

Primo Levi, Salonika and “other great Greek matters”

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Abstract. In each of his writings Primo Levi is a bright and keen interpreter of humanity, for which he nurtures an almost physiological interest and investigates both in its individual and collective expressions. His approach is also due to the curiosity of his spirit, incredibly emphasized during the time he spent in Auschwitz, about which the writer has provided a conscious and analytical description in several of his works. At that time he found himself inside an upside-down world which for the writer became like a big microscope slide where, macroscopically, the laws of nature appeared distorted and as elements to be analyzed, in their deformity. What Primo Levi writes in several of his books is even more surprising since for years Salonika and the fate of its Community have not been studied much, maybe because the enormity of what had happened elsewhere to much larger communities shadowed this particular event geographically distant and smaller in numerical terms. Primo Levi's great merit is to be the first to understand, describe and witness those features, while supplying information about the Salonikan Jews' fate after they entered the Auschwitz camp. Now Primo Levi's writings can be studied together with other Greek witnesses' accounts, whose authors made the decision to interrupt their silence only recently. This aspect of Primo Levi's production is gaining great importance inside the renewed interest for the Sephardic Communities, hit as severely as the Ashkenazi ones by the Nazi annihilation policy.

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On March 20, 1943 the first of the nineteen transports of Salonikan Jews which eliminated almost entirely the town Community arrived in Auschwitz. The great majority of those who got off the trains were immediately sent to the gas chambers, the others endured a peculiar fate, which needs to be considered just taking the cue from Primo Levi's writings.

The long and debilitating journey inside the freight-cars, the building of a further crematorium, which had begun operating on March 22, the problems concerning the linguistic differences represented the main elements which led to the huge number of losses within the transports from Salonika, where almost 55,000 of the 70,000 Greek Jews were living at that time. From March to August 1943 this town lost 95% of its Jewish population, a percentage similar only to that of Poland. Salonika, where the Jews had for a long time represented the majority of the population, and which had been always considered the cradle of the Sephardic world, became then a «city of ghosts» (Mazower, 2004).

The Salonikan Community had peculiar features such as the use of Ladino as their language, their habits, due to their Spanish origins, an open and skilful approach to life and work which depended on the fact that Salonika had always been a cross-road between East and West.

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to present a picture almost as a glimpse that could let us reconstruct the life of a Community long forgotten and deeply emblematic of life in a Lager. As further evidence of this, it must be taken into account that there have been often references and quotes from Primo Levi's work in the last two decades' texts about the history of Greek Jewry. His account is therefore crucial to understand the Salonikan Jewish world during Nazi persecutions which only recently has become the subject of specific studies. What happened can be viewed as a one-off event in Shoah's history for the specific peculiarities of this Community, the particularly fast and effective techniques of deportation and extermination they suffered and for the fate endured by the few who entered the Lager. Salonika was for centuries part of the Ottoman Empire and it was considered the Jerusalem of the Balkans for the importance and the large size of its Jewish Community.

Even if Romaniote Jews had already been present since the second century B.C., it was the massive arrival of Sephardic Jews following the Jewish expulsion from Spain at the end of the XV century to significantly determine the features of the Salonikan Jewish Community. From them they acquired habits, customs, ladino language, elements showing originality and differences with other Jewish Communities living on what is now Greek territory.

It's important to underline that Salonikan Jews didn't consider themselves Greek at the beginning even though, after the city became part of the Greek kingdom in 1912, they were the larger Jewish community in Greece: they had always been subjects of the Ottoman Empire and only during the Twenties and Thirties of the twentieth century began to be hellenized. As K.E. Fleming states in her fundamental essay *Greece – a Jewish history*

«To the extent that to understand Salonika is to understand Greek Jewry, it is crucial first and foremost to understand that although Greek Jewish history is to a large extent the history of Salonika, the history of Salonika's Jews in actual fact has very little to do with Greece.» (Fleming 2008, p. 52).

This is true at least until the Twenties and Thirties of the twentieth century, when the Salonikan Jews began to see themselves as Greek citizens; especially the younger generations grew up feeling themselves attached to their new country, they spoke Greek and fought the Italian invaders in 1940. It was with Shoah and their deportation that Salonikans began to be clearly aware of their greekness, reflected in the eyes of the other prisoners who called them Greek and shared with deportees from other areas of Greece. Up until then they had been a group not consistent and difficult to identify with a common denomination or label.

