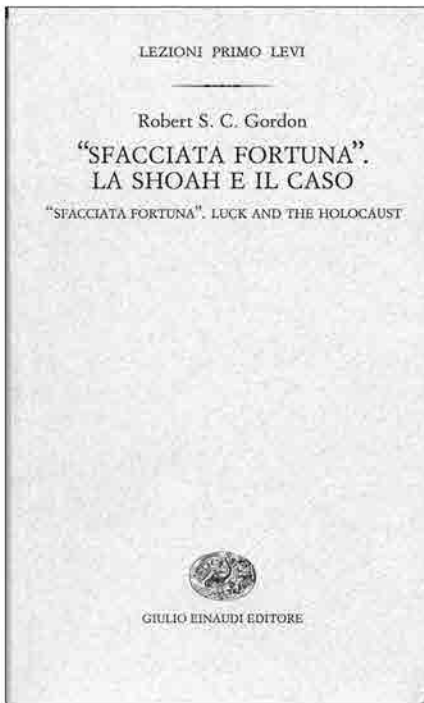


Modern Luck and the Survivor

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2. But what of the Shoah? [...] What relevance can the myth of Fortune, or the notion of human universals, have in relation to the unprecedented violence, the brutally efficient planning and the cynically technical execution of the Final Solution, or indeed to the remarkable work of interrogation and analysis of it that Primo Levi undertook over four decades of careful attention and writing? What place for either free will or fortune in such a degraded and rigid system of death? To begin to answer this question, I would like to take a leap forward from the 16th century of Machiavelli and Shakespeare to the 20th century, stepping over for now some revolutionary transformations in our understanding of the world

and of fortune to which we will return, in order to begin thinking about the Shoah, even if not yet directly about the work of Primo Levi. I would like to consider briefly three works, taken from different media and fields, and from different countries and cultures also, deliberately chosen as an eclectic cluster of contemporary cultural artefacts. One is a popular science book by an American journalist and writer; the second is a Spanish film by a young, experimental director emerging from the late-20th-century new wave of Spanish cinema; and the third is a work of survivor narrative, originally published in Hungarian and then in German, that has gradually emerged as one of the very greatest works of European literature of the Shoah. As we will see, all three, strangely and, I think, compellingly, interweave images and stories of fortune, chance or luck, with stories from

the Nazi Lager. What is more, far from merely setting luck alongside other tropes for talking about the camps, as one device for telling stories about it (although they also do that), all three give us a sense of pure chance in the Lager – perhaps precisely because it was surrounded by and overwhelmed by the iron-clad certainty of death (more or less imminent, within minutes, days or, at most, weeks) – as an essential factor in our efforts to define the coordinates and meanings of the *univers concentrationnaire* (and, by extension beyond that, of our own modernity).

2.1 My first example is a book which appeared in 2008 in America, written by a respected science writer called Leonard Mlodinow, collaborator among others with the Cambridge astrophysicist Stephen Hawking. It is entitled *The Drunkard's Walk*, the image taken from Albert Einstein's famous characterization of the random movement of particles under so-called Brownian motion. It offers an accessible and wide-ranging introduction for the non-expert, lay reader, to the history and present state of ideas about 'randomness', the role of chance in theory, in systems and in everyday events. Mlodinow provides a rapid summary history of the mathematics of probability, risk, large numbers and future events, moving forward to some 20th and 21st-century ideas of quantum physics, chaos theory in mathematics, and causality (we will see below how several of these fields of scientific thinking return, as we work our way towards and through the work of Primo Levi). Using some of these tools, the book wittily explains the patterns underlying various phenomena of contemporary life, from traffic jams, to the spreading of rumours, to the workings of sports tables and stock markets. This is not, even in passing, then, a book about the Shoah: but what is immediately striking – in part, it must be said, as one of many examples of the uncomfortable and often gratingly inappropriate uses to which the Shoah is put in our present-day culture – is the fact that Mlodinow both begins and ends, framing his entertaining and informative 'pop' book, with intensely personal anecdotes from his family history about the concentration camps. For Mlodinow, the Shoah is a compellingly horrific history, for sure, and a punchy way to grab his readers' attention; but it is also in some way a clinching piece of evidence and source of stories about his core theme, the role of chance in human existence, indeed in life itself. Here, for example, is an extract from the first page of the first chapter of *The Drunkard's Walk*, where the young Mlodinow stares entranced at the flickering movements of the flames of the Sabbath candles:

