

Rethinking Primo Levi

Primo Levi's influence in the field of Holocaust studies cannot be underestimated, and the Ottawa conference provides an excellent opportunity to take stock of the effects. From *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947; 1958) to *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Levi's writings have become authoritative canonical works of Holocaust literature, providing consistent reference points in our attempts to understand the Nazi camps. Levi's acerbic account of the Dante-esque descent of the innocent to "the bottom"; his unflinching anatomy of that swift and brutal transformation he calls "the demolition of a man"; and his iteration of the first lesson of Auschwitz—"here there is no why"—have profoundly affected Holocaust scholarship. Indeed, terms and concepts in his work have provided scholars with a number of paradigms. These include the "gray zone," Levi's term for the range of compromised human behavior in the camp; Levi's claim that "if the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born," given that "free words" fail to account for the devastation of camp internment and torture; and his portrayal of "the Muselmänner" as the mute living dead—the "complete witnesses," who cannot testify and in whose stead the survivors must therefore speak.

Seeking to rethink such paradigmatic uses of Levi, this panel focuses on Levi as a writer and author of significant Holocaust texts, but also as a scientist; a writer of science fiction; a sexual being questioning his manhood; and a recorder and critic of the human condition broadly. Following Berel Lang's 2013 biography of Levi, which proposes that we see Levi's life as a series of tensions, we probe the "divided road" between his life as a pre-war scientist and a post-war writer; his personal and more global moral commitments; and his ambivalent feelings about his own Jewishness. We aim to involve our audience in rethinking Levi's Auschwitz accounts through the lens of his non-Holocaust writings, as well as through paradigms drawn from outside the field of Holocaust studies—that is, critical paradigms of literary, linguistic, gender, and sexuality studies.