

SLATE 1574 TAKE 1

IWM 2975 / 03

Q:

How much antithere was..

A:

Anti zionist has never been a big problem in Italy, or to be more precise it was so that it was a problem only locally and for a short time. And the reasons are many - first of all Jews in Italy have always been not very many, never more than some fifty thousand and since there was no big migration of Jews from abroad in Italy they lived, they used to live in Italy in a condition of practical..practically complete isolation.some way as Italians they are Italians in fact, dressed some way er... had a general appearance of Italians, it is not easy in fact it's almost impossible to distinguish a Jew from a Christian. So the most important reason of our.....which is to feel a Jew like an alien has always been absent in Italy.

Q:

In 1943 do you feel any affects yourself personally at all?

A:

Almost nothing - I'm saying almost because in fact my condition was slightly different from the other condition of boys in Italy. I um..did not follow the lessons of the legion which er..obligatory in Italy at the time and still now. So um...for one hour in the week I was standing in the corridors during the lesson of....for Christians.my name in itself is self explaining, so some..some times some er..comrades of mine ask me why don't you go to Mass Sunday um..why don't you cross yourself when a funeral is passing in the road and so on. My father and my grand-father told me about ghettos in Italy, they were ghettos until 1848, and my grand-grand father did in fact remember that as a boy having been in a ghetto

But of course they...they were not ghettos in thequite later on at this
This is a verbatim transcript of spoken word. It is not the primary source, and it has not been checked for spelling or accuracy.
er..quarters of er...

A: Yes it was not a...yes...Jews were compelled to inhabit ~~ghettos~~ ghettos but they could come out in the day to travel and so on.

Q:you suffered nothing....

A: Yes..almost nothing. Some..sometimes I..I met some boy asking me rude questions about Jews being er..greedy..things like that..greedy, er..about being um..more interested in money than other people, but they were marginal difficulties.

Q: Can you tell me how it changed when the Germans took over?

A: It changed almost abruptly before the Germans came, that is in 1938 when/ Mussolini after a meeting with Hitler abruptly decided to introduce a racial legislation in Italy too - it was quite a shock for everybody, for every Jew in Italy. We were so used to live exactly the same way like other people in Italy - in fact many Jews professed that it was no reason not to be.in Italy was obliged to have that er..um...

Q: ...

A: ..er..to be inscribed in the Facist.. Facist Party, it's not like Germany it was a general..a necessity you had to be enrolled in the Facist Party. And er..among the high er..the high.... some Jews were there...some Secretaries..in fact there was notbut in a matter of some months this er..er...this old er..these ancient/.. between Jews and Christians disappeared. First of all, Jews were not allowed any more to go to schools..to er..to be civil servants, a Jewish doctor could not cure a Christian patient, Jews were not allowed to have servants er..what you call them er..maids ...at home.

Q: **And what..and how did that affect you
personally - did it make you feel**

A: **Not..personally not because I was already
at the....**

CUT....

Q: Can you tell me how it affected you personally in 1938 after...

A: Luckily not very seriously because at that time I was already enrolled at the university in the SA...in the chemical... in chemistry and the law admitted me to follow my courses of chemistry up till the end - which I did partly for me, and I did appear later on . So I continued my studies, my father lost his job but it was not particularly..he was already in a pension so it was not particularly er..hard .hard time for me. After obtaining my ..how do you call it...my title my ...

Q: ...

A: ...my grade..my grade I worked as a chemist it was...this was allowed to work - not for the State not in official positions not for private business it was allowed. So I worked about two years as a chemist, when at the time of the ..when Germans following the armastice signed by....in Italy ...Northern Italy, this was a....everybody ..everybody in Italy did know what that meant, and we had already heard about the Germans acting very rudely against Jews in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in Austria, in Germany itself even..France - so I decided with my mother and my sister, my father was already dead at the time, to go away..we retired in the mountainsand after some weeks we met some friends..not Jewish..but my aids and we decided to ..PAUSE...yes very ...to..to ..PAUSE.. become a.....it was very ..it was ingeniousness....we had no money...no weapon..no experience no military experience....Arway we decided to be./...and we er...looked for connections with the general partisan movement starting everywhere in Northern Italy. But in Italy after ..in December '43 we werewe were caught in an action over ...PAUSE...

A:

Search...like er...er...

Q:

....

A:

You understand...we were caught and I was
pistol a pistol rid of it
er....I had the time to...to get rid of my./.I had ./I get...
~~xxx~~ and so when they asked me the Facists.....they were Facists...Italian
Facists they asked me what are you doing here...I had to choose between
declaring myself a partisan or somebody looking for shelter. Well I decided
after some months...after some days of interregation I decided to declare myself
as a Jew, in fact the Facist told me you are a Jew.

CUT.....