Surely, I believed, there must be rhyme and reason underlying the [movement of the] flame, some pattern that scientists could predict and explain with their ma-

thematical equations. “Life isn’t like that”, my father told me. “Sometimes things happen that cannot be foreseen”. He told me of the time when, in Buchenwald, the Nazi concentration camp in which he was imprisoned and starving, he stole a loaf of bread from the bakery. The baker had the Gestapo gather everyone who might have committed the crime and line the suspects up. “Who stole the bread?” the baker asked. When no one answered, he told the guards to shoot the suspects one by one until either they were all dead or someone confessed. My father stepped forward to spare the others. He did not try to paint himself in a heroic light but told me that he did it because he expected to be shot either way. Instead of having him killed, though, the baker gave my father a plum job, as his assistant. “A chance event”, my father said. “It had nothing to do with you, but had it happened differently, you would never have been born”. (pp. 3-4)

For Mlodinow, then, chance and randomness, inexplicability and unpredictability, are at the root of his existence, biologically, and this for him frames his presentation of these phenomena as a science of numbers; but they also confound, in this anecdote, any notions of a system of morality or justice, however perverse, in Buchenwald (i.e. a causality that the prisoners might decipher as leading from ‘crime’ to ‘interrogation’ to ‘punishment’ – in fact, the father’s confession leads directly, and absurdly, to his salvation). In other words, to the vocabulary of fortune and luck, Mlodinow adds a crucial element of random acts of human will – what we call arbitrariness – as a secular equivalent of the inscrutable and fickle turns of the Goddess of Fortune, and one grotesquely on display in the Shoah. All these layerings will return when we come to look at Levi.

2.2 The second example I would like to mention is a film called *Intacto*, first released in Spain in 2001, directed by the young filmmaker Juan-Carlos Fresnadillo. Here too, as in the case of Mlodinow, we find echoes of the Shoah being put to use in ways which are, to say the least, questionable. Indeed, one critic at least has accused the film of anti-Semitism, in its none-too-veiled recourse to a stereotype of the hidden, conspiratorial and money-driven, controlling hand of the figure of the Jew. Nevertheless (or indeed perhaps because of such lapses into stereotype), the film offers an extraordinary and telling instance of how a nexus seems to have formed in our collective imaginary linking luck and the Shoah. *Intacto* is a hybrid in genre, a sort of fantasy or surreal *film noir*, set in the cities and rural settings of mainland Spain, with oneiric climactic sequences taking place in the lunar landscapes of Tenerife. The film imagines a sort of secret society peopled by men and women who are naturally endowed with exceptional good luck. Once drawn into the secret society, these people gamble their luck, attempting to earn or steal the luck of others, challenging each other in a series of increasingly bizarre and dangerous games, in which the winners

