

Primo Levi and the Resistance

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Abstract. In the night between the 12th and the 13th of December of 1943, Primo Levi was arrested in Amay (Valle d'Aosta) during a fascist military operation to search for partisans. In the same night, Luciana Nissim, Vanda Maestro, Aldo Piacenza and Guido Bachi were also arrested: in the previous weeks, they had been gathering in a small rebel group that was linked to Giustizia e Libertà. Despite the fact that this meaningful episode marked the beginning of his long and painful journey to Auschwitz as a deported Jew, Primo Levi did not like to talk about his experience as a partisan hidden in the mountains. On the contrary, he later defined it as “the darkest period” of his career: “it is a story of young people with good intentions that behaved incompetently and stupidly, and needs to be forgotten”, he wrote. What is the reason that lies behind this severe judgment and Levi’s unwillingness to discuss it, other than a short novel and some references in his literary and historical works? Might it be “the nasty secret” that obscured the minds and hearts of all the members of the partisan cell? “The very same secret - Levi says - that had put us in danger of imprisonment, killing, a few days earlier, our desire to resist and to live”? The brutal execution of two young members of the cell whom, with their actions, had threatened the group’s safety and existence might certainly be the cause. Nonetheless, reading the precise and documented report of the weeks when Levi decided to transform his antifascist stand into a partisan struggle helps us to better understand his life, creating a link between his partisan experience and his fight for survival in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Key words: Primo Levi, resistance, racial persecution.

Amay village, located at 1,425 metres of altitude, can be reached by walking on a narrow, bendy and steep paved road that originates in Saint-Vincent’s old town and only partly runs along the dirt mule track that in the 40s led to the Ristoro Hotel. This is exactly where Primo Levi first arrived with his mother and sister Anna Maria at the beginning of October 1943 in a bid to escape bombings and racial discrimination laws¹. “The three of us stayed in Amay for most of the autumn season”, says Anna Maria, “[...] It was very cold, and it had probably begun to snow. We didn’t feel at risk, as Primo had reached Saint-Vincent to be best man at Lea Fubini’s wedding. However, at one stage I decided to go back to the plain.” (A. M. Levi, 2009 in A. Chiappano, 2010, p. 62). The exact date when Primo Levi was left to live on his own is not known to us; according to Anna Maria’s memories, it can probably be set between the end of November and the beginning of December 1943.

From their shelter, the Levis “witnessed horrible things” such as people wandering confusedly, hungry and exhausted, trying to avoid the main roads. In an article for “La Stampa” on September 9th, 1983, Primo Levi wrote: “What we saw was distressing and impossible to forget: what remained of the Italian troops that had occupied Southern France had confusedly come back to Italy crossing all available passages; only few of the soldiers had wanted or were able to keep their weapons; everyone was desperately trying to wear ordinary middle class clothes. While trying to avoid the railway and the valley bottom roads, they marched endlessly on the high mule tracks, village after village, like a herd that lost its guide. They appeared tired, hungry, worn out; they asked for bread, milk, polenta, and their only hope was that of returning home, perhaps by crossing the whole Alpine

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¹ It has also been said that the Levis travelled from Saint-Vincent to Amay towards the end of September. (See Carole Angier, 2004, p. 238). As many other biographers and historians who have dealt with Primo Levi’s movements after September 8th, Carole Angier maintains that it is not easy to retrace the exact dates and Levi’s movements of that period. Paolo Momigliano Levi (1999, pp. 69-70) quotes an unpublished memoir by the Finzi cousins that in 1943 tried to escape to Switzerland like many others, and talks about the presence of Primo Levi in Fiéry, «coming from Amay» on September 19th, 1943. Apparently, Primo Levi participated to this meeting called “the congress of the twelve” under the false name “Dottor Michele”.

region. They hated their uniform, which to them represented nothing but a risk to be caught by the Germans". (P. Levi, 1997, pp. 1190-93).

This brief account, despite being concise, is strong and meaningful and clearly expresses Primo Levi's feeling at the time, which he then described using the following expression: "I spent a few weeks in a state of confusion". This brief sentence conceals his renowned hatred towards Fascism, described by himself as "ironical rather than violent" and repulse for his Mother Land that had denied him the citizenship because of his Jewishness: it is almost an admission of indifference, a "trace of half-hearted resentment, of revenge". The Italy that did not want him "could face its own destiny, whatever that may be" (*ibid*)². Together with that, he felt the sorrow and confusion of those soldiers and officers who by force or by their own volition had been part of the occupying army of a strong and aggressive nation, and now found themselves retreating, like in a nightmare – afraid but also determined to desert Italy and her war.