PRIMO LEVI

Q: Can you explain to me again that you were caught - that you had ~~xxxx~~ to choose between

A: I was being interrogated by the fascists and by the gestapo together, it was in fact an official of the gestapo, travelling in Northern Italy to look for communists for Jews and so on, for political enemies of the Reich. So during my interrogation they asked me what are you doing here, among the snow you are not, not escaping from bombardments, you are somebody who are you. If you are a Jew, (they suspected me to be a Jew because I had false papers), but so new, that they looked very unlikely, they didn't look terrible, if you are a Jew we are putting you in a concentration camp here in Italy until the end of the war. If you are a partisan we will shoot you. So after some hesitation I declared to be a Jew. I suppose this man was in good faith I had to go to a concentration camp in Italy because there was such a concentration camp, near (name) near(name), it was formerly a camp for English prisoners of war and indeed I was sent to to this concentration camp for Jews. It was nothing very terrible it was a concentration camp with plenty of opportunities for to communicate for the exterior we could keep our money buy something to eat, it was a normal concentration camp for displaced persons. So we kept some hope of remaining there until the end of the war - not after about 1 month the SS made appearance in this concentration camp and we understood there was no escaping. In a matter of two days starting from the appearance of the first SS who was condemned to 15 years of imprisonment just last year, he has been recognised. Well after two days starting from Germans entering the camp at we were packed in a goods train

1978-1981 cont.
and sent to Auschwitz. ^{http://collections.ushmm.org} It was exactly the same way Germans had
^{Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection}

in the course of the years first experimenting in France, in Holland, in Poland and so on. They were cattle trucks, 45 to 50 people a truck, no - nothing to eat, nothing to drink, they told us (the Germans) take - take with yourself everything you need for winter, furs, money, brilliant if you have jewels, dollars, foreign money, foreign currency, you have to go and work in very cold place and so everything you, you are allowed to bring with you everything you want only very, only much later, we understood the reason for that, they spoiled us completely, they (pause)

Well the goods we were allowed to take with us, were taken away from us until the last - the rings everything, we entered the camp houses completely nude. The journey, the three days and three nights, two or three, we were 650 people all Italian Jews or Jews not Italian but having been caught with us in Italy and/entered Italy in the last
^{who}

Three of us died, during the journey but we were not allowed to discharge, to get rid of the corpses because the number had to coincide, starting number and the right number. At our arriving somewhere we didn't, we did not know where we were, where we were, we had read the name of Auschwitz on the label on the trucks in the trucks of the wagons, trucks but nobody of us knew what Auschwitz meant and nobody in Europe did know what this name meant at this time. Of course we supposed something terrible was waiting for us, but nobody of us had a clear idea of our destiny. At our arriving in the night at the station, in a sealed station, it was we learned later on it was the sealed station of the town ^{Auschwitz} not of the concentration camp, some trains arrived at the town of Auschwitz and the sealed station of Auschwitz and some trains directly in the concentration camp. We arrived at the town. Very hurriedly we were divided in three, three groups, 96 men fit for work, 29 women fit for work and all the others that is old people, children, mothers with children, and everybody

who declared not to be prepared to work, they asked us are you prepared to work hard or not. .Somebody feeling shrewd said no I am not, I am not well I'm sick, they did not know that with this phrase they had signed their condemnation - their So we went 96 men were loaded on a truck, on a lorry and carried to somewhere in the night, we learned the day after that we were in a secondary camp it was a working camp with the name of(name) in neighbourhood of Auschwitz, in fact it was administrated by Auschwitz but it was particularly a labour camp, not directly an extermination camp.(name) had been built in the neighbourhood, in fact within a factory, it was in almost built in place where a factory of synthetic rubber was being built up, built up. And we worked as unskilled workers for the erection of the factory

cut.....

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Reel 2

PRIMO LEVI

Q: Can you describe your work and the conditions of that unskilled work

A: Yes we learned much later that(name) was a quite particular concentration camp, it was the result of an understanding between the SS administration and the industry at that time, you know the only in Germany. The industry required from the SS people for working in a condition fit for working, the SS insisted on the fact that the concentration camp is essentially an extermination camp, so it was a very curious sort of a compromised between two opposed incidences. Work was very hard because we had no dress, we had only the stripped dress of cotton, we had no gloves, in the winter, we had to work very hard from starting from 5 o'clock in the morning until after walking into the camp still we had many things to do in the camp, control for the lice, control of cleanliness, control of shoes, the German drill, military sort of drill. In the factory we were on under the of the civil authority and so we are not under control of the SS, this was something better than in other camps. Moreover people with a skill, for instance, plumbers, electricians, solderers, welders, welders, had opportunity^{to}/find skilled job for them which was an advantage of course. I was a chemist and this was a to be a chemical factory. But it was still being built, until July the Germans did not need a chemist for their laboratories but in July we were told if somebody among us was a chemist to apply. Many applied chemists and not chemists of course, everybody who thought to be able to do the applied as a chemist. In the month of July '44 we were examined very seriously by a German chemist and among about 80 people we were chosen three, three of us and I was one of the three.