are 'awarded' the failed luck of the losers. For the successful player, the sequence of challenges leads on to a highly symbolic, final, one-on-one challenge in a single round of Russian roulette, against the mysterious guru and inventor of the society, Sam (played by Max von Sydow). In a knowingly self-conscious construction, Fresnadillo and his co-writer Andrés Koppel fill the film with something like an anthology of 20th-century tropes of risk and luck. Thus, the young protagonist of the film, Tomás (Leonardo Sbaraglia), is recruited into the secret world of luck after emerging as the sole survivor of a plane crash (similarly we learn that his lover, by pure chance of circumstance, did not board the same flight; and that his policewoman pursuer was herself the miraculous survivor of a car crash in which all her family died). Sam runs the entire society from his casino on Tenerife (there are recurring sequences and shots of the roulette wheel, the modern wheel of fortune, as well as shots of televisions showing a 'Wheel of Fortune' quiz). The games themselves are, of course, games of pure chance, including the iconic example used in marketing the film of the players blindfolded (*fortuna caeca est*), running at top speed through an archetypically dark and mysterious forest (the luckiest man is the last one not to smash headfirst violently into a tree). And then there is Russian roulette itself (fixed in film history as an icon of abandoning once very existence nihilistically to chance by its famous use in *The Deer Hunter* (1978), dir. Michael Cimino). Plane crashes and car crashes, last-minute decisions, casinos and roulette wheels, TV quizzes, blindfolds and Russian roulette. Presiding over this remarkable collation of chance events is the figure of Sam. Sam lives isolated in a secret, lightless basement of his casino, only appearing to meet his latest challenger at Russian roulette, always emerging wearily and resignedly the winner, his opponent dead. Sam is, we are told, "el hombre más afortunado del mundo" ("the luckiest man in the world"). And Sam is also Jewish – indeed, he is nicknamed "El Judío", The Jew. Crucially, also, he is a survivor of the Nazi genocide, a child survivor of the Shoah. We see Sam's tattooed number on his arm early on in the film, by now a stock visual metonym for the genocide, but in this film also, perversely but not entirely implausibly, a token of the ultimate in good luck. When Tomás finally reaches Sam in Tenerife, as a preface to film's final and newly complicated closed-room challenge (by a series of chance circumstances, Tomás and Sam will be joined in the shoot-out by the policewoman), there is a powerful, still four-minute sequence, in which Sam does something he has never done before: he talks to his challenger. In a hesitant, suffered delivery, he tells Tomás his haunting story of survival by pure chance, showing him first a yellowing photo of Helena, the sister of his Lager companion Daniel, now both dead:

Every morning the door of the barrack-hut opened and they took a few out, first the oldest, then our parents, then our elder brothers and sisters. In a couple of weeks there were only about fifty of us left, all children. [...] The guards returned. They lined us up and shouted a number. I looked at my arm. It wasn't me, it was one of the others. And as [the boy] walked through the door, he turned and looked at us all, thrilled to bits, that he had won, and disappeared. And so on. Every day another number, or two, or none. Sometimes they would just stand looking at us and then leave. In the end, only Daniel and I were left. For four days, alone. And we talked, we talked a lot... Daniel knew things... Daniel knew that it wasn't our parents who would wait for us outside. The day the door opened again, I took my friend's hand and I closed my eyes willing it not to be my number. When Daniel let go of me, I couldn't open my eyes again. I, I didn't want to look at him face to face. And he just said to me "It's yours", and walked off. He left the photo in my hand. The next time the door opened, the uniforms had changed.

Like Mlodinow's father's (true) story, Sam's (fictional) narrative is both confession and explication, even allegory of the workings of randomness and luck. Both seem to afford a powerful role of extreme and essence to the Shoah in this allegory, as if their stories were signs of a new mythology being born, a new variant on the millennial, perhaps universal myth of Fortune in history and anthropology. So much so that we might formulate a tentative hypothesis: if it is true, as many have maintained, that the Shoah shattered a vast gamut of our post-Enlightenment values, destroying our confidence in language itself, in our basic sense of the limits of violence set by the powers of reason, bringing into being new monsters, new dark myths, new *topoi* and new stereotypes, so also, we might suggest, did the Shoah shift the course of the long history of Fortune's imagining. As Sam's role suggests, our modernity perhaps sees the Auschwitz survivor as, precisely, a figure for the 'luckiest man in the world'; as the incarnation of good luck, and of randomness at its purest as a force for determining the individual's destiny, his life and his death, his being or not being. Of course, we should underline once more, this figure of the luck of the survivor, of the survivor as a figure of luck, is not, or is only in part, an historical datum. It must not be confused with the rooted reality of the experience of deportation or survival. Instead what we are dealing with here – as with predecessors such as the Goddess of Fortune, or the proverbial lucky gambler, or indeed, his close relation, the divinely protected figure of destiny (Achilles, Dante, etc) – are imaginary constructs which we use to tell stories about and encapsulate something essential about our reality. In this case, the need of our collective culture to narrate and decipher – and often, thereby, to distort – the historical truth of the genocide produces this *topos*: inside the concentration camp universe, inside a system of total violence such as Auschwitz, survival comes essentially by chance, by pure accident, not by

