

Angier, Carole. *The Double Bond Primo Levi: A Biography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

I wanted to believe in him. I even needed to. I had hoped to put him up on a pedestal with all the others; Wiesel and Amery, Bettelheim and Celan. There is a disturbing picture of him near the front of the book, his face strangely familiar and yet not; it is a young Jewish face; the eyes hungry and haunted, unlike his sister, who sits calmly next to him, steady, ready for anything. His was a characteristic Jewish face; a lot like the ones that litter the scrapbooks of my own family, scared broken down Jews, their eyes betraying them. I knew they rarely get better.

The author, Carole Angier, needed to believe in him too, but in a different way. She was in love with him; that was certain, it colored much of what she wrote. She had spent over a decade researching every facet of his life, and seemed convinced that she alone had figured out what so many others couldn't; why he often seemed so impenetrable. A desperate air fueled her writing, almost a lover's tone; she was protective and seductive simultaneously. Like most lovers though, she fell prey to a fixed notion of who he was, and transfixed by her own personal distortions, lost some of her ability to see. Ironically, her subject, Primo Levi, the famous Auschwitz survivor, writer, and scientist, would often do the same thing.

Primo Levi was always difficult to get to know. He was more comfortable watching people; listening to them talk. Many still remember Primo as a painfully shy adolescent, particularly around girls. He was serious, overly so, his demeanor eerily adult-like. Primo was unnaturally close with his sister; it seemed only she could pull him from the gloom that surrounded him. They would talk for hours, oblivious to those around them. Primo always performed well in school, and was drawn early to science. A skinny and frail looking kid, he was uncomfortable in his own skin.

To be fair, it was impossible for any Jewish kid to feel at ease during the late 1930's in Turin, Italy. Primo was just becoming a man when everything exploded. It hadn't always been like this for the Jews of Italy. Primo Levi was born into the only part of Western Europe where Jews had been living peacefully for over 500 years. Turinese Jews were known to be extremely reserved, almost puritanical; they tended to marry within the tribe. They were always a small group; their numbers never topped 4,000. Earlier, in Italy, there had been restrictions on where Jews could live, and what trades they could practice. By 1848, all this changed and Jews were able to move to the cities and enter many of the professions. Many of them were drawn to journalism, government service, the law, and all aspects of university life. Primo was almost 20 when Mussolini allied himself with Hitler and enacted the racial laws which claimed that "there is a pure Italian race and Jews do not belong to the Italian race." Italian Jews were immediately stripped of their basic civil rights. They could no longer hold any public service jobs, or serve in the armed forces, or own a business above a certain value. They were not allowed to marry non-Jews, or employ any. Soon, the restrictions were extended to include a ban on traveling, or owning a radio. Jewish children could not attend school. The Italian population did not resist, and Angier describes the mounting chaos amidst the Jews as they scrambled to survive, each one sensing that "you had to decide quickly-whether to hide someone or hide from him, help him or ask him for help, enroll him in your band or send him packing; and soon-very soon-whether or not to shoot him, whether or not to kill."

Primo's Jewish identity was shaped in response to the brutal teasing he endured at school, where he was ridiculed about his awkwardness with girls. The underlying implication was that his manhood was questionable, and this was somehow connected with being Jewish. Years later, he was unable to forget a certain classmate who told Primo that his circumcised penis was tantamount to castration, "perhaps not for everyone, maybe, but for you." Angier imagines what this might have felt like for the young boy,

"There is a latent fascism in all boys, a tendency to despise the weak and worship the strong. When political Fascism takes over this tendency is no longer controlled, like the dangerous animal it is, but let out, its coat brushed to a glossy sheen. The bullies are encouraged, the victims left more defenseless than ever, and altogether the situation of a small, skinny, clever Jewish boy becomes unenviable, even in an academic ex-antifascist school."

Primo can't recall having any religious feelings except for a brief period when he studied for his bar mitzvah, and tried to seek contact with God,

“but when he sought that contact, he’d found nothing. His teacher (who was probably not a very good one) presented him with a tyrannical punishing God, *dio padrone*, who did not appeal to him. She described an unknown, an unknowable, to whom nonetheless he was asked to pay homage, and in whom he must believe. ‘*Mi sembrava una violenza*’ he says: it seems to him an act of violence.”

His parents were not concerned; they both came from families who had been observant up to a generation or so before, but were no longer so.