However, despite the effect that Fascism had on Levi and on his group of friends, just as it had done on most Italian people, abstracting him from reality and making him superficial, passive and cynical³, in this cold and isolated shelter Levi understood perfectly what he had to do: "join the fight against the Nazi". "It was an inevitable duty. They were my enemies, the enemies of the whole humankind, and Italy, despite Fascism, was still my homeland" (Primo Levi, 1997).

This is how, forty years later, Primo Levi described the circumstances that led him to the creation "with other young and inexperienced [...] – but more decisive - people" of a partisan group. "We declared ourselves partisans at heart. We would have found our weapons, the money too, and experience can be gained through action" (Primo Levi 1997).

Three years earlier he had been far less indulgent when describing this experience: on June 26th, 1980, in a letter to Paolo Momigliano Levi, director of the Institute of History of Valle d'Aosta, he wrote "My partisan years in Valle d'Aosta were undoubtedly the darkest moment in my career and I am not happy to talk about them: it is a story of young people with good intentions that behaved incompetently and stupidly, and needs to be forgotten". He concluded by saying: "What described in the *Sistema periodico* is more than enough [...] and it is therefore not necessary to add anything else"⁴.

Nonetheless, Primo Levi's partisan years, up until the day of his arrest, were full of events and consequences: today we know that it was the starting point of all that happened afterwards, from his move to Fossoli, to his deportation to Auschwitz and back.

By reading his own words, we can infer that this period left a deep mark on him: "all of us [of the partisan group] concealed an evil secret: the very same secret that had put us in danger of imprisonment, killing, a few days earlier, our desire to resist and to live. Our conscience had forced us to perpetrate an execution, and so we had done, but this had destroyed and displaced us, and all we wanted was for everything to be over, including ourselves" (Primo Levi, 1975).

At this stage we need to find the answer to some questions.

What really happened in the short period of time between his decision to take action and his arrest? Who was involved? How far can our reconstruction go?

There are no accounts, documents or statements that can help us understand how Primo Levi spent his days, which became darker and darker than his first weeks in Amay.

Today, Anna Maria remembers the happiness of the beginning, but also the worries and fear that came afterwards, when every single noise was perceived as alarming, every new person that came to the village was interesting and frightening at the same time⁵.

² *Ibid.*, all the quotations under inverted commas.

³ See Primo Levi (1975, p. 132), where Levi describes his feelings and those of his friends towards fascism, the war and the desire for peace.

⁴ This letter is kept in the historical archive of the Historical Institute of Resistance and Contemporary Society of Valle d'Aosta.

⁵ Taken from a conversation between the author and Anna Maria Levi on May 11th, 2011.

It was at the “Ristoro” that Primo and Anna Maria met Aldo Piacenza, who had joined, a few weeks earlier, the Bachi band. He was younger than Primo and had attended the D’Azeglio high school, where he had met Levi’s sister.

Sometimes in the evenings, Guido Bachi came for dinner: he had not been part of Levi’s group of friends in Turin, but he was an acquaintance. Guido, who used to leave his shed in the wood of Frumy where he lived and led a group of men, had already made his choice. Whereas Aldo had hidden in the mountains to avoid becoming an official of the new Italian Social Republic, Guido was planning an armed fight against fascists and Germans with the support of *Giustizia e Libertà*⁶.

The owners of the “Ristoro”, Eleuterio Page and Maria Varisellaz, never denied their anti-fascist tendencies.

For the sake of consistency, we also need to add that seven kilometres away, in Brusson villages and in the neighbouring areas (Graines and Arcesaz) there was a bigger group of young people who had adopted a military organization to defend themselves from fascist or German attacks and to resist.

These were the “casalesi”, men and women from Casale Monferrato; the locals described them as not very reliable, their commander as inexperienced and often unable to discipline them; they also said that only few of them reached the mountains to pursue freedom.

