



The Drowned and the Saved

Primo Levi

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The author tries to understand the rationale behind Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen. Dismissing stereotyped images of brutal Nazi torturers and helpless victims, Levi draws extensively on his own experiences to delve into the minds and motives of oppressors and oppressed alike. Describing the difficulty and shame of remembering, the limited forms of collaboration between inmates and SS goalers, the exploitation of useless violence and the plight of the intellectual, Levi writes about the issue of power, mercy and guilt, and their effects on the lives of the ordinary people who suffered so incomprehendingly.

The Drowned and the Saved Details

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Orsodimondo says

CAMPO DI ANNIENTAMENTO

A prima vista la Shoa appare materia senza grigio, senza sfumature: il bianco delle vittime, il nero dei carnefici.

Ma è anche materia delicata come un castello di carte, perché, come dimostra Primo Levi in questa breve magnifica ulteriore riflessione sull'argomento, la zona grigia esiste eccome: è quella *piega ambigua dello sterminio*, si annida in quella schiera di persone che ha subito l'ulteriore oltraggio di essere sporcata dal proprio aguzzino.

È una zona grigia, dai contorni mal definiti, che insieme separa e congiunge i due campi dei padroni e dei servi.

La vita nei Lager comportava una regressione, riconduceva a comportamenti selvaggi, trasformava anche la vittima in un essere primordiale, svincolato da ogni legame di solidarietà con i suoi simili. Una vischiosa ambiguità.

Sono rimasto particolarmente colpito da quest'opera scritta da una vittima famosa del Lager: semplice, sintetica, lucida, profonda, acuminata, senza aggressività, senza odio... quasi come se Levi fosse uomo di fede.

Ma non lo era, affatto.

Come Jean Améry, sostiene che i credenti nel Lager vivevano meglio, erano accomunati dalla forza salvifica della loro fede, *il loro universo era più vasto del nostro, più esteso nello spazio e nel tempo, soprattutto più comprensibile*.

Ma né Levi né Améry abbracciarono fede religiosa o politica.

Una voce sobria nel tono e fatta di poche parole chiare, che si alza molto alta.

Levi non si accontentò dei pur notevoli risultati della sua opera letteraria: questo libro, dopo quaranta anni di distanza da quegli avvenimenti, rimane a testimoniare il suo irriducibile tentativo di capire e di spiegare.

Aggiunge aspetti importanti a un tema immenso.

Sembra un sassolino, invece è un macigno.

Sembra un testo di passaggio, invece è basilare, imprescindibile.

Mi colpisce quanto Levi sia consapevole che l'Orrore possa ripetersi, quanto sia lucido sul fatto che per quanto fuori portata, la sua vicenda si rispecchia in vicende simili che lui stesso indica (la Cambogia è citata più volte).

Ciò che è stato possibile perpetrare ieri, potrà essere nuovamente tentato domani, potrà coinvolgere noi stessi o i nostri figli. È avvenuto, quindi può accadere di nuovo.

Era un uomo, ed è rimasto un uomo.
Anche là dove molti si sono trasformati, o persi.

I salvati, i superstiti, non sono i testimoni veri. Noi sopravvissuti siamo una minoranza anomala oltre che esigua: siamo quelli che, per loro prevaricazione o abilità o fortuna, non hanno toccato il fondo. Chi lo ha fatto, chi ha visto la Gorgone, non è tornato per raccontare, o è tornato muto; ma sono loro, i sommersi, i testimoni integrali, coloro la cui deposizione avrebbe avuto un significato generale. Loro sona la regola, noi l'eccezione.

Primo Levi.

Elalma says

Ci viene chiesto dai giovani tanto pi? spesso e tanto pi? insistentemente quanto pi? quel tempo si allontana, chi erano, di che stoffa erano fatti, i nostri "aguzzini". Il termine allude ai nostri ex-custodi delle SS, ma a mio parere ? improprio: fa pensare a individui distorti, nati male, sadici, affetti da un vizio d'origine. Invece erano fatti dell nostra stessa stoffa, erano esseri umani medi, mediamente intelligenti, mediamente malvagi: salvo eccezioni, non erano mostri, avevano il nostro stesso viso, ma erano stati educati male. Erano in massima parte gregari e funzionari rozzi e diligenti: alcuni fanaticamente convinti del verbo nazista, molti indifferenti, o paurosi di punizioni, o desiderosi di fare carriera o troppo ubbidienti Qualunque altra parola mi sembra inessenziale su questo libro cos? necessario.

Meen says

I felt compelled to read this (and other Holocaust literature) after the travesty that was the election of Donald Trump and the re-elevation of white supremacy and the entrenchment of Republican rule at all levels of government. Because it is not hyperbole to say that it **is** happening again now. I read this to try to figure some way that it might be stopped this time. But I don't think it can...

"It took place in the teeth of all forecasts... it happened that an entire civilized people... followed a buffoon... Adolf Hitler was obeyed and his praises were sung right up to the catastrophe. It happened, therefore it can happen again...

