whenever he could. Levi was then transferred to a laboratory because of his background as a chemist. Levi managed to stay healthy almost as long as he was in the camp, but he contracted scarlet fever at the exact moment when the Germans were evacuating the camp under the onslaught of the advancing Russians and abandoning the sick to their fate. The other prisoners were moved again to Buchenwald and Mauthausen and almost all of them died.

On the “terrible and decisive” night when the Germans were wavering between killing the prisoners and taking flight, Levi remembers ending up by accident with a book in his hands, one that would have some meaning for him in his activities as a writer, Roger Verceles' *Remorques* (The book narrates the adventures

of a salvage tugboat on the high seas and of its captain, Renaud. Levi thought that this was a very relevant topic, but one “that was exploited very little, strangely enough. It was a human adventure in the world of technology.” He was to write this in *The Search for Roots: A Personal Anthology*.

“I remember having lived my Auschwitz year in a condition of exceptional spiritedness. I don't know if this depended on my professional background, or an unsuspected stamina, or on a sound instinct. I never stopped recording the world and people around me, so much that I still have an unbelievably detailed image of them. I had an intense wish to understand, I was constantly pervaded by a curiosity that somebody afterwards did, in fact, deem nothing less than cynical, the curiosity of the naturalist who finds himself transplanted into an environment that is monstrous, but new, monstrously new...” (Interview by Roth in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)



Palestinian Brigade at the Synagogue of Turin, 1945, Archivio Terracini

Following liberation, Levi lived in a Soviet transit camp for a few months in Katowice, where he worked as a nurse. In June, 1945 he began his journey home through a devastated Europe wandering for nine months at the mercy of random transports. Levi and his companions traveled over maze-like routes that took them first into Byelorussia and then finally home to Italy after crossing Hungary, the Ukraine, Rumania, and Austria. Of this experience Levi wrote in *The Truce*.

“Family, home, factory are good things in themselves, but they deprived me of something that I still miss: adventure. Destiny decided that I should find adventure in the awful mess of a Europe swept by war.” (Interview by Roth in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)

1945 On August 6 and 9, the US Air Force drops atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

1946 Called to the polls to chose between republic and monarchy, the Italian people chose the republic. The government lead by Palmiro Togliatti extends the amnesty to all functionaries implicated with fascist and war crimes.

In 1946-47 amidst difficulties, Levi returned to civilian life facing his own experience and the hardship of post-war Italy. He found work at the Duco-Montecatini paint factory in Avigliana near Turin. Haunted by his recent memories and the need to recollect them, he wrote *If This Is a Man* in one breath.

He became engaged to Lucia Morpurgo.

Rejected by Einaudi, *If This Is a Man* was published by Franco Antonicelli's Edizioni De Silva. The last page had a brief presentation, probably written by Antonicelli himself: “This book is the revelation of a new author. Levi composed his narrative with the simplicity of someone who has balanced his memories

according to the trials he has gone through. Yet, his act of witnessing succeeds in being the act a human being and of a literary person at the same time. There is no book in the world about these same tragic experiences that has such artistic value as this book that is being published by De Silva.”

“The experience of the Lager cannot be wiped out. It can be overcome, made painless, even made useful like all of life’s experiences, but it cannot be wiped out. It is part of my free moments to keep on insisting on the same question as then: namely, if this is a man or not. The question does not only have to do with the world of war and Nazism, but also with the world of the terrorist, of person who corrupts and lets himself be corrupted, of the bad politician, and of the exploiter. All and all, with all those cases where it comes to us as natural to ask if humanity, that word in its

most personal meaning, is to be saved or lost, can be brought back or not.” (Interview by Nascimbeni, 1984)



Flyer for the first edition of *If This Is a Man*, De Silva 1947

If This is a Man and Italo Calvino’s first novel, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* are reviewed together. This established a camaraderie and friendship between the two authors that would last a lifetime.

