

Primo levi: the two-part victim



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The victimization of Primo Levi must be addressed in two parts: the victimization of his body and the victimization of his humanity. The distinction, as menial as it may appear, is essential in placing blame for the horrors of his experiences in the concentration camp. With regard to his physical victimization, internment and forced physical labor, it can be seen that the Nazi efforts, in addition to the forced ineffectiveness of his pre-incarceration activities, are responsible for his suffering. At the same time, though, it is his personal choices and attitude that allow his humanity to be sacrificed. Primo Levi was an Italian Jew from Turin. Trained as a chemist, he found himself in an anti-Fascist movement that was missing “ contacts, arms, money and the experience needed to acquire them” (Levi 13). The fledgling group further suffered from a lack of men fit for fighting and an inundation of refugees searching for “ protection, a hiding place, a fire, a pair of shoes”. When on December 13th, 1943, the three fascist militia companies swept into the mountain camp, Levi was taken prisoner “ as a suspect person” only to later be deported to Auschwitz, a concentration camp in Poland (Levi 13). The nature with which Levi was captured demonstrates what is to be blamed for his victimization. Taken while attempting to resist, trying to hide, Levi was not a victim of his own choice. Others “ had given themselves up spontaneously...because they lacked the means to survive, or to avoid separation from a captured relation, or even – absurdly- ‘ to be in conformity with the law’” (Levi 14). Thus, unlike those who chose to be imprisoned, he cannot be blamed for his capture. His diction emphasizes the point. Levi becomes disdainful when he refers to those that willingly gave themselves up to follow Fascist legislation. The tone of the passage is semi-patronizing through the use of quotation marks, implying

that he himself cannot even take responsibility for the language of such an excuse. Also, the use of the adverb “absurdly” demonstrates that he does not believe this to be a righteous reason (Levi 14). It is these Jews to whom perpetuate “a commonplace still prevailing in Italy: a Jew is a mild person... unwarlike, humiliated, who tolerated centuries of persecution without ever fighting back”; the same stereotype Levi attempts to vanquish through his book (Levi 186-187). It is the rebellious activities prior to his incarceration, conditions of his arrest, and disdainful attitude toward those that forsook their freedom that best demonstrate Levi’s helplessness regarding his imprisonment. His victimization develops further with his physical suffering at Auschwitz. Upon reaching the camp, half of the group, comprised of women, children and old men, were “swallowed” up by the night, “pure and simply,” while Levi’s grouping “had been judged capable...of working usefully for the Reich” (Levi 20). Levi is taken to Monowitz-Buna where the intense security measures, decreased food and regimented work forces him into an insufferable situation. The idea of escape is impossible: The camp is “surrounded by two fences of barbed wire, the inner one carrying a high tension current...(and) the prohibitions (which) are innumerable” (Levi 31-33). Alongside forced servitude, the prisoners’ diets further debilitate them to “obscene torment and an indelible shame” where the soup that is eaten “in order to satisfy (their) hunger... swells (their) ankles” (Levi 61). Hard labor, of course, tortures the prisoners further. One chemist must carry 175 pound wooden sleepers “more or less at the limits of (his) strength” while barely being able to survive (Levi 67). This sort of suffering cannot be blamed on its victims; it is the product of the system as seen in Levi’s attitude toward such work. Levi uses every excuse to avoid suffering. When the load threatens to

crush him he finds his bedmate who “ seems a good worker and being taller will support the greater part of the weight” (Levi 67). He visits the latrine, luckily located a great distance away from his worksite, in order to stall the strain on his body (Levi 67). He searches the fields for the lighter loads (Levi 69). Levi even goes as far as risking his status as able-bodied by going to Ka-Be, the infirmary, to have a wound checked out, resulting in bed rest (Levi 47). “ The life of Ka-Be is limbo,” he writes, but so are all of his attempts to fight the system from within (Levi 50). He is playing every angle in the system to survive, the attribute of someone victimized by the system and not by himself. It is through his actions that the reader understands that he is not to blame for his physical suffering; that is to be placed upon the shoulders of the Fascist system that incarcerates him and forces him into the labor that he continues to fight against on a daily basis. Yet it is in Levi’s mindset that the reader begins to find the victimization he forces upon himself. Levi adopts the mindset that it is the system that has made him “ forgetful of dignity and restraint”. He becomes the number on his arm, 174517 (Levi 27). The same man who, upon arriving, found the compassion in himself to tell a fellow sufferer with a wife and daughter that the women must be well off, despite his certain convictions that they are to be killed, begins to play the games of telling the “ freshman” that he “ can leave his bowl of soup ‘ in your custody’” and “ sending him to the most ferocious of the Kapos to ask him if it is true that his is the... ‘ Potato Peeling Command’” (Levi 24-28). Levi uses those around him to lessen his own burden. The effects upon his mentality and morality are evident when his compassion upon arriving is compared to the question of whether or not he must tell Sattler who “ does not understand German” that the shirt that he is mending

“ will be of no more use” (Levi 129). By the end of his term he has begun to question the same ethics that gave him his compassion—and his humanity—before his internment. When given a surplus of soup he resorts to “ fressen, the way of eating of animals” (Levi 76). He allows Resnyk to carry the majority of the load in order to lighten his own burden with no mention of Resnyk’s sacrifice (Levi 67). Yet the moral corruption that he exhibits is not necessary for camp survival. This is demonstrated by his good friend Alberto for whom he holds reverence “ for this virtue of his” that “ he himself did not become corrupt” (Levi 57). The attitude that once drove Levi to fight in resistance, as futile as it may have been, has been crushed. His new attitude is that “ all are enemies or rivals” (Levi 42). For this change in mentality and for this compromise of morality, Primo Levi is guilty. For even if “ the Lager was a great machine to reduce (them) to beasts” he himself admits that “ we must not become beasts” (Levi 41). Perhaps he writes it as a warning to others, or perhaps it is in regret for confessing that “ after only one week of prison, the instinct for cleanliness disappeared in (him)” (Levi 40). Yet the same instinct, stated the very sentence before, was “ necessary as an instrument of moral survival” (Levi 40). Dragged away fighting, therefore, Levi is a victim of a Fascist army. Forced to play a system of brutal incarceration, intense physical labor and debilitating daily conditions, Levi is a victim of a Fascist imprisonment and forced servitude. Yet, found taking advantage of his other prisoners and corrupting his own moral principles, Primo Levi is guilty of his own victimization.