I can say I learnt Germany, I learnt German for this purpose, I understood

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very clearly that it was a way of escape, to be put away from unskilled labour, which was extremely painful for me, I'm not very strong, and I had to carry logs to dig earth, to pull waggons, do everthing - everything is needed in a factory in construction.

Q:

A: No at that time I had lost almost completely any hope for survival. But I had kept some strength, I had luck, /I had made an Italian civil worker of almost my compatriot and he brought me something to eat ~~xxx~~ sometimes but helped me to float, to get to remain afloat.

Q: (faint)

A: Hunger, hunger was a thing of every hour of every minute, it is difficult to explain/^{you}what hunger is, it is quite different from hunger normal people feel when they are later one hour for a meal, it is ~~is~~completely different it is after some week of starvation, it is a feeling distributed everywhere in the body of every cell of the body, every cell of your body is hungry and you as soon as you are asleep you are dreaming of it, if I may so it is a chronical, chronical hunger, but not a hunger a chronical one. Every beat of strength remaining in you is intended to get something anyway in every possible way something to eat, something more to eat.

Q: Was it at this point that

A: Yes. Yes. This was the most unexpected shock we received entering the concentration camp, moreorless consciously we hoped in.

finding at least solidarity among comrade prisoners. But it was not so. We found a completely different kind of society, everybody was the enemy of the other, it was extremely rare to be able to have a friendship, I did so, in fact my need of human contact was so strong, I was very young at this time, my need for a - human contact was so strong, that I succeed^{-ed}/in having some friends in the concentration camp. And this was no doubt a factor of survival for me. But generally it was not so, everybody had to fight his battle alone, not only against camp but against the comrades themselves, and it was extremely demoralising to be compelled to watch your bit of bread from it being stolen away from your neighbour in the bunk. This was terrible.

Q: (faint) not clear

A: Yes to guard it, not to watch it. To keep it under your strict in your pocket not here, here it was already dangerous, it could be stolen, during the night or under your eyes. From your friends, from your comrades, next next bunk to you.

cut.....

PRIMO LEVI

Q: Perhaps you can talk about you can tell me about

A: As I told you before our camp was somewhat different from other camps for instance in(name) nearby four miles from my camp there was a crematorium oven burning bodies day and night there was no escape from there B..... some friends of mine went to B..... and they told me about that, it was something impossible to describe, this continuous presence of around you. A friend of mine from his from her it was she was a girl at the time, from her fence to, from her window could see in the night the flames of B..... of the crematorium, crematorium oven. In my camp there was no crematorium, many people disappeared but silently. During my stay in I for one year, I never saw a corpse, never, only after being liberated. So we had the opportunity of cutting of the throat in the of course many disappeared, after three months, one half of our transport from Italy had already disappeared, and there was some talking about gas chambers and crematoriums, but they were not under our senses, under our eyes and so it was possible with a sort of a mental trick to shut our eyes and to refuse the to refuse ^{death} that, to speak about that speak about being caught in a selection, was very improper it was and somebody who acted like this who spoke told about concentration, about er gas chambers, was ~~was~~ obliged to keep silent it was as improper as in party in normal life to ~~talk~~ ^{speak} about gangster, and indecent.

Q: You were talking about

A: Yes I wrote a book about my stay in Auschwitz, in a chapter of my book has a title the submerged and the saved ones, in Italian (.....) I don't know exactly the English translation. The

submerged as a rule have those who don't keep afloat they don't,
 they did not carry the first shock and after one week of concentration
 camp were already lost. Not materially lost but with no hope of survival.
 They were called in the concentration camp and they lucky lost
 almost completely their sensitivity. There was also another way of
 losing your sensitivity and it was the opposed one to climb to be a
 social climber in concentration camp. Somebody succeeded in doing this.
 Many particular qualities were needed to do that. You had to understand
 German very well, to be very shrewd, to be very to be free of every
 solidarity with your mates, the people making a in
 a concentration camp it was not exactly what you mean by do a
 in normal life, for instance to be a it is a of the
 it was already a big step upwards to be a controller of lice, was an order
 in almost that everybody with a function had already begun to.....
 My personal was not like this, I was very big
 in the concentration camp. I made some/..outside of it,
 chemical laboratory.