In 1947, Levi married Lucia Morpurgo and shortly after accepted a job as laboratory chemist at Siva, a small paint factory located between Turin and its nearby suburb of Settimo Torinese. Within a few years he became the technical manager and then the general manager

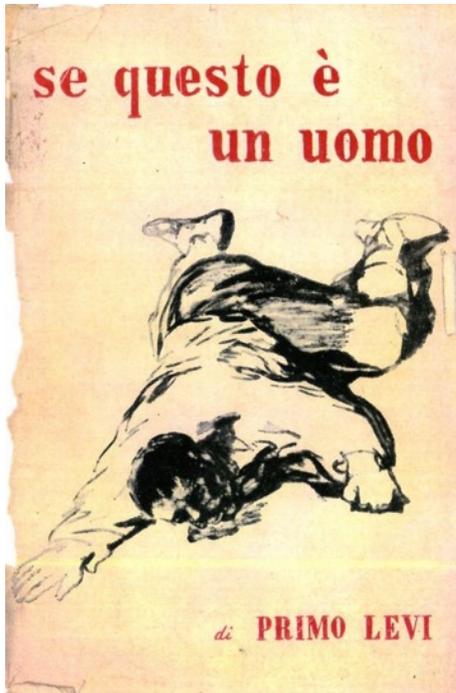
Primo’s daughter Lisa Lorenza was born in 1948.

In the early 1950’s, Levi began to work with Edizioni Scientifiche Einaudi, a branch of the Einaudi publishing house. Levi did translations and text revisions. He read drafts of manuscripts and gave editorial opinions. His collaboration continued until 1957, when Boringhieri started up a publishing house under his own name.

In a July 16, 1952 Boringhieri’s editorial board proposed that Einaudi publish a new edition of *If This is a Man* but the idea stalled.

In 1955, Levi sought again to interest Einaudi in republishing the book. An exhibition on the deportation held at Palazzo Madama in Turin, had raised great interest among young people. This time he found a receptive listener in Luciano Foà, then Einaudi’s general manager.

On July 11, 1955 Levi signed a contract for the new edition of *If This is a Man*. It was to appear in the moderately-priced “little-library” series (Piccola Biblioteca Scientifico-letteraria). Its publication was put off until 1958.



Cover of the first edition of *If This is a Man*, De Silva 1947

In 1957, Levi's second child, Renzo, was born. Beginning that year, Levi committed himself to writing the story of his return, which became *The Truce*. He wrote one chapter a month, first working from the notes he made at the time of his homecoming. He had written the first two chapters some time in 1947 and 1948, almost as a continuation of his writing of *If This is a Man*. He did this under the encouragement of Franco Antonicelli and Alessandro Galante Garrone, who kept on encouraging him to put down the stories he used to tell his friends so often and so effectively.

Levi wrote methodically in the evenings, on the weekends, and on vacations. He did not take one hour of work time away from his job. His life was neatly divided into three parts – his family, the factory, and his writing. He was deeply involved in his activity as a chemist. He made many business trips to Germany and England.

In 1958 the new expanded edition of *If This is a Man* came out in the Einaudi non-fiction series with a comment on the jacket by Bruno Munari. The first printing came out with 2000 copies and then there was a reprint of the same text. In 1959 the book was published in England and the United States by The Orion Press

and met with some modest success. In 1961 the French and German translations were published, but Levi complained about the poor quality of the French translation.

1960 Italian and German court authorities collect Primo Levi's testimony on his arrest and deportation.

1963 The Eichmann Trial is celebrated in Jerusalem

While writing *The Truce*, Levi also began writing short stories which were later published as *Storie naturali*. He tried to test out the reactions of his readers by publishing them in various periodicals and newspapers, including *Il Giorno*.

“When this function of mine [as witness to important historical events] ran out, I noticed that I couldn't insist on the autobiographical register and along with this that I was too distinctively marked to be able to slide into orthodox science fiction. So, it seemed to me that a certain type of science fiction could satisfy the desire to express myself that I was still feeling and could be adapted as a kind of modern allegory. In any case, most of my stories in *Storie Naturali* were written before the publication of *The Truce*.” (Interview by Barberis, 1972)

He submitted several of those stories to Italo Calvino, who wrote his comments about them in a letter to Levi dated November 22, 1961:

“I finally read your stories. Those science-fiction ones, or, better, biological-fantasy ones, always attract me. Your fantastic mechanism that takes off from a genetic-scientific piece of data has a power of intellectual and even poetic evocation, just like the genetic and morphological meanderings of Jean Rostand. Your sense of humor and your aplomb save you very well from the danger that someone usually runs into who uses the shapes of literature for intellectual experiments of this type. Certain of your discoveries are of the first order, like that of the Assyriologist who deciphers the mosaic of the trichinosis worms. The evocation of the origin of the centaurs [the story entitled 'Quaestio de Centauris', published later] has its poetic force, a plausibility that imposes itself on us. (And, really, one would say that writing about centaurs is impossible today, but you have managed to avoid an Anatole-Francian-Walt-Disneyesque pastiche.) [...] “You move in a dimension of intelligent meandering along the borderlines of a scientific-ethical-cultural panorama that should be that of the Europe in which we are living. Maybe I like your stories mostly because they presume that there is a common civilization that is noticeably different than that presumed by so much of Italian literature.”

