

Title: Primo Levi and the Periodic Table

Introduction: “*The Periodic Table* is one of the autobiographical books written by Primo Levi (1919–1987), an Italian chemist and writer. Levi was born in Turin, Italy, into a middleclass family of assimilated, nonreligious Jews. In 1941, he graduated in chemistry as the first in his class at the University of Turin—in spite of Fascist Italy’s racial law of 1938 that forbade Jews access to higher education. He worked in a pharmaceutical laboratory until 1943, when—after Mussolini’s fall and the invasion of Italy by German troops—he joined a group of resistors. Arrested by the German army, Levi was eventually identified as a Jew and deported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. He survived because he was sent to work in an I. G. Farben laboratory, which produced synthetic rubber at the labor section of the camp. Levi died in 1987, after falling down the stairwell from the third floor of the house where he was born, and where he lived since his return at the end of the war. In most of *The Periodic Table*, Levi narrates his memories from a period ranging from a little before to a little after World War II. Each one of the twenty-one chapters of the book is named after a chemical element, and Levi poetically associates properties of the elements to facts of his own life.” (*J. Chem. Educ.* **2007**, *84*, 775.)

Procedures:

1. Read the article about potassium from Primo Levi’s book and then discuss it with your group/class.
2. Write a short summary of the article and answer the questions.
3. Work with your group to fill in the table.

Data: Part A Individual

Read the adapted excerpt of the chapter “Potassium” from Primo Levi’s book, *The Periodic Table*. It is written in his original old fashioned language and vocabulary. Write a summary in your own words. You can use the internet and/or dictionary to help you.

Summary:

After you have completed the summary, answer the following questions.

1. Why did the author suppose that he could use potassium instead of sodium?

How do you think he got that idea?

2. Do you think it is part of a chemist's work to make "innovations" like that, namely, to introduce changes in established procedures, likes changing potassium for sodium?

3. Write your opinion on the following comment made by the author: "*[T]he chemist's trade consists in good part in being aware of these differences [between almost-the same substances], knowing them close up, and foreseeing their effects.*"