

How to Tell the Story of the Holocaust: Memoir Analysis Two

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Never forget. A common injunction addressed to all who encounter the Holocaust. The words come from Elie Wiesel's *Night* (the Holocaust book in the States, competing only with *The Diary of a Young Girl*) in which he writes "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed." And people have not forgotten. Quite the opposite. The Holocaust has become the standard for measuring political and moral health. It is studied as an event that stretches one's understanding of a human being. Within the instruction to never forget, however, is a revisionist consequence. In never forgetting the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, others have fallen to the wayside. Roma people, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, socialists, communists, Jehovah's Witnesses and more suffered at the hands of the Nazis, and yet they are often marginalized or absent from contemporary teachings of the Holocaust, or at least in the average public school education. In never forgetting, we have forgotten.

The first one hundred pages of Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* plainly and powerfully resist the narrowing of memory. Levi urges readers to understand the Holocaust as a structural experience of Jewish suffering *and* a universal story of dehumanization. Levi is clear that he was persecuted by the Nazis because he was Jewish, and tells a story specific to his experience as a Jew, but he does not collapse his personal suffering into the Holocaust as a particularly Jewish experience. Rather, he writes about the Holocaust as a structurally produced experience of dehumanization and Jewish persecution is the form through which he endured and was dehumanized.

In telling a story of the Holocaust, Levi does acknowledge the particular experience he had as Jew. He treats Jewishness as the condition that made him vulnerable. This is evident from the first lines of *If This is a Man* when Levi writes "As a Jew, I was sent to Fossoli, near Modena,

where a vast detention camp... collected all the numerous categories of people not approved of by the new-born Fascist Republic¹.” As a Jew, he was sent to Fossoli. As a Jew, he was not approved of by the republic. When he and the others at Fossoli are transferred to Auschwitz, Levi writes that they experienced “the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century².” Here, Levi is acknowledging a specific Jewish experience. When he arrives at Auschwitz, he writes that the “guests” are divided into three categories: the politicals, the criminals and the Jews³. Levi’s observation that Jews were there as Jews, not as convicts or dissidents, coincides with David Engel’s analysis in his book *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*, in which he notes that Jews became victims of the Holocausts for reasons having nothing to do with what they believed, that they could have been the most “ardent” exponents of Nazi ideology and yet their fate would have remained the same⁴. Levi also suggests that the treatment Jews received at Auschwitz was distinct, writing that among the thousands of prisoners, Jews were the “slaves of the slaves⁵.” Throughout his writing, however, Levi is careful not to characterize the Holocaust as a particularly Jewish experience, rather his experience as a Jew was one among many.

Levi’s writing subtly pushes back against narratives of the Holocaust and dehumanization as a uniquely Jewish catastrophe. One of the basic problems of interpretation when it comes to thinking about and studying the Holocaust, Engel writes, stems from the fact that the “encounter” between the Third Reich and the Jews has a special name, that being the Holocaust⁶. The word holocaust was previously used to describe any large catastrophe or disaster, and Engel notes that

¹ Levi, Primo. *If This is a Man and The Truce*. Translated by Stuart Wolf. Penguin Books, 1979. 20.

² Levi, 22.

³ Levi, 39.

⁴ Engel, David. *The Holocaust : The Third Reich and the Jews*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6521925>. 5.

⁵ Levi, 78.

⁶ Engel, 4.

its singular application to the murder of two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe suggests that that specific case of murder was a catastrophe above all else⁷. In the aftermath of the second world war, many did not see it this way. Of the 700,000 inmates in the camps when British and American troops arrived, only around 100,000 were Jews⁸. The Nazis targeted Jews, yes, but they also went after Roma people, physically disabled people, homosexuals, political dissidents – it was a wide ranging campaign of state persecution and exclusion. Levi writes of thousands of individuals, differing in age, condition, origin, language, culture and customs, all enclosed within the barbed wire⁹. Even his bed-companion in Auschwitz is not Jewish, or at least Levi suspects he isn't because he is not circumcised¹⁰. This was an intentional detail to include. There was diversity in victims. Jews were viewed by the public, and arguably by Levi as well, as one victim among many.

The diversity of victims extended beyond the camps. Hungary serves as an example. In the period before Germany invaded in 1944, a growing nationalist vision of 'Greater Hungary' advanced a new politics in which a Magyar (ethnically Hungarian) majority would control a territory hostile to minority populations¹¹. The state embraced discriminatory policies against Jews and non-Jews, such as Roma and Carpatho-Ruthenians, whenever the opportunity presented itself¹². Segal writes that orders targeted people without Hungarian citizenship, but that citizenship had already become a corollary of ethnic identification by exclusion as defined by the state¹³. Hungarian leaders sought to obliterate diversity and anyone deemed foreign through politics of exclusion. In other words, state policies and practices defined ethnicity in narrow,

⁷ Engel, 7.

⁸ Engel, 5.

⁹ Levi, 21.

¹⁰ Levi, 54.