In 1962, a Canadian radio station produced a radio play of *If This is a Man*, which Levi appreciated greatly.



Primo Levi at his desk, 1952

“Never, perhaps, had I received such a welcome gift. Not only had they done such an excellent job, but for me it was a real revelation. The authors of the script, far off in time and space, and whose experience was very different from my own, had brought out of the book everything I had enclosed within it, and something more. It was a spoken meditation, of high technical and dramatic quality and at the same time punctiliously faithful to the reality that had been.” (Levi, 1966)

Levi offered the national broadcasting company (RAI) an Italian version of the radio play that was different from the Canadian one.

In April, Einaudi published *The Truce* in the series entitled "I coralli". The short comment on the inside jacket was written by Italo Calvino. The jacket featured a Marc Chagall drawing of a little man who seemed to take off in flight over a house. The critics received the book very favorably, recognizing the narrative cunning of a writer who defined himself a writer by accident but who was savvy enough to free himself from the mere techniques of memoir writing. Among these reviewers there were Franco Antonicelli for *La Stampa*, and Paolo Milano for *L'Espresso*.

In the same year, *The Truce* received the prestigious Campiello Prize. In the interviews that followed Levi spoke about his next ambition.

“Today perhaps I have more fun writing than being a chemist, but my real ambition, what I dream about in secret, is to find a point of coincidence between the two. Let me explain: I’d like to tell the wider public the story of what scientific research means, a fantastic record, not too far from the truth, of what happens in the secret world of the laboratory, which is nothing other than a modern-day version of the most ancient, the most mysterious emotions known to man, the moment of uncertainty – whether to kill the buffalo or not, whether you will find what you are looking for or not. [...] But all this is still in the planning stage. The biggest problem is finding the time to do it. I always try to betray neither the factory manager nor the writer.” (Interview by Paoletti in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)

In 1964, Levi wrote several stories with a technological background, working on ideas that come to him in his work in his laboratory and in his factory. These were published in the newspaper *Il Giorno* and elsewhere.

In 1965, Levi returned to Auschwitz for a Polish memorial ceremony.

“The return was less dramatic than it might have seemed. There was too much hustle-and-bustle, little reflection, everything put right in order, and a lot of official speeches.” (Levi, from a 1984 film interview)

In 1966, Levi collected his stories into a book entitled *Storie naturali* under the pen name Damiano Malabaila. He explained why he took these precautions in an editorial comment on the inside jacket that made it easy for the readers to figure out who the real author was:



Primo Levi meets with students, 1979, Archivio storico *La Stampa*

“I have written about 20 stories and I don’t know if I will write any others. For the most part, I jotted them down quickly, trying to give narrative shape to a little dot of intuition, trying to tell the story in other terms (if they are symbolic, they are symbolic unconsciously) of an intuition that is not very rare nowadays – the perception of an unweaving of the world in which we are living, of a little or a big crack, of a ‘structural defect’ that makes this or that feature of our civilization or of our moral universe vain... In the act of writing these stories I feel a vague sense of guilt, like the guilt of somebody who is committing some petty misdemeanor on purpose. I entered the world of writing, unthinkably, with two books on concentration camps. It is not up to me to judge

their worth, but they doubtlessly were serious books dedicated to a serious public. To offer this public a volume of joke-stories, of moral traps – that may very well be amusing but are distancing, cold – isn’t this business fraud, as if I were selling wine in olive-oil bottles? These are the questions I asked myself in the act of writing and publishing these ‘natural histories.’ And so, I would not

publish them if I had not noticed (not immediately, to tell the truth) that a continuity – a bridge – existed between the Lager and these inventions. The Lager, for me, was the biggest of the ‘defects’ – of the distortions – that I had been talking about before, the most threatening of the monsters generated by sleep of reason.”

Levi edited a dramatic version of *If This is a Man* along with Pieralberto Marchè based on the radio play produced by the Rai. The play was staged by the Teatro Stabile of Turin.

