

## ›THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED‹

### A Proposed Reading

By Martina Mengoni (Pisa)

This essay proposes a new reading of Levi's last and probably most complex book, ›I sommersi e I salvati‹. By reading it backwards, the author reconsiders the conception of the book, stating that it should not be seen as a sort of „last Will“ but rather as the result of a twenty-year exercise in questioning power, memory, and the experience of the Lager.

#### 1.

In the very last paragraph of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹, Primo Levi answers a question that students had often asked him, one of the issues he had taken on in the “Appendix” of the school edition of ›If This Is a Man‹ (1976) and again in “Stereotypes” (Chapter 7 of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹): “Young people ask us, more frequently and more insistently as the times grow more remote, what cloth our ‘torturers’ were made of.”<sup>1)</sup> This is a surprising move in the way this book was put together editorially. For isn't this the topic of the entire book that readers have in front of them: trying to understand “what cloth” the SS and the jailers at Auschwitz were made of? Furthermore, why did Levi decide to dedicate the very last words of his book to answering this question despite the fact that he had had a chance to answer it in a whole chapter focused on this issue?

Levi proceeds along this line of reasoning: our persecutors were made of the same cloth as we are without any kind of innate flaw. They “had been brought up badly.” They were “crude and diligent” and “had received the appalling miseducation” in Hitler's schools and then in the voluntary SS military corps. There were few of them who had any second thoughts. All were responsible. Above all, “this responsibility encompasses the overwhelming majority of the German people.” This was an entire people that had been subjected to the project of Nazi-Fascism, had accepted, and consented to, and guaranteed it. They,

<sup>1)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *The Complete Works*, ed. by ANN GOLDSTEIN, intro. by TONI MORRISON, 3 vols, New York and London 2015, vol. 3, p. 2566.

according to the very last words of *The Drowned and the Saved*, “were devastated by its downfall, ravaged by grief, misery and remorse, and rehabilitated a few years later by unprincipled political gamesmanship.”<sup>2)</sup>

Even in terms of rhetoric, this ending leaves its readers confused. It may be unsatisfying to a certain extent, but it is certainly effective. There are pages rich with subtle distinctions and close analyses and after these we might have expected a conclusion that was a little less generic. We might have expected Levi to take up again all the lines of investigation he had traced out in the preceding chapters and wind them around and tie them together into some kind of web or knot.

This did not happen. If we take a look at the structure of the entire “Conclusion” (a little less than five pages), we can notice that the way it develops does not go along with its title; or, at least, that the conventional relationship between an argumentative essay and its conclusion is *virtually* missing. These five pages look very much like an autonomous text that Levi could have written for an anniversary commemoration. In fact, the year he wrote them, 1985, coincided with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation. They are a warning, an admonishment for present and future generations. In its way, the text of the “Conclusion” is a stereotype of Levi’s writings.

It is hard to figure out why Primo Levi decided to end *The Drowned and the Saved* like this. The impetus of the argumentation and the narrative rhythm come to a sharp halt right at the end. His return to the present time rests just on the surface. The only chapter whose content he reviews in the “Conclusion,” if only briefly, is “Useless violence” and in this case, too, the review of the topic of “necessary violence” is rather hurried. Must we think that Levi *did not know* how to conclude his book? This may be true, but with some qualification. Certainly, there is no lack of narrative savvy. There is no scarcity of elements that were available to him. There were no irremediable argumentative contradictions such as might push Levi towards an elusive conclusion. What didn’t Levi have, therefore, for him to write a different concluding chapter?

Above all, *The Drowned and the Saved* is not a book *à these* or, at least, not a book shaped around a single thesis. Levi discusses and, to a certain extent, theorizes authentic conceptual categories that are new or, at least, that had never before been completely articulated in the sociology, philosophy and historiography of the Shoah. There are at least three of these – the “gray zone,” “useless violence,” and the “shame of the survivor.” In spite of this, each of these concepts is not a point in a general demonstration. Effectively, we could say that each of the chapters in this book is a closed universe, one that can be read

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<sup>2)</sup> Ibid., pp. 2566f.

on its own without significant loss of meaning. What holds them together, if anything, is the type of investigation applied to each topic.

This brings us to the second reason why Levi *did not want*, or *was not able*, perhaps, to write a conclusion for ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. When Levi compares his writing to a laboratory report, he forgets to point out the main difference. In an experiment (and therefore in the dry report that should accompany it), the objective is a solution to be reached through a controllable and repeatable procedure. In each chapter of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹, the controllable and repeatable procedure is the narrative itself. In his own words, Levi *demonstrates by recounting*. In the chapter of ›If this Is a Man‹ entitled “The Drowned and the Saved,” Levi notes that he

will try to show in how many ways one might reach salvation by telling the stories of Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias, and Henri<sup>3</sup>).

In this specific case, Stuart Wolff’s translation shows a substantial difference from Levi’s language choices, which were in fact:

In quanti modi si possa dunque raggiungere la salvezza, noi cercheremo di *dimostrare raccontando* le storie di Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias e Henri. [my italics]<sup>4</sup>)

*Dimostrare* (demonstrate) is a frequent verb in Levi’s prose, one much used in non-scientific contexts. Here, the juxtaposition with *raccontando* (recounting, or narrating) sounds like a poetic declaration. This sentence was already part of the text of the 1947 edition of ›If This Is a Man‹ and was not subjected to any changes in the Einaudi edition of 1958. At that time, the “gray zone” had not yet appeared in Levi’s work. However, here is an interesting fact. Levi uses this formula – *dimostrare raccontando* – just before telling the stories of four “human specimens” (*esemplari umani*) who might belong, to all intents and purposes, to the grey zone area. They are the “saved” (or “adaptive”) as opposed to the “drowned.” The portraits of these four saved prisoners (Schepschel, Alfred L., Elias, Henry) are so different from each other that they cannot help but make us wonder if they had any traits in common at all. Rather, the saved are a category of study, products of a laboratory of special interest. They emerge from a reaction whose results are recorded only in the characteristics of one of the two reagents (the Lager) but not necessarily in those of the other (life outside the Lager). Therefore *drowned/saved* is the first analytical distinction that the gray zone is based on, so there is an explicit link between the chapter “The Drowned and the Saved” and the book with the same name.<sup>5</sup>)

