

**Endurance Under Fascism:**

**Comparing and contrasting Levi's "The Periodic Table" and Beck's "An Underground Life:  
Memoir of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin"**

Adam A. Urchison

Department of English, Pennsylvania Western University

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## **Endurance Under Fascism: Comparing and contrasting Levi's "The Periodic Table" and Beck's "An Underground Life: Memoir of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin"**

The atrocities derived from World War II were common across every front. The devastation changed the lives of people all over Europe. However, neither of these stories strongly covered the Nazi's violence, but more so focused on civilian life during these times. Unlike many novels and memoir's regarding the Holocaust, Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*, and Gad Beck's *An Underground Life* take a primary focus on the relationships and experiences that left a lasting impact on the authors lives. While their experiences with fascism have similarities, these men experienced the woes and devastation of the era in different worlds, and it's reflected in the contents of each book.

### **Summaries**

The distinction and similarities between these men's stories are not just related to the plot, but a summary of both is necessary for us to contextualize the relation between each book.

In *The Periodic Table* by Primo Levi, he goes into depth about his childhood and adult life in regions throughout Italy. He grew up in a Jewish community in Piedmont, a region in northwestern Italy. Although Italy was distant from the growing antisemitism of Germany, there was still some form of social tension between Jewish people and the Gentiles. Early on within the book, Levi (1984) says, "The rejection was mutual. The minority erected a symmetrical barrier against all of Christianity" (p. 5). Soon enough Italy began to adopt discriminatory regulations against Jews, although not fully to the extreme and speed Germany adopted them.

It is also important to note, Primo didn't just focus on the Nazi's. In his book he portrayed Fascism as the force that brought the war and prejudice together in Europe. Throughout the book, the growth of fascism and anti-Jew propaganda is put on display across Primo's life. To the reader it seems at first, he is distant from the rot consuming Europe. It isn't clear how bad it has become until Primo is taking classes at the Chemical Institute. Levi (1984) tells us, "The racial laws against the Jews had been proclaimed" (p. 40). From this point on, we can see Primo feeling increasingly more outcast from Italian society. He was barred from attaining his official degree, and his opportunities for work decreased drastically. Fortunately, there were still people who opposed fascism, and those who respected his education as a chemist. His life in Italy was challenging, but not yet deadly. It wasn't until the Italian resistance was working to overthrow the government, that violence overtook Italy. At this time the Nazi's stepped in and set up a puppet regime and began to deport Jews to their camps. Primo also discusses his life afterwards, and how he handled grief and trauma by writing.

In *An Underground Life* by Gad Beck, it starts off discussing his childhood in Berlin, Germany. His family was middle class and one of his parents a Hungarian Jew, the other a Gentile from Germany. His parents tried to hide the growing issues in Germany from them, but around the time he was 10 years old, his "Aryan" classmates began to bully Gad for being Jewish. The school's administration began to bar him from participating in "Aryan" activities in school. Beck (1999) says, "I had to stand in the corner of the schoolyard opposite of everyone else. I was the only Jew in my class" (p. 16). After this point it became distinctly clear Beck was now an outcast. As Gad grew up, he saw Jews barred from being allowed to work freely and were made to find work through Nazi controlled Institutions. They had no other options and

had to work in order to be granted food rations. Although Jews still had free reign to roam, they were more or less enslaved by the government. Luckily for Gad, his mother was a Christian woman. The Nazi government treated mixed families with more caution than those who they deemed fully Jewish. In the years leading up to the war more anti-Jew policies were passed. As the war ramped up, Jews were forced to be deported out of the city to the East. Although people knew whatever lies East was bad, they had no idea the reality of what had already begun. Beck (1999) claims in Berlin, in 1942 “he didn’t have an inkling of the mass murder that had already begun” (p. 64). Basically, the public was still unaware of the atrocities going on after a year of deportations. Beck was relatively safe for now due to his status as a mischling, a Nazi term for being half Jew. He tried to encourage and help non-mischlings live illegally to avoid deportation. Eventually Gad’s story comes to a climax when he and the remaining mischlings of Berlin were ordered to return to the Jewish Employment Office, where the Nazi’s had planned to deport the remaining Jews of Berlin. They rounded up those who listened to the order and placed them in an assembly camp built from the administrative building of a Jewish community in Rosenstrasse. The Nazi’s publicly declared Berlin was now free of Jews. Quickly the public caught on, and the Christian family members of those imprisoned began to show up to and engage in one of the only German displays of dissent throughout the Reich. After a six-day standoff, the government decides to start releasing prisoners. For the time remaining, Beck spends helping illegal Jews escape until the Red Army showed up. Gad doesn’t directly discuss much about his days after the war was over, he only says he moved to Israel with his friends and family.

Despite both countries being members of the Axis entrenched in fascism, the differences in politics, culture, and the way they experienced and reacted to fascism in each story are different.