1968 Primo Levi visits Israel.

1969 The bomb explosion at Piazza Fontana in Milan and at the FIAT pavilion in Turin mark the beginning of a decade of terrorism in Italy.

1971 Primo Levi testifies in front of the German authorities in the trial against Friedrich Bosshammer, head of the Gestapo’s Anti-Jewish agency in Italy.

He collected a second series of stories, in 1971, entitled *Vizio di forma*, published this time under his own name. In 1972-73, he took several business trips to the Soviet Union:



Primo Levi at a meeting with students, Archivio storico *La Stampa*

“I was in Togliattigrad [city housing a Soviet auto plant being built with Fiat, named after Italian Communist Party head] and I noticed the esteem with which the Soviets treated our skilled workers. This phenomenon made me curious. Those men sat in the cafeteria with me, elbow to elbow. They represented an enormous technical and human patrimony, but they were destined to remain anonymous because nobody has ever written about them... Maybe *The Wrench* originated right there in Togliattigrad. It is there that the story is set even though the city is never mentioned.”

By 1975, Levi decided to retire and leave the management of Siva, but kept on working for them as a consultant for the next two years.

“As far as my experience goes, I must say that my chemistry, which actually was a ‘low’ chemistry, almost culinary, first of all supplied me with a vast assortment of metaphors. I find myself richer than other writers because for me words like ‘bright,’ ‘dark,’ ‘heavy,’ ‘light,’ and ‘blue’ have a more extensive and more concrete gamut of meanings. For me ‘blue’ is not only the blue of the sky. I have five or six blues at my disposal... I mean to say that I have had in my hands materials that are not of current use, with properties outside the ordinary, that have served to amplify my language precisely in a technical sense. Thus I have at my disposal an inventory of raw materials, of tesserae

for writing, somewhat larger than that possessed by someone who does not have a technical background. Moreover, I've developed the habit of writing compactly, avoiding the superfluous. Precision and concision, which, so I'm told, are my way of writing, have come to me from my trade as a chemist." (Interview by Levi & Regge, 1989)

In April 1975 Einaudi published *The Periodic Table*, an autobiography in twenty-one episodes, each one inspired by an element of Mendeleev's table of the elements.

Levi collected his poetry into a book entitled *Losteria di Brema* and published by Scheiwiller.

1978 in March, the Italian politician Aldo Moro is kidnapped by the Red Brigades.

The Wrench was published in 1978. It is the story of a skilled worker from Piedmont, a mechanical rigger who goes around the world building pylons, bridges, and oilrigs.

"While writing the novel, I felt the need to give substance to a controversy among the deaf in relation to literary people, who often – differently from technicians – feel irresponsible for their 'products.' A badly built bridge or a defective pair of glasses brings on immediate negative consequences, a novel no." (Interview by Cattabiani, 1979)

In July *The Monkey's Wrench* is awarded the Strega Literary Award in Rome.

The French translation of *The Wrench* was published in 1980. Claude Lévi-Strauss commented on it in this way. "It was a real pleasure to read this book because there is nothing more that I love than listening to people talking about work. From this perspective Primo Levi is a sort of ethnographer, a great one. Besides, this book is really fun to read."

In April Levi visited the oil-drilling platform Castoro off the coast of Sicily. He called his experience "a rare gift for a landlubber like myself."

In 1981, a collection of stories dating between 1975 and 1981 were published with the title *Lilit e altri racconti*.

At the same time, at Giulio Bollati's suggestion, Levi prepared a personal anthology for Einaudi. It was a selection of authors that had especially influenced his cultural education or he felt affinity with. The book was published under the title *The Search for Roots* and was introduced by the author's reflection:

"My choices surprised even me. For example, my over-laden past, the thing that made me a writer, my past in imprisonment – this is something that does not figure in here. This anthology presents an image of me that is not misshapen, but that is something else." (Levi, in an interview)

In the meantime, going through his old papers, Levi found notes of a story that Emilio Vita Finzi had told him ten years before. In 1945, Finzi was working for a relief agency in Via Unione in Milan. A group of Russian Jews arrived. They had been partisans and had organized themselves in Russia traveling across Europe armed and ready for action. Levi decided to write a novel inspired by those men and women. He researched the story for a year before beginning writing.

In April 1982 the book came out entitled *If Not Now, When?* and met with immediate success winning the the Viareggio Literary Award and the Campiello Award.

Levi visited Auschwitz for the second time.

