

Primo Levi's "Survival in Auschwitz"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/primo-levis-survival-auschwitz>.

Introduction

Survival in Auschwitz is Primo Levi's first-person account of his experiences during the Holocaust. Originally published in Italian in 1948 with the title *If This Is a Man*, the memoir takes the reader from Levi's capture in Italy through his transport, his slave labor ordeal in the Auschwitz satellite factory Buna, and his survival under unspeakable conditions to his eventual liberation. In addition to recounting his experiences in precise, clinical, and sometimes ironic and detached prose, Levi muses on various topics such as the nature of ethics in the death camps, strategies for survival under duress, possibilities for forgiveness and reconciliation, and the imperative to bear witness. Many intellectual luminaries consider *Survival in Auschwitz* to be a literary masterpiece and essential to our understanding of the Holocaust. Until his suicide in 1989, Levi was one of Europe's premier public intellectuals, publishing numerous memoirs, essays, novels, and stories, mostly on the topic of the Holocaust.

This kit offers resources to aid a close reading of the book, in addition to material and activities that facilitate deep conversations about the existential issues raised by Levi's representation of the Holocaust.

Cover image: Primo Levi, ca. 1950s. Unknown photographer; Mondadori Publishers.

Subjects

Holocaust, Memoir

Reading and Background:

- *Primo Levi: A Life* by Ian Thomson (Picador, 2004) is a comprehensive, highly readable biography. In the final chapter, Thomson delves into some of the controversies surrounding Levi's suicide: whether, in fact, he committed suicide; whether the suicide was a direct result of his Auschwitz experiences; whether and how much it colors how we read Levi today.
- *Night* by Elie Wiesel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) is another famous literary memoir of Auschwitz written around the same time as *Survival in Auschwitz*. *Night* is very different in tone and narrative strategy and could be a useful comparison for teachers.
- In Philip Roth's interview with Primo Levi in *Shop Talk* (Penguin Random House, 2002), Roth's collection of interviews with writers, Levi goes into detail about how he managed to survive, and about the responsibilities of bearing witness.
- *The Reawakening* (first published in Italian in 1963), *The Periodic Table* (1975), and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), are other books by Primo Levi in which he expands on many of the themes from *Survival in Auschwitz*. *The Reawakening* is the story of Levi's return home to Italy after liberation, so it serves as a kind of sequel to *Survival in Auschwitz*.
- This photograph of [Buna](#), the slave labor camp where Levi toiled, can be a useful visual aid. The Nazis destroyed Buna before the end of the war.

Resources

1: Video clip, "Primo Levi, Back to Auschwitz," Italian with English subtitles, 1983.

Levi returned to Auschwitz for a public visit in 1983. He was accompanied by a group of Italian Jews, along with a documentary crew who recorded the visit for Italian television. In the half hour film, Levi speaks widely and freely to the Italian interviewer. The excerpt to focus on with students begins at approximately 7:00 and goes to the end of the fourteen-minute clip.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

Suggested Activity: Ask the class to compare the interview to the first two chapters of *Survival in Auschwitz*. Ask students to comment on Levi's demeanor as he tells the story in the video, and compare it to how they imagined he might have sounded as they were reading the pages. What might be the differences between trying to represent the Holocaust experience through writing versus through speech? What difficulties might a survivor face in trying to get across the experience through each medium? Is it possible to represent a deeply traumatic episode accurately? Why or why not?

Source: *Sorgenti di Vita (Springs of Life* – a television program of the Unione Comunita Israelitiche Italiane). "Primo Levi, Back to Auschwitz." Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI). April 25, 1983. *YouTube* video, 14:07. January 26, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPOKXfHOuw4>.

2: Excerpt from graphic novel, Art Spiegelman's "Maus: A Survivor's Tale," 1986.

Maus, a fictionalized memoir in comic book form, is the story of Vladek Spiegelman's Holocaust experiences, as told to his son Art. In this excerpt, Vladek explains to his son how ordinary ethics evaporated in the Holocaust, even basic family loyalties.

Suggested Activity: Ask the students to compare the *Maus* excerpt to the chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz* called "This Side of Good and Evil." This chapter is Levi's detailed examination of the death camp's weird market economy, with a particular emphasis on the ethics of theft and bribery. Ask students: what are the possibilities for maintaining moral standards under extreme circumstances? Divide the students into small groups and ask them to study Leviticus, chapter 19 (the holiness code), and/or the Ten Commandments. Ask each group to compose an "Auschwitz Code"—a list of dos and don'ts for human beings in extreme circumstances—and discuss the difficulties of establishing such a code.

