

## If This Is a Man

### Before *If This Is a Man*

When Primo Levi came back to Italy in October 1945, he has no idea that several other testimonies of former deportees like him had already been published. In the year that marked the official end of World War II, eleven books were published or printed by local publishers or presses. We do not know if Levi knew of any of these testimonies, as they were little more than pamphlets circulated locally. Only a few were distributed to bookstores.

The first work to be published was by a chemist like Levi. Alberto Cavaliere was a member of the Communist Party who had told the story of his sister in law, Sofia Schafranov, a Jewish doctor of Russian origin. The title of the 92-page book published by Sonzogno in 1945 was *I campi della morte in Germania: nel racconto di una sopravvissuta* (Death Camps in Germany: The Story of a Survivor). The second title to come out, an 82-page story by the writer and critic Giacomo De Benedetti had already been published in the journal 'Mercurio' in December 1944: *16 ottobre 1943* (October 16, 1943), published in Rome by OET. Neither Cavaliere nor Debenedetti had experienced the Lager first-hand, however. Gaetano De Martino, a Theosophist lawyer and militant communist was the first genuine eye-witness to publish his account alongside testimonies from other deportees. Published by Edizioni Alaya, the book was called *Dal carcere di San Vittore ai "Lager Tedeschi": sotto la sferza nazifascista* (From San Vittore Prison to the "German Lager": Under the Nazi-Fascist Whip). The literary critic, Silvio Guarnieri, wrote a 23-page account after hearing Luigi Rozzi's personal experience as a deportee and prisoner at Monowitz, where Levi, whom he later met in Romania, had also been held. The pamphlet was printed in Salò, at the Ebranati Printing Press and was entitled *Campi di eliminazione nella Germania nazista* (Elimination Camps in Nazi Germany).

Levi, the young Jewish chemist who had made it back to Italy after being deported to Monowitz, also wanted to tell the story of his imprisonment: his journey to Auschwitz and the time he spent in the death camp working in the German synthetic rubber factory. His earliest works, written

almost as soon as he set foot in Turin on October 19, 1945, revealed this need. One of the first was a report written for the Turin Jewish Community, where, after a brief introduction, he provided precise information garnered from fellow prisoners about other deportees. It was a formal “deposition”, as Levi himself called this report: a list of names and a series of events that then found their way into a narrative in *If This Is a Man*, both in the first edition in 1947 and in the later, expanded edition in 1958.

Alongside this deposition, Levi wrote a first draft of what would later become Chapter 17 of *If This Is a Man (The Story of Ten Days)*. At the end of the typescript he put the date, February 1946. This piece of writing was not strictly private, even though he was writing about his personal experience. It was already a story, written in the form of a diary. In the same period, Levi wrote several poems, which he kept private and which remained unpublished for thirty years. These were *Buna*, December 28, 1945; *Singing*, January 3, 1946; *February 25, 1944*, January 9, 1946; *Song of the Crow (I)*, January 9, 1946; *Shemà*, January 10, 1946; and *Get Up*, January 11, 1946. They were published thirty years later under these dates in the collection *L'osteria di Brema (The Brema Tavern)* by the Milan based publisher Scheiwiller after they had been rejected by his publisher since 1958, Einaudi.

A third text in a vestigial form that would later become *If This Is a Man* was co-authored with his friend and fellow concentration camp survivor, Leonardo De Benedetti. Also known as *The Auschwitz Report*, it was a medical report on the sanitary and medical organization at Monowitz (*Rapporto sull'organizzazione igienico-sanitaria del Campo di concentramento degli Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz – Alta Slesia)*). It was published in a medical journal in November, 1946, but was also distributed in manuscript form to various Turin organizations with ties to the Resistance and to the Jewish community. This was a clear sign that as early as 1945-1946 both authors wanted their experiences to be more widely known.