“There were just a few of us. This time the emotion was deep. For the first time I saw the monument at Birkenau, which was one of the 39 camps at Auschwitz, the one with the gas chambers. The railroad has been preserved. A set of rusty tracks enters the camp and ends at the edge of a kind of void. In front of it is a symbolic train made of blocks of granite. Every block has the name of a country. The monument is this – the track and the blocks. I rediscovered sensations, for example the smell of the place, an innocuous smell. I believe it is the smell of coal.” (Interview by Nascimbeni, 1984)

1982 Israeli forces invaded Lebanon in what Israel called Operation Peace for Galilee.



Primo Levi, 1980s
Centro Internazionale di Studi
Primo Levi

There were the massacres in the Palestinian camps at Sabra and Chatila. Levi took a position. In an interview with Giampaolo Pansa, published in the newspaper La Repubblica of September 24.

“Anyway, yes, anti-Semitism is a beast that is stirring. But this is not a reason that Diaspora Jews can put to Begin. It would not make sense to say to Begin, don’t do what you are doing because you are harming us. There are other, more important objections... There are two, one moral and the other political. The moral objection is the following: not even a war justifies the bloody arrogance shown by Begin and his men. The political objection is just as clear-cut: Israel is rapidly heading towards total isolation. It is a terrible, previously unheard-of fact [...]. We must do a number of things. Realize exactly what is going on. Suppress our own impulse towards an emotional solidarity with Israel, so that we can think through coldly the errors of the present Israeli ruling class. Remove this ruling class. Help Israel rediscover its European roots, the balance of its founding fathers, Ben Gurion and Golda Meir. Not that they had spotless records, but who does?”

The French translation of *If Not Now, When?* was published. Levi was invited by Giulio Einaudi to translate Kafka’s *The Trial* for the publisher’s new series Writers Translated by Writers.

“This love of mine [for Kafka] is ambivalent, something close to fright and rejection. It is something like the feeling I feel for a person who is dear to me and who suffers and asks you for a kind of help that you cannot give him. I do not believe too much in the laughter than Brod talks about. Maybe Kafka laughed when he was telling stories to his friends, at the table or in the beer halls, because people are not always the same as themselves, but certainly he did not laugh writing.

His suffering is genuine and continuous. It assaults you and does not ever leave you. You feel like one of his characters, sentenced by a vilifying and inscrutable court, a tentacle-court that invades the city and the world, nesting in slimy attics as well as in the dark solemnity of the cathedral. Or, [you feel like a character] transformed into an insect that is awkward and burdening, unseen by all, desperately alone, obtuse, unable to communicate and to think, by then able only to suffer. We can feel attracted even by somebody who is very different from us exactly because he is different. If it were not like this, writers, readers, and translators would be stratified into rigid castes, like the Indian castes. There would be no connections across fields nor crossover fecundations. Everybody would read only the writers who are their blood relatives. The world would be (or would appear) less varied and new ideas would no longer be born. Now, I love and admire Kafka because he writes in a way that is totally closed off from me. In my writing, in good or in bad, knowingly or not, I have always tended to pass over from the dark to the light. (It seems to me that [author Luigi] Pirandello said this. I don't know where.) This is like a filter-pump, which sucks in dirty water and expels decanted water, maybe even sterile water. Kafka treads down the path the opposite way. He endlessly unravels the hallucinations that come out of incredibly deep faults in the earth and never filters them. The reader feels them gurgle with germs and spores. They are pregnant with meanings that scald. But we are never helped in tearing the veil or in going behind it to see what it is hiding. Kafka never touches the earth. He never condescends to give us end of Ariadne's thread."

Levi translated Claude Lévi-Strauss' *La voie des masques* [*The Way of the Masks*] in 1983.

In April of the same year, Levi's translation of *The Trial* was published.

Levi translated Lévi-Strauss' *Le regard éloigné* [*The View from Afar*].

In June 1984, he met the physicist Tullio Regge in Turin. Their conversations were taped and transcribed and then published in December by Edizioni di Comunità under the title *Dialogo*.