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere... It only awaits its new buffoon... to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory, and so contaminate the world. Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racist attritions."

Greta says

"The drowned and the saved" is a thoughtful, lucid reflection on the Holocaust phenomenon. Primo Levi tries to find answers for different aspects of the concentration camps. He explains the behavior of the inhabitants and of those who guard them. This book tries to explore the psychology of this tragedy, and to offer insight in the human condition. It is very different from his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (and his second book *The Reawakening*) which gave a more thorough, detailed account of his life and experiences in the Lager. Although *Survival in Auschwitz* was written several decades before this book, It should be read first, as Levi refers to it often.

Kenzabur? ?e already stated in his book *Hiroshima Notes*, that he regards the victims of the A-bomb as moralists, as 'interpreters of human nature' and that they have unique powers of observation and expression concerning what it means to be human.

This can also be applied to the victims of the Holocaust, especially to Primo Levi. In each of his essays in this book, Levi offers an intellectually stimulating viewpoint of the human condition. His writings go far beyond just a depiction of life in the Lager.

Primo Levi argues that the survivors, who were the opportunists, are not the true witnesses. The true witnesses were the one's who suffered the most but did not survive. The survivors only speak in stead of these true witnesses.

Only by listening to them, we can remain true human beings.

The only regret I have after reading this book, is that I don't understand Italian enough to read the original version. I don't know if it was only the Dutch translation, but some parts were hard to read because of unusual word-combinations and complicated sentences.

8/10

Bianca Marconero says

In questi giorni mi sono dedicata ad ultimare la lettura de 'I sommersi e i salvati' perché ci tenevo a finire entro oggi.

Questo titolo ha avuto un destino emblematico. Era quello scelto da Levi per la sua opera prima (che l'editore poi cambiò in 'se questo è un uomo') ed è stato quello definitivo della sua ultima opera.

'I sommersi e i salvati' apre e chiude il cerchio di una testimonianza letteraria e storica, si presenta come un binomio, ma si risolve in un'equivalenza, nell'idea che l'opzione in realtà non esiste.

Nella proposizione iniziale i sommersi sono coloro che l'olocausto ha travolto e, di contro, i salvati sarebbero coloro che hanno avuto la possibilità di riemergere dal campo di sterminio alla vita, per fortuna e contingenze. Ma appare chiaro dall'esperienza di Levi e dalle sue parole che da un orrore di queste proporzioni non ci si salva. I Salvati restano Sommersi, travolti dall'atrocità di un'esperienza inenarrabile, dalla responsabilità storica di narrarla comunque.

Non ci si salva, perché il nazismo applicò sulle sue vittime la disumanizzazione, un processo deliberato, e irreversibile come la memoria. La disumanizzazione era conseguenza e causa del concetto di razza inferiore, di subumanità: "non ti tratterò come un uomo, poiché non lo sei, e non lo sei, dal momento che non ti tratto come un uomo".

Tutto quello che accadeva ai prigionieri dal giorno della cattura al giorno della morte era un tassello di questo percorso. Ogni elemento che concorreva alla dignità e all'identità era semplicemente cancellato. Il nome, gli abiti, i trascorsi, la formazione, la professione, gli affetti.

E davanti a questo non c'è liberazione che tenga, le ferite inflitte al corpo e allo spirito restano e non guariscono. Anzi. Il martirio ricomincia davanti allo scetticismo degli increduli, perché nel senso comune "non possono esistere le cose di cui non è moralmente lecita l'esistenza"; le ferite si rinnovano ancora davanti alle offensive semplificazioni degli stereotipi, riassunti nelle domande 'perché non siete fuggiti all'estero? Perché non siete scappati dal campo? Perché non vi siete ribellati?' quesiti analizzati da Levi, che insinuano una responsabilità delle vittime, una loro mancanza di iniziativa o di amor proprio. E infine le ferite si rinnovano di fronte al revisionismo degli smemorati, che rivalutano per pigrizia o per comodo.

Gli anni passano e siamo sempre più distanti dall'olocausto, da questo passato scomodo, perché senza alibi, scomodo perché rivelatore di una ferocia che non riusciamo a guardare in faccia. La releghiamo al rango di eccezione storica. Il capolavoro del Diavolo. Nel rinnovare il ricordo dell'olocausto le future generazioni diventeranno incapaci perfino di commuoversi. Così come non ci commuoviamo per la mortalità infantile dell'ottocento, o per le condizioni dei contadini nel medioevo.

Non sono la comprensione e neppure le lacrime ciò che siamo tenuti a mostrare sulle tombe dei morti. Capire ci è precluso, piangere non serve. La nostra responsabilità verso il futuro non sono le lacrime.

E neppure a quel grand'uomo che fu – e che ancora è - Primo Levi interessava la pietà. Gli interessava il valore della memoria, che se tramandata permette all'individuo di difendersi.

