

INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

# UNTANGLING MEMORY, TAKING A STAND



The entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp, with the words "Arbeit macht frei", meaning "work sets you free". The phrase is known for appearing on the entrance of other labour camps, including Dachau and Theresienstadt.

Yesterday was the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. But what does it mean to remember the Holocaust? It cannot be only to speak of the details of the gruesome barbarity that engulfed a continent in the last century through voyeuristic descriptions of horror. Neither should one speak of the death of six million in the contextual realms of history; it cannot be a matter of numbers. Does one, as the student from Alan Bennet's *History Boys*, simply gloss over the matter with a pithy "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."?

Maybe all we can do is stand in condemnation, in defiance, in remembrance and maybe, as Eric Hobsbawm put it, let our blindfolds be lifted and learn from the past. After all, it is easy to claim, like many Germans did after World War II, that one was only following commands or was unaware of what was being enacted every day around them, that they did not know of the systematic deportation and extermination of Jews that was perpetrated with increasingly clockwork precision. Today more than ever, the Holocaust should be a reminder of our wilful blindness and the horrors that a self-serving myth of chosen people can wreak.

Today, as we see history being increasingly mythologised in order to serve political ends, we would like to focus on two writers who were not only not silent about the Holocaust, but spoke of it in ways which history cannot. Whether through a stand against inhumanity anywhere, committed by whomever, or through painful confronting of one's past, these authors spoke of the Holocaust in a way that was not only devoid of irreverent sensationalism, but one that embodies the spirit of our remembrance: a commitment that never again should a people be stripped of their protection and rights.

## IN CONFRONTATION OF ONE'S PAST

MOYUKH MAHTAB

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."

WALTER BENJAMIN,  
*Theses on the Philosophy of History*

A particularly chilling section of German writer W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, describes how in 1944, SS soldiers took over command of ghetto inmates in the Theresienstadt internment camp in a "vast cleaning-up program." The camp was given the appearance of a false paradise, floral decorations were hung, rosebushes planted, chapels and lending libraries set up, and the streets were scrubbed clean with soap. This was done to show a visiting Red Cross commission the "true nature" of the Jewish deportation policy. "After another seven and a half thousand of the less presentable inmates had been sent east amidst all this busy activity... [*Theresienstadt*] became a... sham Eldorado which may have dazzled even some of the inhabitants themselves." The whole farce was even recorded, to the tune of Jewish folk music, whether for future propaganda or self-justification, the author wonders.

