Primo Levi in an interview with FokusIsrael.ch: “It happened; therefore, it can happen again.”

About the person:

The Italian chemist and writer Primo Levi, like Elie Wiesel, is considered one of the most important eyewitnesses to the Holocaust and, like Wiesel, survived the Auschwitz concentration camp. Primo Levi was born on July 31, 1919, into a middle-class Jewish family in Turin and died on April 11, 1987, after falling down a flight of stairs in his apartment building. The incident was presumed to be a suicide. Primo Levi began writing in 1947, inspired by his experiences in Auschwitz, which he described in his best-known work, *Is This a Man?* His later books were also dedicated to the Holocaust. For Primo Levi, whose convictions were shaped by humanity, reason, and scientific thought, remembrance was a moral duty. FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Primo Levi—with the help of AI—about his story and the lessons he drew from it, both for the past and for the present.

From Sacha Wigdorovits

Mr. Levi, you’re a chemist by training—how did you also become a writer?

Primo Levi: I have always remained a chemist. I became a writer because Auschwitz forced me to. The memories of Auschwitz burned within me. In Auschwitz, I had scribbled hasty notes with a stub of a pencil on scraps of cement sacks. After returning, I felt compelled to tell the story. Without the camp, I would probably have stayed in chemistry and never written anything.

Did chemistry help you survive and write?

Primo Levi: Yes, in two ways. You can make a living from chemistry, but it’s hard to do so from writing—unless it’s commercial writing, which I’ve always rejected. But chemistry gave me intellectual habits: analyzing, solving problems; it taught me vigilance and reason. I write because I am a chemist.

Was there a general rule for survival in the camp?

Primo Levi: There was no general rule, except for being in good health upon entry and knowing German. Otherwise, it was a matter of luck. I have seen the clever and the simple-minded, the brave and the cowardly, the thinkers and the mad survive. We, the survivors, are not true witnesses. We never touched the ground. Those who saw the face of Gorgo did not return, or returned in silence.

Her first book was titled *Is This a Human Being?*. Can a person’s humanity be

erased?

Primo Levi: Unfortunately, yes. That was the defining characteristic of the Nazi camp. It destroyed the personality—not only of the prisoner, but also of the guard. Both lost it in different ways, with the same result. Sensitivity was dulled; hunger, cold, and beatings took the place of memories of home. One became like a workhorse.

Have you forgiven the Germans?

Primo Levi: I consider hatred to be bestial and crude. I prefer that my thoughts and actions, as far as possible, stem from reason. I reject collective hatred against an entire people—that would be Nazism. Yet I do not forgive any guilty party who has not demonstrated, through deeds—not words, and not too late—an awareness of and condemnation of their crimes.

Were the perpetrators back then monsters?

Primo Levi: Monsters have always existed and still do, but there are too few of them to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the ordinary people, the functionaries, who are willing to believe and act without asking questions. Like Eichmann back then, like Höss, and like so many others.

Elie Wiesel told me: “In Auschwitz, I accused God, I did not deny Him.” What is your view of God after Auschwitz?

Primo Levi: The experience of Auschwitz swept away every last trace of religious upbringing I still had. Auschwitz exists, so there cannot be a God. I cannot find a solution to this dilemma. I search for one, but I cannot find it.

If you deny the existence of God, what does it mean to you to be Jewish?

Primo Levi: Yes, Auschwitz wiped out every last trace of religious faith in me. But for me, being Jewish means culture, history, language, our shared memory, and our shared destiny. I am more Italian than Jewish, but I belong to this people, which is scattered and not tied to a single center. Faith is gone, but a sense of belonging remains.

Looking back, when did you first sense that terrible times were ahead for the Jews—not only in Germany, but also here in Italy?

Primo Levi: In Italy, we didn’t feel the rupture until 1938, with the racial laws. Until then, anti-Semitism had been weak, almost invisible. Suddenly, we were excluded from universities, professions, and public life. People still thought it would remain merely discrimination. I didn’t realize until later—when the Germans arrived and the trains began rolling—that it could lead to extermination. Before that, it was more disbelief than foreboding.

You’re a scientist: Did you ever think something like this was possible?

Primo Levi: As a chemist, I believed in the order of matter and in the power of reason. I thought something like that was impossible—not because I was naive, but because it contradicts scientific thinking. Yet Auschwitz has shown that human beings can deliberately do away with reason. There is something incomprehensible, something irrational at the heart of these events. Science explains atoms, but not this abyss.