Scriveva una ragazza tedesca, H.L., dopo la lettura di 'se questo è un uomo'

«dovrei cucirLe un vestito, come quello che indossano gli eroi delle leggende, che La protegga contro tutti i pericoli del mondo»

E commenta Levi «non mi ravviso in questa immagine, ma non gliel'ho mai scritto. Le ho risposto che questi abiti non si possono regalare: ognuno deve tesserli e cucirli per se stesso».

quindi tessiamo e cuciamo, con ciò che i sommersi ci hanno lasciato.

Andrew says

It's really too bad that the whole art-about-the-Holocaust market in the U.S. has been cornered by sentimental war-is-bad treacle in the Life Is Beautiful mode. Because Primo Levi lays it down.

What I admire most about Levi is his refusal to accept any of the easy answers that have been provided since the Shoah to "explain" the events that took place in Europe in the '30s and '40s. Instead of laying blame or bestowing forgiveness, he simply accepts historical events, and looks at how people behaved in those historical events. Most Germans, in Levi's imagination, were opportunists, quick to accept Hitler when they thought it prudent and quick to hide behind the smokescreen of ignorance in the postwar years. Furthermore, by looking for easy blames, we ignore the potential culpability that we ourselves have, and in doing so fail to prevent future genocide.

As dark as that sounds, they're still stunning essays. Necessary reading for humans looking to be better humans.

Patrick says

Primo Levi is best known today as the author of 'If This is a Man' and 'The Truce', a pair of memoirs which dealt respectively with his imprisonment in Auschwitz concentration camp and his subsequent long journey home to Italy after the liberation. Often published together, those books are (rightly) often regarded as two of the most important accounts of the holocaust and the immediate aftermath of the last war in Europe. His training and long career as a chemist inspired his writing and he also produced a collection of shorter pieces based around the Periodic Table of elements, and a couple of novels, including 'The Wrench', all of which are of a high standard.

His writing is both simple and eloquent; he isn't shy of using difficult words, but only when they suit his purpose. He is refreshingly direct in his disregard for what he considers to be overly literary mannerisms, and maintains no exceptionalism for the vocation of writing. This last fact is impressive in itself because he is such an incredible, unassuming writer: his words have an exactitude about them, and this was never more true than in this book, where they seem to possess the weight that comes with the authority of a long life and lived experience.

In form, this is a series of essays which attempt an analysis of the concentration camp system. It's not quite memoir, since there isn't much in the way of new recollection here. It doesn't have the academic rigour of a work of history or journalism, nor does it aspire to those things by presenting itself as wholly original research. It is simply the product of a man who has thought very hard about certain things and set them down in an honest and heartfelt manner. Despite the calm lucidity of the prose, I often felt while reading this that I was being drawn into a kind of special confidence between writer and reader. This is not to say that it wasn't his intention to remain as accessible as possible — only that it is essentially a very personal, very intimate rumination on the crimes of the Nazis, on his own prior published works, and on the subsequent response to those works that he experienced in later years.

The book is especially good in its opening two chapters, 'The Memory of the Offence' and 'The Grey Zone'. The first makes an attempt towards an explanation of the fallibility of human recollection, and how it affects both the survivors of the camps and those remaining Germans who later found themselves able to justify their actions with honesty and in good conscience. There's a heartbreaking story here of the family of a man who vanished in the camp system, yet whose family refused to accept this, relying instead on a set of rumours that allowed them to believe he would return home soon.

The author looks on such stories with nothing in the way of moral judgment; naturally it is shocking and repulsive that men like Rudolph Hoss might absolve themselves in their own memories, that they might in fact not be tormented by the guilt we'd expect them to feel — but these failings are depicted as entirely human, and the end product of a totalitarian state which enabled the individual to point only towards the regime when queried as to their motives. *'This scant reliability of our memory will be satisfactorily explained only when we know in what language, in what alphabet they are written, on what material, and with what pen,'* he explains, in a typically elegant sentence, adding only *'to this day we are far from this goal.'*

'The Grey Zone' dwells also on the issue of responsibility, but takes a slightly different angle. The author considers the position of a new prisoner who, on arriving at a concentration camp, considers the world in terms of white and black: the inmates (good) against the guards (bad). Their expectations are swiftly upended by the discovery that there are various levels of collaboration operating between these two parties, and that because the standard conditions of life in the camp are insufficient to sustain life, the only way to survive is

to establish a degree of power over the other people around you, and to make the best possible use of one's own privilege to stay alive. Because often the first blows to be aimed at a new arrival were not from the SS but from other inmates.

Suddenly altruism is almost inconceivable: you must look after yourself first, second, and third. This condition of competition to rise above the essential state of pain, terror and starvation is what leads to the indistinct moral states suggested by the title of the essay. It is the author's contention that power corrupts absolutely, and that in a civilised society it is essential to struggle against unearned privilege; but his point is also that the dilemma of the camps was such that if you did not leverage your own advantages, you would probably die. And there would be nothing heroic in your struggle, no victory in your death, even if you actively fought back against your oppressors — you would simply be crushed by the weight of an overwhelming opposite force.

