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CHARACTER MAP

Emilia Levi

3-year-old girl, no relation of Primo Levi. Represents innocence of prisoners.

Jewish girl on train

Schlome

Polish Jew who advises Primo Levi.

Prisoner

Steinlauf

WWI veteran who maintains personal cleanliness as a sign of lack of consent.

Prisoner

Dr Pannwitz

A racist and a head of the Chemical Kommando; regards Primo Levi as less than human.

German who selects lab workers

Alex

German Kapo; racist; leader of the Chemical Kommando.

Prisoner, works in lab

Alfred L.

Former industrialist who becomes a prominent in the Chemical Kommando.

Prisoner, works in lab

Primo Levi

Author and narrator; Italian Jew who is captured and imprisoned in Auschwitz; survives for 11 months before being freed. His isolation is highlighted by his brief relationships with others, who are important in his reflections on human nature rather than as friends.

Null Achtzehn

A musselman known only by the last three digits of the number tattooed on his arm: 018.

Prisoner

Alberto

Primo Levi's best friend in Auschwitz. Perishes in the final march from Auschwitz.

Prisoner

Lorenzo

Non-Jewish Italian civilian worker at Buna; shares his rations with Primo Levi and Alberto.

Worker, not prisoner

Elias Lindzen

Small yet strong; prospers in Auschwitz because he lives without purpose.

Henri

Receives protection because others feel sorry for him.

Prisoner

Prisoner

INTRODUCTION

If This is a Man is Primo Levi's memoir of the eleven months he spent as a prisoner in Auschwitz during World War II. It is a harrowing story of survival under the most barbaric conditions. The largest of the extermination camps set up by Nazi Germany during World War II, Auschwitz has come to be seen as a symbol for the Holocaust at large and for the very worst qualities of humanity – in other words, as the ultimate manifestation and locus of racism, hatred, repression and humiliation. To be at Auschwitz was to be, as Levi writes, 'on the bottom'. Those not immediately sent to the gas chambers were used for slave labour until they died of exhaustion, hunger or exposure to the cold; many more were 'selected' for the gas chambers once they were deemed no longer 'useful'. Men and women had to survive in the most crowded, inhospitable conditions, on starvation rations of bread and watery soup that would only keep people alive for weeks or months. Yet some people did survive Auschwitz, albeit an infinitesimal portion of those sent there. Likening the camp to a 'gigantic biological and social experiment', Levi describes for us the fundamental aspects of what was required to live longer than the norm – including the great price that had to be paid from one's personal morality or concept of self.

About Primo Levi

Primo Levi (1919-1987) was born in Turin, Italy, and lived his life there, except for his wartime experiences. In December 1943, Levi was fighting as a partisan against the recently organised Italian Fascist Republic when he was captured and sent to a detention camp. German forces had occupied northern Italy since Mussolini was deposed earlier that year, and were sending Jewish prisoners to Auschwitz, Levi among them. From February 1944 until the liberation of the camp by the Red Army in January 1945, he managed to stay alive, partly through resilience and a burning desire to bear witness to the camp's horrors, but mostly through an extraordinary series of lucky occurrences. Before his untimely death at the age of sixty-eight (many people think he committed suicide), Levi became one of the outstanding and eloquent voices not just of Holocaust writers, but also of world literature.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The Holocaust

To understand the importance of Primo Levi's story, one must properly appreciate the enormity of the crime committed against European Jewry by Nazi Germany and some of its allies. This crime has come to be known as the Holocaust, or (in Hebrew) the Shoah. Jews were not the only targets of the Nazis, but the brunt of the Nazis' racism and the systematised murder to which it gave birth fell on them. By the time Primo Levi was imprisoned in Auschwitz, the overwhelming majority of its inmates were Jewish. He writes as a Jew among Jews, a people who were being destroyed for no other reason than their Jewish identity.¹

The Emergence of Nazi Germany

The roots of the Holocaust are deep in European history. A full examination would have to go back a considerable time, before the formation of the Nazi party or its predecessors, and take account of the phenomenon that was nineteenth-century anti-Semitism. We do not have the space for such an investigation and so will begin the history with Adolph Hitler's ascent to the chancellorship of Germany on 31 January 1933. In the last election before this event, the Nazis had only received 33 per cent of the vote, more than any other party but not enough to rule in their own right. Coalition after coalition failed, leading President Paul von Hindenburg to appoint Hitler chancellor, a move he had been reluctant to make for fear that Hitler would try to become a dictator – a fear that was realised within the year. The story of how Hitler and his subordinates circumvented the nascent laws of German democracy is fascinating, but is not our concern here. It should be noted, however, that in the last free German election, held in March 1933 (*after* Hitler had already gained power), the party still did not achieve a majority.