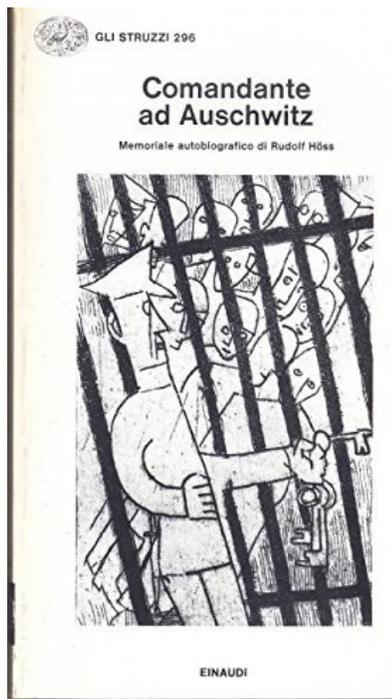
In October he published a collection of poems for Garzanti, entitled *Ad ora incerta* ("At an Uncertain Hour" its title taken from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*). The Italian collection contained the 27 poems already published by Scheiwiller in 1975, 34 others that were published in the newspaper *La Stampa* and various translations (from an anonymous Scottish poet, Heine, and Kipling).

"I am a man who believes very little in poetry and yet I practice it. There is some reason for this. For example, when my verses are published on the third page of *La Stampa*, I get letters and phone calls from readers who show me their agreement or disagreement. If one of my stories is published, the response is not as lively. I have the impression that poetry in general is becoming a portentous instrument of human contact. Adorno has written that poetry could not be written after Auschwitz, but my experience was the opposite. Back then (1946-47) it seemed to me that poetry was more appropriate than prose for expressing what was weighing me down. Saying poetry, I am not thinking of anything lyrical. In those years, at most I would have reformulated the words of Adorno: after Auschwitz, poetry cannot be written except about Auschwitz." (Interview by Nascimbeni, 1984)

In November the American edition of *The Periodic Table* was published to extremely favorable reviews. Saul Bellow's endorsement appeared in the back cover: "The book it is necessary to read next... After a few pages I immersed myself in *The Periodic Table* gladly and gratefully. There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential. It is wonderfully pure and beautifully translated."

Bellow's endorsement sparked a series of translations of various books by Levi in several countries. His work was also reviewed favorably in *The New York Times* in separate articles by Neal Ascherson, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, and John Gross.

In January 1985 Levi collected about 50 articles that had been published mainly in the newspaper *La Stampa* under the title *Other People's Trades*. Italo Calvino commented upon this book as follows: These pieces "respond to his vein as encyclopedist of agile and meticulous curiosities and as moralist of a moral that always starts out from observation [...]. The most representative among the objects of Levi's encyclopedic attention are words and animals. Sometimes one could say that he tends to fuse his two passions into a zoological glottology or into an ethology of language."



In February Levi wrote an introduction to the new paperback edition of *Comandante ad Auschwitz* by Rudolf Höss.

In April he traveled to the United States for a series of talks at various universities on the occasion of the translation of *If Not Now, When?* The English translation of his novel included an introduction by Irving Howe. He visited Claremont College near Los Angeles, Bloomington (Indiana), Boston and New York. He described his impressions of his trip in "Among the Peaks of Manhattan," which appeared in the June 23, 1985 issue of *La Stampa* [and was anthologized in *The Mirror Maker*].

During his visit to the United States, Levi was presented mostly to Jewish communities, whose focus on his degree of Jewishness struck him as awkward. He conceded that the argument for European Jews to settle in Israel and "rebuild" a life for themselves was a powerful one. However, he expressed his reservations on the political situation.

"But it was a simplification. If you thought about the actual situation, the objective conditions ... the country wasn't empty for one thing. I had trouble with this in America. I had to give a talk to a group in

Brooklyn and for the first time in my life I found myself in front of a totally Jewish audience. All old and all Jewish. I gave my talk, which I'd written in England. I'm not sure how much they grasped, given my terrible accent. As soon as I finished, they started asking questions about Israel and where I stood on the Arab-Israeli conflict. When I started to explain that I thought Israel was a mistake in historical terms, there was uproar and the moderator had to call the meeting to a halt." (Interview by Greer in Belpoliti & Gordon, 2001)



Primo Levi, 1980s
Archivio Storico La Stampa

In April 1986 he published *The Drowned and the Saved*, which is the summation of his reflections on his concentration camp experiences, and his intellectual and ethical testament.