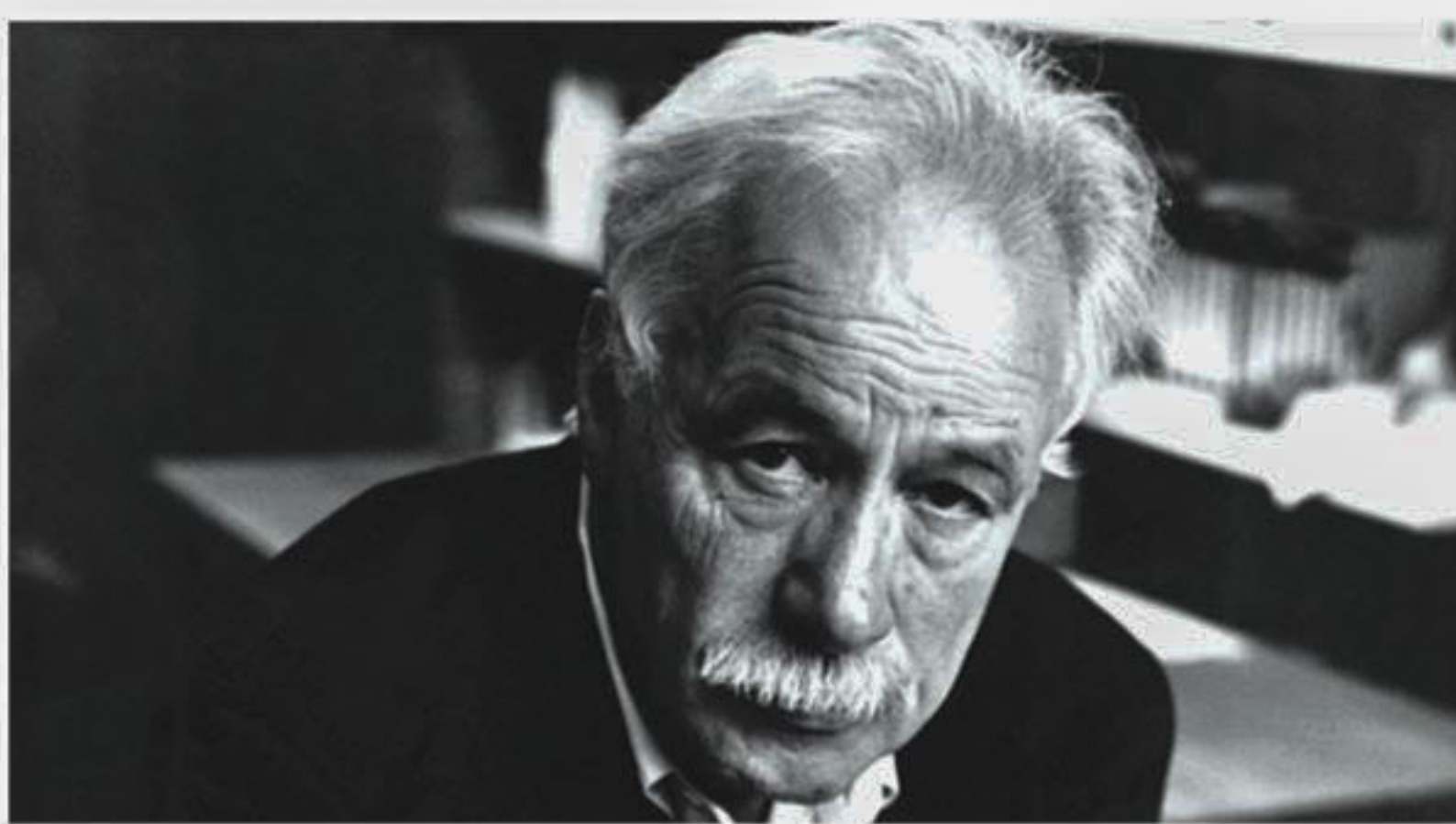
In his last interview, with *The Guardian*, Sebald stated that the "moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory." Shortly afterwards, the writer, then in the prime of his literary career, would die of a car accident. A reticent academic, Sebald wrote only four works of literature, all of which could only be described as a struggle against the dizzying labyrinths of individual and collective remembrance. As the son of a father who served in the *Wehrmacht*, Sebald was from a generation of Germans who grew up in a post-war silence regarding the Holocaust. It is as if this silence is what propels his books forward: an obsession to uncover, document and retrieve what is lost or repressed, but never head on, never overdramatically.

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald narrates the story of Jacques Austerlitz, a man who was sent to Wales as part of the *Kindertransport* (a series of rescue efforts undertaken to take Jewish children to Great Britain), and his slow unearthing of memories he had long repressed. That he was born in a Jewish family in Prague, that his father had tried to escape from the Nazis to Paris, that his mother was interned at Theresienstadt, and as a child he



had been sent to Wales to be brought up by foster parents, not knowing the horror that his parents succumbed to (both, almost certainly ended up in Auschwitz, although Sebald never explicitly mentions this), and how narrowly he escaped.

But, all this is never glorified or stated outright. Keeping to his view that something such as the Holocaust can never be approached directly, on pain of lost sanity, Sebald narrated history through the prism of Austerlitz's grown-up life.



W. G. Sebald

What Catherine Edwards wrote about another of Sebald's book, applies to *Austerlitz* equally: "The reader is constantly reminded of the inability of later generations to understand the past, which becomes simultaneously inescapable yet irretrievable."