<sup>3</sup>) PRIMO LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 1), vol. 1, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>) PRIMO LEVI, *Opere*, ed. by MARCO BÉLPOLITI, 2 vols, Turin 1997, vol. 1, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>) I wrote about the connection between these characters and the gray zone in: MARTINA MENGONI, *Variazioni Rumkowski. Sulle piste della zona grigia. The Rumkowski Variation. Up and Down the Trails of the Grey Zone*. URL: <<http://www.primolevi.it>> [13.01.2018].

Telling an individual story is the activity that Levi exalted in the most, that which he had the most faith in. It is not by chance that his first idea for a novel, which he had explained to his companions during his imprisonment, was the story of the adventures of a carbon atom, an idea that took its final shape as a short story in ›The Periodic Table‹, “Carbon.” Here a scientific object was made into a literary subject. This was how Levi operated from start to finish. In fact, Levi always analyzes starting out from something particular, extracting elements to find out about it, and then almost always returns to the particular. There is a steady analytical swing back and forth that is built up through cases, examples, and *exempla*, a flow of narration and argumentation that almost never leads to a result that ties things together. This is a mental attitude that is mirrored in the construction and rhythm of his texts. The heuristic value of all the concepts traced out in ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ can have their effect only through individual stories. This explains why giving the book a conclusion was so challenging.

In any case, ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ does already have an ending: The chapter “Letters from Germans,” which ended with the death of Hety Schmitt-Maass in 1983. Of all his German correspondents, Hety was the one with whom he kept up a sincere and lasting relationship of friendship. Here are the last words of the chapter:

La nostra amicizia, quasi esclusivamente epistolare, è stata lunga e fruttuosa, spesso allegra; strana, se penso all’enorme differenza fra i nostri itinerari umani ed alla lontananza geografica e linguistica, meno strana se riconosco che è stata lei, fra tutti i miei lettori tedeschi, la sola «con le carte in regola», e quindi non invischiata in sensi di colpa; e che la sua curiosità è stata ed è la mia, e si è arrovellata sugli stessi temi che ho discussi in questo libro.<sup>6)</sup>

Our friendship, which was almost exclusively epistolary, was long and rich, and often joyous. Strange, when I think about the enormous difference between our paths through life and our geographic and linguistic distance. Not so strange when I acknowledge that she, of all my German readers, was the only one who was pure of heart and therefore unencumbered by feelings of guilt; and that her curiosity was and is mine, and she struggled with the same ideas that I have explored in this book.

These words are not, perhaps, the authentic conclusion, but are certainly the equivalent of an ending. This passage is typically narrative, but it has the strength to take up the question of the unity of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ at the last moment. Furthermore, this concluding passage from “Letters from Germans” gives us a glimpse of Levi’s work on this book as a process, the fruit of years of “struggles” and exchanges. Basically, Levi is confronting a friendship

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<sup>6)</sup> PRIMO LEVI, *Opere* (cit. fn. 4), vol. 2, p. 1148; PRIMO LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 1), vol. 3, p. 2562.

that represents the cohesion of his book in living form. His book can certainly be considered a kind of essay but one without a thesis. It is analytical, but its rhythm is narrative, a book whose lines dedicated to his friend Hety are its true last lines.

As seen above, there is an important clue in this undeclared ending. Levi has the reader understand that ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ is the final product of a long period of work and, not least, reflection. How long this period is, Levi does not say. However, we can intuit it as the same period of time as the correspondence with Hety. The two began to write each other in 1966. Hety was one of the German readers of ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹, which was published in 1961 and discovered by her years later. Before her, especially from 1961–1964, Levi had received many letters, about forty, from West Germany. Levi himself writes about this in “Letters from Germans.” They came from young Germans who were neither guilty nor involved with Hitler’s regime, but also from several Germans who had become Nazis opportunistically. These letters to the author of ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ contained considerations on guilt and shame, on “having known,” and on “being implicated.” In fact, these are some of the main topics of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. Read from this perspective, the idea is intriguing that Levi wanted to use these last words about Hety in order to outline the features of a book in which the letters by Germans and thus the Chapter “Letters from Germans” constituted the starting-off point. It is evocative to think that the ending of “Letters from Germans” functions in itself and for the entire ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ as its possible ending because really it is its possible beginning.

2.

On June 14, 1986, Marina Morpurgo, writing for the newspaper ›l’Unità‹, reported on the presentation of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ the previous day at the Einaudi bookstore in Milan. The latest work by Levi had arrived on Italian bookshelves one month before. In front of 200 people, the author explained the motivations that had led him to write a new book about the concentration camps:

L’idea di scrivere questo libro mi è venuta poco per volta, e mi ha dato una curiosa sensazione: a me, laico, è sembrato di sciogliere un voto, di compiere un dovere. La sollecitazione me l’ha data quella specie di “deriva” che avevo notato negli ultimi anni: mi ero accorto che nelle scuole medie si continuava a leggere Se questo è un uomo, ma che i ragazzi avevano cominciato a considerare questi fatti come qualcosa di non accaduto in questo continente, in questo secolo, ma molto lontano nello spazio e nel tempo. Allora ho ripreso alcuni saggi sciolti che avevo scritto in precedenza, li ho riuniti e completati per soddisfare un’esigenza

di riparlare che non è solo mia. Perché il nocciolo della questione è che se è successo può succedere ancora.<sup>7)</sup>

