ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-87
Marco Belpoliti
Primo Levi
Robert Gordon
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Primo Levi, who died in 1987 in what is believed to be a suicide, was a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp and one of the most profound writers to emerge from the Holocaust. Levi's testimony to the horrors he suffered can be found in a number of books, including If This Is a Man, his memoir first published in Italy in 1947, and Moments of Reprive (1979), and The Drowned and the Saved (1986).

Belpoliti is editing Levi's complete works and Gordon is a university lecturer in Italian at Cambridge. In The Voice of Memory Belpoliti and Gordon selected thirty-five interviews out of 250, from newspapers, journals, radio, and TV. The book begins with Levi being interviewed by four English-speaking writers: Germaine Greer, Philip Roth, Anthony Rudolf, and Ian Thomson, and continues with interviews that reveal many of his experiences and interests, likes and dislikes that are often overshadowed by his status as a Holocaust survivor. In these Levi talks about his parents and childhood, his return home and marriage, his work as a chemist, his passion for mountaineering, his love for the city of Turin, and his involvement in campaigns for the morality of science.

Included are interviews that accompanied the publication of eight of his books, giving a sense of the chronology of his career and evolving thoughts on his own writing. In other interviews Levi reflects in more general terms about his books and those of other authors, including his translation of Franz Kafka's The Trial.

In a section entitled “Auschwitz and Survival” Levi discusses the event at the heart of his life and work and at the heart of his interviews. A concluding section contains five interviews in which Levi addresses his identity as a Jew through discussions of religious belief, tradition, and education, and the role of the diaspora Jews in relation to Israel. For Levi, interviews were a way of adding something that he had saved from oblivion; in reading them we can better understand this complex man.

George Cohen