Primo Levi and Bruno Piazza: Auschwitz in Italian Literature

Ilona Klein

Brigham Young University - Provo, ilona_klein@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the European Languages and Societies Commons, and the Italian Literature Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

3832.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3832

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Chapter 11

PRIMO LEVI AND BRUNO PIAZZA: AUSCHWITZ IN ITALIAN LITERATURE

Ilona Klein

To focus on the literature of the Shoah more than 50 years later and 7,000 miles away inevitably creates some sense of dissociation due to both historical and geographic distance. While on the one hand, an analysis of the literature of the genocide might grant further insights through a retrospective look, on the other, however, this distance of time and space risks leading to an oversimplification of the Shoah, in the sense that the plight of the Jews, their individual stories and the overwhelming sense of emptiness caused by the depletion of the intellectual Jewish cultural communities in Europe might be lost within the maze of some collective post-psychological and philosophical/historical studies which claim to give answers to the genocide. In fact, ultimately, Auschwitz represents the undefinable tragic event in history, and no conclusive explanation will ever be possible, for the concentration camp and its crematoria defeat any logical relations of cause and effect. As scholars, it is, therefore, critically important not to lose perspective on the individual human tragedies of the Shoah and its aftermath when dealing with its literature. The study of the Holocaust must preserve the real personal human face.

The pre-WWII Jewish community in Italy counted approximately 40,000 members.1 During the years of persecution, about 8,000 Italian Jews were deported to concentration camps; this number equals to about 20% of the Jews living in Italy at that time. Of these, only approximately 400 (5% of those deported) survived and returned home
after the war. These statistics must make us reflect, especially when we read, as in some recent studies, that Italian Jews are considered among the most "fortunate" European groups. Statistically, Italian Jewry may indeed have fared better than Jews of other European nations (Polish Jews, Jews of the Baltic countries, German and Austrian Jews, Hungarian Jews) thanks to the difficult and courageous work of many Italian partisans and righteous Gentiles who aided them in hiding and refused to hand them over to German authorities. However, of the 8,000 Italian Jews deported, only 5% survived the Endlösung: to talk about "fortune" or "good luck" on the part of Italian Jews under these circumstances reveals at best only a partial understanding of the magnitude of the tragedy.

Among those who returned are two very different writers: Primo Levi and Bruno Piazza. Piazza, a Jewish lawyer from Trieste, was already 55 years old when deported to Auschwitz on July 31, 1944. He arrived seven days later with a new identity: #190,712. As with Primo Levi (a twenty-four year-old Italian chemist from Turin at the time of deportation), Bruno Piazza was accused of being an Italian citizen of the Jewish race, guilty of participating in partisan anti-fascist activities in the Resistance movement. It was Piazza's status as a political deportee, as revealed by the high number tattooed on his arm, which kept him from immediate death on his second day in Auschwitz.

Piazza recalls that a Nazi guard, after furiously beating a Jewish prisoner, then ordered a Russian prisoner ("un uomo di proporzioni gigantesche, un vero colosso" -- "a man of gargantuan proportions, a true giant") to continue the clubbing and handed him a cane. In broken German, the Russian refused, replying that he was incapable of beating a defenseless man. In retaliation, the Nazi guard demanded two more Jewish prisoners. At that point, Piazza was summoned together with a Hungarian Jew by their Kapo. Piazza later wrote about what happened:

The corporal then turned to the Kapo, "To finish, I need two more Jews. Quick, have them report to me..." The Kapo did not need the order to be repeated. He looked around, uncertain, then he came towards me, resolute. "Come," the Kapo said to me, "You're up!" I turned pale, but did not lose my cool. "Pay attention," I told him [the Kapo]. "Herr Corporal said two Jews. Aren't you Jewish?" With effort I smiled, and showed him the high number tattooed on my arm. He then turned to someone else, "Are you Jewish?" Also the other one denied it. However, he was a Hungarian Jew with a low number tattooed on his arm. The Kapo had little time to waste (89).
This tragic episode ends with the Kapo seizing two Polish Jews from the terrorized group of prisoners, two Polish Jews who were then beaten to death in front of their fellow prisoners. Before rushing to judgement on this episode, we must be reminded of the caution of Esther Joffe Israel about moral issues connected to Jewish survival in Auschwitz. She wrote: "I do not judge. Each person judges the means to which she or he has recourse in order to save her or his own life."