Anti-Semitism as Public Policy

The concentration camp was not invented by the Nazis (that nefarious distinction belongs to the British, during the Boer War of 1899-1902), but it

¹ My primary source for this history is the very detailed Holocaust Chronology (more than 200,000 words) online at the website of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and archive in Jerusalem: <http://www.yad-vashem.org.il>

was part of the Nazis' governing philosophy from the start. The first camp, Dachau, was operating by the end of March 1933; its first inmates were communists, homosexuals, and members of the main opposition party (the Social-Democrats). Anti-Semitism had been a foundational element of the Nazi party platform ever since its inception in the early 1920s, not a 'hidden agenda' but an announced policy. The early years of Nazi rule saw the pursuit of a separation philosophy. German Jews had been among the most assimilated in Europe; the Nazis determined to reverse this trend by excluding Jews from mainstream German life. A boycott against Jewish businesses on 1 April 1933 was the first nationwide discriminatory action taken against Jews. New laws required membership in a 'chamber' to take part in certain professions, but denied Jews this membership. Jewish people were not permitted to serve in the German Army (Wehrmacht), though many had fought for their nation in World War I. A status quo was established that encouraged open discrimination against Jews by the German public. Jewish emigration was encouraged and later coerced.

The Nuremberg Laws, first adopted in September 1935, put the separation philosophy into law: Jews were deprived of the right to vote and were fired from civil service positions; they were forbidden to marry people of 'German blood'; elaborate classifications of degrees of 'Jewishness' were established (depending on how many of a person's grandparents were Jewish), each with its own rights and proscriptions. The Nuremberg Laws were revised thirteen times between their inception and July 1943.² In 1938 about two thousand so-called 'asocial' Jews, who had committed crimes as minor as parking violations, were sent to concentration camps. Further anti-Jewish legislation restricted men and women to fewer and fewer occupations, limiting them to working only in their residential areas. Meanwhile, the increasing numbers of unemployed Jews were subject to arrest, and only those who promised to leave Germany could gain release. Tens of thousands of non-German Jews, from Eastern Europe, were deported. These and others who wanted to leave often found themselves without a country willing to accept them. The great powers of the free world did little to protect these refugees.

² In the late thirties Hungary, Romania and Italy (under the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini) also enacted anti-Jewish legislation based on that of the Nazis.

Kristallnacht

In November 1938 a pogrom was launched against Jews in Germany and Austria (which had recently been incorporated into the greater 'Reich'). It became known as *Kristallnacht* – the night of broken glass. The government pretended that it was a spontaneous reaction by a German public angered by the assassination of a Nazi official by a young Polish Jew. In truth, it had been planned for some time, and was organised by Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda. Nevertheless, ordinary Germans took part in the violence. Virtually all the synagogues in Germany, more than a thousand, were destroyed, as were Jewish homes and businesses. Approximately one hundred Jews were murdered, while tens of thousands of prominent Jews, selected from prepared lists, were sent to concentration camps and had their property confiscated.

World War II

With the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 instigating World War II, the Nazi campaign against Jews moved to Eastern Europe. In accordance with the secret non-aggression treaty Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a month before, the two countries divided the quickly conquered nation between them. The Germans' 'section' contained about two million Jews; immediately plans were under way to deport Jews from parts set aside for annexation into the Reich and to concentrate them in ghettos in cities and large towns by railway lines. A Jewish council, called a *Judenrat*, was established to administer each ghetto. Jewish property and businesses were expropriated. These ghettos became increasingly crowded as more and more Jews from the surrounding countryside were forced into them; for example, the Lodz ghetto was only four square kilometres (of which only two and a half were built up), yet 164,000 Jews were made to inhabit it. After the Warsaw ghetto (the largest of the ghettos) was sealed, there were seven people to a room. The Germans used extreme violence and terror to achieve their aims, placing increasingly severe demands on the *Judenrats* to supply money and forced labour – with brutal consequences should they fail.

After quick victories against Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France in 1940, Germany became confident that it and its allies would

conquer all of Europe.³ The Nazi high command started thinking seriously about what solution they could employ concerning European Jewry as a whole. For a brief period the idea was to deport all Jews to an African colony, most likely Madagascar, but this was rejected as unworkable. Invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia were successfully undertaken in 1941, and June of that year saw the beginning of the largest military offensive in history, the invasion of the Soviet Union.⁴

In this phase of the war, German military policy sank to unprecedented depths of barbarity. Special units, called *Einsatzkommandos* ('prompt employment units'), were formed specifically to murder elements of the Soviet population – Communist party functionaries at all levels, political 'extremists' and prisoners of war, among others – as the Wehrmacht proceeded towards Moscow. Jews were considered to be extremists, hence the order included all Jews. These murders were carried out in numerous ways, but mostly by machine gun: large numbers of people were shot next to trenches or ravines that would collect the bodies. Children, women, the elderly – no-one was spared, except some of the healthy men, who were sent to labour camps that the Germans established throughout the conquered territories. Sites like Babi Yar in the Ukraine, Ponary in Lithuania and Rumbuli in Latvia witnessed the murder in this fashion of hundreds of thousands of people.