What did this teach you?

Primo Levi: Chemistry teaches us to weigh, separate, and examine things without prejudice. Matter is neither noble nor base. Applied to human beings, this means: One must not believe and obey without asking questions. Morality begins where reason scrutinizes authority. Science without morality becomes a tool; morality without science becomes sentiment. The two must go hand in hand; otherwise, an abyss opens up.

Was there anything in Auschwitz that you could hold on to? To survive.

Primo Levi: As prisoners in Auschwitz, we were slaves, deprived of all rights, subjected to every kind of abuse, and doomed to certain death. But we still possessed one power, and we had to defend it with all our might, for it was our last: the power to withhold our consent.

You write very matter-of-factly about the incomprehensible. Why?

Primo Levi: The facts I had to recount had enough power to support a moderate style. I deliberately avoided choosing a style that was too bombastic, but the sound of the words should never overwhelm the content. It was better to let the things speak for themselves. That was what I had already learned from telling stories orally.

Do you think something like Auschwitz could happen again?

Primo Levi: Anti-Semitism has not disappeared, and mass racial persecution could happen again. A new Hitler who came to power in any country and had at his disposal the terrible weapons of modern technology and propaganda would find followers with ridiculous ease. It has happened; therefore, it can happen again. That is the essence of what we have to say.

Today, Jews almost everywhere in the world are once again facing incredible anti-Semitism. Is this comparable to what happened back then?

Primo Levi: At its core, it is comparable: yes. But every era has its own characteristics. It is important to remain vigilant.

To what extent are the roots of the widespread hatred of the State of Israel rooted in anti-Semitism?

Primo Levi: Hatred of Israel often takes on anti-Semitic traits, because its ancient roots—religious, ethnic, and economic—live on and take on new forms. Criticizing Israel is permissible and necessary. But demonizing the Jewish people or the state itself is something else entirely. I consider the defense of Israel necessary, but our support must remain conditional. The best part of Judaism lies in the Diaspora, in tolerance.

What do you mean by, “Support for Israel must remain conditional”?

Primo Levi: What I mean is that our approval must not be blind. Unconditional applause is harmful. It is good for the Israeli government to engage with critical, vigilant support. The best part of Judaism lies in the Diaspora: in tolerance and in dissent. That is how one remains faithful.

Why is Judaism in the Diaspora better than Judaism in Israel?

Primo Levi: I don’t believe it is “better,” but rather that its best aspect is linked to its dispersion. Judaism in the Diaspora is diverse, accustomed to contradiction and tolerance. Israel, as the sole center, threatens to overshadow this tradition. We in the Diaspora have the task of reminding our Israeli friends of the thread of tolerance. This is not a contradiction, but a complement.

What role does the State of Israel play for Judaism?

Primo Levi: Israel has a duty to provide refuge and protection—after Auschwitz, this is a painful necessity. It must be defended. But it must not become the sole center of Judaism.

But life in the Diaspora has become dangerous for Jews, especially in Europe. Even in your home country, Italy. Isn’t it safer for us Jews to emigrate to Israel?

Primo Levi: The danger is real; anti-Semitism will not die out. But the answer must not be for all Jews to flee to Israel. Those who leave have their reasons. Those who stay have the responsibility to preserve the thread of tolerance and to combat the old hatred wherever it arises.

Do you ever get tired of fighting hatred and anti-Semitism?

Primo Levi: I will not grow weary, because there is no choice. The struggle against undeserved hatred is a war without end. Remembrance is a duty, not a privilege. Those who remain silent do a service to those who deny the truth. I am no prophet, merely a man with a good memory who emerged from the maelstrom and continues to ask questions.

Remark: This interview is based on statements and writings by Primo Levi that were identified and compiled using AI. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who have been significant to Judaism and Israel. Our goal is to introduce them and their ideas to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, Israel’s only female prime minister, Golda Meir, Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president, who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel, Moses, who led the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom, with the one who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries the great Jewish scholar Maimonides, with whom former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Jonathan Sacks,Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity, Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb,” the Hollywood icon and inventor Hedy Lamarr, the entrepreneur Estée Lauder, and the Nobel Prize in Economics laureate Milton Friedman, Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans, and the writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel.

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Sacha Wigdorovits is president of the Focus on Israel and the Middle East Association, which operates the website www.fokusisrael.ch . He studied history, German language and literature, and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked, among other things, as a U.S. correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, served as editor-in-chief of BLICK, and co-founded the commuter newspaper 20minuten.