

Oral Contributions

[MS40-05] **Primo Levi, William Henry Bragg and the atomic theory of matter.** Davide Viterbo,

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Primo Levi is a well known Italian writer, especially for his books *If This is a Man* and *The Truce* [1] describing in a most intense and moving way his experience in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz and his adventurous return home. Levi was born in 1919 into a Jewish family from Turin, where he received a positivistic and scientific education. Because of the race laws against the Jews, he had to overcome several discriminations to obtain a degree in chemistry in 1941. Primo Levi in his book *The search for roots: a personal anthology* [2] gives a compilation of thirty pieces of prose and poetry which most influenced his life. Relevant citations from the book *Concerning the nature of things* [3] by Sir William Bragg are among them. Levi read the book when he was 16 and, moved by the clear and simple explanations and by the enthusiastic endorsement of Lucretius' atomic philosophy, decided that he would become a Chemist.

W.H Bragg was not only a Nobel Prize winner, who with his son William Lawrence Bragg established the basis for X-ray crystallography, but was also an outstanding teacher capable of exciting the minds of intelligent young people and addressing them to science in general and chemistry in particular. In her biography of Dorothy Hodgkin, Georgina Ferry [4] tells us that also Dorothy 'had found her life's work' after receiving, on her sixteenth birthday, the same book that attracted the young Levi.

Let me explain the reasons for my special affection for Primo Levi. I have three main affinities with him: I am a chemist, Jewish and was born in Turin, and therefore I have breathed the same atmosphere. I grew up in the Jewish milieu described in Argon in *The Periodic Table* [5], lived in a regularly patterned city (Turin

has preserved the pattern of the original Roman military camp) and studied chemistry in the same lecture halls, laboratories and fascinating library.

Levi's tribute to

W. H. Bragg gives me a further point of affinity. I do not have to explain to other crystallographers my affection for Sir W. H. Bragg and his son for giving us, a hundred years ago, such a powerful tool, still full of promising developments.

[1] Levi, P. (1987). *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*. London: Abacus.

[2] Levi, P. (2003). *The Search for Roots: a Personal Anthology*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

[3] Bragg, W. H. (1925). *Concerning the Nature of Things*. London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd. Available from <http://archive.org/details/concerningthenat029331mbp>.

[4] Ferry, G. (1999). *Dorothy Hodgkin: A Life*. London: Granta Books.

[5] Levi, P. (2000). *The Periodic Table*. London: Penguin Books.

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