In these words, we can notice references to two different chronological periods as well as two different statements about the necessities that led to this book. Let's begin with the statements. As the main reason for writing *I sommersi*, Levi speaks about his experiences with young students. For them, Auschwitz was “far away in time and space” (“molto lontano nel tempo e nello spazio”). The book is addressed to them, the main subjects Levi wanted to establish a dialogue with. However, at the end of the sentence, Levi remarks that he also had to satisfy a specific need to “talk again,” which is “not just mine.” Here there is an implicit “we” that may refer to a specific group, the one Levi had led since at least 1958 as the main representative for Italy and beyond – the group of survivors, witnesses, and returnees from the camps; the Italian anti-Fascist community.<sup>8)</sup> Levi refers to two different chronological indicators as well: “Over the last few years” (“negli ultimi anni”), Levi has experienced a drift in students’ perceptions of Auschwitz. In reaction, “I returned to some uncollected essays which I previously wrote. I gathered them together and finished them” (“ho ripreso alcuni saggi sciolti che avevo scritto in precedenza, li ho riuniti e completati”).

There are therefore two moments of composition. In the first moment, Levi wrote some of the essays or some parts of them without having any idea of any book in its entirety. In the second moment, he realized he had to write a whole book in order to answer a social, pedagogical, and (hopefully) political need. We need to locate these different moments of composition and retrace the genesis of this book, discovering the three phases that answer these questions: (1) When did he start to think about these themes? (2) When did he write these essays (or parts of them)? (3) When did he decide that they could be edited and collected into a new book?

We currently do not have access to Primo Levi’s private archives, including his papers, letters, and drafts. Working with published material only, and with

<sup>7)</sup> MARINA MORPURGO, *Primo Levi e la memoria senza tregua*, in: *l’Unità*, 14 June 1986.

<sup>8)</sup> MANUELA CONSONNI, *L’eclisse dell’antifascismo. Resistenza, questione ebraica e cultura politica in Italia dal 1943 al 1989*, Bari 2016), chapter “Mordo Nahum”, pp. 162f.: “Nel dicembre 1959 vennero così organizzate dall’Aned due serate di colloquio tra giovani ed ex deportati: moltissimi ragazzi vi presero parte con domande assidue, interminabili, dense di aspettative. Fu in questi primi e ‘intimi’ colloqui che, per la prima volta, Primo Levi prese la parola in pubblico. Egli – il reduce, il superstite, il chimico – divenne da quell momento la voce della deportazione e dello sterminio”. ROBERT S. C. GORDON, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010*, Stanford 2012, chapter “Primo Levi”, pp. 64–85, here: p. 84: “On the national level, Levi’s Holocaust is strongly rooted in the Italian politics of postwar anti-Fascism. His anti-Fascism, his interest in individual and group resistance, reflects an Italian ‘Resistance’ paradigm, and in particular

the existing archives available in Italy and outside Italy, we can still reach an initial result, which is shown in this table:

CHAPTER	CHRONOLOGY
“La memoria dell’offesa” “The Memory of the Offense”	1982: first published (with variations) in ›Antologia del Premio Campiello‹
“La zona grigia” “The Gray Zone”	1975: Foreword to ›The Night of the Girondists‹ by Jacques Presser (the first mention of a gray zone) 1977: “The King of the Jews” (adapted as the last part of this chapter)
“La vergogna” “Shame”	1960*
“Comunicare” “Communication”	1976: “About Obscure Writing”
“Violenza inutile” “Useless Violence”	
“L’intellettuale ad Auschwitz” The Intellectual in Auschwitz	1976: “Appendice” of the school edition of ›Se questo è un uomo‹ 1978: “Jean Améry, the Philosopher-Suicide”
“Stereotipi” “Stereotypes”	1976: “Appendice” of the school edition of ›Se questo è un uomo‹
“Lettere di tedeschi” “Letters from Germans”	1961: ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ is published in West Germany 1961–1964: PL receives letters from German readers 1963–1965: PL wants to publish a book with these letters; 1966: PL starts a correspondence with Hety Schmitt-Maass.

Here I have displayed some chronological information for each chapter: the years in which each chapter as a whole, or some parts or variations of it, was first written and/or published. The situation can vary. Some chapters, such as “The Memory of the Offense,” first appeared in their entirety with variations some years before 1986. Some parts of other chapters (“The Gray Zone,” “Intellectual in Auschwitz,” and “Stereotypes”) had already been published, but they were subsequently expanded and included in the book. Still other chapters (“Com-

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an ‘Actionist’, moral vision of resistance. A great deal of his writing is collective and rooted in the narrow but intellectually influential circle of Turinese, ex-(Actionist) partisans, ex-deportees, many of them Jewish. His involvement with ANED consistently underscores the collectivity and cultural-political characteristics of his Holocaust”.

munication,” “Shame,” and “Useless Violence”) were completely unpublished but some fragments of them had appeared previously in published or unpublished pieces on the arguments from which they would develop. Most of these “previews” of the book date back to the Seventies, with a significant exception. The last chapter, “Letters from Germans,” contains materials developed during the Sixties. This is precisely the starting point of my hypothesis and I now turn to a more specific analysis of the content of this chapter.

### 3.

“Letters from Germans” retraces the story of the German translation of *‘If This Is a Man’* and of the letters that Levi received from his readers in reaction to his book. The materials I have found in some European archives – the Wiener Library in London, the Marbach Literaturarchiv, and the Wiesbaden Stadtarchiv – have allowed me to recreate this story, which, as I aim to show, is the real starting point for the reflections that led to *‘The Drowned and the Saved’*.