In 1986 Primo Levi wrote:

«We, Italian Jews, didn't speak Jiddish, we were foreigners to the Germans and foreigners to the eastern Jews, since they had no idea that an Hebraism like ours did exist... We felt particularly helpless. We and the Greeks were the last among the last. Let me say we were in a worse condition than the Greeks, because the Greeks were, to a great extent, people used to discrimination. Antisemitism did exist in Salonika and many Salonikan Jews had learnt the ropes living among non-Jewish Greeks. But the Italians, the Italian Jews, so accustomed to being equal with all the others, were actually unarmored, naked like an egg without its eggshell» (Levi, in Bravo and Jalla, 1986, pp.190-191. Translation by the author).

Here Levi emphasizes both the anti-Semitism existing in Salonika and some of the worst problems that Salonikans had to face upon their arrival at Auschwitz: the problematic relations with the Askenazi majority of the prisoners, generated by misunderstanding and mistrust for a different form of Hebraism, not perceived as such, their difficulty in linguistic communication because, while often polyglots, they did not speak the most widely spoken languages in the camp, Polish, German, *yiddish*. This factor led many Greeks to an almost immediate death and rises in Levi, Italian Jew of Sephardic origin, a sense of kinship and solidarity with them.

The Italians and the Greeks shared the same difficulties in understanding and communication that, in the horrible context where they were living, caused the death of most of them. To the writer, however, the Greeks seem to be stronger, better prepared to face the overturned world into which they had been thrown.

As a matter of fact despite the Jewish Christian relations had been generally good in Ottoman Salonika, at the end of the nineteenth century, Jews began to be considered disloyal and traitors against Greece because of the support offered to the Ottomans by the Jewish community of Salonika during both the Greek Turkish war and the Balkan wars.

The idea of a large Greece, deeply linked to the Orthodox Christian beliefs, caused also the end of the freedom Jews had enjoyed in the Ottoman Salonika and the rising of anti-Semitism.

The situation worsened after the annexation to Greece, the end of World War I and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. This involved the so-called population exchange, that is the transfer in Turkey of the Muslims living in Greece and the return to Greece of the Orthodox Christians living in Turkey.

As a result a hundred thousand Greeks from Asia Minor arrived in Greece, especially in Salonika, and, for the first time in the history of the city, the Jews became a minority. These refugees, strongly anti-Semitic, were the core of the nationalist EEE (Ethnikè Enosis Ellados) that, reflecting a popular idea, wanted a fundamentally Christian Orthodox Greece. Many anti-Semitic incidents occurred and, although they were officially condemned, they came to extremes such as the Campbell riots in 1931. This neighbourhood was one of the poorest of Salonika and housed the Jews who had become homeless after the Great Fire of 1917. Also the economic position of the Jews of Salonika, especially the dockworkers, deteriorated significantly since it became common practice to prefer non-Jewish Greek workers.

As a result, even though in the Thirties the situation had become more reassuring, they experienced marginalization and the changes resulting from the difficult Balkanic context where they lived. They often had to deal with a hostile reality.

The Italian Jews, who were assimilated, didn't suffer so sudden and dramatic experiences until the racial laws. On the other hand they shared with the Salonikans their Sephardic origin, their language, their Mediterranean traditional way of thinking and heritage, different from the northern and eastern European one. Regarding the language, in *The drowned and the saved*, Levi writes also:

«We saw incommunicability in a more radical manner. I refer in particular to Italian, Yugoslav, and Greek deportees» (Levi, 1986, p. 70).

As a matter of fact the Greeks began to gradually distinguish themselves from the other prisoners:

«First among them [the merchants in the camp's black market] come the Greeks, as immobile and silent as sphinxes, squatting on the ground behind their bowls of thick soup, the fruits of their labour, of their cooperation and of their national solidarity. The Greeks have been reduced to very few by now, but they have made a contribution of the first importance to the physiognomy of the camp and to its international slang in circulation. Everyone knows that "*caravana*" is the bowl, and that "*la comedera es buena*" means the soup is good; the word that expresses the generic idea of theft is "*klepsi-klepsi*", of obvious Greek origin. These few survivors from the Jewish colony of Salonika, with their two languages, Spanish and Greek, and their numerous activities, are the repositories of a concrete, mundane, conscious wisdom, in which the traditions of all the Mediterranean civilizations blend together. That this wisdom was transformed in the camp into the systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of positions and the monopoly of the bargaining Market, should not let one forget that their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity, made of the Greeks the most coherent national nucleus in Lager, and in this respect, the most civilized» (Levi, 2013, p. 59).

