Primo Levi and the Gospel According to Kafka

Yochai Ataria, *HaMapa VeHaTerritoria: Ben Ketiva LeMavet etsel Primo Levi veKa-Tsetnik* (Hebrew). Haifa: Pardes, 2022, 252 pp.

Reviewed by
Nili Cohen

Structure of the Book

Yochai Ataria's brilliant book *HaMapa VeHaTerritoria: Ben Ketiva LeMavet etsel Primo Levi veKa-Tsetnik* (Map and Territory: Between Writing and Death in Primo Levi and Ka-Tsetnik) reveals the testimony of two great writers about the Holocaust and, from this point of departure, offers a comparative analysis of art, life, and death. The book undertakes a psychological-literary-historical journey between an author and his writings in view of the trauma of the Holocaust. It exposes us, the readers, to the urge to write, the urge to live, and the urge to die, and makes us wonder about the extent to which choice is possible, if it is possible at all.

Ka-Tsetnik and Primo Levi shaped Holocaust discourse in Israel and abroad. Each was perceived as a representative of the Holocaust, albeit in different ways: Primo Levi is identified with the "gray zone," as is Ka-Tsetnik with the "other planet." Levi's restraint is seen as a contrast to Ka-Tsetnik's excitability, kitsch, and furious outcry. Ataria chooses to emphasize the movement that takes place between these representations and examines several issues to which the writers relate: the *Muselmann* as a code for the concentration camp; the possibility and necessity of testifying; the nature of the traumatic memory; the question of humanity; the victim's sense of identification; the possibility of the victims' voice being heard; and the question of collaboration (p. 16).

After the Introduction, in which he presents the structure of the book and the ideas that underlie it, Ataria focuses in Part 1 on Ka-Tsetnik. Chapter 1 reviews the change that Ka-Tsetnik underwent over the years

and his attempt to understand the secret of his nightmares. In chapter 2, a discussion ensues over the authenticity of his works and the necessity that drove him to experience nightmare as reality. In chapter 3, the focus is on his testimony at the Eichmann trial, which Ataria describes as the trauma of his life: the moment when his victimhood became clear to him. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the *Muselmann*, signifier of the entrance code to Auschwitz. It is in reference to this that the distinction between Levi and Ka-Tsetnik stands out: Levi does not try to penetrate the *Muselmann's* internal world, whereas Ka-Tsetnik disintegrates in his futile attempt to understand it. In chapter 5, the psychological cost imposed on anyone who attempts to describe the camp prisoner's experience is presented, with emphasis on the writings of Jorge Semprun. Primo Levi, Semprun believes, tries to make peace with his past, whereas he personally experiences writing as a recurrent process of reconstruction and destruction of the nightmare. Ka-Tsetnik's writing, like Semprun's, Ataria notes, is also an uncontrolled reconstruction of the nightmare. In the last chapter Ataria explains that the use of kitsch in Ka-Tsetnik's works, perceived as a weakness, allows the writer to penetrate deeply the nature of the Nazi regime; thus the weakness becomes power.

The second part of the book deals with Primo Levi. The first chapter presents the stances of scholars who discussed the riddle of his suicide. Chapter 2 takes up this question and contrasts it with the suicide of Jean Améry. Ataria rejects the notion that their suicides reflected their respective struggles against the German people; he presents his interpretation of Levi's suicide in the chapters to come. In chapter 3, Ataria analyzes the way Levi chose to carry out suicide—by taking a leap that was tantamount to a fall: a leap is an attempt of sorts to wake up from a nightmare, but only after the fall does the survivor realize (if he survives at all) that the nightmare remains within him. Chapter 4 deals with the blurring of oppressors and their victims, manifested in the "gray zone," in which, as Ataria proposes in chapter 5, Levi himself is snared. His internment reached its apotheosis as he labored over his translation of *The Trial* and gradually became Joseph K.'s Doppelgänger, leaving nothing to him but to take his own life, albeit more respectably than did Joseph K. Chapter 6 deals with Levi's attempt to understand, tell, and explain. The collapse of humankind leaves no possible way of explaining humanitarian feats such as those of Lorenzo Perrone, who helped Levi in the camp. After the fact Levi could not explain the collapse of humanness or the humanness that accompanied it. His obsessive

attempt to explain exposed him to mortal danger, which indeed came to pass.