Politically, Nazi Germany paved the way for antisemitic extremism. Starting as early as 1933 they were passing laws aimed at making life harder for Jewish people. According to the Holocaust Encyclopedia there were, “more than 400 legal restrictions imposed upon Jews and other groups during the first six years of the Nazi regime” (*Antisemitic Legislation 1933-1939*, 2023, para. 11). Italy started to pass anti-Jew laws just before the war under influence of Nazi pressure. The Holocaust Encyclopedia says, “the Fascist regime passed antisemitic legislation beginning in 1938” (*Italy*, 2023, para. 4). Part of the motivation for this was fear, they worried Hitler didn’t consider them legitimate. Both of these changes are discussed in Levi and Beck’s books, but they don’t go into exact detail about the various restrictions.

Culturally the response to the new wave of antisemitism was quite different. The Nazi’s had formulated a plan to indoctrinate the masses early on. By removing Jews from media and schools and blaming them for German failure in World War 2, they successfully got the population enthralled in Jew hatred. Employing Joseph Goebbels, Nazis established a wave of propaganda intended to gain “the absolute control of German culture” (*Joseph Goebbels*, 2023, para. 11). In Italy, antisemitism hadn’t changed much until pressure from the Nazis. For hundreds of years before World War 2, there had already been antisemitic stereotypes and beliefs which mainly stemmed from the doctrines of Catholicism. Many Europeans were taught, “all Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ” (*Antisemitism In History: From the early church to 1400*, 2023, para. 2). Since Christianity had already been the dominant religion in

Europe for several hundred years, even those who were not actively antisemitic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were predisposed to a cultural bias against Jews. For quite a long time Jews weren't even allowed to live in Europe. The Holocaust Encyclopedia says, "Especially after the enlightenment of the eighteenth century...Jews were invited to settle in central and eastern Europe" (*Antisemitism in History: The Early Modern Era*, 2023, para. 1). Once Jewish people became more common throughout Europe, public figures began to discuss the status of Jews in society. Many Christians began to blame them for economic hardships. Often, they claimed "Jews were displacing non-Jews in professions traditionally reserved for Christians" (*Antisemitism in History: The Era of Nationalism*, 2023, para. 3).

In terms of their own experience Levi and Beck had very different scenarios in dealing with Nazis and Fascism. In comparison to Levi's situation, Beck seems somewhat privileged to have been a *mischling*. Even though Beck was knee deep in the heart of antisemitism, he at least had some slight legal protection. Through his status as a *mischling*, he was able to evade deportation to the east. Levi on the other hand, his own government didn't enforce the laws as harshly when they were still in power. However, once the Nazis installed a puppet regime, Primo had no protections and he was simply a Jew in the eyes of the Nazis. Levi (1984) tells us he had, "become part of the Lager system" (p. 139). Another way to say he had been deported and endured the atrocities of Nazi camps. For many survivors such as Levi, "The trauma of the Holocaust, quite obviously, did not end at liberation" (*Psychological Trauma and the Holocaust*, 2023, para. 1). This is made abundantly evident since Levi took his own life.

A key take-aways from comparing and contrasting their stories is the nature of antisemitism in both countries. Nazi Germany was built from antisemitism, whereas Italian

antisemitism grew from ties with Nazi Germany. Even though both nations were committed to the reprehensible, this difference in the source changed the experiences for those involved.

### **Relationships**

Both men's experience with relationships were also vastly different. Their sexualities, outgoingness, and success in forming relationships were all opposite. However, both men lost potential partners because of the Antisemitism poisoning Europe.

Primo Levi is almost certainly a heterosexual man. While there are only a few women in the book he discusses interest in, there are no men in the book he talks about in the same way. Levi also displays a lack of courage, and shyness when it comes to approaching women, which causes him to struggle romantically. Primo also does not break taboos like Gad does, and the depth he speaks of his relationships is only romantic. Giulia, a girl he desired had rejected him for a goy, and he was overcome with sorrow. Sorrow for feeling different, for feeling taken advantage of, and his inability to bring himself to speak to women. He eventually gets past this and gets married. In the book he speaks very little of his marriage, but it is shown to some extent their relationship is strong.

In contrast, Gad Beck almost fits the stereotype of a flamboyant homosexual, and often depicts himself as something of a deviant. Despite the era, Beck makes claims of several sexual encounters with men throughout the book. Even before the Nazis gained power, Germany had laws prohibiting gay sex. According to The Holocaust Encyclopedia, " Paragraph 175 was the statute of the German criminal code that banned sexual relations between men" (*Gay Men Under the Nazi Regime*, 2023, para. 1). Despite this longstanding law, almost every man outside his family who he mentions by name, he suggests having some sort of sexual encounter with. In

fact, Beck describes some of them in shocking detail. Surprisingly, his adventurous sex life is pertinent to his own survival, as Beck claims his network of connections, he made from these relations was one of the factors which aided his survival. Despite Beck's numerous flings, he does hold one man above the rest. Manfred, a guy from his underground Jewish youth group who he came to have a very deep relationship with. Soon after deportations began, Manfred and his family were called to be deported. Beck tried his best to convince Manfred not to go, but he refused to leave his family despite Beck's wishes. This loss leaves a permanent longing and void in Beck's life.