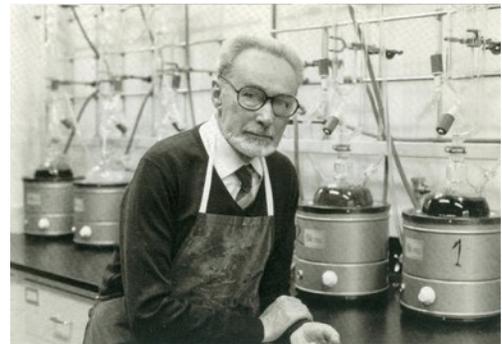
The Wrench and Moments of Reprieve (a selection from the stories from *Lilit*) were published in the United States and *If Not Now, When?* in Germany. Levi traveled to London, where he met Philip Roth, and then on to Stockholm.

In September Philip Roth visited Levi in Turin for a long interview to be published in *The New York Times Review of Books*. The interview was published on October 12.

1986 Chernobyl disaster. A catastrophic nuclear accident occurred on April 26 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

On September 21 Levi wrote an article on the issue of the responsibility of scientists in the newspaper *La Stampa*.

“Whether you are a believer or not, whether a ‘patriot’ or not, if you are given a choice do not let yourself be seduced by material or intellectual interests, but choose from the field that which may render less painful and less dangerous the journey of your contemporaries, and of those who come after you. Don’t hide behind the hypocrisy of neutral science: you are educated enough to be able to evaluate whether from the egg you are hatching will issue a dove or a cobra or a chimera or perhaps nothing at all.” (“Hatching the Cobra,” *The Mirror Maker*, 2002) In November the book-publishing branch of *La Stampa* collected his contributions to the newspaper from 1977 to 1986 and published an anthology entitled *Racconti e saggi*.



A controversy over political revisionism broke out in Germany in 1987. Levi commented on this in the January 22 issue *La Stampa* in an article entitled “The Black Hole of Auschwitz”:

“The current polemic in Germany between those who are inclined to trivialize the Nazi massacres (Nolte, Hillgruber) and those who would claim its uniqueness (Habermas and many others) cannot be a matter of indifference to us. The thesis of the former is scarcely new: there have been massacres down the centuries, above all at the beginning of our own century against the ‘class enemy’ in the Soviet Union, and thus near the German borders. Over the course of the Second World War we Germans did no more than adopt a practice that was dreadful, but now well-established: an ‘Asiatic’ practice of massacre, mass deportation, merciless exile to hostile

PRIMO LEVI

Anthology on Printed Matter

(inhospitable) regions, torture and the splitting up of families. Our only innovation was a technological one: we invented the gas chambers... Now, the Soviets cannot be absolved.... The new German revisionists, then, tend to present Hitler's massacres as a preventive defense against an 'Asiatic' invasion. This seems to me as an extremely fragile thesis... It is true that 'the Gulag came before Auschwitz' but we should not forget that the aims of these two infernos were not the same. The first was a massacre between equals; it was not based on racial supremacy, nor did it divide men into the superman and the subhuman; the second was

based on an ideology imbued with racism.... Not even the pages of Solzhenitsyn, which quiver with well-justified furor, suggest anything similar to Treblinka or Chelmno, which did not produce work, were not concentration camps, but 'black holes' destined for men, women and children guilty of only being Jews.... And I do not see how this 'innovation' [gas chambers] could be considered marginal, or be attenuated with an 'only.' These were not imitations of 'Asiatic' methods, they were decidedly European; the gas was produced by reputable German chemical factories, and it was to German factories that the hair of massacred women was sent, while the gold extracted from the teeth of the dead bodies was destined for German banks. All of this is specifically German, and no German should ever forget it; nor should he forget that in Nazi Germany, and only in Nazi Germany, children and the sick were also sent to an atrocious death in the name of an abstract and ferocious radicalism which has no equivalent in modern times.... If Germany today desires the position which is rightfully hers amongst European nations, she cannot, and must not, whitewash her own past." (Levi, 2005)

In March *The Periodic Table* was published in French and German translations. Levi underwent surgery. On April 11, 1987 Levi fell to his death from the stair well of his home in Turin. Some believe he committed suicide.

A man of the twentieth century, Levi will continue to be a towering moral guide, with a broad universal humanist appeal, well into the future, while remaining tied to the personal, historical and cultural events that shaped his life.

This chronology is an abridged version of a the one edited by Ernesto Ferrero [Cronologia di Primo Levi](#). Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi - All rights reserved. Historical timeline from the online resources of Centro Primo Levi NY.

PRIMO LEVI: A SHORT FILM BY CYNTHIA MADANSKY



Multimedia artist Cynthia Madansky produced a short film in tribute to Primo Levi as an introduction to the program at the National Book Festival.