Ataria demonstrates that the resumption of outcry in Ka-Tsetnik's work was a response to Primo Levi's demand that the survivors be listened to. It was also, in his opinion, Ka-Tsetnik's cry over the fact of his collapse at the Eichmann trial. The book indeed reflects the works of these two survivors with new and moving interpretive listening.

Primo Levi as a Map and Ka-Tsetnik as Territory

Here I would like to comment on the connection, revealed in its full complexity, between Primo Levi and Franz Kafka, whose great work, *The Trial*,[1] Levi translated into Italian. Was it Levi's very acceptance of the task of translating a work that foreshadowed the arbitrariness, cruelty, and disutility of law, and, in effect, of all of humankind, that sealed his fate and made his death inevitable? Was it the shame of a victim who through no fault of his own became part of the executioner's human family that decreed his death? Ataria appears to answer in the affirmative. Before I delve more deeply into this matter, however, I should describe in a few words the connection between the two protagonists of the book.

Ka-Tsetnik and Primo Levi belong to an esteemed group of Holocaust writers:

> Levi and Ka-Tsetnik attempt, each in his own way, to testify to and recount what is often perceived as something beyond the limits of the possible. Indeed, both of them did much to shape the Holocaust discourse in Israel and abroad in the research, political, and social fields. (p. 13)

According to Ataria, Ka-Tsetnik described the territory; that is to say, the atrocity of life in the camp in its lowliness, crudity, and cruelty. Primo Levi, in contrast, described the map; namely, marked the path of that ghastly life in restrained language without revealing the fullness of the degeneracy, the barbarity, the humiliation:

> Whereas Levi paints a broad tableau while dealing with sundry minutiae of daily life in the camp, cases in which the Kapo reveals signs of humanness, and moments when he himself feels he is losing

1 Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Kafka wrote the novel in 1914–1915; Max Brod published it posthumously in 1925.

> some of his humanness, Ka-Tsetnik, just as he did while testifying at the Eichmann trial, disintegrates again and again as he confronts the gazes of those who "walked away from him." (p. 15)

Primo Levi seemingly reconciled himself with the ghastly past, a past that he described in very harsh terms without forgoing its indications of humanity and hope. Ka-Tsetnik refused to do this; his account of the atrocity crescendos with neither consolation nor conciliation. In practice, as Ataria notes, this interpretive reading underwent an inversion adduced from each writer's aftermath. Ka-Tsetnik led a lengthy if agitated life and died of natural causes. Levi's equilibrium, contrastingly, served as a mask for darkness and depression that found expression in his poems[2] and led him to his deliberate fatal fall. "The connection, customarily taken for granted, between the nature of the writing and the ability to recover from the trauma is ungrounded and is more a desideratum on the part of certain theoreticians," Ataria states (p. 15).[3]

Ka-Tsetnik's uninhibited outcry attracted criticism. His writing, it was said, tended toward a simplistic response to the complex and tangled reality of the Holocaust. Ataria commends Ka-Tsetnik's writing for its importance (p. 15) and advises[4] his readers that while Primo Levi's books were greeted with profuse critical acclaim, both writers are, are crucial to an understanding of the Holocaust. The outcry in the former's writing complements the measured tenor of the latter. Both writers are vital witnesses for relaying the testimony and the message to, and assimilating them into, all of humankind.

Holding Levi while reading Ka-Tsetnik means being able to retain a certain anchor at the time of the recurrent collapse. Conversely, holding Ka-Tsetnik while reading Levi allows us to sense the gaping abysses that underlie the clean and precise sentences. The result is an anchored understanding of a feeling, a feeling based on understanding (p. 16).

