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Primo Levi, Mountain Rebel

Levi's experience as a partisan—and the execution of two teenage boys—showed him humans' capacity for extreme violence.

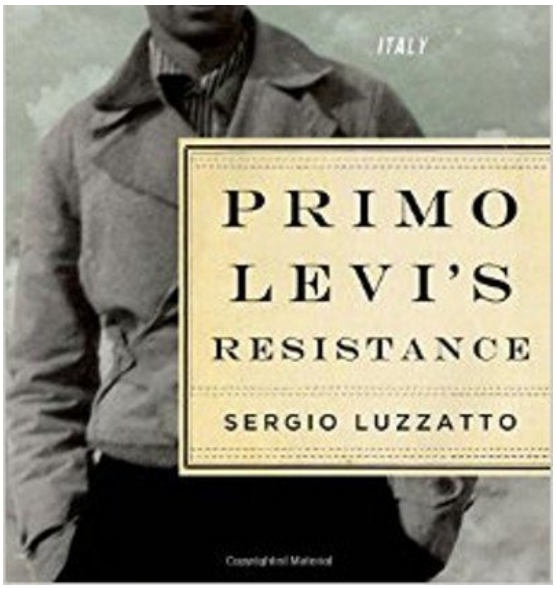
BY **GAVIN JACOBSON**

December 15, 2015

In September 1943, Primo Levi took to the mountains in northwest Italy to escape the Nazis. A keen mountaineer since the age of 14, for Levi the Alps had long been a sanctuary for physical release and spiritual recovery. High up in the alpine tundra, he exulted in hard battle with the elements, the same “Mother-Matter” he confronted at the Chemical Institute in Turin, where he worked as a chemist on the molecular structure of carbon. The mountain’s geological morphologies, the combined sense of its instant creation and eternal presence, the fellowship amongst climbers roped together across pleated terrains: these had been Levi’s greatest pleasures. “Evenings spent in a mountain hut,” he later wrote in a short story called “Bear Meat” (1960), “are the most sublime and intense that life holds.” But after the Nazis established Mussolini’s Republic of Salò and occupied the north of the country, intensifying the roundup and deportation of Jews, the “rocky gymnasiums” became his place of greater safety.

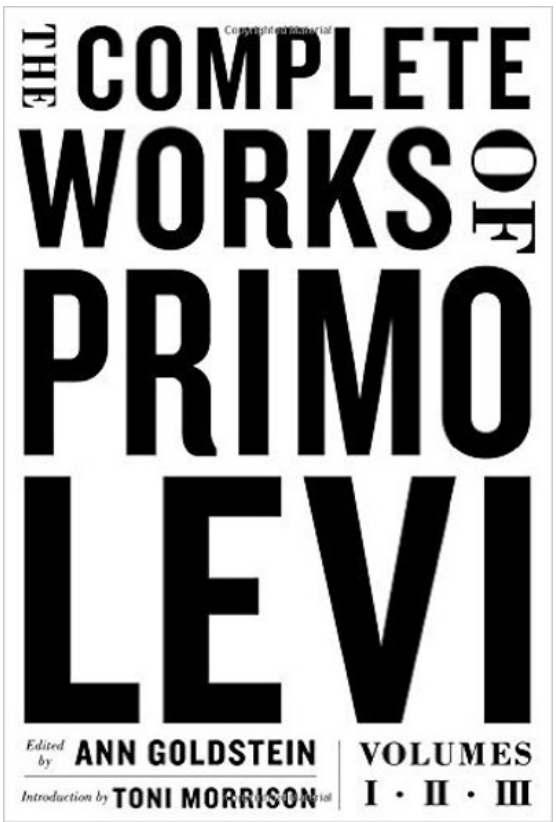
Levi had never intended to pursue armed resistance against the Germans. “I was a young bourgeois pacifist and I’d rather have died than shoot anyone”, he recalled in an interview with his

biographer, Ian Thomson. Like a lot of Italian Jews, he thought the best option was to wait for an Allied liberation. But Nazi-Fascism presented an unforgiving choice for most Jewish citizens of occupied Europe: hide, resist, or, as Arendt documented in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, cooperate. Levi's initial concern was for the safety of his mother and sister, and on September 9 they left for St. Vincent, a spa town 100 kilometres north of Turin in the Valle d'Aosta, where they stayed with friends. But after the Nazis drowned forty-nine Jews in Lake Maggiore near Switzerland, including Levi's uncle, Mario, any hesitations he had about armed resistance disappeared. On October 1, along with a couple of disbanded Italian soldiers, as well as other Jewish refugees and anti-fascists, Levi became part of a small and shambolic resistance group.



PRIMO LEVI'S RESISTANCE: REBELS AND COLLABORATORS IN OCCUPIED ITALY by Sergio Luzzatto Metropolitan Books, 304 pp., $30.00

Sergio Luzzatto's newly translated *Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy* is the story of Levi's time as a partisan. Drawing on materials housed in local archives throughout northwest Italy, as well as interviewing many of those involved in the early Resistance, his book is a micro-history of what happened in the two months between Levi becoming a partisan and his arrest and deportation to Auschwitz in December 1943. The most intriguing part of Luzzatto's story, though, is an event that took place a few days before Levi's capture, when his band executed Fulvio Oppezzo and Luciano Zabaldano, two teenagers accused of threatening the secrecy and survival of the rebel group. After the war, Levi remained disturbed by the execution, and questioned the lengths people in conditions of weakness go to survive. His writings were not just shaped by his experience of



THE COMPLETE WORKS OF PRIMO LEVI BY PRIMO LEVI, edited by Ann Goldstein Liveright, 3008 pp., $100.00

Auschwitz, but by a life at the frontier of powerlessness as both a partisan and a prisoner.