It was the beginning of the *pre-resistance*, here as in many other places of Northern Italy, where new or politically affiliated groups originated; this was also the time when the lack of experience and the risk of the enterprise led to several tragedies (such as the example of the Cervi brothers, whose experience can be set in the early autumn/winter season of 1943, just like Primo Levi’s story).

To summarize, in the nearby area between Ayas valley and Joux hill there were two bands that had little to share with one another: the smaller one, guided by Guido Bachi and affiliated with *Giustizia e libertà*, had fewer members, mainly of an intellectual and middle class background, whose revolutionary ideas were much stronger than their will to enforce them with arms and violence (although they did have a military experience and ability to use weapons and explosive, despite Primo Levi’s comments).

The bigger cell had a considerable stock of arms and munitions⁷ and were more eager to take action (the attacks to the militia quarters are only one example of the military actions they took in the space of a few weeks); they did not have a common guidance and were characterised by an internal feud between two different political convictions, both taking inspiration from the Communist movement. Its strength derived from the number of members, who were not familiar with discipline but were good at fighting; its weakness was the lack of an authoritative guide, who even accepted members with no political or moral consciousness whatsoever. The Rossi brothers

⁶ Aldo Piacenza arrived in Amay shortly after the 8th of September. A lieutenant of a department that had fought in the “Russian Campaign”, following a hint that one of his subordinates from Val D’Aosta, he first reached Sain-Vincent with captain Lo Bue and another official named Rota, and later left the city for personal safety reasons to find shelter at the Ristoro Hotel of Amay. Lo Bue and Rota soon left to reach their families, but Piacenza stayed and met Guido Bachi. In the night between the 8th and the 9th of December, 1943, Guido, who was ten years older than Primo Levi, was staying at a friend’s mansion in Moncalieri when he saw a regiment of soldiers camping out in the park. The following morning, all the officials deserted and went back home. After many years of dealings with representatives of the Partito d’Azione and *Giustizia e Libertà* (such as Leone Ginzburg, Franco Antonicelli and Massimo Mila), after attacking the German Consulate with a number of friends by way of protest, burning papers and documents, Guido Bachi went to Brusson, where he had already been with his father, in order to deal with Olivetti summer camps, and stayed at the Aquila Hotel. The village was too dangerous for him, and Guido walked on the mule track surrounding Joux Hill and reached Frumy, where he gave birth to a cell initially composed of around five or six members.

⁷ A statement of the lieutenant Mario Meoli (alias De Ceglie), Republican Prefecture of Aosta, undated (to be set between January and February 1944), a true copy of which is kept in the Archive of the Historical Institute of Resistance and Contemporary Society in Valle d’Aosta, reveals that the rebel group is composed of “one official, one marshal, about 70 men, 20 Englishmen, 5 machine rifles, 6 Beretta machine guns, around thirty rifles, several guns and bombs (around one hundred). Three vehicles, a warehouse containing food and garments”.

(Italo, Francesco and Bruno, the youngest) took charge of the command by drawing inspiration from the example of Mario Acquaviva⁸, one of the key figures of the internationalist communist movement, a Bordigist branch of the Italian Communist Party. Their purpose was adamant: after the end of Mussolini's Fascism, they did not want to surrender to the middle class parties that wanted to use proletarians to their own interests. The key points, therefore, were class struggle and not a united resistance to fascism! This was root of the antagonism with members of Cln (National Liberation committee) of Casale Monferrato: all of them were veteran anti fascists, already known to the regime, and used to take action as a unit.⁹

Primo Levi will never interact with this group directly. He will therefore never be able to understand the danger they represented for any other resistance organization. Aldo Piacenza and Guido Bachi, both worried and mesmerised by the strength that could suddenly explode from those hundreds of young rebels, were the only ones who maintained any contacts with them.

With regard to fascists, in order to block the partisan movement, the head of the police and governor of the Fascist Province Cesare Augusto Carnazzi, instead of planning a direct armed conflict, after becoming aware of the existence of internal conflicts in the Brusson- Arcesaz-Graines cell, decided to enrol some of his officials in the rebel organization (Roberto Nicco, 1990).

At this time, the fact that Primo Levi and his group were hiding between Amay and Frumy did not concern Carnazzi and the fascists, just like all other rebel cells in the villages and in rural mountain areas.