The author is quite candid in his admission that what enabled him to survive Auschwitz was the privilege he earned by his training as a chemist. This made him more valuable than many others, and he goes so far as to admit that most of the surviving testimonies might be shaped by this privilege: *'At a distance of years one can today definitely affirm that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension.'*

One example of this comes in the form of the author's example of the Sonderkommando units within the prisoners, those who were specially selected on arrival by the SS to take on one of the worst duties imaginable: the cleaning out of the gas chambers after each period of execution. Perhaps some of those fathomed the thing to the bottom but we will never know because most of them did not occupy this post for long; though they were allocated special privileges for the time of their stay in the camp, including large amounts of alcohol, the SS were careful to ensure they too were murdered. Inevitably the first job of the next batch of Sonderkommando would be to clear the remains of the last group to perform the same task.

There is much else here I could write about, and many more stories that will shock and appall. We think — no, I think — I thought I knew most of the salient points about the horrors of the holocaust. And yes, much of this was familiar to me. But it is important to be reminded occasionally that what happened is still much worse than I could ever conceive, and that I basically cannot (by virtue of my own privilege) know what it is to live in such a world. I literally couldn't imagine, for example, a place where the ashes of murdered prisoners could be used instead of gravel to cover the paths of a local village. But that this kind of thing was inconceivable — that the atrocity could be rendered so systematic as to exceed the expectations of a citizen far removed from it all — was partly the point of the whole enterprise. That's why it is so important that we treasure books like this one, which understand exactly the most salient examples of horrors required to demonstrate to us the nature of the crime.

Pierre Menard says

L'ultimo libro di Primo Levi, uscito nel 1946, è un saggio che si propone di tracciare un bilancio di quella parte della sua vita che fu dedicata alla memoria e alla testimonianza. Se pensiamo che *Se questo è un uomo* uscì nel 1947 e che l'autore si suicidò nella sua casa di Torino l'11 aprile 1987, è facile comprendere che a questo impegno fu sempre essenziale per Levi: in alcuni punti del libro si avverte l'intento di stabilire qualche punto fermo, di chiarire una volta per tutte alcuni dubbi fondamentali, come se l'autore intuisse che la sua attività di testimone è giunta alla conclusione.

Nei vari capitoli vengono affrontati gli aspetti del “fenomeno Lager che ancora appaiono oscuri”: la natura delle testimonianze; la capacità dei sopravvissuti di ricordare e di farsi comprendere da chi non ha condiviso con loro la lotta per l’esistenza nei Lager; la zona grigia, preponderante rispetto alle dicotomie buoni-cattivi o vittime-carnefici, irrealistiche e semplificatorie; la vergogna di essere sopravvissuti; l’incomunicabilità e la babele delle lingue nei campi di concentramento; l’uso della violenza fine a se stessa (uno dei capitoli più “duri”); la vita degli intellettuali nei campi (capitolo scritto come risposta alle tesi del filosofo di origine austriaca Jean Améry, sopravvissuto ad Auschwitz, anche lui morto suicida nel 1978); la questione della presunta incapacità dei prigionieri di ribellarsi al sistema. Ovviamente Levi tratta esclusivamente dei campi di concentramento tedeschi ma stabilisce molti paralleli interessanti con Arcipelago Gulag di Solzhenitsyn e con le testimonianze di altri sopravvissuti all’universo concentrazionario sovietico.

Uno dei temi fondamentali è la memoria. Levi spiega con chiarezza che la memoria umana è “uno strumento meraviglioso, ma è fallace”: con il tempo tende a modificarsi, a rigenerarsi, talvolta a cambiare radicalmente. Se da un lato questo processo di rielaborazione della memoria può servire, a livello individuale, a far sopravvivere una speranza o a dimenticare qualcosa di sconvolgente (si legga la triste ma esemplare storia di Alberto D. e della sua famiglia, pp. 21-23), dall’altro, a livello collettivo, è estremamente pericoloso perché favorisce il ripetersi di eventi storici come l’Olocausto. Come spiega Levi a p. 11, uno dei motivi che lo hanno spinto a scrivere questo libro è l’emergere in Europa di numerosi segnali della riproposizione di idee che hanno condotto al nazismo e all’organizzazione dello Sterminio.

Il capitolo sulla zona grigia è forse fra i più interessanti del libro, perché pone l’attenzione sul fatto che a comportarsi in modo eticamente inaccettabile o addirittura criminale poteva essere chiunque, in nome dell’acquisizione di un piccolo privilegio (anche soltanto mezzo litro di zuppa in più) che elevasse al di sopra del gradino più infimo della scala umana dei Lager. Le pagine dedicate ai *Sonderkommandos* (Squadre speciali) dei prigionieri addetti ai forni crematori di Auschwitz sono un documento eccezionale per cercare di comprendere la profondità della zona grigia. Levi definisce l’invenzione dei *Sonderkommandos* “il delitto più demoniaco del nazionalsocialismo”, per il fatto che coinvolgevano nel progetto di sterminio gli stessi individui che ci si proponeva di eliminare, rendendoli complici dell’Olocausto.