It is still Levi the prisoner that we know best, and this is what informs much of his writings. Levi recorded his experience of the Holocaust in *If This Is a Man* (1947), and over the following decades gained success as a writer who, with astonishing self-control, chronicled Europe's tragic *danse macabre*. Yet as Ann Goldstein —editor of the *Complete Works of Primo Levi*—notes, the tag "Holocaust writer" does Levi "a regrettable injustice". A remarkable three-volume set of memoirs, novels, short stories, essays, commentary, book reviews, and poetry, the *Complete Works* now enables us to appreciate the tangle of forms and identities that defined Levi as a writer: memorialist and fantasist, scientist and sensationalist, puritan and jester, poet and political commentator.

What most clearly stands out from this body of work is the experience of violence in service of the absolute—absolute racial purity, for example, or absolute security and freedom, or absolute control over people through force, or even the absolute mastery of the material world through scientific endeavor. He even argued that "perfect happiness" was unattainable, owing to the certainty of our death, nor "perfect unhappiness", since death saves us from the daily agonies of existence. For Levi, then, the twentieth century was so violent because societies strove for the absolute and infinite, and much of his work documented the experience of the powerless when confronted by that ambition.

In contrast to fascism's hate of difference and irregularity, Levi celebrated the fine gradations of being in *The Periodic Table* (1975), a memoir of his life in chemistry:

> In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed, and the impurities of impurities in the soil, too, as is know, if it is to be fertile. Dissension, diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are needed: Fascism does not want them, forbids them, and that's why you're not a Fascist.... Immaculate virtue does not exist either, or if it exists it is detestable.

Natural Histories, a collection of Huxley-esque science fiction stories first published in 1966, is another example of the cohabiting themes and anxieties that imprinted themselves on Levi after what he witnessed between 1943 and 45. Written in an

absurdist key, he mixed the potential of science to attain absolute control and understanding of the physical universe with a deep paranoia of its subversion by the wild spirit of the innovator, the unpredictability of experimentation, and the consequences of human vanity.

In “Angelic Butterfly,” one of Levi’s most disturbing fictions, Dr Leeb, a researcher based on the Auschwitz physician Josef Mengele, transforms humans into birds, which are then devoured by hungry crowds (the story takes place in post-war Germany, which Levi said was “a civilized form of reprisal”). Similarly, “Versamnia” is about the attempt to convert complete pain into pure pleasure, during which the human subjects loose their minds and the inventor commits suicide. And in “The Magic Paint,” in which Levi displays a dark comedic genius, it is the pursuit of everlasting luck that causes death. Having discovered a paint that brings good luck to anyone exposed to it, the scientist-narrator calls on an old friend, Michele Fassio, whose gaze from the right eye brings him eternal misfortune. After having the right lens of his glasses coated in the magic paint, Fassio puts them on and dies immediately—the lens was concave, reflecting his powers of bad luck off the paint and back into himself, a “blameless victim of our experiment”.

But Levi wasn’t just concerned with the tragic, usually violent, consequences of pursuing the absolute. He also grappled with the origins and nature of that violence. As a partisan, he participated in a brutal execution in the winter of 1943, and as a Jew he witnessed the industrial murder of entire peoples. Both issued, in different magnitudes, from what Levi called “the sleep of reason”. But they also resulted from contrasting positions of power: the paranoid fragility of the early partisan movement on the one hand, and the “indiscriminate power” of Nazi Germany on the other. Levi’s writings are not celebrations of the human spirit, as is so often claimed, but reflections on the effects that power and powerlessness have on the human capacity for violence.

Levi’s mountain rebels in Aosta were too weak and inexperienced for effective guerrilla warfare. His only weapon, he recalled, was a tiny pistol, “all inlaid with mother of pearl, the kind used in movies by ladies desperately intent on committing suicide”. The group’s leader, Guido Bachi, would later admit that they weren’t really partisans at all, but simply “refugees—Jews on the run”. Many rebels also mistook banditry for resistance. Partisans were free from the codified norms of national armies, and could devise their

own protocols. Young men, armed and proud, descended into towns and villages in the name of resistance and assaulted locals, hijacked cars, plundered food, and burnt property—willful violence cloaked in the mantle of anti-fascism.

Luzzatto ascertains that Oppezzo and Zabaldano's unruliness ultimately led to their executions. They had terrorized locals around the village of Amay, threatening to denounce to the fascist authorities anyone who tried to prevent them. On 8 December 1943 they joined up with Levi's band of rebels. The next day, their new alpine comrades executed them. There was no trial, no solemn march to a remote clearing where deadeyes lined up and fired. The killing was sudden and without warning, a volley of bullets in the back as the youngsters walked through the snow—it was known as "the Soviet method."

Luzzatto is less concerned with who actually shot them. What's important is the severity of the punishment, which, he writes, Levi's partisans "can only have arrived at after searching their consciences". The decision to execute was a collective one, which Levi granted in *The Periodic Table*. In the chapter 'Gold', an account of his arrest and imprisonment by fascist militiamen, he admitted publicly for the first time his part in the 'ugly secret':

> an ugly secret weighed on us, in every one of our minds.... Conscience had compelled us to carry out a sentence, and we had carried it out, but we had come away devastated, empty, wanting everything to finish and to be finished ourselves; but also wanting to be together, to talk, to help each other exorcise that still so recent memory. Now we were finished, and we knew it; we were in the trap, each one in his own trap, and there was no way out but down.

Like so much of the early days of anti-fascist resistance, seen close-up, the application of physical force is stripped of all romanticism. Levi's partisans weren't indomitable heroes in steadfast pursuit of victory. Even if their original intentions were good, they were neophytes who, weak, powerless, and desperate to survive the Nazi dragnet, turned to violence and immediately regretted their decision (Levi said that afterwards, they lost the will "to resist, even to live").