The two writers' first works were created and published at roughly

2 For his complete works of poetry, see *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* (New York: Liverlight 2015).

3 For a fascinating analysis of dealing poetically with the trauma of the Holocaust and a presentation of three poetic patterns of this coping as seen in the writings of Appelfeld, Ka-Tsetnik, and Levi, see Rina Dudai, *Leshon HaEsh: Edut Poetit 'al HaTrauma shel HaShoa* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: MOFET Institute, 2022).

4 See Dan Miron's important article, "Ben Sefer Le'Efer" (Hebrew), *Alpaim*, 10 (1994), pp. 196–224.

the same time—Primo Levi's first-person testimony[5] and Ka-Tsetnik's novel, written in third person, which describes the horrors in detail.[6] In both cases the issue of reliability of the testimony has been raised. It is perceived as stronger in Levi's writings, since Levi retells what happened to him. Ka-Tsetnik's testimony is seen as relatively challengeable, because he wrote a novel that we understand, from what we know, as somewhat based on the author's life. In this sense the distinction between the "map" that Levi represents and the "territory" that Ka-Tsetnik represents is blurred because a territory must be described with precision, whereas the map that signifies it is by nature more removed from reality. However, the atrocity that Ka-Tsetnik describes, even if imprecisely, captures the terror of the camp more powerfully than does Primo Levi's restrained accuracy. Indeed, it seems that the very identity between Ka-Tsetnik and "territory" and between Levi and "map" is apposite to the spirit of matters.

Both writers experienced falls in their lives. Ka-Tsetnik fell and collapsed from the witness stand at the Eichmann trial while the whole world was looking on. His tumble and silence made him the most important witness at the trial, and his testimony, unexpressed at the trial, was communicated to the world via his books. Thus, paradoxically, the fall he took at the trial gave him rehabilitative strength, since it was assimilated as a formative event into the collective memory of the horrors of the Holocaust. In contrast, Primo Levi's leap/fall into the stairwell from the third floor to the ground floor of his home in Turin in 1987, four years after he translated *The Trial*, was destructive. His literary testimony about the ghastliness of the Holocaust, which resonated enormously, remained intact, but the measured version of the events in his books crossed an interpretive inflection point.

Kafka as a Map and Primo Levi as Territory: The Background of Primo Levi's Translation of *The Trial*

Ataria finds a direct causal relationship between the task of translating *The Trial*, undertaken by Primo Levi, and his deliberate fall. I consider this a map and a territory of a different kind. Joseph K. is the map. He is the signifier of the one who is doomed to death by a cruel, silent, and

5 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (New York: The Orion Press, 1959), was originally published in Italy as *Se questo è un uomo*, in 1947.

6 Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Sunrise over Hell* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977).

inconceivable judicial bureaucracy. Levi is the signified. He embodied Joseph K.'s territory in his life and his death; he could not avoid the character's fate. This explanation of a causal relationship between Joseph K.'s fate and Levi's fall is persuasive, but one may juxtapose to it a different background for the fall, associated with the craft of translation and the responses to the publication of Levi's opus. It is this that I wish to present in this review.

Primo Levi earned eternal fame for his books *If This Is a Man* and *The Periodic Table*. In 1983, Giulio Einaudi launched a new series of books at his publishing house in Turin, the city where Levi was born, lived, and died, titling it "Writers Translate Writers." Levi was one of the first writers he approached, asking him to translate Kafka's *The Trial*. Levi assented willingly. The translation was published in 1983, marking the centenary of Kafka's birth. Kafka had been translated into Italian twice before, but the pivot to translation by writers was meant to give the foreign literature wide public exposure. Primo Levi admired several German litterateurs, particularly Thomas Mann, whose *The Magic Mountain* he liked in particular; he read it with his sister in Italian.[7]