any specific, predictable cause, nor for any decipherable reason: it comes, to borrow from the title of our third and final example, from neither destiny nor fate; it is 'fateless'.

2.3 *Sorstalanság*, translated as *Fateless*, is the title of the extraordinary 1975 novel by the Hungarian concentration-camp survivor and later Nobel-prize-winning author Imre Kertész. The novel is narrated from the point of view, and in the quirky and perplexed voice, of its fifteen-year-old protagonist, Gyuri. Gyuri's story starts out in vaguely comic or ironic tone, as he navigates his family and the streets of Budapest, but swiftly darkens as his father, and then Gyuri himself, are rounded up and deported. We follow Gyuri to Auschwitz and then to a series of other minor concentration and labour camps, before he is able to return to Budapest, a rare survivor. Over the course of his story, Gyuri encounters momentarily but on several occasions a strange figure, suspended like much of the novel between the comic or burlesque and the tragic, a figure with no name, a counter-image to Gyuri himself, since for much of the novel he happens to follow a strangely similar path to Gyuri's. This figure is nicknamed by Gyuri "a balszerencses ember", translated as 'the man with bad luck'. (The nickname is notably close in meaning and in etymology to the Yiddish term 'der shlimazel' [לזמילש]; there would be much to consider in the affinities between what we are exploring here in both ethics and literature through the figure of the 'lucky survivor' and the rich Yiddish storytelling tradition around the Shlimazel, the tragicomic figure of the unlucky Jew). 'The man with bad luck' is first introduced in Budapest, one of a gallery of human odds and ends thrown together with Gyuri, stuck on the wrong side of the city and held by the military – by pure misfortune, like Gyuri. We first notice him loudly and repeatedly complaining, to all who will listen and indeed to many who would prefer not to, about his sick mother who needs him across the city. A figure of some ridicule, he is described as "an odd little guy [...] dressed in plus fours and huge walking boots: even his yellow star somehow seemed larger than usual" (p. 49). Gyuri runs into him again in Auschwitz where he has preserved his clownish, mismatched, comic-grotesque look: "He looked a bit odd in his loosely hanging prison uniform, his oversized cap constantly slipping down his forehead" (p. 117). Finally, however, we find him or what is left of him once more, even more brutally reduced to his filthy clothes, at Zeitz, near Buchenwald, where his journey comes to a truly grotesque, dehumanized end. He is now no more than a "thing", dead and dragged out to be dumped in sight of his fellow prisoners, including Gyuri:

[That thing] looks by now like no more than a motionless pile of inanimate objects, a tangle of rags – is tossed down at the very end of the row and left lying there: I do my best not to look over. Yet a shattered detail, a contour, lineament, or distinctive feature that can be made out even so, would draw, compel me to look across and I did indeed recognize it as the man who had bad luck. (p. 159)