Levi manifesta continuamente la preoccupazione del sopravvissuto di farsi capire, di evitare che la propria testimonianza venga fraintesa, ignorata, trascurata o obliata. E talvolta avverte un profondo senso di scoramento nel rendersi conto che più ci si allontana temporalmente dagli eventi che lui ha vissuto in prima persona più si fa fatica a capirne la trama e a coglierne il senso. Dopo quarant’anni di democrazia (forse imperfetta, ma pur sempre democrazia), in Occidente molte persone, soprattutto giovani, sembrano incapaci di rendersi conto di cosa significa vivere in uno stato totalitario e meno che mai essere rinchiusi in un campo di concentramento, senza alcuna speranza. Quella che Levi chiama la “spaccatura”, fra la realtà del Lager e la loro rappresentazione nell’immaginario collettivo, “slitta verso la semplificazione e lo stereotipo [...], come se la fame di Auschwitz fosse quella di chi ha saltato un pasto”. Esemplare il racconto che Levi fa con un sorriso (ma che a me ha fatto venire i brividi) dei consigli dell’alunno delle elementari, alla cui classe l’autore racconta la propria esperienza (p. 128). Oggi, a ormai settant’anni di distanza, credo che le parole di Levi siano ancora più vere e il problema ancora più stringente.

Nel penultimo capitolo, prima delle conclusioni, Levi riporta vari esempi della corrispondenza che intrattenne con tedeschi e tedesche a seguito della pubblicazione in Germania di *Se questo è un uomo* (nel 1961). Levi non fa mistero della sua diffidenza e delle sue difficoltà ad interagire con queste persone, “quelli che avevano creduto, che non credendo avevano taciuto, che non avevano avuto il gracile coraggio di guardarci negli occhi, di gettarci un pezzo di pane, di mormorare una parola umana”. Con alcuni suoi corrispondenti tedeschi Levi riesce però a imbastire un dialogo lungo e complesso, in particolare con Hety S., con la quale costruisce una sorta di amicizia epistolare.

Completano il testo una prefazione di Tzvetan Todorov che si concentra sul tema “quanto accaduto potrebbe ripetersi, in altre forme” e stabilisce alcuni interessanti paralleli con eventi molto più recenti (e successivi alla morte di Levi), una postfazione di Walter Barberis dedicata a Primo Levi nella veste di testimone e una nota bio-bibliografica di Ernesto Ferrero. Sarebbe davvero auspicabile che le giovani generazioni venissero invitate alla lettura di questo libro così fondamentale nel corso delle scuole medie superiori (forse, con la guida giusta, anche nelle inferiori): sia per capire che cosa è accaduto all’umanità in quel periodo storico, sia per imparare a difendersi da quello che potrebbe accadere in qualsiasi periodo storico, anche in quello odierno. Penso inoltre che la prosa di Levi, così limpida, asciutta ed essenziale, potrebbe anche costituire un buon antidoto contro gli eccessi e gli abusi retorici che tanti scrittori e giornalisti italiani non si peritano di commettere.

Consigliato a chi vuole capire senza affidarsi a comodi stereotipi.

Sconsigliato a coloro che pensano che certe cose non accadranno mai più... no, mi sbaglio: è più che consigliato anche per loro!

Michael says

A lucid and thoughtful examination of lingering questions about the meanings of the Holocaust 40 years after Levi survived his internment at Auschwitz, with the focus more on understanding than blame. He is well known for his compelling narrative of his experiences in "Survival in Auschwitz" and for his excellent account of the aftermath and long interlude in Russian hands in "The Reawakening".

Here, in his last book before he died, he strives to make sense of it all in a series of penetrating essays organized around eight themes. Step by step, he shares his own personal and common sense-based thinking on tough issues without recourse to emotional invocations or scholarly inquisitions along philosophical or theological lines. His logical progressions cut to the heart of what it means to be human and the potential sources of distortion from such a distinction. His chapters cover: the fallibility of memory of the perpetrators and the German people who let it happen; the levels of culpability for the many in the "gray zone" of responsibility; the sources of the sense of shame felt by the victims; the barriers to understanding and communication between the lower class Germans who ran the camp and the polyglot mixture of Jews and political prisoners; the origins and destructiveness of the pervasive "useless" violence employed on the interned; the special hell experienced by intellectuals in the camp; answers to stereotyped thinking in naive questions on why so few Jews escaped or rebelled; and reflections on the letters he exchanged over the years with German readers of Levi's books.

I don't believe the concept of evil was raised anywhere in the book. In his looking for more simply human origins of destructiveness, I was relieved to glean some hope about our ability to prevent more such genocides happening in the future.

Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says

I have read this book and so far I am very happy. I loved how candid Primo Levi expressed his views. He hid

his thoughts on what he thinks about the mental ability of the witnesses who saw, heard, and were tortured by Hitler in his campaign to eliminate all the Jews from Germany.

He raised an issue which has been the concern of many in the legal profession and from the law enforcement agencies. Witness protection has been a matter that most legal systems have been trying to achieve both at the national and international levels. Most court cases will fail if witnesses do not attend. Some don't choose not to attend, but are coerced by the suspects either through intimidation or threats.

