

Rethinking Primo Levi's "Muselmann"

Presenter: Sharon Oster

Primo Levi's influence can be felt in how the figure of the "Muselmann" has been academically normalized in post-Holocaust discourse. In concentration camp lexicons and Holocaust survivor accounts, the term "Muselmann" refers to a phenomenon central to understanding the lager experience: Muselmänner are those closest to death by starvation and abuse, "selected" for the gas, and lowest on the camp hierarchy, often described as the "living dead." Levi, and following him, Giorgio Agamben, have stabilized the term's meaning: a fixed, silent, concentration camp "type," about to die and fated to do so. Yet I contend that the term raises crucial ethical issues worthy of critical reconsideration.

One impetus for this panel on rethinking Levi is my sense that the uncritical adoption of Levi's version of the "Muselmann" has produced a metonymic tool for the paradoxical experience of "living death" in Holocaust memoirs and scholarship. Yet although it is a significant concept and reality within the camps, I contend that the Muselmann phenomenon is not so straightforward. To see this, I will suggest, we need to revisit the concept in Levi's account as well as his own self-representation as a Muselmann of sorts.

For Levi, the concept is a literary one: from the perspective of the "saved," the "Muselmann" becomes a metaphor for the "drowned"; for Agamben, the Muselmänner represent the "lacuna" in every testimony, an ethical aporia that marks the existential condition of the camps. As a result, the term becomes shorthand for a basic human inability to adapt to camp brutality; inevitable death; and the consequent inability to testify to the experience of atrocity. Such analyses treat the category of the Muselmann as objective, yet I see the designation as subjective and fluid. Most survivors were "Muselmänner" of sorts, or passed through a "Muselmann" phase. Levi's own account reveals the term to be a rhetorical construction that distanced the "Other" closer to death than oneself.