The main characters were only a few, but the conflict is also starting to spread among them, and will soon be the cause of their defeat: besides Primo Levi, Guido Bachi, Aldo Piacenza; Giovanni Bertolini (also known as Berto), Cesare Vitta, Guido's cousin, Emilio and later, at the beginning of December, Vanda Maestro and Luciana Nissim, together with other men whose identity we do not know¹⁰.

Some other soldiers were sent there from Turin by lawyer Camillo Reynaud, of the Action Party. Youngsters such as Andrea Luciano Zabaldano (born in 1926, from Monforte d'Alba, also known as Mare) and Fulvio Oppezzo (born in July 1925, from Cavaglia di Biella). They mainly came from

⁸ Luigi Cappa, who was 19 in 1943, says: "After September 8th we had to hide again. This was when I met Acquaviva, the internationalist. He was in his forties and spoke in a mesmerizing way. He was clever, educated and had a strong political consciousness. His manners and his propaganda were very successful among the young people like me. After the 8th of September he told us not to join the partisans and suggested we should perpetrate the class conflict instead of the fight for freedom. Fighting for freedom would have meant saving the factories and the properties of the landowners who would have kept exploiting us after the war. We admired and followed him. We held clandestine meetings behind the rifle range. We gathered weapons. After the 8th of September, he was our main point of reference. We later joined the partisan cells because we had to. Casale was very small and all anti-fascists were identified". In, Fabrizio Meni, (2000, p. 93).

⁹ In, Fabrizio Meni (2000). In particular, the story of the "casalesi" and of the creation of their partisan group is also described in the rich archive, of which we have used a section for the purpose of this article: Confession of Teofisto Fiorini (29 May 1945); Interrogation report for Carlo Eugenio Carretto, 7 January 1944, Chiarle Police station in Aosta; Interrogation report for Carlo Eugenio Carretto, 8 January 1944, Chiarle Police station in Aosta; Interrogation report for Martino Veduti 6 December 194, opposite the Police Inspector Maiocco Riccardo, Casale Monferrato; Statement by foot soldier Cassinelli Luigi, 16 December 1943 Casale Monferrato; Interrogation report for Adriana Massa 8 December 1943, Casale Monferrato; Report of the Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana (GNR) Ufficio Politico Investigativo (UPI) 23 December 1943, Casale Monferrato; Interrogation report for Giovanni Conti 22 December Casale Monferrato; Interrogation report for Luigi Allara 22 December 1943 Casale Monferrato; Interrogation report for Angelo Allara 22 December 1943 Casale Monferrato; Interrogation report for Federico Barbesino 28 December 1943 Casale Monferrato, Comando 11° Legione GNR e UPI; Judicial report of claim of 10 February 1944, Legione territoriale dei Carabinieri di Alessandria, Casale Monferrato Station, 10 January 1944; GNR comando 11° Legione, Detention order, 17 January 1944; Prefecture of Aosta, report on the criminal activity of rebels in Valle d'Ayas, 20 February 1944; GNR, UPI department Casale Monferrato, 31 March and 1st April 1944 request for information. All the documents are to be found Frediano Sessi (2013).

¹⁰ According to some versions of this story, the Amay-Frumy cell was composed by around ten or eleven partisans. The available documents and statements do not allow us to precisely verify this figures. What is certain is that the Bachi cell was composed of a small number of members, and was joined by Vanda Maestro and Luciana Nissim only at the beginning of December.

Piedmont. It was often said that Zabaldano and Oppezzo were undisciplined timeservers, eager to steal goods and food from the population, threatening locals, unreasonable and violent.

Apparently, the cell took action only at the beginning of November, which was when the first financial support arrived from Turin. That was also when the first explorations of the area started with the aim of finding shelters, escape routes and gathering weapons.¹¹

Among his first missions, Guido Bachi recalls robbing the tax office of Chatillon, near Sain-Vincent, at the bottom of the valley, earning around two or three thousand liras.

Aldo Piacenza never forgot the endless missions that took place in the beginning; in one of them he was joined by Primo Levi to gather some weapons. “It was very typical of Primo...”, Aldo remembers, “we had been told that some weapons were hidden somewhere near Chambave, after Chatillon. We had been walking through the mountains all night and we were freezing; we only had had a couple of hours’ sleep leaning on a wall. And then we had found the weapons [...] bombs, rifles, guns”. They then had returned home carrying all the weight on their shoulders, without even feeling the fatigue of walking back up. Aldo and Primo were happy, but at the same time “and this is what was so typical of Primo, as I mentioned before, he seemed upset”. He used to say to Aldo “Isn’t it sad that a man has to search for weapons to be used against other men?” (the interview with Aldo Piacenza is taken from: Carole Angier, 2004, p. 252).