The story of ‘the man with bad luck’, Kertész’s Shlimazel, recalls in his absurd journey towards degradation and death, in his status as ‘hollow man’, the figure of the Muselmann. Evoked by Levi and many other Auschwitz survivors, the term Muselmann was an uncomfortably anomalous piece of camp jargon denoting those who had reached the nadir within the panoply of Lager victims – the man who has come so close to death as to have given up all hope of living – and who also therefore stood in some way for the essence of Nazi degradation or, following Zygmunt Bauman, of the humiliations of modernity: as Levi puts it, the Muselmann is “una immagine di tutto il male del nostro tempo” (*Se questo è un uomo*, I, 86). Picking up on this image of an essence, Giorgio Agamben recently positioned Levi’s account of the Muselmann at the very heart of his argument about the irredeemable remnants left by Auschwitz in our consciousness, in his controversial book *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*. Thus it is that the thread of contemplation of luck, of ‘the man with bad luck’, set as a counterpoint to Gyuri himself, the ‘lucky’ survivor, draws us to the very heart of our understanding of Nazi violence and the meanings of genocide and modernity. In *Fateless*, the thread is picked up with great power at the very end of the book, as a disoriented Gyuri contemplates his survival, and determines to struggle against the sense of randomness and chance – the blind fortune, pure error or incident that ‘determined’ both his deportation and return – by paradoxically embracing this very fateless fate as somehow ‘willed’. To invert his ‘fatelessness’, Gyuri determines to embrace his status as victim and survivor as if chosen and causally lucid, to construct it as his own ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’ and to ‘do something with it’, to become, as he puts it, his own destiny and thereby reclaims his singularity and his freedom:

I now needed to start doing something with that fate, needed to connect it to somewhere or to something; after all, I could no longer be satisfied with the notion that it had all been a mistake, blind fortune, some kind of blunder. [...] If there is such a thing as freedom, then there is no fate [...] That is to say we ourselves are fate. (pp. 259-60)

Kertész is building up in Gyuri here a residue of causality for the single individual in the face of what feels like an overwhelming, indifferently macroscopic ‘causelessness’. (Of course, the historical cause is not in question:

the genocidal agencies of the 'Racial State' of Nazi Germany and its allies). In this, he recalls in crucial respects a striking feature of the short narratives of both Młodinow's father and Max von Sydow's Sam; that is, a particular role played by the numerological interplay of the single and the many, of the sole survivor in the face of the serial deaths and beyond them the mass of millions of murdered victims. The SS operate in Młodinow's tale by threatening to kill the prisoners 'one by one' until only one or none remain. Sam's fellow child-prisoners are similarly called out by number 'one by one' until only one – Sam himself – survives. In each case, the one-ness of the survivor embodies his luck and his exceptionality or singularity, his scandalous, indeed miraculous (in a secular sense) challenge to the macroscopic certainty of systematic genocide. Survival, then, is an expression of singular luck; but in that singularity, too, resides its isolation, its misfortune and almost unbearable weight. And in this way, the figure of the survivor, from embodiment of luck is transformed into the simultaneously melancholic 'man with bad luck', as evident in the morbid melancholy of Sam, or in one of the great figures of Italian Shoah literature, Giorgio Bassani's Geo Josz, protagonist of *Una lapide in via Mazzini*, returned from the camps to his native Ferrara only to be shunned and half-ridiculed and ignored. In the new mythology of luck and the Shoah, good luck and bad luck coincide, to survive is also a curse. The numerology of luck and singularity – a sort of non-mathematical thinking with number categories not unlike Machiavelli's fake calculation that Fortune controls half our destiny and virtue the other half – calls to mind an important essay by Carlo Ginzburg on the historical, juridical and moral problem of the lone witness, entitled *Just One Witness*. Ginzburg's apparently arcane exploration of an aspect of the testimonial tradition rejects in the name of historiography, and especially in the case of the historiography of genocide, the juridical anathema found in both Latin and Hebrew juridical traditions against the uncorroborated single witness; the principle which says that the evidence of one witness alone has the same value as the evidence of no witness at all (*unus testis testis nullus*). For the historian of genocide, and for its most sensitive chroniclers such as Primo Levi, the single witness is instead a precious remnant, a random, chance fragment torn from oblivion, which precisely in its singularity and in some necessarily provisional and perhaps paradoxical manner (much like Gyuri's hallucinatory reasoning at the end of *Fateless*), can illuminate aspects of genocide, the Shoah, modernity.