In November 1961 *‘Ist das ein Mensch?’* arrived in the bookshops of Western Germany. It had been translated by Heinz Riedt (1919–1997), an atypical German. Riedt was a young scholar of Italian literature in Italy during the Forties, a student of Concetto Marchesi. He became a member of the partisan group “Giustizia e Libertà” in Padua. He then returned to Germany and began living in East Berlin, working as translator of Carlo Goldoni, Ruzante, and other authors, but was officially considered a deserter from the GDR. After he received an assignment from Fischer Verlag to translate *‘If This Is a Man’* on August 13, 1959, Riedt wrote his first letter to Primo Levi. This began a lifelong correspondence, friendship, and mutual exchange that was cultural, intellectual, and linguistic, but primarily founded on intimate brotherhood: the consciousness underlying shared similar past experiences and the same love for language.<sup>9)</sup> All their correspondence during that first year was, in fact, based on language. They discussed hundreds of words and expressions, and the possibilities of rehabilitating the “acoustics of Auschwitz” in the language Levi had experienced it in.<sup>10)</sup>

<sup>9)</sup> GIOVANNI TESIO, *Ritratti critici di contemporanei. Primo Levi*, in: *Belfagor* XXXIV, 6 (30 Nov. 1979), pp. 657f.; GIORGIO CALCAGNO, *Primo Levi e i tedeschi, un carteggio sconosciuto*, in: *La Stampa*, 18 Apr. 1987; ALBERTO PAPUZZI, *Se questo è un tedesco*, in: *La Stampa*, 14 Apr. 1995, p. 17; extended version: ALBERTO PAPUZZI, *Il mondo contro*, Turin 1996, pp. 99–110; MASSIMILIANO BOSCHI, *Il ‘partner tedesco’ di Levi: Heinz Riedt, traduttore partigiano*, in: *l’Unità*, 26 Jan. 2011, p. 38.

<sup>10)</sup> DOMENICO SCARPA, *Leggere in italiano, ricopiare in inglese – Reading in Italian, recopying in English*, in: D.S. and ANN GOLDSTEIN, *In un’altra lingua – In Another Language*, Turin 2015, pp. 59–83.



One example of this was the question of the best translation for *gamella* (*mess tin*)? *Schale* and *Schassel* were the expressions actually used in Auschwitz, but German civilian readers would not be able to understand these. *Essnapf* was the expression for *mess tin* normally used by the military, but an *Essnapf* was something much more luxurious, totally different from what was used in Auschwitz. Another example is Levi's insistence on maintaining grammatical errors in some French expressions in order to stress the deportees' difficulties with language as well as the linguistic melting pot of the camp. I have taken note of all the words that Levi and Riedt discuss in their correspondence and would like to present a third example. In Levi's letter of November 25, 1959, he discussed the expression "Non sono più abbastanza vivo per sapersi sopprimere," used to end the chapter "Die drei Leute vom Labor," where he reflected on the contrast between his past life before Auschwitz and his actual condition:

I miei giorni erano lieti e tristi, ma tutti li rimpiangevo, tutti erano densi e positivi; l'avvenire mi stava davanti come una grande ricchezza. Della mia vita di allora non mi resta oggi che quanto basta per soffrire la fame e il freddo; non sono più abbastanza vivo per sapersi sopprimere.<sup>11)</sup>

My days were happy and sad, but I regretted them equally, they were all full and affirmative; the future stood before me as a great treasure. What is left today of the life of that time is only enough to make me suffer hunger and cold; I am not even alive enough to be able to kill myself.

One week before Levi's letter, Riedt had asked him about the sentence, whose meaning he could not figure out. Levi answered:

Per uccidersi, occorre un atto della volontà, una libera decisione, un momento di energia; di tutte queste cose, pochi laggiù erano ancora capaci. In realtà, i suicidi in Lager sono stati pochi, e nessuno tra i cosiddetti Muselmaennner.<sup>12)</sup>

To kill oneself, you need an act of will, a free decision, a moment of energy; down there, very few people were still able to do any of these things. In the Lager, there had been very few suicides, none of them among the Muselmen.

If this sentence by Primo Levi feels familiar, it is because it appears in the chapter "Shame" ("Vergogna") of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹:

Il suicidio è dell'uomo, non dell'animale, è cioè un atto meditato, una scelta non istintiva, non naturale, e in Lager c'erano poche occasioni di scegliere, si viveva appunto come gli animali asserviti.<sup>13)</sup>

<sup>11)</sup> LEVI, *Opere* (cit. fn. 4), vol. 1, p. 139; LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 1), vol. 1, p. 137.

<sup>12)</sup> All the translations of unpublished papers and uncollected interviews are mine, unless stated otherwise. Xeroxed copies of the correspondence between Levi and Heinz Riedt (13 Aug 1959–14 June 1960) and between Levi and Hermann Langbein are held at the Wiener Library in London, ›Papers RE Primo Levi Biography‹, "Material on individuals including correspondence, notes, interview transcripts and printed materials," 1406/2/22 HEINZ, RIEDT (single sheets of paper, unnumbered). Henceforth: "WLL", followed by the shelf mark.

<sup>13)</sup> LEVI, *Opere* (cit. fn. 4), vol. 2, p. 1049; LEVI, *The Complete Works* (cit. fn. 1), vol. 3, p. 2462.

Suicide pertains to man, not to animals. In other words it is a premeditated act, a choice that is not instinctive, not natural. And there were few opportunities for making choices in the Lager, since people lived like enslaved animals.

In ›If This Is a Man‹, Levi never talked about suicide in the Lager. The only sentence in which he evokes it is precisely this: “non sono più abbastanza vivo per sapermi sopprimere.” Here he is referring to himself and not to the phenomenon more generally. Therefore, this passage in the letter to Riedt is the first time Levi reflects on his book from an outside perspective. This is a good example of the way this correspondence worked to stimulate novel, expanded, and additional reflections on Auschwitz. The basis of ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ is to be found here, at the place where this dialogue with Germans started. And Levi’s first German interlocutor is indeed Heinz Riedt.