Unfortunately, at the beginning of their organization the partisan cells were haunted by a much worse danger that came directly from the inside:

«Both for us and for the locals it was fundamental to get rid of thieves as soon as we discovered them. Unfortunately it could only be done by physical elimination, which also served as deterrent. We had to be strong and ruthless, or else we would have lost our credibility» (In: Roberto Nicco, 1990; cfr. Carole Angier, 2004, p. 257).

This description given by a partisan of Giaveno, near Turin, can be seen as one of the first signs of something going wrong with the partisan cells. They were constantly in danger, living amongst a frightened population that could help them but that at the same time put their lives at risk when not reporting the presence of “rebels” in the area.

The Bachi group, where Primo Levi was starting to realize what the partisan struggle really meant, fell apart in the night between the 8th and the 9th of December, when two young people were executed through the hand of sergeant Giovanni Bertolini, aka Berto. Guido Bachi reported that the two boys, Zabaldano and Oppezzo, had “stolen chickens from the local farmers and also wanted to kill him because he did not accept to take action immediately without waiting for orders from the CLN.

In a statement he gave in 1945¹², Guido Bachi declared that he spent the night of the 8th of December in Brusson. During his absence, sergeant Giovanni Bertolini, aka Berto, who was acting as his deputy, killed the two men outside the shelter in Frumy¹³. Almost fifty years later he affirmed that he had nothing to do with this execution and that he had become aware of it at a later time (interview with Guido Bachi, in: Carol Anger, 2004, pp. 258-259).

He also stated that Berto had been forced to kill them: after confiscating their weapons he had taken them out of the shed and shot them dead with a Beretta machine gun about 100/150 metres

¹¹ The memoirs have never been published and are kept at the private archive of Bachi family, but part of them has been inserted in the book edited by Marie-Rose Colliard, Manuela Lucianaz, Silvana Presa, Emanuela Limonato, (2011, p. 197).

¹² Claim report dated June 6th, 1945, by Mr. Guido Bachi, delivered to the Criminal Police Official Giulio Filippetto. Kept at the Archive of the Historical Institute for Resistance and contemporary society of Valle d’Aosta.

¹³ Statement by Guido Bachi in 1946, kept at the Archive of the Historical Institute for Resistance and contemporary society of Valle d’Aosta.

away. Berto had then taken documents and personal items from the corpses with the aim of sending them to their respective families.¹⁴

What we quoted previously from Primo Levi's memories suddenly becomes clear "all of us [of the partisan group] concealed an evil secret: the very same secret that had put us in danger of imprisonment, killing, a few days earlier, our desire to resist and to live. Our conscience had forced us to perpetrate an execution, and so we had done, but this had destroyed and displaced us, and all we wanted was for everything to be over, including ourselves" (Primo Levi, 1975, p. 136).

At this point it is necessary to go back in time, and precisely to the 5th of December, when the Militia official Edilio Cagni, disguised as a tenant of the escaping army under the false name of Renato Redi, together with lieutenant Bianchi (under the false name of Carlo Cerri) and lieutenant Mario Meoli (alias De Ceglie), joined the Brusson-Arcesaz-Graines cell and, by taking advantage of the internal conflicts between the Rossi brothers' Bordigist branch and the CLN of Casale Monferrato, took its command¹⁵.

This description makes it quite clear how the partisan cell that Primo Levi was part of was not considered of interest. It was too small to be identified as dangerous, it did not have enough weapons to later become a rebel organization of considerable size.

In any case, in Brusson there was no time to gather information on Redi and on his collaborators (Cerri and Meoli), the links were slow and difficult.

Redi immediately expressed his criticism to the Rossi brothers and proved extremely skilled and experienced in organizing a military group. After taking charge "I soon started to improve the field from a military point of view as it was in a very poor state. In the following days several shooting sessions were organised with the sole purpose of reducing the amount of munitions" (Statement by Tenant Renato Redi, *alias* Edilio Cagni, Republican Prefecture of Aosta, previously cited).