In those years one could not study chemistry without being fluent in German. Primo Levi acquired German at the University of Turin as part of his chemistry studies, which he completed *summa cum laude*. He improved his German proficiency in the concentration camp.[8] The fact that he was an Italian who understood German and could even speak the language gave him an edge in the camp and set him apart from others. The German used there was obviously totally different from the language he had learned as a chemistry student and from Heine's poetry. In the babel of Auschwitz, German was an instrument of violence that doomed anyone who failed to understand it. Nearly all prisoners from Italy were excluded from the camp hierarchy, because, as Levi himself notes, the other prisoners' vernacular was Yiddish (pp. 126–127).[9]

7 Martina Mengoni, "I tedeschi prima e dopo Auschwitz: Primo Levi," *Tradurre: Pratiche, teorie, strumenti,* 19 (2020), pp. 1–4.

8 Between the 1960s and 1980s, Levi further improved his German at the Goethe Institute in Turin. See Monica Biasiolo, "'È come sbucciare una cipolla, vi è uno strato dopo l'altro': Il chimico e scrittore Levi di fronte a Kafka," *Ticontre: Teoria Testo Traduzione*, 6 (2016), pp. 117, 123.

9 Murray Baumgarten, "'Lachshov BeGermanit': Tsematim Leshoni'im BiKhtivato shel Primo Levi" (Hebrew), *Zehuyot*, 4 (2013), pp. 55, 61–66.

Primo Levi adored Thomas Mann, but not Franz Kafka. Kafka's writing threatened and frightened him, he said. Nevertheless, he assented to the translation project willingly. After his ghastly experiences in the camp, he felt admiration as well as great intimacy—perhaps even identification—toward the Jew Franz Kafka. He saw him as a member of a rejected minority who had inadvertently foreseen the horrors of the Holocaust and the ascendancy of a bureaucratic cruelty devoid of law and justice even before it came about.[10] Kafka drew the map; Primo Levi experienced the territory in his life. By means of the translation, Levi relived Auschwitz. He felt like a person who had been placed on trial for an offense of which he was not aware and had not committed. Joseph K. signified not only him but also the state of all of humanity.

Furthermore, there had been tension between Kafka and his father, reflected in his work *Dearest Father*.[11] Kafka's father represented the tyranny of authority in a significant way and inspired Kafka to revile any institution based on authority and domination, including institutions of governance and law. Some claim that Levi, like Kafka, disapproved of and even felt enmity toward his father.[12] The shared bond of Jewishness; tension surrounding paternal authority; and, perhaps, authority at large; fluency in German; and, foremost, the experience of the Holocaust, epitomized by Kafka's prophecy in *The Trial*—all of these prompted Primo Levi to accept the task of translating the book, and he invested everything he had in it (pp. 177–179).[13] Levi noted that he considered translation a mission, a craft that creates a relationship between people who are far apart, surmounts foreignness, overcomes the cacophony of the Tower of Babel, and makes understanding possible.[14]

10 Primo Levi, "An Assault Called Franz Kafka," in Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961–1987* (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 156.

11 Franz Kafka, *Dearest Father* (Richmond, UK: Alma Classics, 2017).

12 Stefano Bellin, "Primo Levi and Franz Kafka: An Unheimlich Encounter," *Ticontre: Teoria Testo Traduzione*, 6 (2016), p. 139.

13 For parallels between Kafka's and Levi's Jewishness and the connection between Kafka, the prophet of the Holocaust, and Levi, who experienced it, see Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski, "Primo Levi and Jewish Kafka in Italy," *Journal of the Kafka Society of America* (2012), p. 76.

14 Bellin, "Primo Levi and Franz Kafka," pp. 142–143. On Levi's attitude toward the language, see Dudai, *Leshon HaEsh*, pp. 175–181.