#### 4.

The second interlocutor was not a German but an Austrian, the historian Hermann Langbein (1912–1995), who was a political prisoner in Dachau and Auschwitz. During the Seventies, Levi sponsored the translation of Langbein’s ›Menschen in Auschwitz‹ in Italy, which was published by Mursia with a preface by Levi in 1984. But their relationship had begun much earlier. In 1960, Langbein wrote to Levi as General Secretary of the International Auschwitz Committee. As with Heinz Riedt, their correspondence is preserved at the Wiener Library in London. Langbein asked Levi to participate in an anthology on Auschwitz entitled ›Auschwitz Zeugnisse und Berichte‹, contributing one chapter of ›If This Is a Man‹:

Caro amico,

Ich wende mich heute mit einem grossen Anliegen an Sie:

Wir haben die Absicht, ein Buch über Auschwitz in deutscher Sprache herauszubringen und haben auch bereits einen Verlag für dieses Buch gefunden – die Europäische Verlagsanstalt in Frankfurt am Main. Das Buch soll im Herbst 1961 herauskommen, damit es bereits aufliegt, wenn in Frankfurt der große Auschwitz-Prozess durchgeführt wird. Da man in so kurzer Zeit unmöglich ein neues Buch schreiben kann, haben wir uns entschlossen in diesem Buch einzelne Kapitel aus der bereits bestehenden internationalen Auschwitz-Literatur so zusammenzustellen, dass sich daraus ein Gesamtbild von Auschwitz mit all seinen Lagern, Problemen und den verschiedenen Perioden ergibt.<sup>14)</sup>

<sup>14)</sup> WWL, 1406/2/15, HERMANN LANGBEIN. Neither the Ian Thomson nor the Carole Angier biographies of Levi mention this Auschwitz anthology. Langbein himself recalls the events in his essay, “Se questo è un uomo: un uomo straordinario,” in: PRIMO LEVI, *Il presente del passato. Giornate internazionali di studio*, ed. by ALBERTO CAVAGLION, Milan 1991, pp. 63–66, p. 65: “Negli anni sessanta abbiamo cercato di riunire in un’antologia ricordi che

In 1960, Levi's book had not yet been published in Germany. Levi accepted Langbein's request and suggested publishing a chapter from it, "The Last One" and the poem ›Shemà‹ in Riedt's translation. Finally, Langbein published two chapters: "The Last One" and "The Story of Ten Days."

This anthology is quoted extensively in ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. An example is the chapter by Myklos Nyiszli (1901–1956) about the *Sonderkommando*. (Nyiszli is the author of ›Médecin à Auschwitz‹, which had been published in French, translated into English in 1961 with a preface by Bruno Bettelheim, and translated into Italian in 1962.) Nyiszli's chapter in the anthology, drawn from his book, gives a general introduction to life in the *Sonderkommando* and dwells on the episode of Muhsfeld and the girl found alive in the gas chamber. This is the episode that Levi discusses in "The Gray Zone." ›Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte‹ was edited by Langbein and Ella Lingens-Reiner, whose ›Prisoners of Fear‹ had been published in 1948 – a book also quoted in ›The Drowned and the Saved‹.

The anthology was published in spring 1962, a few months after ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ The correspondence with Riedt led Levi to see his book, perhaps for the first time, from the outside. It was also now the case that the experience of Auschwitz was being told in the language of the oppressors, addressed to the compatriots of the oppressors or, more likely, their children, who experienced Nazi-Fascism without experiencing Auschwitz. In the correspondence with Langbein, which continues throughout the Seventies, we find something different. We find a Levi who interacts with German-speaking victims, Jews and non-Jews, with an international effort to preserve the historical truth, with a network of relationships that project him into complex international situations where he can exchange experiences, information, and contacts with writers, intellectuals, and even ex-SS-members who had been in charge in Auschwitz twenty years before. Levi was impressed by the printed copies of ›Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte‹, which he received by mail:

Je tiens non seulement à vous remercier, mais aussi à vous déclarer que j'ai été frappé par le sérieux et la dignité de l'ouvrage, et surtout par la précision des "cross-references" contenues dans les Notes finales. Le livre ne peut qu'honorer ses Éditeurs, et par [ré]flexe tous les camarades d'Auschwitz.<sup>15)</sup>

In this judgment you can see both Primo Levi the Auschwitz scholar, who could relate on equal terms to Langbein and dominate the Auschwitz bibliography,

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potessero spiegare Auschwitz nel modo più evidente e più impressionante a coloro che non hanno dovuto subirlo. Abbiamo pregato naturalmente anche Primo Levi di poter trarre citazioni dal suo libro *Se questo è un uomo*; ha subito risposto, accettando."

<sup>15)</sup> Primo Levi to Hermann Langbein (25 Aug. 1962) WLL, 1406/2/15.

and Primo Levi the Auschwitz “comrade” included in an international group of returnees that he feels very much a part of.

In 1959, ›Se questo è un uomo‹ was translated into English but Levi was not very satisfied with the translation, as he confided to Heinz Riedt.<sup>16</sup> In 1961 it was translated into French as ›J’étais un homme‹, literally ›I Was a Man‹, a translation that greatly disappointed and enraged him. In view of these two translations, the German translation was really a reconstitution, rephrasing, and re-delivery of the facts back into the language in which they happened, that of the oppressor. It finally reached the addressees for whom it had been written. ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ was the one translation that really satisfied Levi and gave him the chance to attract an international audience.

