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Writing, Resentments, and Suicide in the Works of Primo Levi, Jean Améry, and Ka-Tsetnik

Lecture by
Yohai Ataria (Tel-Hai College, Israel)

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While Primo Levi's suicide was seen as a scandal, Jean Améry's was perceived as reasonable, even necessary, particularly when considered through the lens of contemporary trauma theory, which suggests that writing, often driven by acting out, can lead to a loss of self. Indeed, Améry would likely have signed a declaration stating that no one wants survivors of his kind. The contrast between Levi and Améry is striking. Moreover, it seems Améry believed that, at times, suicide—perhaps only suicide—could make one fully human. It is difficult to imagine Levi agreeing with such a statement, although, as we will explore, he may have come to embrace this idea in the final years of his life.

This open dialogue between Levi and Améry requires a deeper examination of the connection between writing and death. To further understand this connection, I will also discuss a key figure in Holocaust memory in Israel: Ka-Tsetnik, who is widely known for his dramatic collapse during the Eichmann trial. Like Améry, Ka-Tsetnik is often viewed as someone trapped in rage and acting through processes of acting out. However, unlike Améry, Ka-Tsetnik did not die by suicide.

This lecture will explore the complex relationships between these three Auschwitz survivors, each of whom played a significant role in shaping Holocaust memory in both Israel and Europe. I hope that revisiting their writings and the processes they underwent will offer insights into the meaning of extreme trauma and, importantly, whether healing from such trauma is even possible



Prof. Yochai Ataria is a full professor at Tel-Hai College, Israel. He completed his PhD at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and conducted post-doctoral research in the Neurobiology Department at the Weizmann Institute of Science. Prof. Ataria is a prolific author and researcher, having published over 40 academic papers. His notable works include *The Structural Trauma of Western Culture* (2017), *Body Disownership in Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2018), *The Mathematics of Trauma* [in Hebrew] (2014), *Not in Our Brain* [in Hebrew] (2019), *Levi versus Ka-Tsetnik* (2022), *Consciousness in Flesh* (2022), and *Genes, Technology, and Apocalypse* (2024). In addition to his authored books, he has co-edited several volumes such as *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Culture and Trauma* (2016), *Jean Améry: Beyond the Mind's Limits* (2019), *Kafka: New Perspectives* [in Hebrew] (2013), *The End of the Human Era* [in Hebrew] (2016), *2001: A Space Odyssey – 50th Anniversary* [in Hebrew] (2019), and *Body Schema and Body Image: New Directions* (Oxford, 2021).