Levi was so disturbed on returning home that he felt the urgent need to eliminate the toxins that had been forced into his system at Auschwitz by writing about his experience. The aim of writing was thus to free himself of the poison. And yet, his urge to write – not just testimonies - was already

there at the camp. As Levi himself reminded us many years later in his *Appendix* and in *If This Is a Man*, the young deportee had a notebook and the stub of a pencil when he was inside the death camp. The expression he used to communicate with his readers when they would one day read the result of his note-taking was that he was writing “what I could never tell anyone” (p.135). The idea was implicit in the very act of writing. Writing, with its distancing and objectifying stance, stood in for the direct, oral account of events – which would have been obsessive and impelling in his first few months back in Turin. Levi’s eye-witness stories were reflective, and for Levi reflecting on his past was his way of actually going back in time to the episode that he wanted to relate.

The body of work Levi produced in the early months of his return to Turin took the form of written reports and testimonies and were an act of denunciation; for Levi, writing these was an essential part of his return. The image of the pencil stub he used to note things down would return in later stories set in the Lager. The letters he managed to write to his family in Turin when he was imprisoned at Monowitz, and was even able to send with the aid of a volunteer at the factory, were physical evidence. Sending letters was by no means a common occurrence in the Nazi extermination camps.

## Avigliana

Several chapters of *If This Is a Man*, if not all, were written in a small town in the Piedmont region called Avigliana where Levi found a job in 1946. Two months after his grueling but ultimately fortunate journey home, Levi was employed by the Montecatini, the company that owned the chemical plant there. Years later, Levi wrote about the period when he was writing his first book in a short story called *Chromium* (in *The Periodic Table*). Levi’s duties in the noisy paint factory were not particularly pressing (“No one paid much attention to me”, p.877), and he found time here and there to dedicate to his writing. It is likely that some chapters were written by hand, while others were typed, especially in the evening in the factory dormitory where he stayed during the week. The “maniacal scribbler who disturbed nights in the dormitory” (p.881). Since he had just come back from

Russia, some suspected him of being a Soviet agent. He was in no hurry to finish, but told his story “giddily” (p.876), almost compulsively. He had no precise plan. The chapters of *If This Is a Man* he produced “little by little” (*Ibid.*) in Avigliano were still very much fresh reports of facts, impressions, reflections, and eye-witness accounts, which would only take on a cohesive form when the final project was completed.

Levi also “scribbled”, as he put it, on his commutes from Turin to Avigliano and back. As he himself would later relate, one important chapter, *The Canto of Ulysses*, was written in a lunch break. He finished his meal in fifteen minutes and then retired to his dormitory to write the story of Pikolo and how he attempted to use Dante’s Canto XXVI to teach his French fellow prisoner Italian. These impressions linked to facts, as he liked to say, were exactly what Levi was extracting by writing a testimony in the guise of a story.

Before examining the work-in-progress that was the 1947 edition of *If This Is a Man* – the one published by De Silva after Einaudi had rejected the manuscript – let us take a few steps back in time and look at the text known as the *Auschwitz Report*. This is because there is an important link between this more ‘technical’ witness statement and the first edition of *If This Is a Man*.

### Writing the *Auschwitz Report*

In the Katowice concentration camp where Levi was held after Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army in January 1945, Leonardo De Benedetti and Primo Levi were commissioned by the Soviet officials who managed the camp to write a report on the sanitary and medical conditions at Monowitz where they had been imprisoned. The Soviet government requested a similar report from all the doctors who had been held at Monowitz. De Benedetti, who was a doctor, had worked in the infirmary there, and Levi had been his assistant.

We do not know what language the report handed over to the Soviet officials was written in. It may have been in French, a language both sides were familiar with. What we do know is that the initial report served as a palimpsest for a later report entitled *Rapporto sull’organizzazione igienico-*

*sanitaria del Campo di concentramento per Ebrei di Monowitz (Auschwitz-Alta Slesia)* (Report on the Sanitary and Medical Conditions of the Concentration Camp for Jews in Monowitz, Auschwitz, High Silesia, better known as the *Auschwitz Report*) written by the same two former prisoners who had worked at the Buna synthetic rubber factory at Monowitz.

De Benedetti and Levi sent the *Report* to the medical journal “Minerva Medica” in 1946, after they had been introduced by Silvia Pons, a doctor and former partisan. The article was reviewed by the board and published in the November 26 edition under the section ‘Original Work’. The article was signed by the two authors, although De Benedetti’s name was spelt wrong. De Benedetti was credited as being a “surgeon” while Levi was referred to as a “chemist”.