Jewish families are flooded by stories of dark relationships between mothers and their sons; distorted affairs, fueled by need, excessive need. No one ever seems certain how these obsessive relationships flower, but once in motion; they take on a force all their own. Usually we look to the mother, certain she must be to blame, and ignore, as Angier does, the part others play in the creation of such a dynamic. We also overlook how, even in these ‘dark’ relationships, much is learned. Loving is difficult and messy, an easy place to drown, but delicious too, full of want. Primo never said or wrote much about his mother; most of what we know is second hand. Many felt her presence around him even when she wasn’t there. Others said she was cold and insensitive, not one to embrace her children. One person never holds all the cards for another; families are all high wire acts, the balance often tips one way or another. Most marriages, at some point, become a war, and children cast themselves with whomever they think can pull them through. It seems Primo felt his chances were best with his mother; and thus received both the benefits and deficiencies of her love.

Primo’s father, however, was not without influence. He had spent much of his adult life as a bachelor and married late; it seems the constraints of a traditional marriage were troublesome for him. He found Primo’s mother too quiet and reserved; for he was passionate and full of curiosity. A voracious reader, he never forgot to bring home books for his son. But Primo was not like his father, nor did he particularly like him; they were ill at ease with each other.

Most of us remember our families with more than a share of regret; we grow tired of how little changes, the same hurts repeated over and over again. We look elsewhere. Primo found great comfort in friendships, because “friendship, for Primo, was the opposite of love. Here he had no secret block, waiting like a reef to wreck him. Here he had what he lacked in love-confidence, trust and luck.” His friends showed him what his family could not, a freer kind of love.

Angier takes us into the world of Primo’s friends; young Jewish Turinese intellectuals, caught up in extreme times. A peculiar mixture of passion and impending doom surely fueled these relationships; no one knew what the next day would bring. Interrupted Jewish lives are painstakingly fleshed out one by one, creating a panorama of unforgettable portraits. Some would become partisans and fight, as Primo did briefly, before being captured and sent to Auschwitz. Others would hide where they could. A few escaped before it became too late to do so. Anxious, some did desperate things. Many became politically active for the first time in their lives, others would remain silent. Many died in the camps, an unspeakable death. The book has pictures of many of them; young bewildered Jewish faces, straining to smile. They were mostly Jews who had never paid much attention to their “Jewishness,” yet now it defined them, and they were caught:

“desperately trying to carry on as before in an atmosphere of theoretical pessimism and actual pleasure...living a happy life under the bombs. With their new sense of themselves as Jews, they celebrated Passover in the Via San Martino. On New Year’s Eve 1943 they partied so wildly at Saccarello, Primo’s family house near Superga, that Ada echoed Dante, as Primo would do later, in darker key: ‘Many things happened then, which shall best be left in silence.’ They continued to talk and read to excess; and write to excess too.”

One of the stars of Primo’s group was Franco Sacerdoti, known as the best looking Jewish man in Turin. His picture looks different from the others; strikingly handsome with big brown eyes, he seems slated for some kind of greatness. It was not to be. Sacerdoti was the seventh of eleven children of Guido Sacerdoti, who owned a paper factory in Naples. When Franco turned 20, his father allowed him to move to Turin, to work in his uncle’s textile firm. He soon married a very wealthy Jewish girl, but their union was troubled from the start. The girl’s father was soon arrested and taken to an Italian prison. He somehow managed to bribe someone for his release, provided he could find someone to replace him. Franco’s wife was desperate to have her father let go, and asked Franco to take her father’s place, assuring him it would only be for a few days, until they could

arrange for him to be freed. He agreed to take her father's place, but something went terribly wrong; he was sent to his death at Auschwitz. It is still suspected by some that perhaps his wife had knowingly sacrificed him for her father. But no one was certain, confusion was everywhere.

Another friend of Primo's, Guido Bachi, convinced Primo to fight the Nazis with him, as part of his partisan unit. Guido's father was a socialist and vehement anti-fascist; he was sent to prison at 75 for his boisterous political activism. Guido had a degree in economics and commerce, and worked in insurance with his father. His true passion was music; he was a wonderful pianist. He was the director of the University orchestra during the early 1930's until the racial laws were enacted, and he was let go. He was captured trying to fight, and spent months in Italian prisons, but luckily survived. He eventually landed in Paris, working as a representative for Olivetti.

