

‘Why I refuse to hate Nazis’



by Primo Levi

He is a major figure of 20th-century literature. Born an Italian Jew in 1919, he trained as a chemist, but was then sent to Auschwitz. He survived to write memoirs and novels, many of which are about his experiences of the Holocaust.

Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, was famous for writing about the horror in a calm, detached way. He explains how he did this in this moving interview given just one year before he died.



“Work sets you free”: So reads the notorious sign above these prisoners at Auschwitz.

The world in which we Westerners live today has grave faults and dangers, but when compared to the countries and times in which democracy is smothered it has a tremendous advantage: everyone can know everything about everything. Information today is the “**fourth estate**”. In an **authoritarian** state it is not like this. There is only one Truth, proclaimed from above. Propaganda is substituted for information.

Still, it was not possible to hide the existence of the enormous concentration camp apparatus from the German people. What’s more, it was not (from the Nazi point of view) even desirable.

Creating and maintaining an atmosphere of undefined terror in the country was one of the aims of Nazism. It was just as well for people to know that opposing Hitler was extremely dangerous.

“BECAUSE I AM NOT A NAZI, I REFUSE TO GIVE WAY TO

THE TEMPTATION TO HATE.”

It is true that the great mass of Germans remained unaware of the most atrocious details of what happened later in the camps: the methodological industrialised extermination on a scale of millions, the gas chambers, the cremation furnaces, the vile **despoiling** of corpses.

Among other precautions, in order to keep the secret, only cautious and cynical euphemisms were employed by the official language: one did not write “extermination” but “final solution”, not “deportation” but “transfer”, not “killing by gas” but “special treatment”.

Not without reason, Hitler feared that this horrendous news, if it were divulged, would compromise the blind faith that the country had in him, as well as the morale of the fighting troops. And yet varied sources of information were available to most Germans. But most Germans didn’t

know because they didn’t want to know. Because, indeed, they wanted not to know.

I regard hatred as bestial and crude, and prefer that my actions and thoughts be the product, as far as possible, of **reason**. Much less do I accept hatred directed collectively at an ethnic group, for example at all the Germans. If I accepted it, I would feel that I was following the **precepts** of Nazism, which was founded precisely on national and racial hatred.

I must admit that if I had in front of me one of our persecutors of those days, certain known faces, certain old lies, I would be tempted to hate, and with violence too; but exactly because I am not a **fascist** or a Nazi, I refuse to give way to this temptation.

I believe in reason and discussion as the supreme instruments of progress. Thus, when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lamenting tones of the victim or the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge.

I thought that my account would be more credible and useful the more it appeared objective, the less it sounded overly emotional; only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers.

All the same, I would not want my abstaining from explicit judgement to be confused with an indiscriminate pardon. No, I have not forgiven any of the culprits, nor am I willing to forgive a single one of them, unless he has shown (with deeds, not words, and not too long afterwards) that he has become conscious of the crimes and the errors, and is determined to condemn them, to uproot them from his conscience and form that of others, because an enemy who sees the error of his ways ceases to be an enemy.

This text is an excerpt from an interview Primo Levi gave to New Republic in February 1986.

YOU DECIDE

Do you agree that a Nazi who repents should be forgiven?

ACTIVITIES

Write a short story titled *The Day I Stopped Hating*. (It does not have to be autobiographical.)

WORD WATCH

Fourth estate – In medieval Europe, society was often described in terms of three “estates”, or classes of people: usually the clergy, the nobility and the commoners. Although that concept is no longer used, the term “fourth estate” is often applied to the press.

Authoritarian – A society in which people have

few freedoms and are expected to be loyal to the government, and bow to its authority, is said to be “authoritarian”.

Despoiling – Stealing valuables from someone.

Reason – Levi trained as a chemist, and worked as a scientific consultant after the second world war. He sometimes drew on chemistry in his writing, often in a metaphorical way. His book *The Periodic Table* tells 21 autobiographical stories, each of which is

linked to a chemical element.

Precepts – General rules or guidelines on how to behave.

Fascist – A political ideology combining populism, aggressive nationalism and authoritarianism (see above). Its heyday was the mid-20th century, when figures like Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini were in power.

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Notes