This event in which Piazza was involved is emblematic of that which Primo Levi called the "Grey Zone"; it will be treated briefly later in this essay. After the liberation, Piazza started his long journey home (through the Polish refugee camp of Katovice) in March of 1945, to arrive in Trieste in June. Before his death on 31 October 1946, he completed his memoirs entitled *Perché gli altri dimenticano* (Because Others Forget, published in Italian in 1956 -- untranslated, and now out of print), about the time spent in the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

In the chapter entitled "Undici miracolati" ("Eleven people saved miraculously"), Piazza recalls the horrible selection of 19 September 1944, when he -- together with another 800 adults, 300 Lithuanian children between the ages of eight and twelve, and 200 sick prisoners - - waited for death almost 24 hours inside the gas chamber (126). Piazza had been selected by Josef Mengele (whom Piazza refers to as "Mengerle" (122), Italianizing the name) because he stumbled slightly while walking during the selection (124). One minute before being gassed, the names of 11 people, all of whom were political prisoners, were called out. Bruno Piazza's was among them, the last name on the list (133). He was then escorted out of the gas chamber. By then, he had been in Auschwitz for 50 days and weighed 51 Kgs (136). "Is this a man?" Primo Levi would ask. The countless humiliations which Piazza and his fellow inmates suffered are recounted in painful detail in his narration, which develops chronologically with an almost obsessive order.

Somehow Piazza manages to sense and describe more than just his immediate surroundings in the camp. When recounting the location of the barracks in Auschwitz, for instance, he presents it through an aerial view (36-40): he wants the reader to see the entire camp. This is a striking exception among writers of the Shoah, for, typically, they describe and write about the very limited area with which they came into daily contact, the only part of Auschwitz they knew. As an aside, the literature of Jewish annihilation written by survivors should be handled as pieces of a mosaic: due to the subjectivity of the experience,
only by reading several authors who were in the same place at the same time, may one reconstruct facts and dynamics of a certain concentration camp within a specific time frame.

In addition, Piazza recommended that his book *Perché gli altri dimenticano* be read primarily as a chronicle dedicated to the sacred memory of the victims of the Nazis. The recounting of the tragedy is necessary so that it may, in Piazza's words, "yield everlasting infamy to those who perpetrated it." Even though *Perché gli altri dimenticano* is Piazza's only literary document dealing with the Shoah (before being deported he also had written a novel, a collection of essays and some poems), the circumstances described are so detailed and his prose so vivid, the reader is certain never to forget.

Unlike Piazza, Primo Levi's works return to the subject of his months in Auschwitz time and again, for he did not exhaust his narrative with his first book, nor is his prose chronologically as linear as Piazza's. Levi explained in the introduction of his *Se questo è un uomo* (the title literally translated reads "If this is a man") that the chapters were written in order of "urgency," thus necessarily giving the book a somewhat fragmentary format. Written in 1946 and first published in 1947 at Levi's own expense, *Survival in Auschwitz* (this is the catch-title given to its American translation of 1959) was written out of the need to tell "others" who were unaware of or pretended to be unaware of the genocide. Most importantly, Levi wanted to communicate with the contemporary young people, to bear witness for them about the Jewish annihilation.

The essays about Auschwitz contained in the last book published while Levi was still alive, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), reveal the same urgency and motivation which had driven Levi to write about his experience and its aftermath thirty years earlier. Indeed, *I sommersi e i salvati* -- "The submerged and the saved," literally translated -- was the working title of *Se questo è un uomo*, and is the title of a central chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Here, Levi encourages his readers to beware of superficial or hasty verdicts, and to exercise suspension of judgement when reading about the behavior of prisoners in Auschwitz. The author's *impotentia judicandi* vis-à-vis his Jewish fellow prisoners is an evident component of his works.