Here Levi, as always, is a bright and keen interpreter of humanity, for which he nurtures an almost physiological interest and investigates both in its individual and collective expressions. In a few sentences he allows us to understand what were the differences and the peculiarities that Salonikans showed in an upside-down world which for the writer becomes like a big microscope slide where, macroscopically, the laws of nature appear distorted and as elements to be analysed, in their deformity. Reflecting on this text and considering that in Levi's writings the choice of each word appears to be strongly meaningful and never accidental, a few key words that define the difference between Salonikans and the rest of the prisoners can be identified. Firstly Levi examines

their contribution to the international jargon of the camp. That was necessarily linked to actions and objects related to the sphere of survival and was enriched by words evidently derived from Greek and Ladino. This demonstrates that Salonikans had taken a foreground position in exchange activities and "trade", because of the *concrete, mundane, conscious Mediterranean wisdom* that allowed them to accept, as everyone in the camp, the idea of theft, but that prevented them from sharing the useless violence that dominated there. In another passage of *If this is a man*, concerning the importance in the camp of the number indicating the order of arrival, Levi writes:

«It is as well to watch out in commercial dealings with a 116.000 or a 117.000; they now number only about forty, but they represent the Greeks of Salonica, so take care they do not pull the wool over your eyes » (Levi, 2013, p. 23).

These Salonikans, who had survived the first selection, were often dockworkers, accustomed to hard work and used to facing different and various realities. In a 1986 interview with Anthony Rudolph, Levi remembers that

«The Greeks remarkable for their ability to survive. [...] They were dockworkers from Salonika. They were extremely civil people, mutually loyal, smart, prone to seek the company of us, the Italians, because of the sympathy among Mediterraneans» (Levi, in Belpoliti, 1997, p. 104. Translation by the author.)

When he writes about *two languages*, Spanish and Greek, Levi focuses on what is one of the most original elements of Salonikans. Until 1912 the language spoken by the Jews in Salonika was Ladino, or Judeo Espagnol, the common language in which they spoke, wrote, sang and newspapers, such as *El Mesajero*, were published. It consisted in the old Castilian, influenced by Turkish, Greek and Jewish elements, and it was a legacy that the Jews had brought with them from *Sefarad*. Another popular language among the Jewish population was French, mainly because of the schools the Alliance Israelite Universelle had founded in the city in the second half of the nineteenth century. Only in the Twenties Greek became the first language for young people, after it had been introduced as a compulsory subject in school programs. Only then they began to see themselves as Greek. The others, the older ones, did not speak Greek or, if they did, their Spanish accent made them recognizable as Jews. That meant the impossibility for Jews in Salonika to blend in among Christians during the period of Nazi persecution, like it happened in Athens. In Auschwitz instead, Ladino made the Salonikans recognizable as Greeks and what had been felt as an element of diversity at home became there a form of identification of their native country.

In the text, two aspects which in many ways are both cause and effect of what has been said so far are highlighted: the feeling of national solidarity and the *amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity*, which Levi defines *amazing* because generally missing in the Lager, where the basic needs shadowed by far any spiritual or moral need. The Salonikans then represented *the most coherent national nucleus in Lager, and in this respect, the most civilized*. This exceptionality of the group of Greeks is emphasized again by Levi:

«Next to us there is a group of Greeks, those admirable and terrible Jews of Salonika, tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious and united, so determined to live, such pitiless opponents in the struggle for life; those Greeks who have conquered in the kitchens and in the yards, and whom even the Germans respect and the Poles fear. They are in their third year of camp, and nobody knows better than them what the camp means. They now stand closely in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, and sing one of their interminable chants. [...] And they continue to sing and beat their feet in time and grow drunk on songs» (Levi, 2013, p. 53).