In the opening sentence of the *Auschwitz Report* the co-authors stated that, owing to photographic evidence and depositions provided by former prisoners, readers already knew about the existence of extermination camps instituted by the Germans in order to wipe out all Jews in Europe. It is true that after 1945 there were a number of photographs that circulated in newspapers, magazines, as well as short films that were included in news-reels. Clément Chéroux (Chéroux, 2001) examined the impact of these pictures in Europe, while Elisabetta Ruffini (Ruffini et al., 2016) conducted research on Italy in particular. Numerous photographs were published in the Italian daily press from May 1945 onwards. In the following years books and pamphlets with printed photographs began to circulate. In 1945, a book by Giancarlo Ottani, *Un popolo piange: la tragedia degli ebrei italiani* (A People Weep: The Tragedy of the Italian Jews) was published in Milan by Spartaco Giovine. This was a collection of witness accounts of the persecution received by men and women “of the Jewish race” in the San Vittore Prison in Milan, the transit camp at Fossoli, and in the concentration camps. The book also reported Princess Mafalda of Savoy’s imprisonment and death at Buchenwald and the Nazi massacre at Meina. In 1948 a book entitled *Nei campi della morte* (In the Death Camps) was printed by Tipografia Lucchi. The author, Angelo Colleoni was a writer and journalist, correspondent for the Rome daily ‘Il Messaggero’ at the Russian Front, who received the very first witness statements from former concentration camp survivors who were still in the Russian occupied territories liberated from the Germans.

When De Benedetti and Levi wrote the *Auschwitz Report*, there were already several testimonies circulating. Elisabetta Ruffini (Ruffini et al., 2016) and her Bergamo team confirmed that there were sixteen books or pamphlets on the deportation and concentration camps, eleven of which were specifically about the Lager experience, and five written by people who did not have first-hand knowledge of the facts. Most of these texts concentrated on deportation for political rather than racial reasons. In 1946, Luciana Nissim and Palagia Lewinska co-authored *Donne contro il mostro* (Women against the Monster), published by Vincenzo Ramella in Turin. Nissim, who was a doctor, was deported to Auschwitz on the same transport as Levi, a friend of hers. Her section of the book was called *Ricordo della casa dei morti* (Memories of the Death House), and her testimony as a doctor and a Jewish prisoner made specific references to the medical and health conditions in the camp where she had been held. De Benedetti and Levi may well have read her account in manuscript form, before they wrote and published their Report.

One of the most interesting elements about the *Auschwitz Report* is the authors' point of view. They announced themselves from the start as both witnesses and victims, thus placing themselves inside and outside the text at the same time. This dichotomous point of view would later be replicated in a more complex literary form in *If This Is a Man*. The *Report* is co-authored by De Benedetti and Levi, but it is possible, with a certain degree of approximation, to deduce which parts were written by which author. There are several textual indications that, once the two had finished writing, Levi edited the entire Report, making corrections, adding factual details, or changing the lexis in a way that revealed his aspirations as a budding writer.

The more specifically technical or medical sections were presumably written by De Benedetti; the more narrative or meditative parts, with greater attention to details relating to people or things, were most likely Levi's. The longest central segment of the Report, listing the prevalent diseases and their development in the context of the concentration camp, was almost certainly written by De Benedetti. In addition, the clinical descriptions of the effects of deprivation, starvation, insanitary conditions, violence and fatigue on prisoners at Monowitz were certainly the doctor's. The account of the journey to Auschwitz, however, was clearly Levi's, to the extent that one can draw a parallel

between the story as it was reported here and the story at the beginning of *If This Is a Man* as it was told a year later.

The band playing “infernal” marches and “popular songs dear to every German” described in the chapter *Ka-Be* (p.48) appeared in the *Auschwitz Report* in more general terms. Likewise, Levi’s focus on shoes, which returned in many of his works, as well as the German soldier who offered friendly advice on what to do with their money and jewelry to deportees as they were leaving. The figure in this early sketch resembled the soldier “bristling with arms” (p.16) in the 1958 edition of *If This Is a Man*, who asked the thirty prisoners “if they have any money or watches to give him, seeing that they will no longer be of use” (p.17) in the truck that would take them to Monowitz. This detail was added eleven years later, showing how Levi’s mind processed successive waves of memories.