Levi's participation in the execution is well known. Ian Thomson mentions it in his biography *Primo Levi*, as do Carole Angier in her book about Levi *The Double Bond* and Myriam Anissimov in *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist*. But Luzzatto zeroes-in

specifically on this episode, and in so doing, is more judicious and systematic. He writes with verve (rendered beautifully into English by Frederika Randall), and has mined a great many sources to provide a decent account of life under arms in the Aosta Valley.

Yet his conclusions are no more assured than previous interpretations. It still remains unclear how much Levi was involved beyond the debate to execute (was he a triggerman, for example?). Nor whether the lawless behavior of Oppezzo and Zabaldano was the real reason for the execution. It also cannot be proved that Levi participated in the burials of the two teenagers. Luzzatto speculates that he did, pointing to his poem 'Epitaph' (1952) that is "far from any kind of historical proof", but that provides the strongest suggestion. The narrator in the poem is a dead partisan, buried beneath the soil of Aosta. Like Oppezzo or Zabaldano, he was condemned to death by his comrades:

Here where my comrades dry-eyed buried me, [...]
I, Micca the partisan, lie here. Brought down by my comrades
For no small wrong, and not many years ago,
Nor many years did I have when I met the night.

The sporadic clues in Levi's writings that allude to his "ugly secret" are tantalizing in their promise to yield more treasure about a darker past. Luzzatto's book is in part hostage to this temptation. He readily admits that he might be "insisting on a very minor episode in the overall experience of the Italian Resistance, not to mention in Primo Levi's personal existence." A harsh conclusion might be that this book is, above all, about the imaginative license the historian has when confronted with patchy source material.

It is, however, clear that the experience of the execution deeply informed Levi's writing and thought. Levi forged his voice in opposition to neat moral distinctions like good and evil, innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, honesty and deceit, strength and weakness, perpetrators and victims, and life and death. For him, these coexist in one and the same person in precarious balance. While he never denied the goodness of human nature, the essential truth of his works—filtered through his experiences of Europe between 1943-1945—is that powerlessness, too, or desperate weakness, manifests itself in the baser part of our natures. What else can the absolutely powerless do when confronted by absolute power?

In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), his final work on Auschwitz written one year before his suicide, he described those who survived, like he did, as driven by despair to all forms of egoism, violence, insensitivity, and collaboration. Only the "drowned", those who never returned, "did not plumb the depths" of moral compromise: "The best all died". This was not to condemn the "saved", only to recognize that powerlessness served to accelerate the violent and calculating potential within men and women. This, if anything, was the true sign of victimhood—being forced to unlock the darker side of human nature.

Like the mythical creature the centaur, a symbol of man's liminal status, humans, Levi believed, live in a state of tormented oscillation between conflicting moral drives, such as virtue and cruelty, truthfulness and deception, courage and cowardice. (*Natural Histories* also contains a fable called "Quaestio de Centauris," in which Levi imagined himself as half man, half horse). In conditions of extremity, like a death camp, that oscillation is of course more radical. But it was also a state of being Levi recognized during his time as a partisan, as he put it in the poem 'Partigia' (1981):

What enemy? Every man's his own foe,
Each one split by his own frontier,
Left hand enemy of the right.
Stand up, old enemies of yourselves,
This war of ours is never done.

Luzzatto examines Levi as someone who, after being part of an execution, was aware of being "split by his own frontier" between wanting to do good on the one hand, and being capable of extreme violence and bloodshed on the other.

Levi's brief account of life in the Resistance in *The Periodic Table* was published in 1975, a moment in Italian history when the Resistance was celebrated with unqualified certainty. To portray it as something less than wholly virtuous—and as something that led to his eventual imprisonment in Auschwitz—was an example of his characteristic honesty. Levi knew better than most that the fight against Nazism was an undeniable good mixed with incidents of profound wrong. No human was entirely free of these ambiguities. For him, categories of good and evil aren't to be found *in extremis*, only choices and compromises.

Primo Levi's Resistance provides the most in-depth account of the most formative experience of Levi's outside of Auschwitz, and reveals a side of Levi we're not used to seeing—a man implicated in a most pointless killing. The significance of *The Collected Works* is that it gives us a far more eclectic and interesting writer, one who ranged across a vast intellectual terrain that included astronomy, history, linguistics, classical literature, art, current affairs, memory, and religion. Together, the books not only show the formative effect violence as both a partisan and a prisoner had on his writings, as well as the fundamental relationship between violence and powerlessness.

They also display the basic honesty of Levi's work: the human condition as one of countless moral shades. Perhaps that is why, away from writing, he loved mountaineering, because of its refreshing certainties. Spared of the complications of human existence, which he celebrated but found so exhausting, rock climbing came down to nothing more than the strength of a piton driven into the mountainside. As he wrote in *The Periodic Table*: "the rope holds or it doesn't".

Q&A with Sergio Luzzatto author of Primo Levi's Resistance

Posted on January 20, 2016

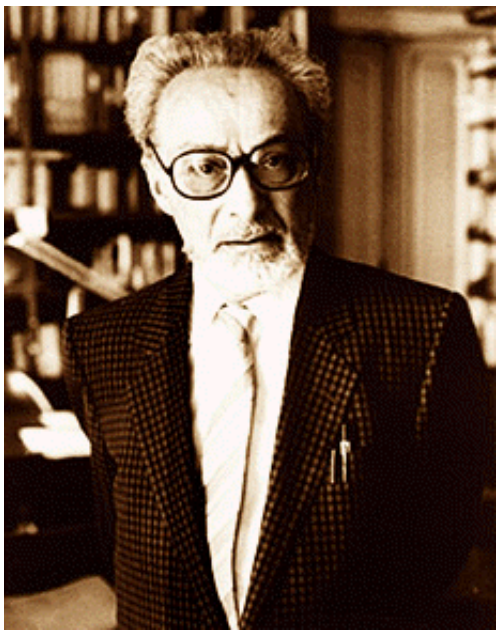
by Sergio Luzzatto

No other Auschwitz survivor has been as literately powerful and historically influential as Primo Levi. Yet Levi was not only a victim or a witness. In the fall of 1943, at the very start of the Italian Resistance, he was a fighter, participating in the first attempts to launch guerrilla warfare against occupying Nazi forces. Those three months have been largely overlooked by Levi's biographers; indeed, they went strikingly unmentioned by Levi himself. For the rest of his life he barely acknowledged that autumn in the Alps. But an obscure passage in Levi's The Periodic Table hints that his deportation to Auschwitz was linked directly to an incident from that time: "an ugly secret" that had made him give up the struggle, "extinguishing all will to resist, indeed to live."

