

# BOOKS

## Creating the semblance of a whirlwind?

### IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

By Primo Levi; translated by William Weaver. Summit Books. 349 pp. \$15.95.

By David G. Roskies

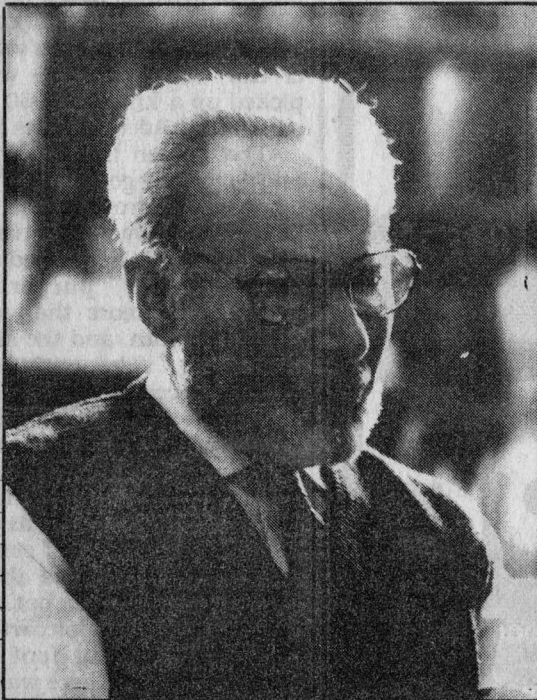
Perhaps the central problem facing the writer on catastrophe is how to find the part for the whole — a single theme, event or character that will embody or elucidate the boundless horror. Postwar writers on the Holocaust have been especially vulnerable on this score, taking refuge either in abstractions (the "six million," the Apocalypse, the "banality of evil") or in reductionism (the survivor as Christ figure, the victim as ac-

complice, the murderer as Gentile lover). Thus it is all the more surprising to find not one but three Italian-Jewish writers, each of whom has found exactly the right lens through which to refract the landscape of darkness: Giorgio Bassani's hometown of Ferrara becomes the setting of exclusion, expulsion and painful return in the best of his novels and short stories; Elsa Morante's monumental "History: A Novel" depicts the mundane terrors of an ordinary Jewish woman, her illegitimate son and his dog; while the triptych of his own life in Turin-Auschwitz-and-Turin forms the basis of Primo Levi's brilliant autobiographical fiction. While these works argue for the power of art to create the semblance of a whirlwind, it is Primo Levi's decision to en-

compass more than his natural focus that argues for the irreducibility of the Holocaust into "mere" fiction.

"If Not Now, When?" is Levi's vicarious tribute to the strange and vibrant Jews of the East, those Yiddish-speaking masses upon whom the Nazis unleashed their murder machine with greatest zeal. Levi, whose first contact with his eastern European brethren came in Auschwitz (his bunkmate had been a watchmaker, like Mendel, the hero of his novel), discovered that theirs was a story the world would not tell because their language had been murdered and their homes had been permanently laid waste. With a rigor worthy of his LEVI, Page 85

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Primo Levi: a writer-survivor himself.

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## Novelist's search for a lost people

### ■ LEVI

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 scientific calling (Levi until recently was a professional chemist), he set about researching an extraordinary chapter of that untold saga — the story of Jewish partisans in the Ukraine and White Russia during the latter half of the war. With published sources in Italian, English, German and Yiddish yielding the essential facts as to when, where and how the battles had been fought, and with a book or two on Yiddish folklore to provide the cultural backdrop, Levi wrote a thrilling tale of heroism, vengeance and moral conquest that made of history a timeless legend.

To highlight the legendary contours of the tale, Levi disassembles the events of the Holocaust into biblical myths and archetypes in much the same way as other writer-survivors have been doing since 1941. The novel is studded with references to Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and, especially, to Moses. When Mendel, the novel's central consciousness, awakens one morning upon arrival at the encampment of a dozen or so Jews in hiding, he has a flashback to "another world and another period: perhaps in the midst of the desert, or the march for 40 years toward the prom-

ised land, perhaps inside the walls of Jerusalem besieged by the Romans, or perhaps in Noah's Ark." Later, these biblical allusions are reinforced by Gedaleh, the larger-than-life Jewish partisan commander who, like Mendel, is deeply rooted in Jewish culture. But while the story of survivors-turned-fighters in the forests and marshes of eastern Europe readily lends itself to a Scriptural reading, and

### Primo Levi's novel bears mute witness to a civilization that was destroyed.

while Levi is careful not to push the analogies too far, this very biblical overlay exposes the novel's inherent failing — its inability to re-create the cultural profile of the Jewish partisans.

The young men and women who escaped from the ghettos to fight the Nazis in the forests were, for the most part, a self-select group of urban and urbane intellectuals and party activists (from the Zionist and Socialist youth movement) whose knowledge of Jewish and Western culture was at least as sophisticated as Primo Levi's command of his own cultural heri-

tage. Yet, here, they are portrayed as a gallery of folk types, only one of whom has any urban savvy (and he, characteristically, is a morose and tortured individual), another of whom can play the violin, all of whom together consider "Tumbalayka" a mystical parable on the meaning of life. To be sure, "Tumbalayka," that all-time favorite riddle song, was sung in the Holocaust but to new parodic lyrics. For this was a generation of Jews who could draw on Marx as on Maimonides, on Blok as much as on Bialik. This generation mediated the Bible not only through rabbinic law and lore, but also through a modern literary and political culture conducted in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish and Russian. Levi's work of sympathetic imagination succeeds in vivifying their actions, but not their thoughts; their struggle, but not their songs.

Thus, there is an unintended sadness to this book. What was designed to be a glorious testament to Jewish heroism grounded in factual detail in effect bears mute witness to a civilization that was destroyed — so totally destroyed that a supreme act of identification on the part of an exceptionally gifted writer cannot bring even a small part of it back to fictional life.