

“If Primo Levi is a Man: Writing Masculinity after Auschwitz”

Presenter: Gary Weissman

Scant attention has been paid to the place of gender and sexuality in Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, although the Italian title of this most widely read, frequently taught, and extensively discussed work of Holocaust literature—*Se questo è un uomo*, *If This is a Man*—points to the central place that questionable manhood occupies in his account.

To be sure, Levi’s biographers have noted a crisis of masculinity rooted in his childhood. Ian Thompson writes that when Levi was “the youngest, smallest, and shortest boy in his grade, and the only Jew,” his classmates likened circumcision to castration and teased him for being unmanly. Myriam Anissimov describes Levi as “a painfully shy young man” crippled by a “sense of inferiority in the presence of girls.” Carole Angier remarks that “the puritan repressiveness of good Turin society” led Levi and many of his friends to be “neurotically shy and awkward, as underdeveloped socially as they were advanced intellectually.”

Whereas Levi stands as the paradigmatic survivor-as-intellect in Holocaust Studies, scholars have hardly attended to his less ordered grappling with gender identity. Yet, it factored not only in how Levi experienced the virtually all-male world of the Lager, but also in how he wrote about the camps after the war. This presentation shows this to be the case by turning first to two stories *from Other People’s Trades* (1985), in each of which Levi recounts a childhood competition he had with another boy. It then turns to passages in *If This is a Man* in which Levi pairs himself with a series of male figures. Together, these examples seek to demonstrate how, through autobiographical writing, Levi constructs a series of male characters who serve as inverted and idealized variations of himself, figures through whom he probes and measures his own manhood.