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Bearing the Imprint: Primo Levi (1919 - 1987)

We fought with all our strength to prevent the arrival of winter. We clung to all the warm hours, at every dusk we tried to keep the sun in the sky for a little longer, but it was all in vain. Yesterday evening the sun went down irrevocably behind a confusion of dirty clouds, chimney stacks and wires, and today it is winter . . . We know what it means because we were here last winter; and the others will soon learn. It means that in the course of these months, from October till April, seven out of 10 of us will die . . . Strange how, in some way, one always has the impression of being fortunate, how some chance happening, perhaps infinitesimal, stops us crossing the threshold of despair and allows us to live.

Those words are taken from Primo Levi's classic account, *If This Is A Man*, of the year he endured as a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz. Of all the accounts of life in Auschwitz, his is perhaps the most clear and dispassionate as if he felt it was his moral duty to bear witness as precisely as he could. Levi's training as a scientist no doubt helped him in this task. In his account, he shows how it is possible, if only just, to keep hope alive in the most seemingly hopeless of circumstances.

Although Levi is better known as a writer of prose, poetry was a vital means of expression for him all his life and it is through his poems that he speaks most passionately of his experience of Auschwitz as in the following poem entitled *Shema* which is taken from a Hebrew prayer and is a command to listen:

*You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:*

*Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.*

*Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when
you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces
from you.*

Levi was born into an affluent and cultured Jewish family in Turin and went on to study chemistry at the University of Turin. The life of his family radically altered when the German army occupied northern and central Italy and restored Mussolini to power. In 1943, Levi and his friends formed a partisan resistance group in the foothills of the Alps but he was captured by the Italian fascist militia. He was first taken to an internment camp but when the Germans arrived, he along with countless Italian Jews were sent to concentration and death camps in Eastern Europe. In the winter of 1944, Levi found himself in the massive complex of Auschwitz.

He was greatly helped by his knowledge of German which he had gained from reading chemistry papers in that language and he was therefore a little less bewildered by the barking of commands in an incomprehensible tongue. His survival was also considerably aided by gaining work in a laboratory thus avoiding working outside in the savage Polish winter. You might say, that Levi's life was saved by science.

In his poem, *The Shield of Achilles*, W.H. Auden writes:

*What their foes liked to do was
done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they
lost their pride
And died as men before their
bodies died*

What Levi witnessed and what he fought above all to transcend was the stripping of all sense of humanity from himself and his fellow prisoners. In a central passage in *If This Is a Man*, he recalls one day in June when he had been working alongside a young French man who was keen to learn Italian. They had been cleaning an underground petrol tank and *the powder of the rust burnt our eyelids and coated our throats and mouths with a taste almost like blood*. Together, they were on their way to collect their meagre daily rations when suddenly Levi recalls some lines from the greatest poem in Italian literature, Dante's *Inferno* which is a journey through Hell, not dissimilar to his own journey through Auschwitz. Among the