An oxymoric series of adjectives represents this group of Greeks, celebrated for their ability to live and survive, stood out among the other prisoners after taking such a position and a reputation as to make them visible even to the Germans. This situation is certainly unique, and almost paradoxical, in the process of depersonalization and dehumanization carried out by the Nazis: these prisoners for their distinctive characters acquired an individuality even in the eyes of their

executioners, despite their will of standardizing and annihilating them. Their singing, in particular, was emblematic. Levi writes about this Greeks' custom, as other witnesses will do later, and represents it as a feature specifically identifying their group. The Salonikans sang their songs in Ladino or in Greek, often changing the words and using them as a means of communication with other prisoners, newly arrived from Greece, who were still unaware of what was happening in the Lager. The Mediterranean melodies attracted the camp guards who, when they saw the Greeks, ordered: *singen*. One of the songs was *Etsi In 'I Zoi* (Έτσι είναι η ζωή), *That's the way life goes*, in which, by changing the original text, it was said:

*I didn't know prison, now I do
Trapped in the cell, I stare at the walls
All comes back to my mind, the laughter and the loves
All became ashes, on the train of life.*

*That's the way life goes, girls, that's the way life always goes
For us to be closed up in Auschwitz.
Youth that passes, joys that leave and don't come back.
Girls, be patient, we'll get out
Of Auschwitz.¹*

In another song, *Siete dias enserados*, written by the Salonikan David Haim in Auschwitz, the author gives information about the journey and the arrival at the camp.

*Siete dias enserados
En vagones de beemas
Una vez a los tres dias
Mos kitavan a airear*

*Madre mia mi kerida
Ya tuvites el zehut
De murirte en tus tierras
I no pasates por el oluk*

*Padre mio mi kerido
Ken te lo iva dezir
Ke vinyeras kon tu 'rmano
Al krematorio de Auschwitz*

*Padre i madre ermanas i ermanikas
Saliendo todos redjadjis
A el Patron del Mundo
Ke embie salud a mi
Ke me kite de estos kampos
Para vos echar kadis.*

(See the web site <http://www.antiwarsongs.org>)

Also the Salonikan members of the *Sonderkommando*, who organized the only desperate attempt to revolt at Auschwitz in October 1944, sang the Greek national anthem and their songs, while the crematorium, which had exploded, was still burning. They had been involved, without knowing what they would encounter, in the monstrous activities that preceded and followed the process of

¹ Τη φυλακή εγώ δεν ήξερα / και τώρα τη γνωρίζω / Μεσ στο κελί γυρίζω / τους τοίχους αντικρίζω. / Όλα στο νου μου έρχονται: / τα γέλια κι οι αγάπες / Όλα γίνηκαν στάχτες στο τρένο της ζωής. // Έτσι είναι η ζωή, κορίτσια,/ πάντα έτσι είναι η ζωή / Νάμεστε κλεισμένες μεσ στο Αούσβιτς. / Νιάτα που περνούν, χαρές που φεύγουν / πίσω δεν γυρνούν. / Κορίτσια, κάντε υπομονή, θα βγουμε/ Από το Αούσβιτς. In Alempertos Nar, Keime/nh epi/ akth/j qala/sshj”, [Writings from the Edge of the Sea] (Thessaloniki, 1997, 220).

extermination in the gas chambers. They knew perfectly well that they too would be killed, they then decided to act and became a symbol of strength and endurance. Some managed to survive and luckily had the strength, over time, to bear witness to their story. In the chapter devoted by Levi to the *gray zone* in *The Drowned and the Saved*, as he writes about the members of the *Sonderkommando*, he abstains from any moral judgment. He tries to examine the situation and writes: «I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not live through it.» (Levi 1986, p. 42-43). Many Salonikans, along with other Greeks, were chosen to work in the *Sonderkommando*. This happened mainly for reasons related to the implementation of the extermination process, not least the need to keep secret what was happening in the crematoria, for the Salonikans did not speak either German or Polish. But also the widespread image of the strong Greeks played a significant role in Nazis' decisions. The Germans considered them good athletes and especially one of them, Yacoov Razon, a boxer, became famous fighting in the matches the SS organized for fun. He used his privileged position to help those in trouble and is still remembered today as a symbol of solidarity. His and the other Salonikans' behavior confirms what Primo Levi emphasized: they were resourceful, skilled men, sympathetic and ferocious at the same time. The symbolic representative, but deeply real at the same time, of this view of life is the Salonikan Mordo Nahum in *The truce*. After the liberation, in the difficult start of the labyrinthine journey back home, he helped and supported Levi, not only practically but sharing with him his ancient and practical wisdom. Mordo, whose real name was Leon Levi, in the novel is a *super Greek* with exceptional organizational and survival skills. These are essential to a convalescent Levi, physically and psychologically exhausted, still incredulous and unable to face freedom. Mordo, on the contrary, despite his poor state of health, has proved his wise concreteness providing himself with necessities he keeps inside a large sack. He also has shoes. As they walk alone on the way to Krakow, «A man who has no shoes is a fool» (Levi, 2013, p. 145). Mordo says to Levi who hasn't got them. The relation between Mordo and Levi is clearly unbalanced, the Italian is clumsy and is aware of the Greek's superior skills, so he makes a deal with him:

«As for myself, I confess that I was impressed mainly by his big sack and his quality of a Salonikite, which, as everyone in Auschwitz knew, was equivalent to a guarantee of highly skilled mercantile ability, and of knowing how to get oneself out of any situation. Sympathy, bilateral, and esteem, unilateral, came later» (Levi, 2013, p. 144)

Mordo spoke Greek, Spanish, French, Italian, and other Slavic languages. To be the only two Mediterranean in the group evacuated from the Lager and the consequent possibility to communicate easily became effective elements of affinity that favoured an otherwise unlikely bond between them. When they arrive in Cracow, they find a temporary shelter in some barracks full of Italian soldiers. Mordo affably interacts with several of them who are veterans from the Greek campaign and they get to like him.

«...mine was no ordinary Greek, he was visibly a master, an authority, a super-Greek [...] He possessed the right equipment; he could speak Italian, and (what matters more, and what is missing in many Italians themselves) he knew of what to speak in Italian» (Levi, 2013, p. 147).

His ethic was founded on work, whose concept was very wide and

«included, as well as certain permissible activities, smuggling, theft and fraud (not robbery; he was not a violent man» (Levi, 2013, p.148).

In fact, he refuses to be maintained and to receive food without earning it, abhorring all forms of servility or subservience. This is an idea of work in a broad sense, as something that would let one be self-sufficient. Mordo doesn't understand whether Primo Levi is an idiot or just lazy, however he helps him and shares with him his food and some precepts of his ancient wisdom. Unlike Levi,

Mordo sees Auschwitz as a natural demonstration of eternal human evil, «There is always war » (Levi, 2013, p.151), he says. With this sentence Mordo represents the human nature but, maybe, also refers to his life as a resident of Salonika. The city was either indirectly involved or in an actual state of war since the end of the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War.

«The biography of my Greek was linear; it was that of a strong and cold man, solitary and logical, who had acted from his infancy within the rigid framework of a mercantile society. He was also (or had been) open to other claims; he was not indifferent to the sky and the sea of his own country, to the pleasures of the home and the family, to dialectical encounters; but he had been conditioned to drive all this back to the margins of his day and life, so that it would not disturb what he called the '*travail d'homme*'. His life had been one of war, and he considered anyone who refused this iron universe of his to be despicable and blind» (Levi 2013, pp. 151-152).

During the rare moments of rest Mordo shares with Primo Levi his memories, including some private ones, never talking about his two years in Auschwitz but

«of his multiple activities in Salonika, of goods bought, sold, smuggled by sea or across the Bulgarian frontier by night; of frauds shamefully endured and of others gloriously perpetrated; and, finally, of the happy and serene hours spent after the day's work by the shores of his bay, with his merchant colleagues, in cafés built on piles [...] and of the long discussions that took place there. What discussions? Of money, customs, freight charges, naturally, but of other things as well. What is the meaning of 'knowledge', 'spirit', 'justice', 'truth'? What is the nature of the slender tie that binds the soul to the body, how is it established at birth and dissolved at death? What is liberty, and how can one reconcile the conflict between the liberty of the spirit and fate? What follows death? ; and other great Greek matters» (Levi, 2013, p. 151-152).

When Primo Levi came back to Italy, in the chaotic world following the war, he lost every trace of his Greek friend. During the following years he searched for him through his business contacts in Salonika. In 1986 he said to Anthony Rudolph: «Leon Levi could be a heartless man but he gave me a pair of trousers. I'd like to meet him again» (Levi. In Belpoliti, 1997, p. 104. Translation by the author). He never did.

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