But for Sebald, this inability to understand did not equate to not speaking about the past. He was critical of the post-war silence from his father's generation. Like Theodor Adorno before him, he was appalled by the day to day affairs continuing as if nothing had happened. He would say in *The Guardian* interview, "Until I was 16 or 17, I had heard practically nothing about the history that preceded 1945. Only when we were

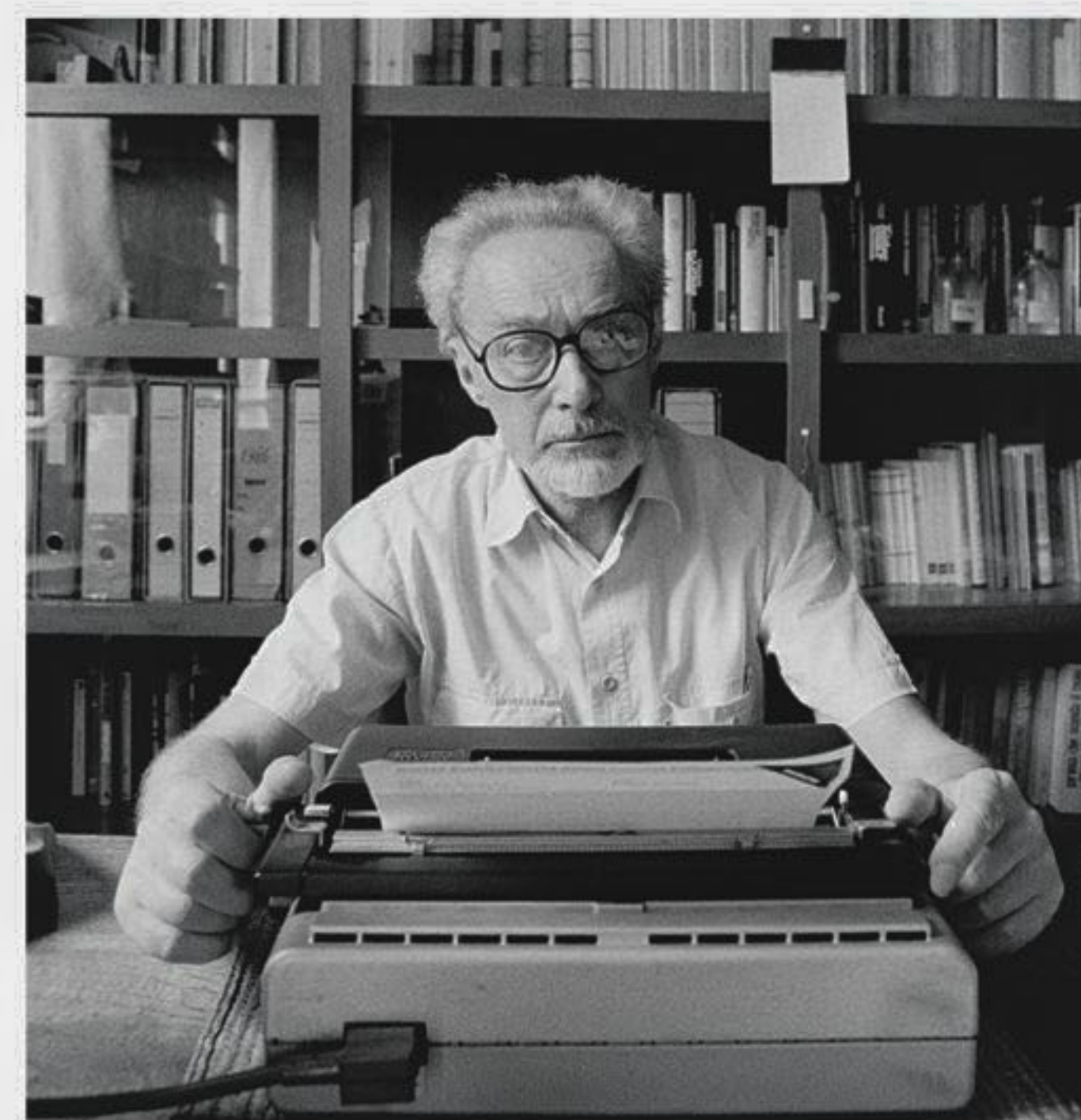
17 were we confronted with a documentary film of the opening of the Belsen camp. There it was, and we somehow had to get our minds around it - which of course we didn't. It was in the afternoon, with a football match afterwards. So it took years to find out what had happened. In the mid-60s, I could not conceive that these events had happened only a few years back."