What did Levi mean by those dramatic lines? Using extensive archival research, Sergio Luzzatto's groundbreaking Primo Levi's Resistance reconstructs the events of 1943 in vivid detail. Just days before Levi was captured, Sergio Luzzatto shows, his group summarily executed two teenagers who had sought to join the partisans, deciding the boys were reckless and couldn't be trusted. The brutal episode has been shrouded in silence, but its repercussions would shape Levi's life.

Combining investigative flair with profound empathy, Primo Levi's Resistance offers startling insight into the origins of the moral complexity that runs through the work of Primo Levi himself.

A Q&A with Sergio Luzzato



Primo Levi was an Italian Jewish chemist, writer, and Holocaust survivor. Image is in the public domain via cWikimedia.com

To what do you credit your "powerful curiosity," verging on obsession, about Primo Levi and the Italian Resistance in World War II?

Such a powerful curiosity is only natural. The Italian Resistance is the founding event of modern Italy as a free and democratic state. And Primo Levi is an extraordinarily thoughtful interpreter of the heart of darkness of the twentieth century. I was therefore obsessed first and foremost as a citizen, then as a historian. But I trust that my obsession was not pathological. I would rather refer to the Latin origins of "obsession": an idea or image that occupies the mind, and goes as far as laying siege to it.

Why do you think Levi chose not to disclose more details about his brief participation in the Italian Resistance in his autobiographical works? And what alerted you to the particular importance of those four pages in The Periodic Table where Levi describes his time in the Resistance?

I think that Levi did not share more about his experience because he wasn't able to look at the Resistance the same way as he looked at the Holocaust. He wasn't able to look at that side of twentieth century history through the scientist's lens—to filter, gauge, distill, as chemists do—rather than through that of a humanist.

It is this different approach and tone, and his different attention and intention, that alerted me to those four pages in The Periodic Table. How is it, I asked myself, that when Levi talks or writes about the Resistance he is so different from the Levi we know, so much so that he almost seems to be another person?

Did you expect the controversy that followed the Italian publication of this book? How did you handle that?

To be honest, I expected it. I expected controversy around the Resistance, given that when Italians reflects on their twentieth century past, they rely so often on myth rather than on reality. People want to see only virtues on the side of the partisans, only absolute evil on the other side. I also expected controversy around Primo Levi, since he too is so often regarded as a kind of saint rather than a human being.

How did I react? I was disappointed by the accusations. But I believe it is the historian's job to expand our knowledge, to illuminate what actually happened. Treating the partisans not as abstract heroes but as real people honestly struggling to do the right thing is the best way to honor their memory.

Your personal passion for the subject matter adds so much to this history. How did your personal engagement with the material affect your research?

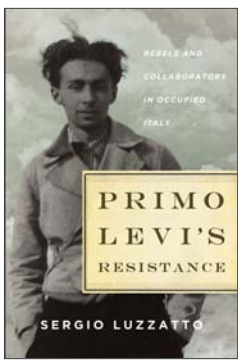
This research particularly affected me since the subject matter—the Italian Resistance and Primo Levi—are the two poles of my moral and civic world. But this passion notwithstanding, I hope (and trust) that I was able to maintain sufficient critical distance as befits a historian.

What are the biggest misconceptions about Primo Levi's life and legacy?

The biggest misconception about Primo Levi's life concerns his status as a survivor. Until I published my book, Primo Levi was only seen as a survivor of Auschwitz. This was somewhat understandable, given the exceptional historical relevance of the Holocaust and the exceptional role of Levi as a writer and as a witness. Yet Levi was also, whether he liked it or not, a survivor of Amay, the tiny village in the Italian Alps where he tried to fight his Resistance. That partisan experience left deep scars on his identity, I believe.

The worst misconception about Primo Levi's legacy, in my view, is of those who believe that the Levi monument must be "defended" against the attacks of an alleged vandal of memory posing as a historian. Whereas I think that the best way to pay tribute to him consists in carrying out the unceasing, necessary, inexhaustible work of research. This is one of his many lessons. A search for meaning, if not for precision; and a search for truth, if not for justice.

Sergio Luzzatto is the author of Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy, Padre Pio: Miracles and Politics in a Secular Age, which won the prestigious Cundill Prize in History, and of The Body of Il Duce: Mussolini's Corpse and the Fortunes of Italy. A professor of history at the University of Turin, Luzzatto is a regular contributor to Il Sole 24 Ore.



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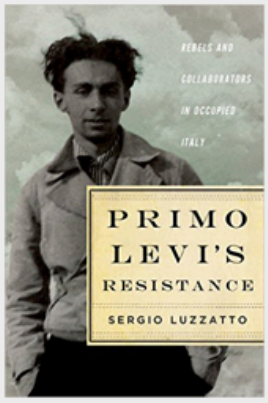
Tagged with: concentration camp, Jewish History, Nazi, Primo Levi, Sergio Luzzatto, World War II, WWII

Posted in Modern History

Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy

Sergio Luzzatto; Frederika Randall, trans.