Words as Translations of Experiences

What, however, does translation mean in this context and in general? Arguably we live all of our lives experiencing translation. The sensory experiences that we undergo and wish to express are translated into words. So, too, are our intellectual experiences, such as those of a scientist who observes the world and translates their observations into words. One may say that both Ka-Tsetnik and Levi transposed their life experiences during the Holocaust into words; their works translated these experiences into words or transformed them into testimony. Primo Levi described Galileo as a witness and likened himself to that scientist (p. 197).[15] As a writer who mobilized to produce a testimony that should be assimilated into the memory of humankind, he strove for accuracy, although he was not always sure that he had attained it (p. 199). Indeed, witness and translator play a similar socio-judicial role. All witnesses who step forward in a trial translate into words the relevant life experience that they are asked to address.[16]

There is, of course, a difference between a work of art, even one that has an autobiographical aspect, and the translation of a witness's experience at a trial. Authors enjoy artistic freedom and can embellish their personal experiences even with figments of their imagination, as Ka-Tsetnik did. Witnesses, in contrast, must translate their experiences, their memories of the event about which they need to testify, so that their words will describe exactly what happened. It is the extent of commitment to the truth that distinguishes the translation of an artist's spirit into words from the translation of an experience into court testimony.

When translating ordinary meaning—transferring a text from one language to another—translators must remain faithful to the source, as must witnesses who dredge up from memory the details of the action about which they testify. Obviously a distinction should be made between translating a formal text—one of administrative or bureaucratic nature—and translating an artistic one. In the latter case the question is how much creative license a translator may employ in translating another person's

15 Michael Tager, "Primo Levi and the Language of Witness," *Criticism: Fin De Siècle Perspectives on Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture*, 35:2 (1993), pp. 265–288.

16 The challenges of translation and testimony evoke debate over the limits of representing the Holocaust by means of language and the question of whether ordinary language can describe what happened there. For a fascinating discussion of the matter, see Rivka Brot, "Eduyot Me-Ha-Ezor HaAfor Beyn 'i-Safa' Le'Tirgum'" (Hebrew), *Forum 'Iyune Mishpat*, 44 (2020), pp. 1–17.

work. Aesthetic value plays a role here, and the dilemma widely posed is whether the translator must stick to the verbal meaning or, perhaps, express the spirit of what is being said even if this disserves the verbal meaning. The debate is as old as antiquity and has complex theoretical aspects that cannot be discussed in this setting.[17]

Translation from Language to Language

In Italian the verb "translate" is *tradurre*, whereas *tradire*, similarly pronounced, means "betray." The proximity of these words gave birth to the saying *Tradurre è tradire*;[18] that is, translation is in some way an act of betrayal. The basis of this saying is the realization that faithfulness to the source cannot be absolute, due not only to language differences but to differences in the cultural freight of each language and also, sometimes, to differences in the particular times. Therefore, a translated work has a life of its own, which may stray from the source. When Einaudi chose to launch his "Writers Translate Writers" series, he was probably aware of the conceptual debate over the extent of a translator's obligation to the source text. He was also in all likelihood mindful of the difficulty of imposing restrictions on artistic freedom when the translator is a writer of the highest order, such as Primo Levi. Although translation cohabits with interpretation, in this context it is hard to accept Roland Barthes's belief that the original author dies when the interpretive reading that appears in the wake of the original work is born.[19] When any text, even an artistic text, is translated, the extent of interpretation is narrower and an obvious obligation to the source exists.[20]

Primo Levi's translation of *The Trial* touched off a polemic. The translation of *The Trial* was placed on trial. Levi's critics took considerable

17 See Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in Joseph F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165–207; See the essay "The Task of the Translator," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913–1926* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 253–263; See also Rahel Weisbrod, *Lo al haMila Levada: Sugiyot Yesod beTirgum* (Hebrew) (Ra'anana: The Open University of Israel, 2007).

18 The adage is attributed to the French poet and critic Joachim du Bellay (1549).

19 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (1977), pp. 142–148: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

20 See Umberto Eco's disapproval of this interpretation: Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For a response see Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," ibid., pp. 89–108.

exception to the extent of freedom that he allowed himself in translating Kafka's text. It is important to note that Primo Levi himself was aware of the linguistic choices he had made; he admitted that he had been embroiled in a continual debate with himself, torn between his philological conscience and his personal reflexes (p. 179).