Q: The next thing I'd like to talk about is how

A: Yes perhaps it was

Q: How important it was/to understand German
 very quickly,
 to learn

A: Yes. I've spoken before of the shock of entering a human
 group without any solidarity, one of the reasons of solidarity lading
 was the comprehension, the official language which was
 German of course but many inmates were Polish or Jews speaking Yiddish
 or Hungarian or French or Holland or Dutch and so on, so the environment

of us in the first days was completely upsetting you. It was an ocean of incomprehension of orders being shouted in foreign languages, and it was extremely important to get immediately as soon as possible some sort of an understanding, I think the first day I was there I immediately told to the bible story of the it was an extremely coincidence down there in Auschwitz a tower was being erected and it was being erected among the confusion of languages. And it was a doomed tower like the one of ^{Babel} it was a - in an astonishing repeating age old history of human effort being frustrated by the lack of comprehension.

Q: Explain why it was that you were left behind

A: . Already the end of 1944 we heard by ~~night~~ night the rumble of guns of Russian guns and we knew we were very clear everybody of us knew quite well what was going to happen because some news had arrived to us of what had happened in December * I think '44 the Germans had put four machine guns at the four corners of the camp and everybody had been killed so we expected something like this to happen to happen in Auschwitz.

cut.....

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PRIMO LEVI

Reel 3

Q: Tell me again

A: Starting from December 1944 we already heard night and day the rumble of guns and we knew that meant the Russians were coming, we were everybody of us had a very clear idea of what was likely to happen with us because we heard news of what happened in other camps in for instance where four machine guns had been put by the Germans at the four corners of the camp and the camp had been completely destroyed before the Russian arrived. What happened was ~~was~~ somewhat different and we never knew why in fact I was never sick during my stay in Auschwitz and ludily I got sick with Scarlet Fever exactly the just time at the beginning of January 1945 I had a very high fever and I was obliged to go to the surgery. I had Scalet Fever, I was put in a bunk and two days after that the Germans cleared the camp that is they obliged every being able to walk to the railway, about 9 tenths of the camp went away this way, it was a terrible journey I learnt about that very - much later about one half of walking people were killed during the journey by the cold (it was winter). They died from starvation, or they were killed by the SS because they couldn't walk any longer. We remained we ^{sick} ~~xxx~~ people remained in the abandoned camp for 10 days perhaps our salvation was provocated by a bombardment a bombing - our camp was bombed very heavily that night and many barracks went into fire but luckily the Germans thought the camp was completely destroyed and they went away so we remained 10 days between the departure of the Germans and the arrival of the Russians alone without anything to eat ~~and~~ naturally with our hunger. But we were not killed. In fact few among us and I was I was among the few moreorless were able to walk, we went around looking for womething to eat, we found

1977 take 1 cont. potatoes buried in the ground, ^{http://collections.ushmm.org} for winter, we found an oven, and we ^{Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection} succeeded in keeping alive until the arrival of the Russians. WE were about 700 of us sick people at Auschwitz and I reckon that about one half died during these ten days, with two friends comrades I succeeded not only in keeping ourselves alive but to rescue our inmates in the same room, in fact we cured them, as well as we could. We cooked potatoes for them, we gave them drugs, found in the half destroyed surgery and so we were we had ~~been~~ put in the same room, we were three with scarlet fever, two or three with typhoid, one with and un~~ex~~plainably nobody of us contracted the of the others this was quite/to be explained. So I was very feeble, very feeble, very sick and very tired at the arrival of the Russians but it was

Q: What did the Russians do

A: They were ^{still} ~~xxx~~ fighting, they had not much leisure to occupy themselves with us anyway the Sunday when they came they gave us something to eat, a cow alive, the day after a boy appeared among us coming from the country around, pulling a cow, this cow was immediately slaughtered by somebody and the entire camp received some meat, after 1 year of deprivation of meat, this was a danger somebody ate too much meat at once and died of it.

Q: (not clear) (faint)

A: Yes it was in fact, it was difficult we were not used to it anymore and it was the beginning of our return to civilised life.

This collaboration, I remember quite clearly and with love to this extremely difficult beginning, this new start to a human life - at the beginning of collaboration, collaboration between comrades, in fact the two friends with whom I collaborated are my friends still now. I write to them as soon as much as possible I go to France to ~~DEET~~ visit them

Q: Can you tell me the way

A: It was difficult because it was a disappeared habit among us, there was no collaboration - normally, but liberty co-incided with us with making the collaboration. Working not working and toiling, not for yourself but for others too.

Q: ^{did} So what form/the difficulty take

A: I don't understand

Q: You say - can you describe the sort of difficulty

A: It was difficult to think to your comrade as to a human being. Normally formerly it was your neighbour was your enemy. Your concurrent in the struggle for life, liberation was a stop to that. Your comrade was not anymore your adversary in the struggle for life but a human being who had - who was entitled to be helped. It was really a sort of re-awakening for us, of our sensitivity for human mutual help, was being born again in us and around us

cut.....