Source: Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 116. Excerpt from MAUS by Art Spiegelman © 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986 by Art Spiegelman, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

3: Source sheet, excerpts from Holocaust survivor-writers Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Kosiński, and Paul Celan.

Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Kosiński, and Paul Celan were all writers who survived different aspects of the Holocaust and wrote successful, well-regarded books about their experiences, each in his own unique and often idiosyncratic style. Each writer, with the exception of Elie Wiesel, committed suicide.

Suggested Activity: In small groups, ask students to compare the styles, tones, and narrative choices of all five writers (including Levi). Ask students which pieces they prefer and why. Ask students to list the ways in which Primo Levi's story and writing style stand out from the other writers'.

Sources: Eli Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2009), 32.

Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: Penguin Books, 1959), 45.

Jerzy Kosiński, *The Painted Bird* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 62.

Paul Celan, *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. Pierre Joris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46-47. © 2005 by the Regents of the University of California.

4: Video excerpt, oral history interview with Norbert Wollheim, 1994.

In this clip Norbert Wollheim, an Auschwitz survivor who was imprisoned at the Buna slave labor complex where Primo Levi toiled, describes the physical deprivations the laborers endured every day, enough to destroy many of them emotionally, if not physically. This raises the question of Levi's suicide in 1987, more than forty years after his liberation. Did Levi take his own life because the Holocaust eventually did him in? Do we ever really survive our deepest traumas?

Suggested Activity: After viewing the clip, ask the students to read over the chapter of *Survival in Auschwitz* called "The Drowned and the Saved," and then the scene where Levi's friend Steinlauf urges him to wash up every day, even if it's in dirty water. Ask them also to read over Paul Celan's poem "Death Fugue" from resource #3 of this kit, and point out that Celan took his own life. Ask the students to respond to three questions in their journals: 1. What turned Auschwitz victims into what Levi called

Musselmen? 2. Why do you think Levi didn't become a *Musselman*? 3. Do you think Levi actually survived the Holocaust? Give them whatever information you think is necessary regarding Levi's suicide. (For a fascinating novelistic meditation on Holocaust writers who committed suicide, see *Golems of Gotham* by Thane Rosenbaum.)

Source: Norbert Wollheim, "Norbert Wollheim describes forced labor at the Buna works," (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Archives, 1994), <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/oral-history/norbert-wollheim-describes-forced-labor-at-the-buna-works-1>.

5: Excerpt from essay, "Who Owns Anne Frank?" by Cynthia Ozick, 1997.

There is an interesting debate among thinkers and writers as to whether any redemptive outcome or sense of happy ending is possible when thinking about the Holocaust. For example, many intellectuals attacked the final few minutes of Steven Spielberg's epic 1993 film *Schindler's List* because it flirts with the idea of a possible happy ending to the Holocaust. In the scene, survivors liberated from concentration camps begin marching toward their next destination and while they march we hear the unofficial Israeli national anthem, "*Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*" ("Jerusalem of Gold"), implying that the State of Israel effectively redeems the Holocaust.

In this excerpt from her famous essay on the diary of Anne Frank, writer Cynthia Ozick attacks any attempt to find silver linings in Holocaust material. She particularly targets various optimistic responses to Anne Frank's diary, and she wonders at the end of the essay if it would have been better for the world if the diary had been burned.

Suggested Activity: After reading the excerpt (and possibly assigning the entire article), and reviewing the scene from *Survival in Auschwitz* to which Ozick refers, have students debate the issue: Is it possible to speak of happy endings or redemption when discussing the Holocaust?

Source: Cynthia Ozick, "Who Owns Anne Frank?" *The New Yorker* (New York: October 6, 1997) 30-43.

6: Text excerpt from Levi's "The Periodic Table," 1975.

In the "Vanadium" chapter of *The Periodic Table*, Levi tells the story of his correspondence with Müller, a German businessman who had been a civilian supervisor at Buna, the Auschwitz satellite where Levi worked as a slave laborer. In 1963, Müller writes to Levi and offers an apology of sorts. He claims that he gave some prisoners food, though Levi doesn't remember this. He also denies knowing the full extent of Auschwitz, which Levi doubts. Müller asks to meet so the two can talk in person. The excerpt here paraphrases a letter Levi considered writing to Müller, declining to meet and refusing to offer forgiveness. But before Levi can send the letter, he discovers that Müller has died.

Suggested Activity: Ask different pairs of students to improvise and act out an imaginary meeting between Levi and Müller. What would they say to each other? Would Levi change his mind about offering forgiveness after encountering the man in person? Would Müller alter his approach, and if so, would Levi then forgive him? Instruct the students to allude to specific episodes or quotes from *Survival in Auschwitz* in their skits. Encourage the "audience" (other students) to ask questions of the characters.

Source: Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1984), 189.