### 5.

As Levi notes in “Letters from Germans,” he received letters from West German readers in particular between 1961 and 1964. One of these letters was from Wolfgang Beutin (1934), who published an article in 1999 about the story of his exchange with Levi and included two of these letters in the appendix.<sup>17</sup> Beutin’s letter was the very first one that Levi received from a German reader. Beutin gave Levi’s address to a German writer, Hans Jürgen Fröhlich (1932–1986), who reviewed ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ for ›Norddeutscher Rundfunk‹ in Hamburg. Levi received the manuscript of this review and considered it “die freundlichste und umfassendste [Besprechung] die mein Buch bisher in Deutschland erworben hat” (“the most friendly and extended [review] the book has ever had in Germany”). Fröhlich also asked Levi to record a reading of “The Greek” for the station in mid-1962, a preview of the German translation of a chapter of ›The Truce‹, which Levi had sent him on May 11, 1962. Levi also exchanged letters with the German Catholic writer Albrecht Goes, whose book, translated as ›Prima dell’alba‹, was published by Einaudi in 1959.

The feedback from these readers was extremely important for Levi. He wished to have them published, as Giuseppe Mayda reported in an interview with Levi :

<sup>16</sup> Primo Levi to Heinz Riedt (31 Dec. 1959): “Le ho spedito oggi *If This Is a Man* che mi è finalmente arrivato. È stata un po’ una delusione: ci sono molti errori di stampa e non solo di stampa, e la traduzione mi pare fedele e nulla più”, WLL, 1406/2/22 HEINZ, RIEDT.

<sup>17</sup> WOLFGANG BEUTIN, *Die Revolution tritt in die Literatur*, Frankfurt 1999, chapter “Beiträge zur Literatur und Ideengeschichte von Thomas Müntzen bis Primo Levi”, pp. 147–155.

E da quando Se questo è un uomo è apparso nelle librerie tedesche, Primo Levi ha ricevuto dalla Germania decine e decine di lettere. Ha risposto a tutte: ora l'editore Einaudi intende raccoglierte e stamparle.<sup>18)</sup>

Since *If This Is a Man* appeared in German bookshops, Primo Levi has received dozens of letters from Germany. He has replied to them all. Now Einaudi wants to collect and publish them.

This was a wishful thinking on Levi's part, as Einaudi never did publish them.

In 1965, Levi sent a letter to Kurt Heinrich Wolff (1912–2003), a German-American sociologist. The letter is crucial in two ways. First, Levi suggested “Upon a Painted Ocean” as the title of the English translation of ›La tregua‹. This clear quote from Coleridge's ›Rime of the Ancient Mariner‹ is also the first appearance of Coleridge in Levi's work. Coleridge was one of the key literary inspirations for ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. Second, in closing, Levi mentioned a “German project”:

Ho visto Cases verso Natale: si è sposato di recente, perciò ha avuto altro da pensare, tuttavia mi ha fatto capire che non ha tempo né voglia di occuparsi del “progetto tedesco” e che ritiene che le lettere in questione siano troppo poche per giustificare un libro. Perciò, se Lei pensa diversamente, il campo è libero, e le lettere sono a sua disposizione.<sup>19)</sup>

I saw Cases around Christmas: he recently got married, so he had other things on his mind. However, he let me know that he has neither the time nor the desire to handle the “German project” and he also believes there are too few letters from them to become a book. So, if you think differently, the coast is clear, and the letters are completely available to you.

The “German project” was to be a book based on these letters, which would represent Levi's reflections that were different from ›If This Is a Man‹ and autonomous from it. This message was sent in late May, 1965. A few months beforehand, in January, 1965, during one of the famous Wednesday meetings at Casa Einaudi, Cesare Cases had introduced the “German project.” In a memorandum that has yet to be published, the anonymous stenographer reports:

Cases: Devo aggiungere che un tale Wolf [sic], che aveva già condotto un'indagine sul tedesco medio '50–'51, sarebbe disposto a riprendere e aggiornare il materiale utilizzando

<sup>18)</sup> GIUSEPPE MAYDA, Poeta triste dei Lager, in: *Resistenza* XII, 5 (1963). LEVI repeated this intention in a TV interview, with LUIGI SILORI, *L'approdo*. Intervista a Primo Levi, p. 1963. Full video available here: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk1j6BljBII&ebc=ANyPxKrZtw\\_Rr4JB8rYkVQrTg35f4bwXeUG5W29cJEo\\_Oknlq3xwPe9AgChWbBBrmaM3NBVbfMR9i3DyjR7P68F243pcLPKMtUQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk1j6BljBII&ebc=ANyPxKrZtw_Rr4JB8rYkVQrTg35f4bwXeUG5W29cJEo_Oknlq3xwPe9AgChWbBBrmaM3NBVbfMR9i3DyjR7P68F243pcLPKMtUQ)> [14.01.2018]; (see the sentence at minute 1:56). For partial transcript of this interview, see: *Settimo giorno* XVI, 42 (19 Oct. 1963), p. 57. However, no reference to the German letters is reported.

<sup>19)</sup> The letter was first published in *Domenica – Il Sole 24 ore* (19 Jun. 2011), intro. by SERGIO LUZZATTO, Primo Levi su un ‘oceano dipinto.’ and DOMENICO SCARPA, *Artigliato al petto da rime marinare*.

anche alcune lettere di tedeschi ricevute da Primo Levi quando *Se questo è un uomo* è uscito in Germania (*Lasciamo cadere*).<sup>20)</sup>

Cases: I should add that a certain Wolf [sic], who performed research on the average German in 1950–51, would be willing to update and publish these materials using as well some letters from German readers received by Primo Levi when *If This Is a Man* was published in Germany (Let's drop it).