Einsatzkommandos were aided frequently and voluntarily by local police, militias and nationalist political parties in the Ukraine and in the Baltic. Mobs, often comprised of peasants from the surrounding countryside but led by local police, were let loose on the Jewish populations of cities to rape and butcher as they pleased. Romania massacred Jews both in its own country and wherever its army fought with the Wehrmacht. As many as two hundred thousand Bessarabian Jews were murdered by Romanians in July and August 1941. Hungary, another German ally, also took part in the murder of tens of thousands of (non-Hungarian) Jews during the invasion of the Soviet Union, though the mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz would not occur until 1944. By the time Germany and its allies began their retreat from the Soviet Union in the spring of 1943, 1.25 million Jews had been murdered by *Einsatzkommandos* and their collaborators.

³ Germany's European allies would eventually include Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Croatia.

⁴ This invasion, of course, broke Germany's non-aggression treaty with the Soviets.

Extermination Camps

As we have seen, the first German concentration camps were established well before the war. Once the war began, though, the need to increase the number of camps led to the construction of a network. The major extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*) – Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka – were all in Poland. Reinhard Heydrich, the SS⁵ *Obergruppenführer*, was assigned the task of devising a ‘final solution’ to the question of what to do with European Jewry. He convened the Wannsee Conference on 20 January 1942, a remarkably short meeting in which it was decided that the Jewish populations of Europe under Nazi control, estimated to be eleven million in total (using the definitions established by the Nuremberg laws), would be deported to the newly built camps in Poland where they would be ‘treated accordingly’. The words ‘exterminate’, ‘execute’ or ‘murder’ were not used officially, but the plan was to kill immediately all Jews not suitable for work – the aged, children, the sick and most women – retaining the rest for forced labour. These last would be worked to death or exterminated when they could no longer work.

As effective as the Einsatzkommandos were in the Soviet Union, such wholesale murder was not considered feasible in other parts of Europe where Germans could not count on the cooperation of local populations. Hence the extermination camp, where murder could be committed en masse behind ‘closed doors’, quietly, efficiently and with a minimum of involvement from outsiders. Having been home to the largest population of Jews before the war, Poland was chosen as the site of Jewish extermination. The task of implementing the ‘final solution’ was given to SS leader Heinrich Himmler.

The ‘liquidation’ of the ghettos throughout Poland and the other conquered territories began in early 1942 and was carried out in a piecemeal fashion. The ghetto Judenrat would be ordered to fill human quotas for transport in sealed freight cars directly from the ghetto to the *Lager* (German for camp), where most were murdered immediately. Great attention was paid to make sure nothing went wrong – that there was not too much congestion at the entry of the camps, that no-one was unaccounted for. Jews were transported also from the many smaller labour

⁵ *Schutzstaffel* (SS) – an elite military unit of the Nazi Party.

camps and, starting in March 1942, from Western Europe, beginning with collaborationist (Vichy) France.⁶ Almost until the end of the war Jews were deported from nearly all of the countries over which Germany held dominion, including former allies like Italy and Hungary which the Germans occupied in 1943 and 1944.

There were exceptions to the wholesale deportation of European Jews. In occupied Denmark (a stark contrast to countries like the Ukraine and Lithuania) nearly the entire population mobilised to save more than seven thousand Jews, who were covertly ferried to neutral Sweden as Germans began their arrests in October 1943. Bulgaria never sent more than the fifty thousand Jews of Sofia that its German ally demanded – though it did send tens of thousands from territories it occupied in Thrace and Macedonia. There were innumerable examples from all parts of the Nazi dominion of individual heroism, of non-Jews risking their lives to hide or assist Jews.

There was a Jewish resistance to the Holocaust, just as there was political resistance in all of the occupied countries. Young Jews who had escaped from the ghettos formed partisan groups in the forests of Eastern Europe. There were uprisings in ghettos at Lachva, Tuczyn, Bialystok, Vilna, and most famously at Warsaw, the largest of the Jewish ghettos, where scarcely armed men and women heroically engaged an enormous German force for more than a month (April-May 1943). In the years before this final assault, the Jewish Fighting Organisation (ZOB) was formed in the Warsaw ghetto; this network organised resistance there and throughout other ghettos, even penetrating the camps. There were also revolts in Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz.

Yet the extermination camp, as a force for implementing genocide, was unstoppable. For example, in the first two months of operation at Sobibor (May-June 1942), a camp much smaller than Auschwitz, one hundred thousand Jews were murdered; eighty thousand Jews were murdered at Belzec in its first four weeks (March-April 1942).

The End of the War

Only the war's end interfered with the 'final solution'. Even when in decline, Germany continued the butchery, and indeed increased the pace. After its devastating loss at the pivotal battle of Stalingrad, Germany began

⁶ The Vichy government established anti-Jewish laws of its own, sometimes more severe than in Germany, almost immediately after France was conquered in 1940.