

**Anna Baldini**

## **In Search of the Roots: Primo Levi and the Importation in Italy of mid-European Jewish Culture**

The international perception of the “Holocaust” had changed greatly at the end of the Seventies: in those years the American cultural industry began to show interest for the theme (see the TV serial *Holocaust*, 1978) while the emerging French and German historical revisionism transformed it into a current issue in the field of politics. In Italy these phenomena went together with the “discovery” of the Ashkenazic culture, which had been caused, among the rest, by a rebound from the international literary field: in 1976 the Nobel Prize was awarded to Saul Bellow, in 1978 to Isaac Singer. Through which agents and channels was this literature imported to Italy? Which interests in the literary field were concerned? I will try to answer these questions by analyzing the strategies of publishing houses engaged in importing mid-European Jewish literature, especially Adelphi: before it was founded (1962) and acquired a crucial part in the field of publishers, no one in Italy spoke about a literary «Mitteleuropa».

Robert Gordon (*Which Holocaust? Primo Levi and the field of Holocaust memory in post-war Italy*, «*Italian Studies*», 61, 1, Spring 2006, pp. 85-113) has recently shown how crucial were Primo Levi’s writings in shaping the Italian memory of the extermination of the European Jewry. At the end of the Seventies Primo Levi began to write short stories whose action is set again in Auschwitz and

whose central characters are Ashkenazim (see *Moments of reprieve*, first published in Italy in 1981); in 1981 he published a «personal anthology» (*In Search of the Roots*) which included Schalom Alechem’s, Isaab Babel’s and Paul Celan’s writings; from 1980 he studied Yiddish to give a realistic setting to his 1982 novel, *If Not Now, When?*; in a lecture given at the Rockfeller Foundation in 1982 he accepted for the first time to be “labelled” as «Jewish writer». These new interests can be seen also in his work as cultural mediator: he began to be asked to write prefaces or introductions not only to Holocaust related books, but to more generally Jewish related ones.

Levi’s actions must not be seen as totally self-determined: he was one of the most important writers published by Einaudi, which was undergoing in those years an economic and symbolic crisis which it tried to solve pinning its hopes on him. Both his «personal anthology» and his translation of Kafka’s *The Trial* (1983) (who significantly had been recently translated for the competing Adelphi in 1973) inaugurated two new Einaudi’s series. May we see these strategies as a reaction to Adelphi’s redefinition of «literary»? Is Levi a promoter, or is he pulled towards those themes by Einaudi’s editors? I will analyze how the changes in Italian literary field has influenced Levi’s self-perception as a «Jewish writer» and how his work has contributed to the diffusion in Italy of the “exotic” mid-European Jewish culture.