There were the brothers, Ennio and Emmanuele Artom; both outstanding scholars and daring young men. When Ennio died accidentally mountain climbing, his brother Emmanuel began to look towards Judaism for answers. Their father, Emilio Artom, was one of the few professors in Turin who had refused to join the Fascist Party. Emmanuele soon became politically energized and was caught by the Germans during the spring of 1943. He was found dead a few days later in a prison cell in Turin.

Luciana Nissim was one of the shining stars of the group. She had come to study medicine at the University of Turin, and became politically active when the racial laws were enacted. Like Primo, she was deported to Auschwitz, where she survived, and returned to Italy to become a psychoanalyst.

When Primo got to Auschwitz, one of his Italian friends, Alberto, had him pulled off the line that was slated for certain death, by telling the SS guard that they were both chemists. The majority of their transport, 94 out of 125, was dead within 10 days of their arrival. Women and children were almost always immediately killed. Primo never forgot how his friend Alberto "understood before any of us that this life is war; he lost no time complaining or commiserating with himself and others, but entered the battle from the beginning. He fought with a sure instinct, with great astuteness and great daring." Alberto never made it back.

But Primo Levi did return, and the reader may become distressed by his post-Auschwitz response, particularly in light of the close relationships he shared with his Jewish friends; in college, as a partisan, and above all, in Auschwitz. One would imagine he would find it impossible not to feel beholden to the many friends he lost; to their memory. But his response was often cold and confusing. He remained fixated on writing about Auschwitz as an observer; a social scientist trying to decipher madness, objectively, without passion or anger. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he tells us that the SS were not monsters, but simply average men with an inclination towards the wicked; "miseducated and deformed by the vast power of a totalitarian regime." He goes on to say that "just as the torturers were not monsters, so the victims were not martyrs and saints: they too were average human beings corrupted in the same proportion...by the internal system to which they were subjected." It's as if he is looking for equity between aggressor and victim; there isn't any. He neglects the greater truth; Auschwitz was a catastrophe of the Jewish people.

Primo Levi never behaved like the other survivors; his public persona was odd; disquieting. He returned to Italy after Auschwitz, married, and had two children. He began a lengthy and successful career as a chemist and writer. Unlike Eli Wiesel, who never stopped speaking about Auschwitz with his head bowed, and his eyes misting over, Primo remained masked. He was probably embarrassed by Wiesel's lack of reserve; it must have seemed distasteful to him. He was not interested in baring his soul. Wiesel's religious hunger must have disturbed him as well.

In *If This Is a Man*, Primo tells a story about a fellow prisoner who knows he is going to die. Often, a condemned man would receive an extra portion of bread on the day before his death. When the man is not given his extra piece, he cries out, and is reluctantly given an extra ration. Later, Primo sees another prisoner, Kuhn, who is lying on his bed thanking God that he has not been chosen that day to die. Primo writes, "Kuhn is out of his mind. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him? Beppo, who is twenty years old and is going to die in the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it, and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything, and without thinking anymore...If I were God, I would spit on Kuhn's prayer." Why would he have such condemnation for a helpless man praying for life? There is something distressing about his contempt for such a helpless man.

Primo's views on Israel were also troubling. He was ambivalent about Israel from the start, and concerned that it had become too militaristic. In 1969, he signed a protest letter in Turin by a group of left-wing Jewish intellectuals who objected to Israel's policies. Many were disappointed by this, but he refused to budge, going so far as to say that "Everyone is somebody's Jew," and the "Palestinians are Israel's Jews."

Thane Rosenbaum, the son of Holocaust survivors, has recently written a novel, *The Golems of Gotham*, which portrays dead Holocaust survivors returning to New York City to re-enact Kristallnacht upon the residents of Manhattan. It is their punishment for forgetting. Rosenbaum's fantasy of revenge grows increasingly bizarre. Tattoos disappear from people's skin and showers no longer function; there can be no more of either after Auschwitz. Rosenbaum is fixed on revenge; his book a loud primal scream. Rosenbaum's response seems more authentic than Primo's strained rationality; being unreasonable seems to make more sense.

But perhaps I judge Primo too harshly. The inner struggle of Primo Levi remained inside Primo Levi. He may have left us a clue at the end. On his gravestone, he had his name, and the date of his birth and death inscribed as most people do, but there was something else; the number the Nazis tattooed on his arm, 174517.

Carole Angier has written a complex and intriguing biography that makes you think, makes you angry, and makes you remember.