¹¹ Segal, Raz. "Beyond Holocaust Studies: Rethinking the Holocaust in Hungary." *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.878111>. 6.

¹² Segal, 6.

¹³ Segal, 9.

exclusionary terms, yes with Jews at the top of the list, but to which all others deemed foreign were subjected. What Segal makes clear is that the persecution and annihilation of Jews in Hungary was a central part of a broader political drive to drive out all “different” groups. He argues that anti-Jewish positions acquired a specific meaning and became functional through a violence aimed at more than just uprooting the Jews¹⁴. Focusing on the mechanisms through which persecution and annihilation were carried out, with Jews at the center from which violence against others emanated, Segal is focused on the structures.

In *If This is a Man*, Levi also illuminates the structures through which he experienced the Holocaust. While Levi does not write about this same pre-deportation time period, his work aligns with Segal’s structural analysis in illuminating the Holocaust as a structurally produced experience under a nation-state, one that has taken Jewish persecution as a historical form, but was truly a more universal and systematic experience of death and dehumanization.

So, how does Levi do this? In part through what he refuses to write. Levi consistently resists framing the Holocaust in terms of divine punishment, sacred martyrdom or ineffable evil. He doesn’t use lofty or grandiose language. He does not believe that man is fundamentally brutal¹⁵. Levi is plainspoken. Suffering is systematic. Auschwitz is a system, one that silences social habits and instincts¹⁶. Dehumanization is administrative. The Lager was a great machine¹⁷, with complicated rules and innumerable prohibitions. Life, if one could call it that, functioned in accordance with those rules and prohibitions. Go out and come in; work, sleep and eat; fall ill, get better or die¹⁸. Prisoners are reduced into an anonymous mass, renewed and always identical,

¹⁴ Segal, 14.

¹⁵ Levi, 93.

¹⁶ Levi, 93.

¹⁷ Levi, 8.

¹⁸ Levi, 42.

a population of non-men¹⁹. Locating suffering within these structures, Levi reveals the mechanisms through which the Nazis constructed death and moral collapse.

Levi thus illustrates a violence and ultimate dehumanization originating in state exclusion, first in his transport to Fossoli in Italy and then Auschwitz, and catalyzing in the camp. In this way, his account mirrors Segal's emphasis on the state as an organizing force of exclusion. Levi locates evil not in abstraction but in ordinary operations of power: men in offices, slaves and masters, the masters slaves themselves²⁰. There is a hierarchy: the Kapo, the Blockältester, the Prominents. Everything is hostile, and hostility is a governing force of life. One wakes up at every moment, shaking in every limb, under the impression of an order shouted out by a voice full of anger in a language they do not understand²¹. Here violence is also constructed through the unintelligible and in the unknown. There is power and comfort in information, and that is a power that is withheld from Levi and those in the Lager. There is violence in hunger too. Levi paints a picture of hunger as a condition of existence at Auschwitz, structured by power relations. It is not the same thing to be given a ladle full of soup from the top as from the bottom, the bottom is for the Kapo. Hunger becomes a mechanism of domination, and is never-ending, calibrated and enforced. Violence is never-ending, calibrated and enforced. Fear is never-ending, calibrated and enforced. Through the rules, prohibitions, and hierarchies, fear, hunger and violence is constructed. It is through these systems that the Holocaust emerges as a structural entity.

An anecdote to exemplify: Every morning, Levi must make his bed perfectly flat and smooth. Earlier in the memoir, he also tells the reader that death begins with shoes, they become instruments of torture after long hours of work. Levi ends chapter 5, "Our Nights" with this

¹⁹ Levi, 96.

²⁰ Levi, 48.

²¹ Levi, 68.

statement: “When I have remade my bed and am dressed, I climb down onto the floor and put on my shoes. The sores on my feet reopen at once, and a new day begins²².” Here the reader sees clearly how rules coalesce with pain and monotony to produce this day, again and again.

For all that Levi writes about suffering, and the descent into hell and dehumanization does characterize the first 100 pages of his memoir, he does not characterize his experience at Auschwitz as a particularly Jewish experience. Rather, he tells his story more so as a story of “man” and man’s descent into hell. His universalizing style is clear from the outset when Levi introduces the reader in the first chapter to a “people condemned to death²³,” not the Jews condemned to death, but a people. In Levi’s context it was the Jews he was with in Italy, however he makes the deliberate choice not to frame it in that way. Furthermore, in discussing the sorrow of these people who knew they were going to die, Levy writes that “everyone felt it²⁴,” everyone including the German and Italian guards. They were not immune.