Other witnesses may attend but the question is whether they can remember what happened to them. When Mr. Levi says that no witnesses can give the same account about what happened, he is right. Yes, it does not matter how recent the events are. It is simply impossible.

The other fallacy that he delves in concerns the tactics by the defence of coaching the suspects to selectively forget specific painful events. Suspects will easily lie in court by stating that they have either forgotten or do not know what happened. Lastly, the author was very open about his thoughts on suicide. He is reported to have committed suicide himself, but the jury is still out as to whether he indeed killed himself. All in all, it was a good book.

Lobstergirl says

Levi's last book is about several things:

- the necessity of witnessing to what happened in the *Lager* (camps), even though memory is fallible. Witnessing - telling the story - is not wholly possible, because those who have the truest vision did not survive. They reached bottom, and never came back.
- the moral structure of the *Lager* - the gray zone in which some prisoners collaborated with the guards, which improved their position slightly and also meant they would have to inflict suffering on other prisoners. The guards picked prisoners for this purpose. It was part of the strategy of making the victims complicit in the victimizing.
- understanding shame, which for Levi is the feeling of guilt during imprisonment in the camp, and afterward. It is "the shame which the just man experiences when confronted by a crime committed by another, and he feels remorse because of its existence, because of its having been irrevocably introduced into the world of existing things, and because his will has proven nonexistent or feeble and was incapable of putting up a good defense." (The quote is from Levi's book *The Awakening*.) He sees shame written on the faces of the Russian soldiers who liberate his camp. Germans, he says, never knew shame. (In this instance. I don't think he means throughout all history.)
- trying to figure out why Germans allowed this to happen. This is probably impossible, but Levi tries when he has *Survival in Auschwitz* translated into German and published in Germany. He was extremely concerned that important things would be lost in translation, and that a German translator might fudge. He needn't have worried; his German translator turned out to be a lovely person who was entirely sympathetic both to the Holocaust's victims, and to the need to get every word right. They became friends, and when the German publisher asked Levi to write a preface to the edition, he asked that his thank you letter to the translator be used instead. ("I never harbored hatred for the German people. And if I had felt that way, I would be cured of it after having known you.") Though Levi didn't hate the Germans, nor did he understand them, as he

explained. This preface induced about forty Germans to write him letters attempting to explain themselves as a people. Some excerpts of these form the book's last chapter.

He addresses why suicide was much more common after survivors were liberated, than in the *Lager*. Note: it is not at all clear that Levi himself committed suicide. There's evidence that he might have, but also evidence that he might not. There are also chapters on "useless violence" (completely gratuitous violence) and communicating in the camps. It was incredibly difficult to survive if you didn't understand any language being spoken and had no one who could help you understand. Knowing some extremely rudimentary German could help you get an extra bread ration. Knowing what a guard was yelling at you might save your life. The prisoners who were unable to communicate and understand usually died quickly.

Pat says

Chissà quanta forza c'è voluta. Chissà quanta sofferenza è costata la stesura di questo saggio a Primo Levi. È un'analisi feroce, acuta, lucida, obiettiva. È un bisturi che lavora con precisione terrificante. Lavora sugli aguzzini e sulle vittime. Lavora sulla "zona grigia" composta di oppressi fatti oppressori, lavora su chi sapeva e ha taciuto, su chi vedeva e s'è finto cieco. Lavora sul senso di colpa del "salvato" cui pesa come macigno la domanda "perché io e non un altro?". Un'indagine che scava nel profondo del genere umano capace di "costruire una mole infinita di dolore". Lettura drammatica, spesso, potente. Non si trovano le parole per dare una dimensione allo scritto di Levi. Quei "salvati" sono "sommersi scampati". Per onorare i sommersi, per dare un senso al dolore dei salvati è nostro dovere ricordare, tramandare le loro testimonianze. È nostro dovere per loro, per noi e per chi sarà dopo di noi. Non possiamo e non dobbiamo dimenticare. Perché la vittoria del male avverrà il giorno in cui ciò che è stato sarà dimenticato.

"È avvenuto, quindi può accadere di nuovo: questo è il nocciolo di quanto abbiamo da dire".

Paul Bryant says

An unrelentingly grim series of eight essays about the concentration camp experience, recommended only for true pessimists and those who think that Primo Levi is one of the very greatest writers about the Holocaust, which I do.

One thing Primo Levi does for us is complicate things. He explains :

Without profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema.

However, you don't have to go far to discover that what has been presented to you in the official rhetoric as being straightforward is not so – the war isn't winnable, the peace isn't with honour, the enemy aren't terrorists, they had no weapons of mass destruction, they don't hate us because we love freedom. These are simplifying, comforting untruths.

In the first essay, "The Memory of the Offense", he notes the optimistic self-generated rumours of the prisoners in the camps - the war will be over in two weeks, there will be no more selections, Polish partisans will liberate the camp soon – and sets them beside the similarly comforting lies of the surviving perpetrators – only following orders, we knew nothing about this, I was not a Nazi.