The critics challenged Levi's translational interpretation. They noted that, in contrast to Kafka, who chose to leave matters opaque, Levi insisted on explaining even the inexplicable in an attempt to translate Kafka in a manner that the translation would mediate between Kafka and Auschwitz. Levi's language may be likened to an arrow that reaches its target, whereas Kafka's sends a message that never reaches a target. Kafka plays reflection against revelation, concealing when he tries to reveal, and revealing when he wishes to conceal. The characteristics of his writing rest on non-understanding and uncertainty; he invites his readers to provide meaning for a bewildering world. Where Kafka obfuscates, Levi elucidates.[21]

Sandra Bosco Coletsos, an expert in German, rules that Levi revised the German text:

> Levi's version, more flexible and fast-paced than the source, actually loses the power of the absurd, the materiality, and the vague personality that we defined as the basic and decisive components of the message that *The Trial* sends us. Its excessively subjective interpretation and development mean, in a certain sense, its betrayal. (p. 180)[22]

This critique, published during Levi's lifetime, expresses the idea that the act of translation somehow betrays the source. Coletsos believes that Primo Levi imposed himself on Kafka as a writer. Later interpretations of the translation, published after Levi's death, however, treat the translation with other and more sympathetic esteem. Some claim that Levi chose a different language not in order to impose himself but rather to distinguish himself from the text and from the threatening Other who tenants it.[23]

21 Bellin, "Primo Levi and Franz Kafka," pp. 144–145.

22 Sandra Bosco Coletsos, "La traduzione di Der Prozess di Franz Kafka," *Annali. Istituto Universitario orientale; Sezione germanica. Studi tedeschi* (1985), p. 28. See also David Mendel, "Primo Levi and Translation," *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, 31 (1998), p. 11.

23 Chiara Montini, "La traduction du Procès de Kafka par Primo Levi: Un conflit entre le même e l'autre," *Traduire le même, l'autre et le soi* (2020), pp. 201–208.

In yet another linguistic analysis of the translation, it is confirmed that Levi made linguistic choices different from Kafka's, but it is reasoned that Levi did not do so in order to amplify himself but to obscure the Kafkaesque world of the absurd and counter it by offering a rational conceptualization of the world.[24] Some scholars also stress Levi's profound exposure to the German language and his scientific rigor as a chemist and find that these are manifested in his translation.[25] In this context it may be worth mentioning that Kafka had begun to study chemistry, but, unlike Levi, did not persevere with it and abandoned his studies shortly afterward in favor of law.[26]

Expectations and Disappointments

As stated, Primo Levi translated Kafka in 1983. We now go back to 1947, when Levi submitted the manuscript of *If This Is a Man* to Einaudi's publishing house. The referee, Natalia Ginzburg, rejected it (after two small publishers had done the same). Only after the intercession of two associates of Levi's was the book published by another small publisher.[27] In 1958—about a decade after the first rejection—Einaudi recanted the rejection and published the book in a new edition. The book then became enormously successful. Thus, even exemplary works may walk a Via Dolorosa, and even outstanding referees may make fateful mistakes, as Natalia Ginzburg admitted years later.[28]

Levi's expectations at the first stage, when he fought to have *If This Is a Man* published, were low. His success was built in a process that began with rejection, continued with publication, and culminated in towering acclaim. In 1983, when *The Trial* was translated, Levi's expectations were different. No longer did he need to approach Einaudi. Einaudi approached Levi, now a giant of Italian and world literature. His identification with the task of translating *The Trial* traced to a blend

24 Arianna Marelli, "Primo Levi e la traduzione del Processo, ovvero il processo della traduzione," *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, 8 (2014), pp. 177–198.

25 Biasiolo, "'È come sbucciare una cipolla, vi è uno strato dopo l'altro,'" pp. 117, 124–125.

26 Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), pp. 104–105.