At this point, the "rebel" group operating between Brusson-Arcesaz and Graines was under the control of the three republican spies, but on the 9th of December they were supposed to cover a wider portion of partisans. This was when Guido Bachi and Aldo Piacenza, who had just been experiencing the brutal execution of two members of their group, came into action. As Redi wrote "On the 9th of December I went to Brusson with Meoli for a meeting with the delegate of the central command of the national liberation front of Turin. We were joined by the delegate from Turin, Bachi, Carretto, De Furia, Pagliolico, Piacenza and a stranger" (*ibid.*); several topics were discussed during the meeting and he concludes by saying: "Following Bachi's request, I sent Meoli to Amay" (*ibid.*).

It is now necessary to underline the strong link between the death of the two young men, executed in the woods of Frumy, and Bachi's decision of speeding up the connections with Brusson's cell to ask them for expert military support in order to improve the organization of the group (he reported two more cases of rebellion).

Consequently, the small Amay-Frumy cell that did not raise any interest at the beginning of the operation planned by the head of the police Carnazzi, was involved in the militia actions of RSI because it was detected by three spies and considered dangerous, at least for the determination that led Bachi and Piacenza to strengthen their organization.¹⁶

Luciana Nissim wrote: "All of a sudden, one morning the house was completely surrounded" (Alessandra Chiappano, 2010, pp. 67-68). The forty militia men had arrived in Amay-Frumy very slowly, in the night between the 12th and the 13th of December 1943, walking along the mule track and climbing in the steep woods, torches in their hands, followed by their dogs. This could only

¹⁴ Police Station of the Border Militia of Aosta, interrogation report for Aldo Piacenza, 11 January 1944, cit.

¹⁵ Aosta, 7 marzo 1944, la Prefettura repubblicana alla Procura generale di Stato presso il Tribunale Speciale di difesa Stato e p.c. al Ministero dell'interno, direzione generale di P.S., kept at the Archive of the Historical Institute for Resistance and contemporary society of Valle d'Aosta.

¹⁶ The meetings are reported and detailed during the interrogations of lieutenant Renato Redi (Cagni) and the 2nd lieutenant Mario Meoli (De Ceglie), cit., as well as in the post war inquiries on Aldo Piacenza and Guido Bachi, cit.

mean one thing: they were feeling quite safe with the information that Meoli had given them on the low risk nature of the group, which was not accustomed to fight on the mountains. They could easily be beaten by a handful of men: the middle class nature of some of the rebels had even led them to choose a hotel as their shelter!

Primo Levi was stopped and slapped. His account of these difficult moments helps us understand his point of view on what happened. One thing for sure is that, despite the dogs barking loudly, during the arrest “all the men appeared sleepy” (*ibid.*).

“They beat us up a little bit, they told us “not to make any sudden move” and promised they would have interrogated us and then shot us. They surrounded us and we started to walk towards the passage” (Primo Levi, 1975, p. 135), that is to say towards the peak of Joux Hill, to later descend towards Brusson.

With regard to “they beat us up a little bit”, Aldo Piacenza said that Primo Levi was slapped so hard that he still had a mark on his face after several hours (statement by Aldo Piacenza in Carol Anger, 2004, p. &&). Furthermore, the four men arrested were immediately separated and forced to walk alongside the militia. The same happened to the hotel owners.

Guido Bachi met the group while walking to Amay and his friends acted as they did not know him. When stopped, he showed his false ID: however, major Ferro had been told by Meoli about him and therefore arrested him. The men from Frumy followed them for a short while bearing weapons and trying to understand whether they could take action to free the prisoners without risking their lives, but they were scarce in number and guidance. They opted for hiding in the woods to later join other cells (Roberto Nicco, 1990, p. 33).

It all happened very quickly, and the prisoners were fast in deciding what they would declare during interrogations. Guido Bachi, who had been reported by Meoli as the person in charge of the group, could not declare himself a Jew who was escaping from racial discrimination laws as Primo Levi, Luciana Nissim and Vanda Maestro did.

According to the statements given by Guido Bachi and Aldo Piacenza, this decision had been shared (Account of Bachi e Piacenza in Carol Angier, 2004, p. &&), although we cannot take this as certain (Primo Levi later wrote that he had decided not to admit he was a partisan after being imprisoned). They were all aware that partisans could be executed, while Jews were just sent to collection camps.(G. Bachi and A. Piacenza in: C. Angier, 2004; for detailed references, see F. Sessi, R. Sandri, E. Collotti, 2001).