Review by Linda F. Burghardt



Metropolitan Books 2016
270 Pages $28.00
ISBN: 978-0-8050-9955-3

Even people with only a glancing knowledge of the Holocaust seem to have heard of Primo Levi, probably the most famous survivor of Auschwitz. It is widely known that Levi was a victim of the Nazis, but few people, even those well versed in Holocaust history, know that he was also part of the Italian Resistance. His involvement with this guerilla warfare group took place in the fall of 1943, when the Resistance was still young and inexperienced. But though the group's efforts were still small at this point, their effect on Primo Levi's life was both lasting and intense.

In his many autobiographical writings, Levi mentions briefly and mysteriously that he was deported to Auschwitz because of an "ugly secret." He never elaborates, and neither, until very recently, has any historian. Now acclaimed historian Sergio Luzzatto has taken Primo Levi's veiled comment and investigated it fully, establishing a theory that it has to do with those lost months of Levi's life—months during which he was part of a small partisan band.

Luzzatto begins his scrupulously research exposition with a shocking episode in which the band of partisans turned on itself and murdered two of his own members, both young men still in their teenage years. Then he examines the rich moral complexity of the Resistance fighters, creating detailed and moving portraits of both the rebels themselves and the Nazi collaborators with whom their fates become intertwined in the postwar years. He is able to make us deeply aware of their humanity and yet simultaneously horrified; we are drawn ever more irresistibly into their story.

Written with wit and flair, *Primo Levi's Resistance* enters the deep recesses of the partisans' minds, examining their innermost thoughts and motives and praising their profoundly dedicated spirits while at the same time exposing their moral flaws. Luzzatto's ability to both empathize with the partisans and still remain dispassionate demonstrates his powerful grasp of journalistic techniques and his highly developed storytelling skills.

Throughout our tension-filled progress through the book, we find that Luzzatto has kept the story exquisitely balanced between loyalty and betrayal, aggression and acquiescence, forgiveness and revenge. We remain in thrall to the raw courage we can't help but admire, despite the actions to which it sometimes leads. He forces us to judge for ourselves what is justice and what is not, and to look squarely in the face of moral responsibility.

Luzzatto, a professor of history at the University of Turin and a regular contributor to well-respected political journals in Italy, is an award-winning historical writer, one whose highly praised lucidity is applied masterfully in this new work. The book, originally written in Italian and translated smoothly into English, was deservedly a bestseller when it first came out in Italy.

Index, map, notes, prefatory note.

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- Primo Levi Reading List
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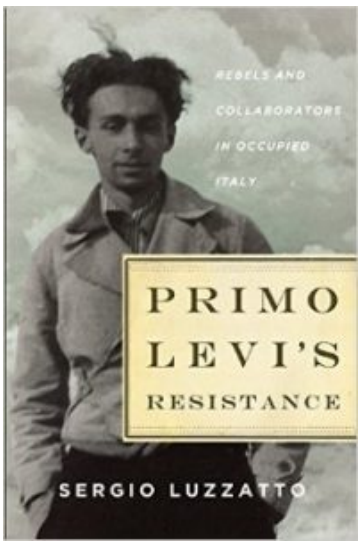
The Devil in the Hills

By Dorian Stuber (June 1, 2016)**Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy** No Comment
By Sergio Luzzatto, Translated by Frederika Randall



Metropolitan, 2016

For three months in the fall of 1943, the Italian writer Primo Levi joined a small band of partisans based in the Piedmontese Alps. More than thirty years later, Levi described the group in characteristically modest terms: "We were cold and hungry, we were the most disarmed partisans in the Piedmont, and probably also the most unprepared." Much of their time was spent wheedling supplies from the locals, who were often suspicious of their aims. The rest was spent looking for ammunition. According to Levi, they had nothing but a "tommy gun without bullets and a few pistols."

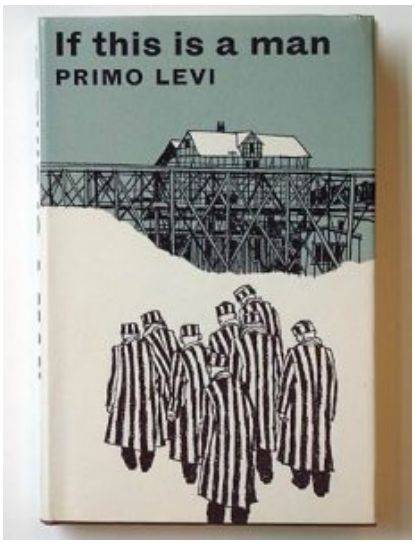
In his fascinating new book, *Primo Levi's Resistance: Rebels and Collaborators in Occupied Italy*, Sergio Luzzatto explains that, however insignificant Levi and his comrades may have seemed to themselves, they had attracted the attention of officials in the Italian Social Republic. Popularly known as the Republic of Salò, after the town in Lombardy where it was headquartered, the Republic had been formed in September 1943 when the Germans reinstalled the deposed Mussolini as head of a satellite state. Italy was split in two: in the south a government supported by King Victor Emmanuel III worked with the Allies, while in the north fascism persisted.

Salò took its orders from Berlin; Luzzatto focuses on how that obedience played out in a small corner of northern Italy. He does so by showing how the actions of individuals made a difference in a time when so many of the larger political entities were in flux. One of those individuals was the zealous Police Prefect for the region of Aosta, Cesare Carnazzi. Carnazzi was eager to arrest two kinds of people: the partisans who were forming the nascent Italian Resistance and Jews who were to be deported to satisfy the demands of the Republic's Nazi allies. In the mountains of Piedmont, those people were often the same.

On December 5, 1943 Carnazzi ordered three agents, led by a man named Edilio Cagni, to infiltrate Levi's band of

partisans. Cagni, "a pure and disinterested hunter of human prey," as Levi later described him, was skilled at his work, and the agents quickly insinuated themselves amongst the disorganized partisans, who in this valley never numbered more than 100. A week later, after staging needless military exercises to waste the partisans' precious ammunition, Cagni and his subordinates slipped away to meet the forces sent by Carnazzi to capture the partisans. Levi and his comrades were taken down the valley to Aosta where they were imprisoned and interrogated.