And yet, Sebald was critical of literature's new-found interest in the Holocaust in the 1960s. He hated the vulgar nostalgia, melodrama and the "false identification" with Jewish victims that he saw in German literature. In *The Emigrants*, he wrote isolated, as if just-remembered events, from the lives of four German emigrants, two of whom were directly related to the events of World War II. He tells the story of Paul Bereytor, the narrator's childhood teacher, who is a quarter Jew, how he served in the *Wehrmacht* and his subsequent life as a depressed school teacher. On the other hand, through the story of painter Max Ferber, we get a glimpse of a woman's last reminiscences of her childhood as a girl in a Bavarian village, while she and her husband await certain deportation.

Sebald's fixation of memories, his archival unearthing, was a humane and dignified effort to come to

terms with his past as a German. His characters come to us not as victims, but as human beings. What he showed was the ever-present memory of the Holocaust and how Jewish people, caught in that situation dealt with its horror—he spoke of the life afterwards. Of course, a lot more can be said about Sebald's greatness as an author, but it is in his confrontation of disorienting memory, of events too inhumane to speak of directly, that his work shines the brightest. Not in false empathy, but in a search, which, no matter how futile, leads one to the introspection of the past. Maybe it's the only way one can learn from history.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.



Primo Levi

PHOTO: GIANNI GIANANTI/CORBIS

January 27 marks the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the deadliest Nazi concentration camp. The Italian writer Primo Levi was deported to this concentration camp after being captured in December, 1943 and stayed there until February, 1945, when the Red Army liberated the camp. He is considered to be the most perceptive chronicler of the human condition during the Holocaust, which Levi perceives as "the greatest of the structural defects" in our "moral universe."

Among the survivors of the Holocaust there are two categories of people. One tries to forget the suffering, as to them it was just a misfortune and hence meaningless. But to another category of survivors, remembering the Holocaust is a duty, and they want the world also to not forget it because they perceive genocide not as an accident, rather as a steady process which can begin if discrimination and hatred are not checked and prevented. Primo Levi was obviously of the latter group.

He once shared that the moment he was deported to Auschwitz, his writing career began. "I may have survived in order to become a writer, but I also became a writer in order to survive," says Levi. That's why his genre is non-fiction novel, where memoir and fiction often dissolve into one another.

With his professional acumen as a chemist, Levi analyses and exposes the incurable nature of offense, which spreads like infection. He informs: "It [oppression] is an inexhaustible source of evil...It rises again as infamy in the oppressors, is perpetuated as hatred in the survivors, and springs up in a thousand ways, against the very will of all, as a thirst for revenge, as moral breakdown, as negation, as weariness, as resignation."

In the face of such terrible affront, Levi gives testimony to what humanity actually meant. Remaining human in a

concentration camp meant having the capacity to survive dehumanising attempts enforced by the oppressor. It might even be a prisoner's "gay and meaningful grimace" to his inmate, or a mother carefully washing the children's clothes and packing up their toys and cushions during deportation to Auschwitz. Levi finds hope in these simple acts of freedom and captures them as the most precious moments of mankind. His works are pervaded with the conviction that it is possible to remain a free man in conditions of extreme hardship and horror.

Reading Levi's works, one equally feels a moral resistance against hatred and revenge.