For Levi, the simple statement is usually self-deluding. This is true for the prisoners of the Nazis as well as the Nazis.

The network of human relationships inside the lagers (camps) was not simple – it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and perpetrators.

...

The privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population, but they represent a potent majority among the survivors

And the "privileged" prisoners were ones who managed, by one means or another, to get better food rations than the others. Ordinary prisoners got 800 calories a day and died of malnutrition and disease.

This is a shocking thing – most of the survivors, he is saying, were, in some way, compromised.

Levi reminds us again that one of the central lessons of the Third Reich is the seemingly infinite compromisability of human beings. You can get them to do almost anything, just ask a sonderkommando.

Sandra says

"Veramente si è indotti a pensare che, nel Terzo Reich, la scelta migliore, la scelta imposta dall'alto, fosse quella che comportava la massima afflizione, il massimo spreco di di sofferenza fisica e morale. Il nemico non doveva soltanto morire, ma morire nel tormento".

E' un dovere leggere e rileggere le parole lucide e pacate di Primo Levi, e prestare la massima attenzione al suo ammonimento: " è avvenuto, quindi può accadere di nuovo".

Ginny_1807 says

Riletto per non dimenticare.

Crudeltà e orrori inimmaginabili vengono descritti in uno stile analitico, piano e pacato che rende il resoconto delle vicende vissute dall'autore e le sue considerazioni in merito ancora più toccanti, terribili e sconvolgenti.

Bellissimo.

Greta says

The Drowned and the Saved

"The drowned and the saved" is a thoughtful, lucid reflection on the Holocaust phenomenon.

Primo Levi tries to find answers for different aspects of the concentration camps. He explains the behavior of the inhabitants and of those who guard them.

This book tries to explore the psychology of this tragedy, and to offer insight in the human condition.

It is very different from his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* (and his second book *The Reawakening*) which gave a more thorough, detailed account of his life and experiences in the Lager. Although *Survival in Auschwitz* was written several decades before this book, It should be read first, as Levi refers to it often.

Kenzabur? ?e already stated in his book *Hiroshima Notes*, that he regards the victims of the A-bomb as moralists, as 'interpreters of human nature' and that they have unique powers of observation and expression concerning what it means to be human.

This can also be applied to the victims of the Holocaust, especially to Primo Levi.

In each of his essays in this book, Levi offers an intellectually stimulating viewpoint of the human condition. His writings go far beyond just a depiction of life in the Lager.

Primo Levi argues that the survivors, who were the opportunists, are not the true witnesses. The true witnesses were the one's who suffered the most but did not survive. The survivors only speak in stead of these true witnesses.

Only by listening to them, we can remain true human beings.

The only regret I have after reading this book, is that I don't understand Italian enough to read the original version. I don't know if it was the Dutch translation, but some parts were hard to read because of unusual word-combinations and complicated sentences.

8/10

Gattalucy says

lettura perenne

Questo libro non lo finirò mai.

Perchè non riesco a leggerlo dall'inizio alla fine, ma sta lì, e ogni tanto lo apro a caso, e ogni pagina è densa di lacrime, di orrore, di pensieri, e di lucida analisi sull'uomo e le sue contraddizioni.

Sta lì, sul comodino, a ricordarmi sempre il valore della libertà, che non si baratta con "qualcosa di buono fatto comunque" o con qualche riforma promessa, rischio di cui non siamo immuni anche oggi.

Sta lì, come un'arma contro chi pensa di stuprare una donna solo perchè ebrea, come una croce di frassino contro i vampiri dell'intelligenza che ancora popolano le nostre città, e pretendono di tornare come "albe dorate" a promettere ordine e sicurezza.

Alcuni miei alunni sono oggi sul *Treno della Memoria*.

So che l'hanno letto.

E questo mi fa ben sperare .

Aubrey says

*This **desire** for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself, which is a working hypothesis, useful as long as it is recognized as such and not mistaken for reality.*

Here, as with other phenomena, we are dealing with a paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor, and we are anxious to be clear: both are in the same trap, but it is the oppressor, and [they] alone, who has prepared it and activated it, and if [they] suffer[] from this, it is right that [they] should suffer; and it is iniquitous that the victim should suffer from it, as [they do] indeed suffer from it, even at a distance of decades.

Every victim is to be mourned, and every survivor is to be helped and pitied, but not all their acts should be set forth as examples.

I've wasted a lot of time over the years pandering to people who were around for the entertainment rather than the maturation. For too long, I stagnated in the idea that I not only had to say what I believed, but also had to convince every single one of my audience to feel the same way, not on subjects of favorite food or most disliked pop star but whether or not certain sectors of the population should be afforded the same human treatment as the artificial norm. I've gotten past that for the most part, and coming to this work when I did simply confirmed my suspicion of those who decry Tumblr as a hive mind while simultaneously depending on others to build a better future, for the words Primo Levi penned in 1986 and most assuredly cogitated in a far earlier period can confirm everything I've argued for and lost friends over and eventually alienated the silent masses with. The work's not perfect, as in addition to the usual ableist mumbo jumbo there's the mystical way in which generally worded arguments somehow pass over various nationalities and socioeconomic systems as many a European-birthed morality bulwark does, but Levi is not a saint, and the skeleton he built will always need the flesh that has been brought forth between now and the time he put forth his incalculably valuable philosophy. It is telling, however, that the most popular quote of this work is when he speaks of being a nonbeliever. Out of context as it is, I don't think the majority of them liking it knows what it means.