Luciana Nissim remembers very clearly her time in prison, but does not recall being interrogated¹⁷. Unfortunately, we have no details on Vanda Maestro’s imprisonment, but we do possess information about that of Guido Bachi, Aldo Piacenza and Primo Levi. It is however necessary to make a clarification: whereas Guido and Aldo had attended all the connection meetings with the chiefs of the Brusson-Arcesaz –Graines cell and with the delegates of the liberation committees of Casale Monferrato, Alessandria and Turin, where Redi and Meoli were also present, and were therefore classified as “rebels” despite their racial background, Primo Levi never attended those gatherings and his name was never mentioned in the police reports, statements and documents dating back to after the end of the war. It was easy for him, just as it was for Vanda Maestro and Luciana Nissim, to be believed when he declared himself an escaping Jew.

In the researched archives¹⁸ there was no trace of any interrogation report for Levi and his two friends. There are a few possible explanations to this: the archives might have been broken into

¹⁷ “I’m not really sure if I was interrogated or not. Maybe I was.”, in Alessandra Chiappano (2010, p. 68).

¹⁸ List of the archives that were consulted: Turin Historical Archive, Primo Levi Foundation, at the Historical Archive of Giulio Einaudi Editore (1933-1983); Archive of the Institute for the History of Resistance and Contemporary society in Valle d’Aosta; Rai Archives – Roma; Private archive of Prof. Filippo Meni. While searching for transcriptions of Primo Levi’s questioning the following archives were consulted: Regional archive of Valle d’Aosta, thanks to Lauretta Operti; Wartime archives at the Questura in Aosta; Turin’s historical archives, thanks to dr. Marco Carassi, the International Primo Levi studies centre, to which I owe the publication of the Nazi crimes of the exiled Polish Government of 1941.

after the liberation by the same people who had been interrogated (this was quite common); or they might have been lost while transferring documents from police stations, prisons and other places where they were kept to official bodies such as the Police Headquarters, the Prefecture and the involved Ministers; or they even might have been deemed irrelevant by the police itself, as the report by the head of the police Carnazzi states: “At the Ristoro Hotel, owned by a man named Page Eleuterio but in fact managed by his wife Varisellaz Maria, there were also [besides the rebels] three Jewish men that were escaping from the racial discrimination laws: Mr Levi Primo, Ms Nissim Luciana and Ms Maestro Vanda; due to the absence of further charges they have been sent to the concentration camp in Carpi” (Report of the head of the police Carnazzi, previously cited).

Since Levi writes about being interrogated in the presence of Redi and commander Ferro (whom he calls Fossa in the short novel *Oro*), we could infer that he had only been asked about his friends and family and their hiding places¹⁹.

We possess little information on what Levi and his comrades did during the month that they spent in prison in Aosta. Despite the darkness of the cell, Levi used to read the books that were allowed, trying to pass them onto his friends and leaving tiny notes on words or letters, by which he meant to keep on sharing thoughts with them. In *Oro*, Levi tells us about another method they used for communicating: “On the fourth day, during my out-of-cell time I secretly hid a big stone in my pocket [...]” (Primo Levi, 1975, pp. 138-142). Aldo and Guido were locked in the neighbouring cells but it was hard to communicate because “it took one hour to transmit one single sentence with coded knocks on the dividing walls, like the “Germinal” miners used to do when trapped underground”(ibid.).

Primo Levi also felt trapped and lost, despite the admiration his jailer had for him for being a doctor, and wrote it explicitly when describing how a little mouse had been living in the cell. “I felt worse than being a mouse: I used to think about the paths in the woods, the snow, the silent mountains and the hundreds of beautiful things I could have done if I had been freed, and I immediately started to feel a lump in my throat” (ibid.).

However, the very same vital energy that in the camp would lead him to declare himself able to work, to resist step by step, preventing him to fall into the darkness with the Muslim prisoners (the walking dead) and allow him to practice solidarity and poetry and to build his relationship with Pikolo and other Monowitz detainees, emerged from the darkness and cold of his cell and gave birth to the story of the smuggler cell mate, a “skinny and rather curved” man, with “frizzy and messy hair, unshaved chin, a big beaky nose, thin lips and shy eyes” (ibid.).