In the slim volume *Conversations* (a long interview with Ferdinando Camon, published posthumously in 1987) Levi explained:
It's true that I refrained from formulating judgments in *Survival in Auschwitz*. I did so deliberately, because it seemed to me inopportune, not to say importunate, on the part of the witness, namely myself, to take the place of the judge. So I suspended any explicit judgment, while the implicit judgments are clearly there. (13)

On several occasions, Primo Levi wrote that a great number of Italian Jews were killed upon arrival in Auschwitz because they did not speak nor understand German and thus could not communicate with other inmates, nor understand orders yelled by the guards. Bruno Piazza's testimonial would serve to confirm Levi's speculation. Most Italian Jews do not (and did not) speak Yiddish, the *lingua franca* of the camp, for most were not of Ashkenazi descent. Italians' reputed linguistic deafness and dumbness in the camps thus contributed to their meaningless deaths. Far from theorizing that Piazza and Levi survived the Shoah merely on account of linguistic skills, their limited knowledge of German did increase slightly their chances of survival in Auschwitz.

Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* and Piazza's *Perché gli altri dimenticano* abound with examples of men and women who, having survived the initial selection, tried to increase their chances of survival by making the best of things, by burdening themselves with extra hardships which hardly justified the extra half liter of thin broth and the label of "privileged prisoner." There were other Jewish prisoners -- such as Piazza, as mentioned in the beginning of this presentation -- who tried to maximize their status as political prisoners to postpone or avoid death.

These people belonged to a group which Primo Levi calls "Grey Zoners," because they lived in a so-called "Grey Zone:"

It is a grey zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge [...] the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness [...] to collaborate [with those in power]" (42-43)

In his attempts to explain Auschwitz, Levi grants a special territory to those "grey zoners" who survived by choosing what they thought would give them a small edge. They existed within a variety of tones, extending from the over-exploited Jewish slave-worker on the one side to the more violent Kapo at the opposite extreme.
The "Grey Zone" also includes non-Jews. In a 1986 interview with Risa Sodi, Levi offered his thoughts about the then-current Waldheim scandal and explained that surely Waldheim knew very well what was going on, and hence the accusations brought against him were more than justified. "Waldheim è un grigio," "he’s a grey zoner," concluded Levi. At the same time, it is of the utmost importance to understand that the individual responsibilities borne by members of the two groups (Jewish prisoners and Nazis) are very different, and hardly comparable to one other, because for the Jews to become a "grey zoner" was a matter of life and death, while for the Nazis it represented a question of degree in crime perpetration.

Unlike Piazza, when Primo Levi described the concentration camp in his *Survival in Auschwitz*, mostly he wrote about the microcosm which closely surrounded him: his prose is poised, almost journalistic in style, devoid of hyperboles as he recounts his 11 months as inmate #174,517. His precise wording contains no superfluous elements, and his unambiguous and extremely detailed memories are related without pause. The chapter "Kraus" ends with a telling description of what Auschwitz had come to mean for Primo Levi: "... everything is nothing down here, except the hunger inside and the cold and the rain around" (122). The reader understands the sense of desperate void which prisoners faced: as though per three concentric circles, the innermost core was formed by the unfathomable, continuous hunger. This, in turn, was surrounded by the void, by "nothingness," by numbness. It was the prisoners’ numbness, their sense of disorientation, their loss of a vibrant culture of European Judaism silenced by the Nazi killing machine. The outermost of the three concentric circles, the hostile atmospheric agents of cold and freezing rain, annihilated the fragile bodies of those who had survived the selections.

Only the first two and the last chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz* indicate a relatively clear chronology in Levi’s narration. At the beginning and at the very end of his internment, Levi maintained an idea of the passing of time, and a sense of division and succession of days and nights. For the duration of his internment, however, days and nights had lost their identity, each flowing into another, each backing up against one another. Time became meaningless: only a vague element to hold on to, a feebly tangible indication of one’s survival.