[I]t was not a matter of thrift but a precise intent to humiliate.

Privilege, by definition, defends and protects privilege.

The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unfailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent. It is the duty of [the] righteous [] to make war on all undeserved privilege, but one must not forget that this is a war without end.

The institution represented an attempt to shift onto others—specifically, the victims—the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.

Similar to Black Reconstruction in America, the quotes derived, as well as text itself, is worth far more than anything I have to say about it. Similarly as well to how BR lays out history as a testament to the nativity that proclaims time equals progress, The Drowned and the Saved identifies the kernels of calamity lying in the bosom of complacent types who expect the likes of Antifa and co. to stem the bloody tides and carry them in a polite and apolitical fashion towards a new and more ethical future. If everyone practiced as exactly a self-reflexive gaze as Levi puts down in these pages, there would be no need to go to war after the genocide had already begun. However, little by little, drop by drop, the slaughter of mentally ill people and poor people and trans people and occupied people paves the way towards the normalization of speech that calls for such violence against populations which turns into books, which turns into platforms, which turn into political victories, which turn into reality. All it takes is an old ingrained prejudice, lax public integrity, a socioeconomic and/or political opportunity (usually a crisis), and a can do attitude when it comes to the propaganda and the jargon and the us vs them reasoning that uses the excuse of natural selection as a means to a future, and suddenly no one is safe and everyone is complicit. You can't tell me hardworking and morally upright adults will prevent this from happening, as it's hardworking adults who dehumanize on a small scale and, when this is pointed out, mewl and puke and sea lion their way out, refusing to believe another's pain is more important than their pride. You can't tell me someone who fails on such a small level as this will do any better on the larger and more genocidal ones. Levi doesn't render his foreshadowing completely intersectional, but his bias does not irredeemably compromise his truth.

One must benefit in order to feel beneficent, and feeling beneficent is gratifying even for a corrupt satrap.

It is naive, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims: on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lacking a political or moral armature.

I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.

This is my first favorite and five star of 2018, which is a fucking shame because this book is terrifying. People want the world to survive Trump as US president, but they want it as a either a slow abolishment of hate without them lifting a finger, or a WWII where the villains are concretely villains and there's character development to be had by the good guys. The world is filled with children with gavels and guards and guns, and I'm not talking about the mentally disabled adults who will be the first to be shot down if Hitler's trajectory is to be studied as a model. In the words of Ursula Hegi, one will adapt and adapt and adapt by saying this is too controversial, this is too violent, this is too hasty, this is too presumptive, this is too soon, this is not enough, this is my president, this is my boss, this is my friend, until there is nothing left, as if all of this hadn't happened before. At this stage, it will happen again. It is, for all intents and purposes, gift wrapped.

I frequently noticed in some of my companions (sometimes even in myself) a curious phenomenon: the ambition of a "job well done" is so deeply rooted as to compel one "to do

well" even enemy jobs, harmful to your people and your side, so that a conscious effort is necessary to do them "badly."

[T]hey realized that testimony was an act of war against fascism.

Obtaining a passport and entry visa is much easier than it was then, so why aren't we going? Why aren't we leaving our country? Why aren't we fleeing "before"?

Luis Zamarro Fraile says

Five deep 5 stars...

Primo Levi became a thinker and an intellectual after his experience as lager prisoner. He survived the Holocaust, but never acknowledged the reason why. He defined him self as a non believer and died the same way. Ironically, His books prove that he was wrong, because after all this time, the reason of his survival is undeniable: He lived to become a witness and give testimony to all of us, so we can learn, so we can avoid evilness and try to be tolerant, respectful and peaceful, because otherwise we could only be instrument of our own destruction...

LZM

Wanda says

How in the world do I rate a book like this? I guess its four stars, because I didn't find it to be quite as engaging as Night or Man's Search for Meaning, but it was still an un-put-down-able book. I'll be reading more of Levi's work, without a doubt. The voices of these Holocaust survivors become ever more important as attrition takes them from us and their story becomes doubted by some.

The Drowned and the Saved is a powerful metaphor for the concentration camp experience. Those who emerged became the Saved, those who perished became the Drowned. As in the two books that I referenced above, Levi tells us that those who appear to be the Saved had to do some brutal things to get that status. He goes so far as to say that all the good people were among the Drowned. So how was he to feel about himself, supposedly one of the elect? His death in 1987 was ambiguous—officially ruled as a suicide, but it may have been an accident.

He says that the Saved were the prisoners who didn't actually touch bottom while in the camps. It seems that he may have hit bottom well after the fact.