Desperation and hope, the fear to lose his life and the unwillingness to give up: “I was painfully jealous of my devious mate, who would soon have returned to his precarious but terribly free life [...] with endless time before him”(ibid.).

Primo Levi never tells us about the crying, but the sound of the river flowing inside the cell could easily represent it.

While he is writing this short novel, he has come back from the concentration camp and life has prevailed over everything else. The feeble light that had anchored him to his desire to resist, hope and live had not been wept away even in the worst place of all: Auschwitz. Just like everything began with his arrest, deriving from his decision to join a small partisan group, his will to react originated inside the prison of Aosta, because that was where Primo became aware of his potential.

¹⁹ During an interview with Ferdinando Camon, Levi talks about his arrest and questioning without mentioning dates or places: when I was arrested I had false documents – patently false documents. Incidentally, my supposed birthplace was Battipaglia, and the soldier who captured and beat me was from Battipaglia himself, which immediately put me in a very difficult position. I was suspected to be a Jew [...] The soldiers who captured me told me “If you are a partisan we will shoot you, if you are a Jew we will send you to Carpi”». Camon: «So [your confession of being a Jew] was a direct result of that threat.» Levi «Yes. But also, I was tired. [...] And ultimately there was an element of pride: I would have been sorry not to point out that albeit a terrible partisan [...] I was a partisan, and that I was also a Jew, and therefore show that Jews also have the resolve to stand up and fight », in Ferdinando Camon (edited by) (1987 pp. 15-16).

Towards the end²⁰ of January 1944, Vanda, Luciana and Primo were loaded on a passenger train towards Carpi, to be admitted to the Fossoli camp.

Levi's brief partisan experience terminated with an unresolved tragic event (the execution of the two boys) and with a physical and spiritual pain that will accompany him throughout his whole Fossoli experience and his long journey towards Auschwitz. And although it has been omitted in his writings (or, as we mentioned, it has not been understood correctly in the past), this is exactly when his ability to resist to the evil he would encounter during his imprisonment in Monowitz with both his body and spirit originated. To Primo Levi the resistance, in the same way as the mountains²¹, represents the journey to a more mature age along a tormented path, the sense of guilt for a crime that he did not choose to commit but had to share (being part of the same group made him feel responsible) and the suffering for having lost everything with his arrest and first imprisonment: his family, his relationship with Vanda, his freedom and his ability to plan his future. By choosing to "resist", Primo Levi began a long journey that allowed him to survive in Auschwitz and get over the loneliness of his return; to see his experience in the death camp as an opportunity to grow up²², which will enable him to question himself and overcome the "shame" of being a man in the era of the Nazi extermination of Jews.

Mantua, Italy, March 31st, 2012

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²⁰ The date of transfer isn't the same on all the accounts. Primo Levi (1997, I p. 8) writes: «When I arrived [in Fossoli], that is at the end of January in 1944». Luciana Nissim mentions mid January: «Around mid-January the gathered in Aosta all the Jews that they had come across (as there were many Jews hiding in Val d'Aosta). There must have been around 50-60 Jews, old ones, young ones, many were from Yugoslavia [...]. We stayed there for one and a half days, then they loaded us on trains and took us to Fossoli», In Alessandra Chiappano, (2010, p. 68). Myriam Anassimov (1999), mentions the 20th of January 1944, Liliana Picciotto (2010, p. 40) writes «between the 20th and the 21st of January the men who were arrested in Aosta arrived to Fossoli, among them was Primo Levi. Finally, Carole Angier (2004) writes: «Around the 26th of January, Primo, Vanda and Luciana were taken out of their cells and put on a train bound for the concentration camp in Fossoli». As the registry of arrivals hasn't been found, it is difficult to establish a definitive date.

²¹ "I think that without this preparation, this involuntary preparation we did on the mountains, unaware of doing it, my generation would have lived through war and resistance in a worse way. Perhaps we wouldn't have survived it either; I think that [on the mountains], we learned a few key virtues: endurance, resistance, holding on to faith, preparing for danger and for the unknown". In TV strand "Bric à Brac", third channel Rai TV Piemonte, transmitted on 29/11/1983 interviewed by Massimo Mila.

²² Many times in separate interviews, Primo Levi says that Auschwitz was also his University.