Primo Levi and Bruno Piazza both survived the Inferno and wrote about their experience. "I had to go through the Inferno of Auschwitz," wrote Piazza, "and I crossed it, like the legendary salamander that went through the flames." The memoirs of both authors offer numerous
passages in which Dante's *Inferno* is either alluded to, or explicitly mentioned. More than once, Piazza refers to Auschwitz as the Dantesque "bolgia infermale," and compares the punishments inflicted to Jewish prisoners and slave workers to those suffered by Dante's damned souls. The tension between the inscription "Abandon every hope, you who enter here" on the gates of Dante's Hell, and the revised "Abbiate ... " ("Hold every hope ...") which Piazza discovered on a graffiti in the *lager*, form one of the most moving and intense focal points of *Perché gli altri dimenticano* (20). And "The Canto of Ulysses," a central chapter of Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, becomes a nightmare of fragments: Levi's scholastic memories fail him, his limited French knowledge severely impedes communication with Jean Pikolo, oxymorons splatter the narration, present and past tense alternate rapidly, marring the frame of narration. In order to prevent his readers from ending up like Dante's souls of the III canto of *Hell*, shadows who lived without praise and without blame -- grey zoners, essentially -- Levi admonishes us of the importance of learning the historical facts, of handing them down to the next generation.

The last lines of Levi's poem "Shemà," echo Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 and read:

> Consider that this has been/I commend these words to you/(...)/Repeat them to your children/Or may your house crumble/Disease render you powerless/Your offspring avert their faces from you.15

Still decades later, we must acknowledge and accept the inherent difficulties we face when trying to understand the experiences of Jews in Auschwitz: when moral codes change, it is costly and painful for everybody. Most importantly, we must be aware of easy oversimplifications.

The legacy of Primo Levi and Bruno Piazza lives on in their literary works, in the almost impossible task of recounting the "Unspeakable:" the "drowned" and the "saved" are forever alive in their pages, "because others forget."

Notes

1. A few of the following paragraphs in this essay are taken from Ilona Klein, "Primo Levi: The Drowned, the Saved, and the 'Grey Zone'," in *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 7 (1990): 77-89. According to Susan Zuccotti, *The
Italians and the Holocaust: Persecutions, Rescue, Survival (New York: Basic Books, 1987), the Italian Jewish community numbered approximately 45,200 members during the German occupation, including some 7,000 foreign Jews who were living in Italy at that time. However, the numbers vary considerably, depending on the source. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975) counts 40,000. At the Wannsee Conference, it was mentioned that the number of Jews living in Italy was 58,000—see Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A Record of the Destruction of Jewish Life in Europe* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

2. My gratitude goes to Risa Sodi, currently a doctoral candidate at Yale University, who has generously shared with me some of her bibliography on Bruno Piazza. "The Holocaust in Italian Literature" is the provisional title of her dissertation which will contain a chapter on Bruno Piazza.


4. All page numbers in parentheses refer to the Italian edition of *Perché gli altri dimenticano*. Translations in this essay are mine, unless otherwise noted.

5. "Non lo giudico. Ognuno è giudice dei mezzi a cui ha il diritto di ricorrere per salvarsi la vita," in Israël's (transl. from French by Aldo Borlenghi) *Vagone piombato*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1949): 118. This statement appears in a context which is unrelated to Piazza's narrative.

6. Also Primo Levi stayed in Katovice: he wrote of his experience there in *La tregua* (*The Truce*), 1963. The two authors never met.

7. "Dedico questo documentario alla sacra memoria di tutti coloro che morirono vittime del fascismo e del nazismo, asfissiati e gettati nei fornì crematori, dopo infinite persecuzioni e atroci sofferenze," reads the epigraph of his book.

8. "La rivelazione esatta e oggettiva di tali misfatti è però necessaria, perché frutti infamia perenne a chi li perpettrò" (9).

10. "The fundamental reason was the lack of communication [...] Few of us Italian Jews understood German or Polish—very few. I knew a few words of German. Under those conditions, the language barrier was fatal. Almost all the Italians died from it. Because from the very first day they didn’t understand the orders, and this wasn’t allowed, wasn’t tolerated" (Camon 23).