27 Manuela Consoni, "'LaDor Shelanu': Primo Levi ke'Ed" (Hebrew), *Bishvil Hazikaron*, 37 (2000), pp. 41–45.

28 Hen Melul, "Hazehu Adam? Ha'Edut MehaTofet SheKim'at veLo Ra'ata Or Yom" (Hebrew), *Hasafranim*, https://blog.nli.org.il/sodot-primo-levi (accessed January 25, 2022).

of Kafka's prophetic description and the nightmarish German world that he himself had experienced. Levi probably reasoned that his work, combining Kafka's map with the territory in which he had lived, would be strongly appreciated. This did not happen. The chilly breeze that greeted the translation plunged Levi into despair. His descent into the cold abyss of rejection at the peak of his fame was an unbearable blow. The depression that had long nested in him led to his final descent several years later.

The discussion regarding Primo Levi's relationship with the translation of Kafka's *The Trial* raises interpretive questions about motives of life and death. According to Ataria, Kafka sealed Primo Levi's fate. Levi realized that he, like Joseph K., was fated to die. Levi identified himself with Joseph K. Yet unlike Joseph K., who is murdered in a humiliating manner, Levi imposed the death sentence on himself.

Levi flees from Kafka, whom he knows well until in a moment of weakness he agrees to translate him and the dams are bursting. Levi identifies himself as Joseph K. and realizes accordingly that he must die and that his dog-like death is inevitable. However, Joseph K. fails to carry out the mission to the end; therefore, instead of dying a "free" man (insofar as this concept is possible in Kafka's writings), he is murdered in misery. In such a world, a Kafkaesque and gray world, there is only one possibility of repair: to write *The Trial* anew (p. 193).

Primo Levi decided to redeem himself from Joseph K's ignominy by rewriting *The Trial*:

> Levi solved Joseph K.'s problem and with his death he tried to save us from Kafka. To start the world from a point where death must occur but where it is possible, at least, to try to die without ignominy. (p. 196)

The map that Kafka sketched imposed itself on Levi's territory. Interestingly, however, it did not impose the territory on Kafka himself. True, Levi noted that even though Kafka had not experienced the nightmare that he had described in *The Trial*, his own life—Levi's—was better than Kafka's.[29] Comparisons are hard to make, but Kafka did not decree death upon himself. Perhaps he knew that his end was imminent in any case; therefore, it was not worth the effort. Either way, his life

29 Ziolkowski, "Primo Levi and Jewish Kafka in Italy," pp. 76–77.

ended unwillingly in precisely its happy period, when he was living in Berlin with his beloved companion, Dora Diamant.[30]

The interpretation that traces Levi's suicide to Joseph K. is a conceptual one that originates in the world of the absurd and with the acceptance of the guilt foisted on an individual as a Jew for revealing man's horrific nature, with all the shame it involves. Alongside this interpretation, however, as stated, one may also conceive of a more banal one that uncouples the fate of Joseph K. from questions of guilt, human evil, and passive collaboration with evil. The alternative reading centers on the existential despair that bedeviled Levi almost all of his life and the periodic despair that engulfed him when he invested his every fiber into the world of writing after having resigned his position at the chemical plant—a despair that worsened due to his declining state of health and also, perhaps, in view of the criticism of his translation. This was a death blow that dramatically worsened his condition. Ending his life in 1987, Levi was not privileged to see the torrent of articles that accompanied his translation-interpretation of Kafka in the years to come, in which a different and more sympathetic approach accompanied his interpretative act.

Holocaust survivors were never hewn of one stone. Not all could withstand the burden of carrying on with life in the aftermath of the atrocity. Manifestations of depression were probably more common among them than among other population groups. Primo Levi's death unleashed mountains of interpretations. *HaMapa VeHaTerritoria: Ben Ketiva LeMavet etsel Primo Levi VeKa-Tsetnik* adds a fascinating and important layer to this body of interpretation.

Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood

30 See Laurent Seksik, *Franz Kafka Ne Veut Pas Mourire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2023), a novel that describes the last period of Kafka's life along with the main protagonists—his physician, Dr. Klopstock; his sister, Ottilie; and Dora Diamant.