### **Family**

The authors differed in the way they portrayed their family. When Gad spoke of his family, he meant his direct family who lived in and around Berlin. When Primo talks about family, it includes many members from his Jewish community in addition to his direct family. Both men had to have loose attachments to their families because the state of their countries made them need to travel for work.

### **Humor**

Both men use some humor in their writing to different extents. Beck uses a cruder and more overt form of humor, often somehow related to his sexual orientation. For example, in the prologue Beck talks about an interaction he experienced as an infant when a woman bent over to look into his baby carriage. Beck (1999) says, "two humongous breasts entered my field of vision, darkened the sky, robbed me of my daylight, the air to breathe, the world. No wonder I ever enjoyed any sort of desire whatsoever for female breasts" (p. 4). By describing such an exaggerated scene, yet one most are familiar with, Beck is almost guaranteed to garner a smile



from the reader. Alternatively Primo uses a subtle style of humor that builds much like a joke with a punchline. Years after the war, he starts off explaining a discussion about a coworker. This coworker is confused about a useless material that's always been an ingredient of the varnish. Levi then flashes back to immediately after the war and tells this whole elaborate story about trying to recover ruined varnish. At the end he discovers putting a certain solution returns the varnish to its fluid state. The recipe inspection gets mixed up, and it accidentally becomes a permanent part of the recipe that everyone is afraid to change. Not everyone may find situational irony in the short story "Chromium" very amusing, but it's the more comedic side of his writing.

### **Language**

Both books share a lot of language in the way they are translated. Levi and Beck both make frequent use of words related to Hebrew in some way. The way they write is timeless as they both elaborate on phrases from Hebrew, Italian, and German when discussing matters that are confusing without context. For example, the term Goy or mischling would have no meaning to someone who isn't familiar with Yiddish or Nazi vocabulary. However, both authors make a point to elaborate for the reader. Whether or not this is a service done by the translators would take further investigation.

Their styles of writing are also very different. Levi is more succinct, which allows him to delicately weave the story together with precision. Beck's story is written almost as though he is telling you in person, from beginning to end. Because of these distinct tones, the text feels more vibrant in *An Underground Life* work than in *The Periodic Table*. The fact *The Periodic Table* is a

collection of stories allows for it to contain more allegorical possibilities, whereas *An Underground Life* is an autobiographical account, which leaves less up for interpretation by the reader.

### **Perspectives**

Both authors have different perspectives throughout the story. In a literary sense, *The Periodic Table* contains multiple stories told from the perspective of people other than himself. There are four stories, "Lead", "Mercury", "Sulfur", and "Titanium" which tell the story of people involved in chemistry in the same era, but also less civilized ones. There is also the story "Silver", which contains nested within, the story of Cerrato, narrated by himself at a reunion. Primo also doesn't tell his stories in exact chronological order, but rather skipping and jumping between points in time. It isn't clear what significance the order of the elements holds. Alternatively, *An Underground Life* was completely in first person, and strictly in order from the beginning of his life to the end of the War.

### **Resistance**

Because of their experiences and outlooks on life, Levi and Beck also had different reactions to fascism. While both resisted in some form, the ideas backing their own resistance was different.

Primo's resistance was more active. He was among the many men who joined the anti-fascist resistance group called "The Partisans". These partisans were in a civil war with the Fascist led government and the Nazi's who were invading Italy to prop up its own regime. Primo (1984) says, "We were the most disarmed partisans in all the Piedmont" (p. 130). Which implies

Primo may not have seen a lot of combat, as his crew had very little supplies and were in hiding when they were discovered. His involvement almost led to his death, but he denied being part of the partisans and Nazi soldiers apprehended him for being Jewish.

Beck took a more spiritual and community-based approach to resistance. He spent much of his time attending an illegal youth group which met up to study Judaism. They also planned their Zionist Aliyah, or immigration from the diaspora to Israel. This group also spent time aiding illegal Jews living in Berlin. This approach not only provided Beck with hope, but also gave him another community to rely on in his time of need. Like Primo, Gads resistance also led to being captured by the Nazi's, as his involvement in aiding illegals regularly put him at risk even after his release at Rosenstrasse.

### **Their Message**

Both of these books reveal nuance about the holocaust and life often isn't well covered in our education systems. When you hold the books up, side by side, you may come to realize the experience for European Jews during WW2 was not universal. Some Jews were tricked into helping facilitate efficient deportation to concentration camps. Many experienced fates worse than death. There were those who much like today, got to watch society crumble with a front row view from start to finish. Some tried to tell their stories in hopes it won't happen again, that the slightest bit of empathy can peak from behind the mask. Some refused to share, thinking perhaps we should let the past die. Some of them weren't even Jewish. You may also realize the importance and power of your own voice, and the importance to lend a voice to those not being heard. The climax of Beck's book shows that people only stop doing bad things when

people speak up for what is right. Primo's book was written with the primary intention to lend his voice to the chemists who he felt were not being heard. Both books beg the question, how does one use their voice for good?

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