Levi is famous because of what happened next: he was deported to Auschwitz and through amazing fortune survived to become the greatest chronicler of that terrible experience. But Luzzatto insists that the short time Levi spent in hiding in the Alps matters just as much as what came after. *Primo Levi's Resistance* is about the after-effects of significant events, whether in the life of a nation or of an individual. Like so many readers, Luzzatto has been shaped by Levi's example. Assigned Levi's extraordinary Holocaust memoir *If This Is a Man* as a school text, Luzzatto emerged from the experience "as changed as an adolescent can be by the reading of a book." Thus began "a kind of civil worship and literary veneration" of Levi, who stood for Luzzatto, as for generations of readers, as "the epitome of civilized intelligence and dignified memory."



But one of Levi's memories might not have been so dignified. Many years after that first schoolboy encounter, Luzzatto started wondering about Levi's reticent descriptions of his time as a partisan. He was particularly struck by a passage in Levi's autobiographical text *The Periodic Table* in which Levi explained what happened once he and his comrades were arrested. They were put one man to a cell and forbidden from talking to each other:

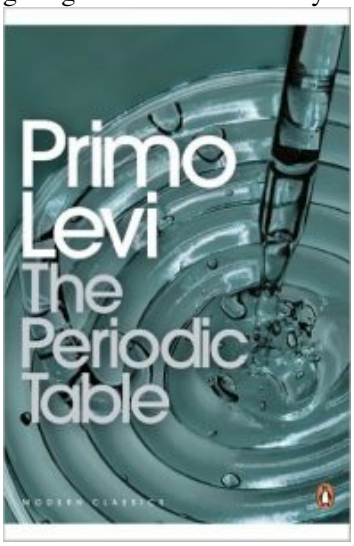
> This prohibition was painful because among us, in each of our minds, weighed an ugly secret: the same secret that had exposed us to capture, extinguishing in us, a few days before, all will to resist, indeed to live. We had been forced by our consciences to carry out a sentence and had carried it out, but we had come out of it destroyed, destitute, waiting for everything to finish and to be finished ourselves; but also wanting to see each other, to talk, to help each other exorcize that so recent memory. Now we were finished, and we knew it; we were in the trap, each one in his own trap, and there was no way out except down.

What is this ugly secret? Luzzatto asks. What kind of sentence is Levi talking about? Who carried it out? And was Levi himself involved?

Luzzatto answers these questions as fully as the historical record allows. He discovers a story emblematic of the confusion of the early days of the Italian Resistance. Luzzatto likens his task to using "a zoom lens rather than a wide angle": by uncovering the events alluded to by Levi and by tracing their widening repercussions, Luzzatto uses "one story from the Resistance to illuminate the Resistance as a whole." He believes historians have a duty to help the present understand itself through the past. The events in Piedmont may seem unimportant or even tawdry, but they have larger significance:

> It may seem a thin history, politically useless and morally futile, about men who hated other men. Yet ultimately, I believe, it's only such an intimate perspective that allows a history of the Resistance to speak to us today. It allows us to see that conflict as a clash between people battling not just out of hatred but because they have different conceptions of humanity, justice, and society. The historian too, must grapple with these people, to avoid seeing them either as saints or as monsters, and to help renew (along with the best of them) our values and our memory.

The story begins in the days before the spy Cagni infiltrated the partisans, when two other men joined the resistors. Luciano Zabaldono and Fulvio Oppezzo were young hotheads, more interested in stealing cars than fighting fascists. Luzzatto says



they conformed to the image the Republic of Salò was putting out about the Resistance: that they were nothing but bandits. From the moment Zabaldono and Oppezzo arrived they made trouble for the partisans, extorting food from the locals, thereby exacerbating already tense relations, and even, when the partisans sought to rein the boys in, threatening to denounce their supposed colleagues to the police.

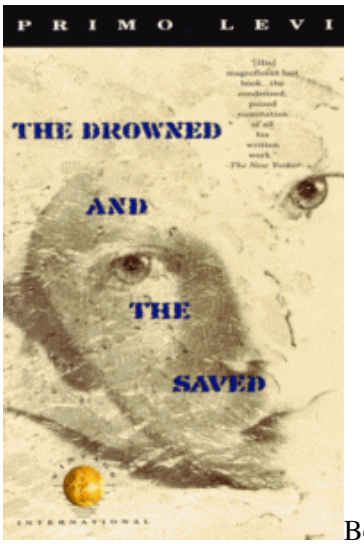
The partisans reacted swiftly. In the early morning of December 9, 1943, Zabaldono and Oppezzo were shot without warning from behind. Luzzatto concludes: "the two were the very first victims of the Resistance in Valle d'Aosta. But they did not die under attack from German or Salò forces. They lost their lives to their own companions."

Luzzatto is unable to determine who did the actual shooting. Based on what he has uncovered about partisan justice in 1944-5, Luzzatto believes the judgment would have been collective. He also notes Levi's use of "that weighty 'we'" in the central passage from *The Periodic Table*: "We had been forced by our consciences to carry out a sentence and had carried it out." But in the end, Luzzatto is not especially interested in who made the decision or pulled the trigger. He doesn't condemn the actions of the partisans that morning in December 1943 even as he is certain that the punishment was disproportionate to the crime, referring to the "irreparable punishment meted out to Oppezo and Zabaldano for having confused adventure with banditry, and banditry with the partisan fight" and, even more baldly, to "a high-handed decision by inexperienced commanders, a spray of bullets from a Beretta to punish the bullying of villagers or the theft of a few kilos of flour." In so doing, Luzzatto successfully challenges the myth of the Resistance as unimpeachable moral good without capitulating to the mentality of what he condemns as "crudely revisionist antipartisan books about the Italian civil war."