Kurt Wolff fled the German racial laws in 1933, escaping to Italy and staying in Florence (studying with Ludovico Limentani) until 1939. He spoke, wrote and read fluent Italian almost all his life. He then emigrated first to the UK, then to the USA. There he worked at several universities. In 1959 he became a professor at Brandeis University. In 1963–1964, he was a Fulbright professor at the University of Rome when he came into contact with Primo Levi, probably thanks to Levi's sister Anna Maria and the sociologist Franco Ferrarotti. As one of Fröhlich's letters informs us, Levi and Wolff were committed to finding a small apartment in Florence for Fröhlich in 1964. This is the earliest proof we have so far of Levi's friendship with Wolff. At the beginning of the Fifties, Wolff was invited by Max Horkheimer to join the ›Institut für Sozialforschung‹ in Frankfurt. Wolff was assigned to lead the sociological *Gruppen-Experimente* involving the population of Germany. The report on this research was finally drafted by Wolff and Günther Roth and mimeographed at Ohio State University, although it was not published in Germany. Entitled ›German Attempts at Picturing Germany‹ and ›The American Denazification of Germany: Historical Survey and an Appraisal‹, this was what Cases had termed “research on the average German in 1950–1951” and it brought together and commented on encounters with “136 small groups held in three major localities in West Germany” focusing on topics such as “America,” “Russia,” “Germany Now,” “Democracy,” “What Germans are Like,” “Jews,” and “Nazism and World War II.”<sup>21)</sup>

There is one last very important point concerning the German letters, which I will discuss here very briefly, though it deserves a much longer discussion. In 1966, Primo Levi began a correspondence with Hety Schmitt-Maass (1918–1983), as mentioned above. One year older than Levi, she was raised in

<sup>20)</sup> Archivio Einaudi, AST, “Verbali editoriali,” folder 319, sheet 5.

<sup>21)</sup> Gruppenexperiment. Ein Studienbericht, bearbeitet von FRIEDRICH POLLOCK (= Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie), Frankfurt/M. 1955; Engl. trans. *Group Experiment and Other Writings: The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany*, ed. & trans. by ANDREW J. PERRIN & JEFFREY K. OLICK, Cambridge 2011; NICO STEHR, *Wie ich zur Soziologie kam und wo ich bin: Ein Gespräch mit Kurt H. Wolff*, in: M. RAINER LEPSIUS (ed.), *Soziologie in Deutschland und Österreich 1918–1945. Sonderheft 23: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Opladen 1981, pp. 324–346. English trans. by PAUL MALONE: <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236623035\\_Interview\\_with\\_Kurt\\_H\\_Wolff\\_English](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236623035_Interview_with_Kurt_H_Wolff_English)> [14.01.2018]; GÜNTHER ROTH, *Partisanship and Scholarship*, in: BENNETT BERGER (ed.), *Authors of Their Own Lives*, Berkeley 1990, pp. 383–409, here: p. 395.

an anti-Nazi Catholic family. After refusing to join the Nazi Association of German Girls, she was expelled from school and her father was then sent to Dachau. Her former husband had been a chemist for IG Farben, the company that owned Auschwitz III-Buna, the private camp in whose chemistry laboratory Levi was forced to work. In 1959 she settled in Wiesbaden to work for the local ministry of culture. She knew Hermann Langbein, who suggested that she read ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ and write to Levi. Schmitt-Maass wanted ›Ist das ein Mensch?‹ to be read in Western German schools. This correspondence – 110 letters, sixteen years, four languages (German, English, French, Italian) – is crucial for many reasons. First, Levi discussed many of the topics with Hety that he would later reflect on in ›The Drowned and the Saved‹. “She struggled with the same ideas that I have explored in this book,” Levi writes at the end of “Letters from Germans.” Second, she put him in contact with Jean Améry, a crucial figure for his book. Third, Hety was in contact with some ex-Nazis and IG Farben workers who had been employed at Auschwitz. She encouraged Levi to exchange letters with them. The correspondence between Levi and his supervisor at the Buna laboratory would be fictionalized in “Vanadium,” the twentieth piece in ›The Periodic Table‹. Thanks to Hety, Levi discovered Jean Améry’s books and exchanged letters with him.<sup>22)</sup> The correspondence between Levi and Schmitt-Maass is full of information concerning German cultural and social life: exchanges of books, reviews, articles, and recommendations for reading. They came to a kind of *epistolary pact*<sup>23)</sup> dedicated to *understanding the Germans* from the outside and inside, reading them, writing to them, and eventually meeting them.

<sup>22)</sup> The correspondence between HETY SCHMITT-MAASS and PRIMO LEVI is held at the Wiesbaden Stadtarchiv. I discuss this conversation between Levi and Ferdinand Meyer (his supervisor of the Buna) and its fictionalization in M. MENGONI, *Primo Levi e i tedeschi/Primo Levi and the Germans*, bilingual edition. English trans. by GAIL MCDOWELL, Turin (Einaudi) 2017 (Lezioni Primo Levi 8).

<sup>23)</sup> For the notion of the *epistolary pact*, see: JANET GURKIN ALTMAN, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Athens 1982, p. 89: “The call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world”; LIZ STANLEY, ANDREA SALTER, & HELEN DAMPIER, *The Epistolary Pact, Letterness, and the Schreiner Epistolarium*, in: *Autobiography Studies* 27(2) (Winter 2012), pp. 262–293, here: p. 279: “We very much agree with Altman about the critical and foundational role of a reader responding and that this is foundational to what a letter *is* in an ontological sense, but for us characterizing what occurs in epistolary exchanges in terms of just ‘response’ underplays the complexities involved [...] it is not just that one ‘I’ writes to another ‘I’ who responds, but that the exchange takes a strongly relational form, and for each party within a correspondence [...] Certainly there is a signatory [...] who is also the ‘writing I.’ But at the same time, letter-writing is usually about something or someone external to ‘I’ and it is also a relational form, in which ‘I’ always takes cognizance not only of ‘You’ but also what you wrote that ‘I’ am replying to, as well as telling ‘You’ something about what ‘I’ have been doing and thinking [...] Following from this, reciprocity in the sense of a tacit agreement about appropriate kinds and levels of epistolary engagement on both sides