Writing about the transit to the camp, Levi describes the group he is traveling with as a “common sample of humanity.” Arriving at the camp, Levi tells the reader to “imagine a man” deprived of everything he loves – he will be a hollow man, he will lose himself²⁵. He will be a man, Levi writes, whose life or death can be decided with no sense of human affinity because he is no longer a man. A man, not a Jew or a Roma or a homosexual. A man. Now sure, Levi may be describing himself or his Jewish companions in this moment in the text, but in his choice to tell this story of dissolution through the lens of a man, Levi keeps the story open. At the Buna factory, Levi writes that a curse hangs over a building, a curse that “we all feel, and the Germans themselves feel²⁶.” Again, he is extending the experience beyond that of the Jewish people. Not

²² Levi, 70.

²³ Levi, 20.

²⁴ Levi, 21.

²⁵ Levi, 33.

²⁶ Levi, 79.

necessarily that the Germans felt the curse in the same way, or even that they all felt the same curse, but that everyone, “we” the Jews, the Germans, all were touched by the Holocaust.

Observing the impact of death and hell on his fellow prisoners, Levi writes that there are two categories of *men*. We feel, men, man - these are all-encompassing words

Levi’s story of man continues throughout the book. It poignantly comes to play when he is in the Ka-be, the infirmary, and has time to think about his situation at Auschwitz. He determines that the world he currently occupies, or more accurately the hell, is the result of “the evil tidings of what man’s presumption made of man in Auschwitz²⁷.” This line is critical. It highlights this throughline of thinking about the Holocaust first as this man made experience, but second as an experience that touched mankind, that speaks to mankind, that harmed people across mankind. It is man on man, not German on Jew or even the world vs Jew. What did man make of man? The Holocaust as a human experience. That is the story Levi is telling, and importantly, in telling this story, Levi does not erase the specifically Jewish form of persecution that brought him and keeps him in Auschwitz. At the same time, he does not make it the focal point of his experience either. It is a sort of subtle departicularizing.

This subtle departicularizing hits home on a pattern that comes up throughout Jewish history. Just as Jews have come to stand for all victims of the Holocaust, and the ultimate other in Hungary and Nazi Germany more broadly, there are numerous examples wherein Jews are the model [fill in the blank]. Thinking about the Holocaust, Jews have come to stand in for all victims. Turning to modernization, Slezkine argues it was about everyone becoming Jewish. Jews were the most creative entrepreneurs, the most experienced exiles, the most proficient

²⁷ Levi, 61.

professionals²⁸. Diaspora too, has come to stand alongside Jews. Jews are the “classic” case²⁹. However, in peeling back the layers and turning back to history in each of these instances, as many scholars have done, including scholars of the Holocaust like Engle and Segal, the particular, or special experience of the Jews begins to crack. One begins to see through it, and not that Jewish history is not unique or not special, but it is not the only history. That is of critical importance - and something I’d argue Levi is doing with his writing as well. His story, although told from the first person, is not framed as the only. Rather, it is a story of man.

In departicularizing, in moving away from Jews as uniquely victimized, we expand meaning. In expanding meaning, we are forced to confront new questions. Who or what is included? Who counts as a victim of the Holocaust? What makes a diaspora? What is antisemitism? Who is, referring back to this course’s central question, a Jew? Who gets to make those decisions? Departicularizing is only the first step in revisionist history.

Thinking about all of these things together: the Holocaust as a Jewish experience and as a universal experience. Of departicularizing and expanding meaning. Of Levi’s story of man and mankind, a reader might be left wondering: How do we talk, study and think about the Holocaust in ways that acknowledge the Jewish experience without making it the only experience? How do we talk, study and think about the Holocaust in ways that acknowledge its horrors without making it *the* horror above all else. Levi’s writing may offer one path forward. He writes from the position of a Jew, from his experience as a Jew, but does not frame his Judaism as the end all be all explanation of the story or universal answer to life’s suffering. Looking to contemporary solutions, another corrective measure may stem from the context within which the Holocaust is taught. Engle brings in the other groups who suffered during the Holocaust from the very

²⁸ Slezkine, Yuri. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton University Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828555>. 11.

²⁹ Brubaker, Rogers. “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (November 5, 2004): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000289997>. 2.

beginning of his book. Segal too is keen to include Roma, Carpatho-Ruthenians and all others who were persecuted along Jews in Hungary. In her essay “The Shoah After the Holocaust,” Pankaj Mishra writes that for most people outside of the West, whose experience with Europeans was to be brutally colonized, the Holocaust did not appear as an unprecedented atrocity³⁰. Noting that many people were recovering from the “ravages of imperialism” when the Holocaust was happening contextualizes the experience of those persecuted by the Nazis as one experience of imperialism among others. While the focus of Mishra’s essay is more so a critique of the Holocaust as a rationalization for the Nakba and the existence of the state of Israel, the context he provides in building up that argument is helpful in putting the Holocaust in more of a global story and global history. This widened historical lens does not deny the centrality of Jewish experience, but resists treating it as the sole interpretive frame, instead situating the Holocaust within a global history of empire, violence and dehumanization.

³⁰ Mishra, Pankaj. “Pankaj Mishra · the Shoah After Gaza.” London Review of Books, March 13, 2024. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n06/pankaj-mishra/the-shoah-after-gaza>.

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