What interests Luzzatto is whether it is possible to come to nuanced conclusions about a chaotic time. Here as always Levi is his lodestar. Luzzatto characterizes Levi as a man who spent his life drawing out the moral ambiguities of the fight against fascism, the way, for example, the Nazis conscripted their victims into

perpetrating injustice, from the lowliest overseer of a potato peeling detail all the way to the *Sonderkommandos*, the units of Jewish prisoners forced to operate the crematoria. In the essay collection *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last work, Levi argued that none of us is ever in the place of another, which means we cannot predict our own behavior let alone their's. The upshot is that we should ponder the totalitarian history of the 20th century "with compassion and rigor."

No matter how important Levi is to Luzzatto, however, it quickly becomes clear that he is more presiding spirit than main actor in Luzzatto's tale. After describing Levi's arrest and deportation—from Aosta, where his captors concluded he should be treated as a Jew rather than as a partisan, he was sent to the transit camp at Fossoli, and from there to Auschwitz—Luzzatto abandons Levi for long stretches, concentrating instead on the rise of the partisan movement. He is especially interested in how the actors in this struggle were remembered. Because he is most interested in how the partisans enacted justice, he concentrates on the fate of perpetrators such as Police Prefect Carnazzi and the secret agent Cagni.



Both Carnazzi and Cagni were initially sentenced to death by firing squad, but over the next two years they appealed each successively more lenient verdict. In the end, each served only a few months. Those verdicts, Luzzatto argues, were informed by the shifting sense of justice in Italy in the years after the war as the country moved from an era of "emergency and revolution" to one of "regulations and reaction."

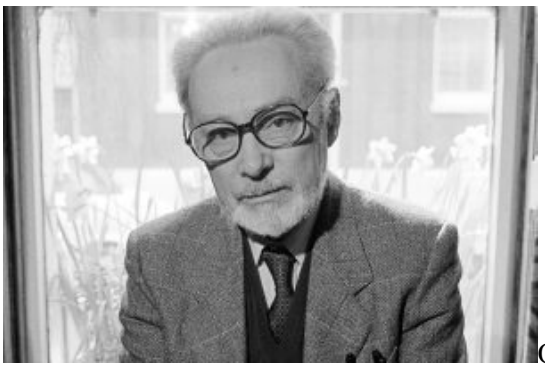
But these men also benefitted from some surprising personal circumstances. Despite Carnazzi's zeal in upholding fascist law, he was also instrumental in saving a Jewish family from deportation. Cagni is an even stranger character: he served after his arrest as a double agent for the American Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA), helping them to arrest Nazi sympathizers as well as informing against Communist elements in the Resistance.

In fleshing out the portraits of these two men, Luzzatto isn't suggesting judgment is impossible. Nor is he recuperating villains as heroes. But he is insisting on the complexity of the past. Nowhere is this conviction more interestingly developed than in the book's final chapters, in which Luzzatto uncovers the posthumous afterlives of Fulvio Oppezzo and Luciano Zabaldono. Remember them? They were the young hotheads shot by their comrades, the ones Luzzatto calls the first victims of the Resistance in the Valle d'Aosta. Luzzatto travels to Oppezzo's hometown where the central piazza and the local school are named after him. Luzzatto recounts how Oppezzo was transformed into a martyr of the Resistance. As a parish bulletin from 1952 put it, "During those most difficult days of the nation he saw and chose his place without hesitation: for Italy!" This canonization bears no resemblance to the haphazard circumstances, which even Luzzatto's tireless inquiries are unable to determine with certainty, that led Oppezzo and his friend to join the partisans in the hills.

Zabaldone was similarly lionized, even though his journey from rebellious boy (he left school

at age 12 and never settled to anything) to political rebel is even more obscure than Oppezzo's. But he too was mourned as a hero of the Resistance. In 1945 the two men's bodies were exhumed from the shallow graves where Levi and his comrades had buried them. Zabaldone was interred with two other men from his neighborhood in Turin. A funeral notice lauded their valor: "They are and they will always be alive and among us; their sacrifice will be an example and a spur to our future deeds."

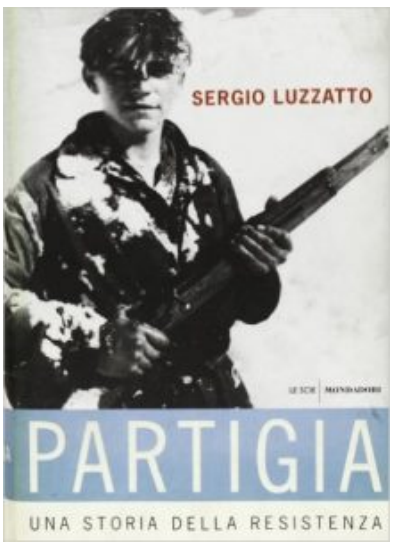
Memory is indeed alive, as Luzzatto shows, but it is more complex than the bombast of postwar Italy admits. One of the most moving parts of the book comes when the author meets Zabaldone's nephews, one of whom has researched this uncle he never knew, this hero of the Resistance whose portrait hangs over the bar in the family restaurant. The nephew, too, has carefully underlined that passage from *The Periodic Table*. He too suspects his relative was murdered in shady circumstances. But like Luzzatto, he isn't interested in either exonerating his uncle or in unmasking the murderers. He—and by extension Luzzatto—stand as examples of level-headed historical understanding.



Once again, Levi is the exemplar of such behavior. He returned from the camps in time to testify at Cagni's first trial. Searching the trial records, Luzzatto is initially disappointed by what he finds, only two terse sentences: "I was taken away and interrogated by Cagni at Aosta. I was identified by [one of the other double agents], who supplied extensive information about our band and the National Liberation Committee." As Luzzatto says, this statement is "practically telegraphic" in its concision. His disappointment turns to appreciation, however, as he reflects on how remarkable it was that Levi was there to testify at all. Here Luzzattto makes his most speculative claim: that the significance of the testimony lay not in what it accomplished against Cagni but "in what it did in the mind of the man then writing *If This Is a Man*." Luzzatto distinguishes "the witness Levi" from "Levi the Witness," the former "eager for justice and revenge," the latter "analyzing morality and human nature."