## 6.

All this information gave me the idea of reading ›The Drowned and the Saved‹ backwards, last chapter first. This can be justified by the timeline of the writings themselves and of the topics they address. If we read this book as a result of a cultural and personal exchange with Germany and German readers dating from the Sixties and Seventies, we can appreciate that its core began to take shape when Levi was not yet an established writer. When it was published, the book did provide an answer to the French and German revisionism and negationism of the Eighties, but its genesis was much earlier. From this different perspective on the book, we can better understand how stratified the book was. There were times when the single essays were worked out and written down and there was a period when Levi gradually came up with the idea of gathering this material together as a whole. Published and unpublished evidence reveals that Levi had this impulse during the Seventies as a result of his experiences with students, of some studies he made after he retired, and of the political situation in Italy. Levi alludes to his concerns in both of the following exchanges. In 1972, he wrote to Langbein about the draft of his ›Menschen in Auschwitz‹:

Est-ce que je peux te demander à quel point est ton travail? Ce n'est pas seulement de ma part un intérêt personnel (bien que je sois impatient de connaître à travers tes pages bien des secrets du Lager), mais je pense aussi que, en Europe et tout particulièrement en Italie, un livre sur Auschwitz serait en ce moment tout-à-fait nécessaire, et tu sais bien pourquoi.<sup>24)</sup>

“I think at this moment in Europe, and most particularly in Italy, a book on Auschwitz is necessary, and you know very well why,” he wrote. Langbein did indeed know the reason. In Italy, a neo-Fascist front was growing rapidly. Italians were still reacting to a bombing at the Piazza Fontana in Milan and the murder of the anarchist Pinelli in police custody and were afraid of a possible coup d'état. At that time, Greece was under a military junta dictatorship, Spain was ruled by Francisco Franco and Portugal by Marcelo Caetano. In the summer of 1973 – that is, a year later – Primo Levi was interviewed by Marco Pennacini, then a 15-year-old student. This is the way he answered the question, “Come scriveresti oggi *Se questo è un uomo?*” (“How would you write ›If This Is a Man‹ today?”):

Lo scriverei con riferimento al fascismo di oggi che nel libro non c'è. Quando ho scritto *Se questo è un uomo* era finito, il fascismo era finito, era chiaro come il sole che era finito.

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is another core component of the epistolary pact”; EMMA GIAMMATTEI, In memoria dello scriber lettere. Il gioco dei carteggi, in: *Prospettive Settanta* 13(2–3) (1991), pp. 415–428; EMMA GIAMMATTEI, I dintorni di Croce. Tra figure e corrispondenze, Naples 2009.

<sup>24)</sup> Primo Levi to Hermann Langbein (11 April 1972) WWL, 1406/2/15, HERMANN LANGBEIN.



Quando ho scritto *Se questo è un uomo* ero convinto che meritasse la pena di documentare queste cose perché erano finite. Adesso non sono più finite.<sup>25)</sup>

I would write it related to present-day Fascism, which is not in the book. When I wrote ›*If This Is a Man*‹, it had ended. Fascism had ended. It was as clear as daylight that it had ended. When I wrote ›*If This Is a Man*‹, I was convinced that it was worth documenting those things exactly because they had ended. Now they have not ended anymore.

With this in mind, if we read the last chapter of ›*The Drowned and the Saved*‹ first, it is easier to see that this book was not a rewrite of ›*If This Is a Man*‹. It was a consequence of it, closely linked to it, but completely autonomous from it. In ›*The Drowned and the Saved*‹, Levi never uses episodes from ›*If This Is a Man*‹ to build a thesis but uses them as examples of theses he had already demonstrated or problems he had already explored. Episodes from ›*If This Is a Man*‹ never determine his argument. Thus this book was in no way a testament written in the final years of his life in an “unhappy state”<sup>26)</sup> (in the words of a very recent review), an oft-repeated pre-judgment that began with Levi’s suicide and that is both methodologically misleading and false, as I hope to have demonstrated.

“*If This Is a Man* is a book of modest dimensions but, like a nomadic creature, it has left behind a long and tangled trail for forty years now.”<sup>27)</sup> These are the opening words of “Letters from Germans.” If we read this chapter first, these words can serve as the incipit for ›*The Drowned and the Saved*‹ as a whole, a perfect incipit for a book which should also be read as a story of the 40-year journey of ›*If This Is a Man*‹ after Auschwitz, and as a map of the “tangled” geographical and intellectual “trail” it followed. Levi shaped ›*The Drowned and the Saved*‹ in a hybrid way. Histories, stories and questionings overlap and intersect, enabling readers to share in the various stages of both a journey and a reflection, an intersection of history and the topics under discussion. The book is the gradual externalization of Levi’s Lager experience as a human being and as a writer. This is only one of the many facets of the book, the one that impressed me to trace its story. ›*The Drowned and the Saved*‹ – like all novels and perhaps all masterpieces – can be read even if we do not know how it evolved, but it can only be fully understood if we do.

<sup>25)</sup> Some parts of this interview have been published in MARCO PENNACINI, Primo Levi. Dal fascismo ad Auschwitz c’era una linea diretta, in: *l’Unità*, 26 Jan. 2011, p. 36. I am quoting from the complete record, which is conserved at the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin. I am very grateful to Daniela Muraca there, who allowed me to see and use this document.

<sup>26)</sup> TIM PARKS, The Mystery of Primo Levi, in: *New York Review of Books*, 5 Nov. 2015, pp. 28–30: “It was in this unhappy state that Levi chose to return to his core material in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986)”.

<sup>27)</sup> LEVI, *Opere* (cit. fn. 4), vol. 2, p. 1124.