She used little known archival images and footage provided by the Digital Library of the Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi, Archivio Patrizia Antonicelli, Archivio Ebraico Terracini, Leo Levi Family, Archivio Serafino, Fabrizio Salmoni, La Stampa, Fondazione Fossoli, YIVO Institute for Jewish

Research, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and RAI Teche.

Music: Luigi Dallapiccola's *Quaderno Musicale di Annalibera* recorded by Matthew Laurence Edwards, San Francisco 1991. The production of the short was made possible through the generous support of the American Initiative for Italian Culture (www.aific.org).

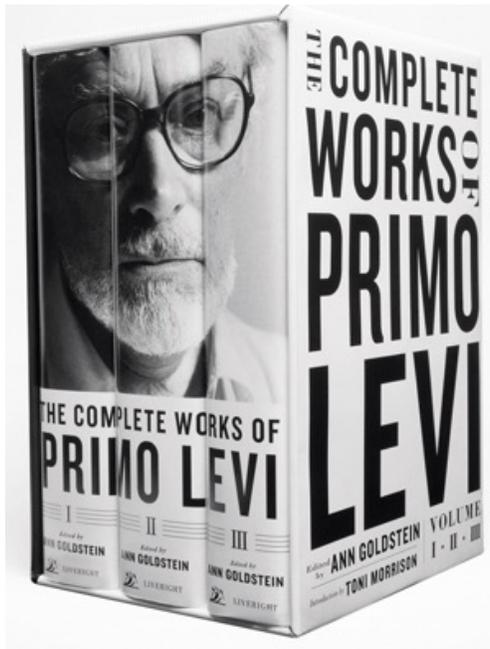
Qaddish, Aldo Perez recorded by Leo Levi in 1954 and published in the collection: *Musiche della tradizione ebraica in Piemonte* curated by Franco Segre and produced by the Archivio Ebraico Terracini.

Cynthia Madansky's films integrate hybrid forms including autobiography, experimental tropes, cinema verité, literature, anthropological observation and dance, engaging with cultural and political themes, such as identity, nationalism, displacement and war and foregrounding the human experience and personal testimony. The most recent works include *I+8*, a video installation on the borders of Turkey co-directed with Angelika Brudniak and two films produced as fellow at the American Academy in Rome, *Anna Pina Teresa*, exploring one of Anna Magnani's legendary gestures in Roma Città Aperta and *E42* a cinematic exploration of Fascism's urban space.

NATIONAL BOOK FESTIVAL PANEL

The panel features Primo Levi's translator and editor of the *Complete Works*, Ann Goldstein of *The New Yorker*, with *The New Yorker* cultural critic Adam Gopnik. It will be moderated by Michael Abramowitz of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. With the participation of Alessandro Cassin of Centro Primo Levi.

Q & A session with the audience will follow the presentation.



Primo Levi's Complete works can be ordered from major bookstores, from [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com) as well as any online book distributor. Buona lettura!

Thanks

We are grateful to the many organizations and individuals that collaborated at the production of this event. In particular we wish to thank Italian Ambassador Armando Varricchio and Cultural attaché Renato Miracco, Robert Weil at Liveright Norton, National Book Festival director Marie Arana, Michele Sarfatti and Laura Brazzo at the Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation in Milan, Renzo and Lisa Levi, Ernesto Ferrero, Fabio Levi and Cristina Zuccaro at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi, Marzia Luppi at the Fondazione Fossoli, Chiara Pilocane and Anna Tedesco at the Archivio Ebraico Terracini, Adolfo Serafino at the Serafino Archive, the Levi Family and the Leo Levi Archive, Guido Vaglio at the Museo Diffuso della Resistenza, Fabrizio Salmoni, Davide Tabor, Patrizia Antonicelli and Carlotta Cernigliaro at the Franco Antonicelli Archive, Luisa Fava at *La Stampa*, Carla Consalvi and Laura Plahuta at RAI Teche, Helga Davis and Hannis Brown at WQXR, Robert Raben, Donald Gatlin, and Dario Disegni at the Italian Jewish Heritage Foundation, Matthew Edwards and Matthew Laurence Edwards.

Centro Primo Levi is the recipient of an endowment established in memory of Achille and Maria Viterbi by Andrew and Erna Viterbi. The Center's programs are made possible in part through the generous support of the Cahnman Foundation and Dr. Claude Ghez.