I wish Luzzatto had made more of this distinction. He might for example have cited the contradictory aims Levi offers in the Preface to *If This Is a Man*. On the one hand, he wants the book to document "a detached study of certain aspects of the human mind." On the other, he apologizes for its "structural defects," which result from "an immediate and violent impulse," a need to tell his story to the world. The distinction between detachment and passion is everywhere in Levi's writing. Luzzatto misses an opportunity to examine more carefully what witnessing meant to Levi, which might have allowed him to develop his own argument about how historians should represent the past. Are historians supposed to recount the past, or advocate for (a version of) it? Are historians witnesses?

Luzzatto doesn't answer these questions because, in the end, *Primo Levi's Resistance* isn't really about Levi as a writer and thinker, despite Luzzatto's attention to Levi's style. Instead it's about Levi as a partisan, as an actor, as someone who did something, maybe even something morally dubious. The problem is that we only know the latter Levi through the former. Luzzatto has uncovered a lot, but what actually happened that morning in December 1943 when two men were killed, especially Levi's role in it, remains a mystery.



Based on the title of the American edition and the way its publisher has pitched it, readers might be surprised to find that the book is more about the Resistance and less about Primo Levi. It doesn't help that

the publisher speaks of a "shocking episode," which, it hints, will make us reassess Levi's moral worth. I wish Metropolitan had seen fit to keep the original title, *Partigia*, which Luzzatto takes from a poem Levi published in 1981. *Partigia* is a colloquial term "widespread in Piedmont" for "partisans without many scruples, decisive, light-fingered, or quick to brawl." Zabaldone and Oppezzo were *partigia*, but so too, it seems, were Levi and his comrades. In a careful reading of the poem, Luzzatto explains that "Partigia" is addressed to the retired partisans, who are urged to go back into the mountains again in order to make sure "the enemy does not surprise us."

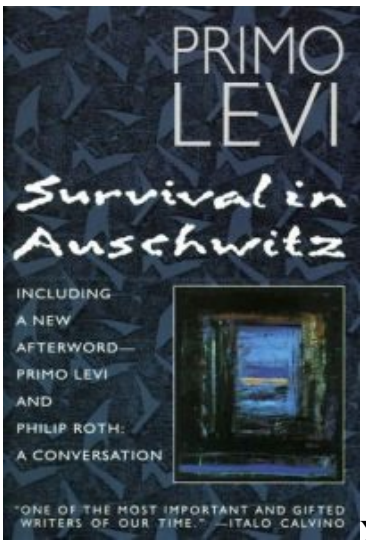
Yet the enemy is not, as we might expect, revisionist history or renascent fascism or even Holocaust denial. Instead it's closer to home:

> What enemy? Every man's his own foe,
> Each one split by his own frontier,
> Left hand enemy of the right.
> Stand up, old enemies of yourselves,
> This war of ours is never done.

For Luzzatto, Levi's poem, which he offers as a distillation of the writer's philosophy, refuses the consolations of good and bad, enemy and friend, right and wrong. But it doesn't do so in favor of relativism. "This war of ours is never done": there are always battles that have to be fought. For Luzzatto, the story of the Italian Resistance is "a story of unquestionable good, the fight against Nazi-Fascism, intermixed with a story of profound wrong, a wrong no human being, even the best, can say he is totally free of."

*

Primo Levi's Resistance deserves a wide audience. Luzzatto organizes his material about the turbulent and complex events of the years 1943-46 with impressive clarity. Nonetheless Anglophone readers might find themselves hard-pressed to keep up with the many names, places, and organizations. Fortunately, they will be helped by the book's accompanying material, including a decent index and an excellent map. Yet there's no getting around the fact that the book, although not academic per se, is specialized, and readers who approach it as a biography of even a small but significant part of Levi's life will come away disappointed.



Yet Primo Levi *is* central to Luzzatto's argument. Because he is a writer of such ethical nuance, so ready to offer himself as anything but a hero, Levi has paradoxically become a figure we can admire—even love—unreservedly. Luzzatto is willing to reassess Levi—his suggestion that those few months in the mountains were formative for the writer's later investigation of moral complexity is ultimately convincing—but he isn't interested in making sensational or revisionist claims about him. *Primo Levi's Resistance* doesn't cut Levi down to size, doesn't tarnish his memory. Levi's careful self-critique in his monumental body of work has rendered that superfluous.

As Levi told us so forcefully in his remarkable books, complicated, ethically fraught situations resist easy judgment. But they also call for judgment. Remember that what Levi needs above all in jail is to not be isolated, to engage with others. He needs to talk through what they have done, not in order to whitewash their terrible but necessary action, but in order to be human: we "want[ed] to see each other, to talk, to help each other exorcize that so recent memory." As in the poem "Partigia," it falls to each of us to wrestle with our own complicity with oppression and violence. What is permitted in the struggle against an enemy? Can violence be morally just? We will answer that question best, Levi shows us, if we bear witness to the enemy within ourselves. The idea of critical and communal reflection is that Luzzatto to bring together the two strands of his story, one about the fate of the Resistance in postwar Italy and one about the fate of Levi during his brief time as a member of that Resistance. Levi, Luzzatto concludes, carried "only one set of moral baggage: a notion of dignity." Readers are thus allowed to worship Levi as much at the end of the book as Luzzatto does in the beginning. That the vision of Levi as humane and decent, modest and clear-sighted should outlast this investigation of a morally ambiguous time is a consolation all the more powerful since Levi himself gave us the tools to be critical of just such a formulation.