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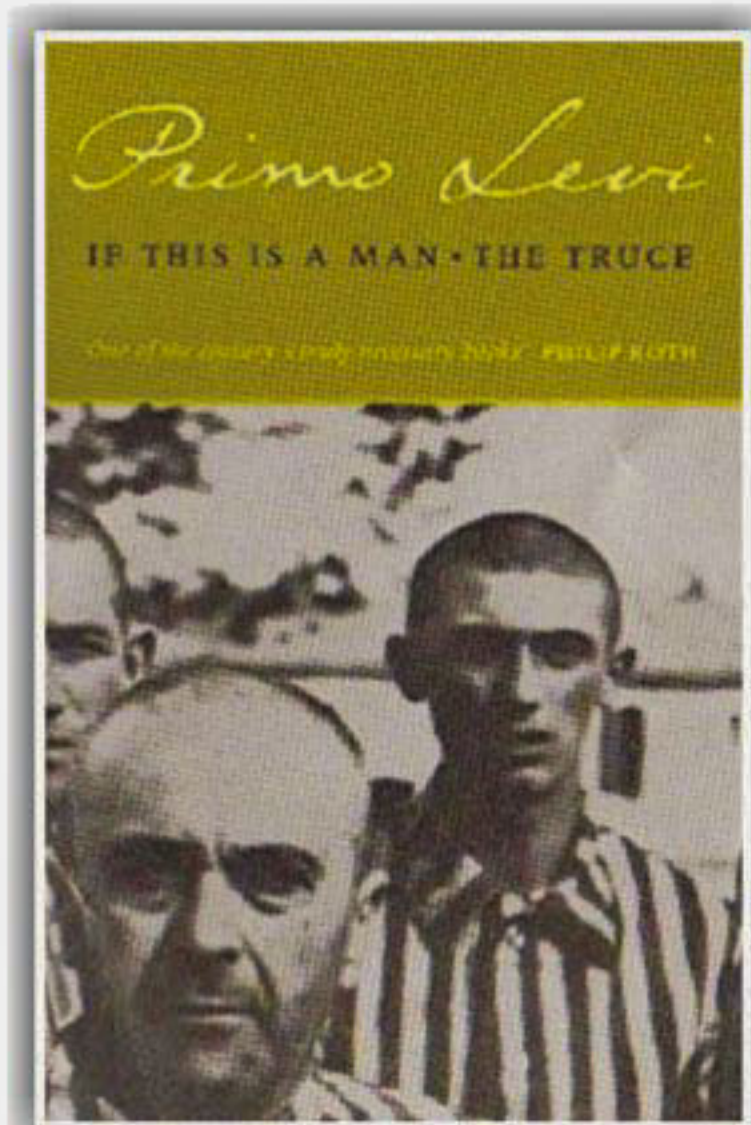
"Hatred is bestial... if I accepted it, I would feel that I was following the precepts of Nazism, which was founded precisely on national and racial hatred," shares Levi. He emphasised the importance of impassionate telling of oppressive events and listening to the participants as an antidote to rise above mutual hatred. "I deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of witness; neither

## HUMANITY AFTER AUSCHWITZ

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

"Since he wanted so to see ahead,  
He looks behind and walks a backward path"

DANTE  
*Divine Comedy*



the lamenting tones of a victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge," says Levi. In the concentration camp, he found that the greatest source of torment was a lack of understanding as no one had the time and patience to listen. We see in *If This Is a Man*, Dr. Pannwitz does not understand Levi; he uses him like a machine. In contrast, Pikolo tries to listen to what Levi is saying and thus understands him and restores humanity.

Levi does not give an indiscriminate pardon to a perpetrator. He thinks it is only forgivable when the perpetrator condemns the crime and determinedly works for uprooting it from his conscience. An enemy who sees error in his deeds ceases to be an enemy, believes Levi.

Levi is often compared to Dante. Like Dante, Levi, with the authority of a first-hand participant, depicted the demolition and painful recreation of conscience and freedom at the edge of humanity. His works will remain a source of reprieve against every dehumanising attempt.

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