The centaur's memory

The voice of memory: interviews, 1961–1987
Primo Levi
Edited by Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon
Translated from the Italian by Robert Gordon
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On the train from the Munich airport not long ago I was reading the English edition of *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. The front page had a story on compensation payments for Nazi-era slaves. Primo Levi would have been eligible for a cheque and an apology. An Italian Jew and chemist, he was deported in 1944 to the Monowitz concentration camp, part of the Auschwitz complex. He first worked helping to build a chemical factory and later was assigned to a laboratory. Levi survived 11 months as slave labourer 174517 until the liberation of what he called "that hideous distortion of humanity."

The Monowitz *Lager* (Levi preferred this German word for camp) was part of a huge industrial plant financed and built by I.G. Farben, a conglomerate of chemical companies. As one initiative in its wide support for the German war effort, the industrial giant manufactured Zyklon B, the gas used in the death chambers. The special compensation ceremony, under the auspices of the Jewish Claims Conference, took place in the I.G. Farben building, now home to the humanities departments of the university in Frankfurt. The irony would not be lost on Levi. In the latter part of his life he'd become an archetypal witness to the horrors of Nazism. Although he would probably have declined such a designation, he might have taken some satisfaction that the unhealed wound of the Holocaust confronts us periodically in the daily papers.

The works of Primo Levi continue to command attention 14 years after his death. It wasn't always that way. His first book, *If This Is a Man*, an account of his life in the *Lager*, appeared in 1947. He had difficulty finding a publisher, and the first edition sold poorly. More than 15 years passed before he wrote his second book, *The Truce*. Although known primarily for his writing about the Holocaust, he also wrote poetry and science fiction, and was for a time a regular contributor of essays to the Italian paper *La Stampa*. (A selection of the latter was published as *Other People's Trades*.)

The last few years have been good ones for admirers of Levi and his work. Myriam Anissimov's biography, *Tragedy of an Optimist*, was published in 1999. *The Search for Roots*, Levi's personal anthology from those favourite books that "accompany you through the years" came out this year, 20 years after its first Italian publication. Also published in 2001 is *The Voice of Memory*, a selection of media interviews given between 1961 and 1987. Most of the interviews included in the book took place in the 80s as Levi's stature as a writer and speaker grew, especially outside of Italy.

The Voice of Memory provides access for interested readers to the person beneath the writer. Each of Levi's works of nonfiction presents an opportunity to listen to his precise, articulate and refreshingly dispassionate voice:

> [W]hen describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge.

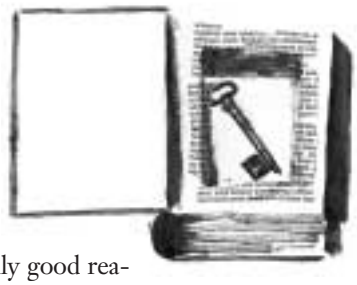
Levi once described Kafka's *The Trial* (which he translated) as "a marvelous book that runs you through like a spear, like an arrow." It's an apt description of my initial response, a dozen years ago, to a borrowed copy of *The Drowned and the Saved*. A reprise of his Auschwitz experience 40 years after the fact, it proved to be his final book. My reaction then was not so much to the content but to this voice, the voice of memory that speaks eloquently, without rancour, resonating with moral energy and an unceasing desire to understand those days.

A recurring motif in *The Voice of Memory* is the comparison of Levi to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, the returning survivor who must tell and retell his story. Levi says, "If you asked me why I wanted to tell the stories, I couldn't answer. Probably it was part of an understandable instinct: I wanted to free myself from them."

The Voice of Memory includes 3 different forms of interviews: questions answered by Levi in writing (including a "self-interview" in which he composes answers to 8 of the questions most frequently put to him), traditional interviews by journalists, and transcriptions of Levi in conversation. The content is divided into 6 major sections: encounters with prominent writers like Philip Roth and Germaine Greer, diverse aspects of Levi's life, interviews given at the time of publication of some of his books, more general reflections on his and other writers' books, a major section entitled "Auschwitz and Survival" and a final part concerned with Levi's identity as a Jew.

In his introductory essay to *The Voice of Memory*, "I am a Centaur," editor Marco Belpoliti describes Levi as a man of four métiers: chemist, witness, storyteller and "talker." Levi's training as a chemist contributed to his unlikely survival in the death camp. It was during and after Auschwitz that he became a witness and, in turn, a writer and speaker, all the while continuing his career as a chemist. In an interview related to his collections of science fiction

stories, he states: "I am amphibian, a centaur … . One half of me is of the factory, is the technician and the chemist, but there is another, quite separate half that lives in the world of writing, giving interviews, working on my past and present experiences."



To listen to the compelling voice of Primo Levi is not the only good reason to sit down with one of his books. He possessed a powerful gift of language. Beyond that, he was a writer who recognized that language is imperfect:

> I sometimes feel the inadequacy of the medium. Ineffability, it's called, and it's a beautiful word. Our language is human, born to describe things at a human level. It collapses, falls apart, cannot cope … .

It's also worth spending a few minutes considering the moral sensibility of Primo Levi, a sensibility that is neither moralistic nor self-righteous. When he writes about forgiveness his comments reveal the ambivalence many of us feel in these days of repeated crimes against humanity, trials, apologies and compensation:

> To forgive is not my verb. It has been inflicted on me … . I think of myself as, in my own way, a just man. I can forgive a man, but not all men; I only feel able to judge case by case. If I had had Eichmann before me, I would have condemned him to death. I do not accept, as some ask me to, a wholesale pardon.

Any literate person should, during a lifetime, read one account of the Holocaust. *The Voice of Memory* is not that book. It is a luxury for those readers who have time to listen at greater length to one important author. Those who are pressed for time should go directly to *If This Is a Man* or *The Drowned and the Saved*. But don't be surprised if a kinship develops … .

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