Some of the expressions used in the *Auschwitz Report*, such as “impartial and affectionate advice”, “the group was tough”, “imprisoned here”, “dark” or “tragic presentiments,” sound like phrases from *If This Is a Man*. Many years later, further details emerged in other works by Levi, such as a reference to improvised shoe laces made with twisted paper strings or electric wire when possible. All of these clues put together allow us to attribute the first and the last section of the Report to Levi. Clearly, his narrative style had not yet been as honed as it would be when he came to write *If This Is a Man*, but these are early experiments. Writing improves with practice, and as we shall see, the young chemist from Turin would go on to work hard on the various versions of his books in the future.

Robert Gordon (Gordon, 2006) analyzed the *Auschwitz Report*, comparing the text with later work. He highlighted the progressive sharpening of Levi’s prose style in terms of concision, rhythm and balance. There were already several specific traits of the author’s style in the *Report*, which owed as much to his training as a chemist as to his natural precision and seriousness: his technical lexis, and his wide reading. These features tend to confirm the hypothesis that Levi edited the entire Report, including the technical parts written by De Benedetti. Another quality of the Report is ascribable to Levi: the underlying irony of the text, highlighting his natural sense of humor. An example of this was when he stressed the Germans’ obsession with form and appearance. The double layer that irony

and humor provided meant that Levi's prose was not tainted by moralism, here or in later works. It also allowed him to grasp the comic or ridiculous aspects of human behavior – as he did so patently in his later writing. Levi had a flair for subtle irony which saved him from deep pessimism, and helped him relativize – or at least judge from a distance - the things that happened to him.

As Gordon noted, the *Auschwitz Report* was a call to be heeded. Both authors felt an urgent need to testify, but at the same time they took nothing for granted. The two authors mentioned the gas chambers that then figured in *If This Is a Man*. In the Report, Levi made every effort only to include details he had witnessed in person; he mentioned them but did not describe them. In the medical section the Report talks about the special *Kommando* responsible for the gas chambers and the crematoria. One detail in particular is inexact, as it was probably second-hand information. That is, that the *Sonderkommando* was made up of criminals with blood on their hands. In 1945-1946 not much was known about the running of the camps, nor about the number or provenance of those prisoners that Levi would go on to describe in detail forty years later in *Gray Zone (The Drowned and the Saved)*. When the two authors talked about the crematoria, they adopted the formula “we understand that”, or “we have heard that” so that it is clear they are writing about other people's experiences not their own. In the case of the diseases prevalent in the Ka-Be hospital wing, by contrast, the diagnoses and details were extremely precise because Levi and De Benedetti had seen them with their own eyes.

How should one classify the *Auschwitz Report*? Some critics have referred to it as a “proto-document” or “ante-text”, but if we see it as a work-in-progress over the first few months after his return to Turin (together with the poems, stories and the various chapters that would then comprise *If This Is a Man*), then the Report could be seen as a “parallel text”. Levi worked, if one can put it this way, at different tables, in different genres. When he decided to write down his memories of the concentration camp he had not yet established what genre or style he would adopt for this purpose.

The *Auschwitz Report*, at least the parts he most likely wrote, was a ‘technical’, or ‘scientific’ text, in line with the two authors’ professions. Another text written in the same period, *The Story of Ten days*, was a diary. Added to these were the poems and the stories, such as *Mnemagogs*, where



Levi experimented with other literary forms that he hoped might be complementary, or even parallel, to the other tables he was working on in those early months, both with his notebook and pencil and with his typewriter.

A vital difference, on the other hand, between the *Auschwitz Report* and the other pieces he was working on at the same time which would then evolve into his first book, was the grammatical subject it was written in. The Report was written in the third person, given that is precisely that: a report. In *If This Is a Man*, by contrast, the dominant person is the first person singular and plural: the I/We that constituted the grammatical fulcrum of the narrating subject (La Fauci, 2015).